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On March 27, 2009, the Obama administration released its new policy and strategic goals for Afghanistan amidst much fanfare. Just six months later, though, the administration has mounted yet another review of U.S. policy and strategy – the fifth high-level review by the U.S. government in the past 12 months. Two things happened to spur this review.

First, the contested Afghan elections were, in many ways, a worst-case scenario for U.S. and other NATO policy-makers. Prior to the elections, the scenario most feared by the international community was one in which Karzai was re-elected by a thin margin amid widespread irregularities and allegations of corruption. That is exactly what happened, leading a much-respected U.S. deputy to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to depart acrimoniously after witnessing what he perceived to be a U.N. cover-up of ballot box-stuffing and election-rigging. The U.N.-backed Electoral Complaints Commission has now disqualified ballots 210 polling stations, ensuring a run-off election.

Second, the grim strategic assessment presented by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) commander in Kabul,

has persuaded the Obama administration that winning in Afghanistan will be much more difficult than then-Senator Barack Obama imagined in 2008 when he pledged to devote more resources to a campaign in Central Asia.

In any strategic planning exercise, one starts with a list of planning assumptions and should revisit the plan if an assumption turns out to be wrong. It now appears as if some of the assumptions behind the administration's original policy and strategic goals were false. The administration is thus correct to revisit its plan. As it does so, it is useful to imagine scenarios for what Afghanistan might look like 24 months from now and how U.S. policy might make each scenario more or less likely.

A Return to September 10, 2001

The worst case scenario is as frightening as it is unlikely. In such a scenario, the insurgent groups of Afghanistan defeat the Government of Afghanistan in relatively short order and re-establish the state that hosted al-Qaeda and provided such a useful base for transnational terror groups to train and plot against Western targets prior to November 2001. These same transnational terror groups then turn their attention to overthrowing the regime in Pakistan and undermining the regimes of Central Asia. Insurgencies and terrorist activity in states and ungoverned spaces in Yemen and the Horn of Africa worsen while

a repositioning of U.S. and allied power leaves a vacuum in which such activities flourish.

It is hard to imagine U.S. and allied policies in Afghanistan that would allow such a nightmare scenario. At the very least – and regardless of how many U.S. and allied forces remain in Afghanistan – the United States and its allies are likely to continue their support of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and take direct action against insurgent groups through air and drone strikes or special operations raids. A long and bloody civil conflict in which the United States openly supports the forces of the Government of Afghanistan would therefore precede any takeover of the country by the Taliban and its allies.

Proxy War

The most likely scenario in Afghanistan, by contrast, is one in which the United States and its allies gradually tire of a costly counterinsurgency campaign and transition to a more limited engagement that, while not meeting many of the strategic goals articulated by the president in March, allows the United States and its allies to still influence affairs in Central Asia and prevent a total return of the Taliban and its allies to power in Afghanistan.

In this scenario, most U.S. allies withdraw their forces from Afghanistan in the next 18 months as the war becomes more exclusively a concern of the United States and its Afghan partners. Spurred by popular displeasure with the war in his own party, the president directs the commanders in Afghanistan to reduce the presence of U.S. general purpose forces and to shift the mission away from a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign to foreign internal defense (FID) making better use of U.S. Special Forces and other special operations forces. A limited and short-term “surge” into Afghanistan precedes this transition, with the goal of rapidly training more ANSF. A combination of U.S. and

allied airpower and direct-action special operations support this limited surge.

Afghanistan remains caught in civil war between a government in Kabul, led by essentially the same politicians and warlords who ruled Afghanistan between 1992 and 1996, and a disenfranchised Pashtun community in the south and east represented by the Quetta Shura Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The former, backed by the United States and its allies, fights insurgents backed by elements of Pakistan’s intelligence community and military and financed by supporters in the Persian Gulf. For Afghans, this *is* the worst-case scenario.

Despite Pakistan’s support for insurgent groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan continues to receive U.S. assistance due to U.S. fears that Sindh and Punjab Provinces will fall to militant groups if the insurgents targeting Pakistan’s regime and security services grow too strong. The Pakistani state, meanwhile, remains focused on the perceived threat from India and views its internal violence as a byproduct of that rivalry.

In this scenario, President Obama’s policy of not allowing Afghanistan and Pakistan to be a safe haven from which transnational terror groups can plot attacks against the United States and other Western states will likely not be realized. And while al-Qaeda and related groups have established similar safe havens in Yemen and the Horn of Africa, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan served as the training ground for the terrorists of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks and holds strong potential to become the base for future attacks. A containment strategy in which the United States attempts to limit the threat from these areas through cruise missiles failed during the 1990s. So too, it appears likely, would a policy in which the United States attempts to either punish or disrupt al-Qaeda from afar through drone strikes. The success or failure of drone strikes depends on access to time-sensitive human intelligence – the

kind of intelligence difficult to obtain from an aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean or in an office at Fort Meade.

If this scenario transpires, the president will either establish a new policy of containment, which articulates why we can now live with risks previously unthinkable, or admit policy failure. Nonetheless, this strategy would most certainly reduce the short-term costs of U.S. and allied investment in Central Asia.

A Foundation for Peace

The best case scenario for Afghanistan is a functioning Afghan state inhospitable to transnational terror groups. In this scenario, a government representing all major factions in Afghanistan, however imperfectly, would be essential. This government must be backed by a strong military and security services. Disenfranchised Pashtun communities would be reintegrated into the political process – and in cases, peeled off from insurgent groups – following the establishment of security in key population centers and the construction of effective security forces.

Realizing this scenario requires a considerable investment of resources, though perhaps fewer than imagined. The first requisite is additional troops to train and partner with Afghan military and police units. Second would be additional troops to provide security for particularly endangered population centers in Kