



Progress of the Afghan conflict: recent research and statements

Standard Note: SNIA/6025

Last updated: 4 July 2011

Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

This note is a compilation of excerpts from a variety of official and think tank publications on the progress of and outlook for the west's strategy in Afghanistan.

Adam Pain, “Opium Poppy Strikes Back: The 2011 Return of Opium in Balkh and Badakhshan Provinces”, Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, July 2011

After several years of decline, opium poppy is experiencing a resurgence in both Badakhshan and “poppy-free” Balkh. While rising prices have played a part, a range of other factors including local power relations, security and the poor health of the rural economy continue to make opium cultivation an attractive choice for many farmers.

FCO, “UK Special Representative comments on the need for a reconciliation settlement and resilient security forces in Afghanistan”, News release, 28 June 2011

Our 2014 goal is clear: Afghanistan should be able to secure and govern itself without international combat forces but with international support. This will involve a whole government, whole country, whole people, and whole international community approach. To achieve that, Afghanistan needs a reconciliation settlement, resilient security forces and a viable state, all of which must be durable as we shift gear in 2014 from the transition phase to the sustainment phase. This includes a sustainable security, political and economic settlement underwritten by sustained commitment from the international community. My country will continue to play its part, and in that context, we hope to conclude a bilateral long-term partnership agreement in the near future.

Michael E O’Hanlon, “Gauging the Effect of Obama’s Troop Cuts”, Brookings Institution, 23 June 2011

With 90 percent of our forces remaining another 15 to 18 months, we will be able to do roughly 90 percent as much as before. Training and mentoring of Afghan security forces should continue at a robust pace, as their current total strength of 300,000 grows to 350,000 or perhaps 375,000 in the coming 12 to 18 months. The most fraught parts of Kandahar and Helmand need not be turned over immediately to Afghan lead control, even if other parts of those crucial provinces may have to be. Our existing forces in the east, north and west will not have to be cut, although some coalition

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

partners may downsize in those areas in coming months.

Afghan forces' existing and proven abilities to protect Kabul fairly well will not be compromised. Our intelligence networks and special operations forces - so key to taking out extremist leaders - can be maintained at or near current levels. And perhaps we can, if lucky, strike the right balance between reassuring Afghan and Pakistani partners that we are still committed to the mission while also reminding them that we are not staying forever.

As with most things about Afghanistan these days, the president's speech makes me a bit nervous and again, I will be much more nervous if next year's drawdown has to happen by September. But on balance, there remains a good case for a measured dose of optimism that we gradually will reach our modest goal of an Afghan government able to control most of its territory and to do so increasingly on its own. Now on to the next challenge: making our political strategy for supporting Afghanistan's young democracy as generally solid as our military plan.

Leslie H Gelb, 'Mission Accomplished', Council on Foreign Relations, 23 June 2011

Obama pointed to the fact that U.S. troops have killed 20 of 30 al Qaeda leaders in the past year alone, including Osama bin Laden, but he could have said a lot more. His own White House aides surely told him, as they told me, that al Qaeda members in Afghanistan "number in the tens." Let me repeat that: not in the hundreds or the thousands, but in the tens. And beating them down to this pulp was the main mission of U.S. forces. Besides, the White House aides surely told their president that Taliban forces in Afghanistan now number between 20,000 and 40,000. (One might have hoped that our intelligence analysts could have been somewhat more precise about this figure.) Even 40,000 is a tiny total when compared to the 200,000 or so friendly Afghans now under arms and the millions of Afghans who purportedly are on our side and hate the Taliban. Obama could have said, accurately, that the U.S. military has already done a great job in bringing the enemy down to levels that should be manageable by friendly Afghans. He also could have said that if the Afghans, with all our support—indeed with all our prospective support—can't cope with 20,000 to 40,000 Taliban, then only heaven can help them.

Gilles Dorronsoro, "*Afghanistan: the impossible transition*", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2011

A combination of two critical problems threatens to undermine the mission of the United States–led coalition in Afghanistan: the failure of the counterinsurgency strategy and a disconnect between political objectives and military operations. If anything, the current strategy is making a political solution less likely, notably because it is antagonizing Pakistan without containing the rise of the armed opposition. That has put the coalition in a paradoxical situation, in which it is being weakened militarily by a non-negotiated and inevitable withdrawal while at the same time alienating potential negotiating partners. The Obama administration has made new appointments to head the defense and intelligence agencies, and, in Afghanistan, has installed a new leadership to oversee U.S. military forces and named a new ambassador. The U.S. administration must take advantage of these appointments to establish greater coherence in both policy and operations:

- The 2014 transition anticipated by the coalition is unrealistic because the Afghan army will not be capable of containing an insurgency that is gathering significant strength. If the transition were carried out, it would provide a considerable boost to the insurgency and, ultimately, the defeat of the Karzai regime. The July 2011 withdrawal

must not significantly weaken the coalition, or it will create a military and political vacuum and ultimately make the success of the negotiations less likely.

- In the border provinces of Pakistan, we are now seeing the creation of a sanctuary liable to harbor jihadist groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda fighters. This is alarming because counterterrorism operations cannot eliminate groups in a sanctuary that is steadily growing larger. Meanwhile, the coalition's operations are essentially focused on the southern regions where these jihadist groups do not exist. In practice, the only way to contain the threat posed by transnational jihadist groups is to politically reintegrate the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami into a coalition government in order to isolate the most radical groups.
- The Western withdrawal therefore inevitably requires a political agreement with the Taliban leadership, which implies abandoning the coalition's reintegration policy. Confrontation with Pakistan is not an option since American leverage on Islamabad is limited and the Pakistani army has some influence over the insurgents, which would be useful should negotiations take place.

George Friedman, “US and Pakistan Afghan Strategies”, Stratfor Global Intelligence, 21 June 2011

There may be some in the U.S. military who believe that the United States might prevail in Afghanistan, but they are few in number. The champion of this view, Gen. David Petraeus, has been relieved of his command of forces in Afghanistan and promoted (or kicked upstairs) to become director of the CIA. The conventional definition of victory has been the creation of a strong government in Kabul controlling an army and police force able to protect the regime and ultimately impose its will throughout Afghanistan. With President Hamid Karzai increasingly uncooperative with the United States, the likelihood of this outcome is evaporating. Karzai realizes his American protection will be withdrawn and understands that the Americans will blame him for any negative outcomes of the withdrawal because of his inability or unwillingness to control corruption.

Anthony H Cordesman, *Afghanistan and the Uncertain Metrics of Progress Part Six: Showing Victory is Possible*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 24 March 2011

The US, allied states, and ISAF should provide an overview of how the strategy of “clear, hold, build, and transition” is working. In fact, recent unclassified analysis and metrics fails to do so in virtually every important respect. As has been shown in Parts Three, Four, and Five of this analysis, there is far too little transparency and credibility in dealing with major current challenges. The data in describing progress in governance, economics, and building capable Afghan forces far short of what should be available.

The limited unclassified data that are available on how the new strategy is working focus almost exclusively on current developments in the fighting, and many of these data have only been reported in very limited and large anecdotal form since mid-2010. The official data reported in the press consist largely of factoids more oriented towards “spin” than substance.

The end result is not to control the message, but to fail to provide one. It is hardly surprising that a great deal of media coverage is questioning or negative or that public opinion polls reflect a steady drop in support for the war. This is particularly critical a time that there is a budget crisis in virtually every country in ISAF and the cost of the war is rising so sharply.

Stephen Biddle, “Long Term Goals for Afghanistan and Their Near Term Implications”, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 10 May 2011. Hearing on “Steps Needed for a Successful 2014 Transition in Afghanistan”

The Afghanistan debate often focuses, understandably, on near-term concerns. Sound policies in the near term, however, require a longer term vision to guide them. And for now, several key components of a long term vision for Afghanistan are absent or underdeveloped. What would success look like? What does the United States require to secure our central interests there? What relationship do we want with Afghanistan or its region after 2014, and what role will that require us to play then – or now?

I argue below that core American interests in Afghanistan are real but narrow, and center on the security requirements of denying Afghan territory to terrorists as a base for attacking us or destabilizing Afghanistan’s neighbors. These limited interests can be realized via a range of possible Afghan end states – we need not hold out for the highly ambitious political and economic development aims that the United States adopted in 2001. While desirable, these are not strictly necessary to meet our core requirements. But we cannot settle for just anything. There are limits on the acceptable that exclude outcomes such as partition or anarchy, and this limits the viability of approaches such as a counter-terrorism (CT) strategy that would leave us unable to prevent a collapse of the current government. And it is hard to see any feasible, acceptable, Afghan political outcome that could function without sustained American and other international engagement.

In the longer term, that engagement need not be primarily military (though some U.S. military presence ought not to be excluded as a possible means to the end of Afghan stability). But financial and technical assistance is likely to be needed on a sustained basis if Afghanistan is not again to suffer the fate that befell it the last time the West disengaged. To realize U.S. interests will require a long term relationship with Afghanistan that accepts the need for continued assistance, albeit at levels far below today’s, in the service not just of a better life for Afghans, but of a safer future for Americans.

Ashley J Tellis, “Creating New Facts on the Ground Why the Diplomatic Surge Cannot Yet Produce a Regional Solution in Afghanistan”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2011

- Although meaningful cooperation in the region surrounding Afghanistan is of vital importance, it has been elusive because Afghanistan’s key neighbors have significantly divergent aims. Engineering a successful regional solution would require the United States to fundamentally transform either these actors’ objectives or their dominant strategies. Achieving the latter may prove more feasible, most crucially vis-à-vis Pakistan.
- The region’s history of discord is mainly rooted in the troubled relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan is colored by its rivalry with India, its relations with Afghanistan are a geopolitical challenge independent of India because of its fears of disorder along its western borders, the unwelcome idea of “Pashtunistan,” and a related long-standing border dispute.
- Pakistan’s reaction to these problems has only exacerbated them. As Islamabad, by supporting the Taliban insurgency, has sought to exercise preponderant, if not overweening, influence over Kabul’s strategic choices, it has earned Kabul’s distrust,

deepened the Kabul–New Delhi partnership, and increased the risk to its relations with Washington—not to mention threatening the lives of U.S. and other coalition forces operating in Afghanistan.

- Despite widespread support in Afghanistan for ending the war through a negotiated settlement if possible, the Afghan Taliban leadership is unlikely to consider reconciliation unless it is faced with the prospect of continued losses of the kind sustained as a result of coalition military operations in 2010. A regional solution is similarly unlikely as long as Afghanistan and its neighbors, including India, perceive Islamabad as bent on holding Kabul in a choking embrace.
- Solving these problems lies beyond the capability of American diplomacy, and right now even of the promised diplomatic surge. The best hope for progress lies in continuing military action to alter the realities on the ground— thereby inducing the Taliban to consider reconciliation, while simultaneously neutralizing the Pakistani strategy that is currently preventing a regional solution.
- To increase the probability of military success, however, President Obama will need to forgo the politically calculated drawdown of combat troops this summer and instead accept the advice of his field commanders to maintain the largest possible contingent necessary for the coming campaign in eastern Afghanistan. Hard and unpalatable as it might be for the president, this course alone offers a solution that will protect the recent gains in Afghanistan and advance American interests over the long term.

Andrew C. Kuchins, in an article for the [Spring issue of the *Washington Quarterly*](#), argued that the west should concentrate on putting the Afghan economy on a more sustainable footing:

Given the relatively short transition period to planned Afghan sovereignty in 2014, there is an urgent need to shift the focus from assistance to sustainable business development and commerce. It is imperative to move from aid to trade and foster an environment which creates jobs and increases returns on investment and entrepreneurship.

The United States Department of Defense, [Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan in April 2011](#):

The 2010 surge of ISAF forces and civilian personnel, and the ongoing surge of ANSF, has allowed ISAF to get the inputs right in Afghanistan for the first time. As a result, security gains have been made, as have improvements in governance and development. The Taliban's momentum has been halted and much of their tactical infrastructure and popular support removed, although hard fighting is expected through the spring, summer, and fall of 2011. Key insurgent safe havens have been eliminated, hundreds of insurgent leaders have been captured or killed, and more than 2,000 insurgents have begun re-integrating into Afghan society. The ANSF continue to translate training into operational capacity, and are now regularly operating side-by-side with ISAF troops and proving themselves increasingly capable in combat. Overall, a sound strategy and sufficient resources have given the coalition sufficient momentum to capitalize on these gains through the summer and, in July 2011, to begin the process of transitioning security to the Afghan Government. Nonetheless, the months ahead will see setbacks as well as successes. There will be difficult fighting and tough losses as the enemy tries to regain momentum and key areas lost in the past six months.

For more information on Afghanistan, see the following Library papers:

Afghanistan: The Timetable for Security Transition, 30 June 2011

The cost of international military operations, 23 June 2011

Political developments in Afghanistan, 13 May 2011

The 'AfPak policy' and the Pashtuns, 22 June 2010

Afghanistan and narcotics: Opium poppy cultivation trends, 2001 - 2009, 24 March 2009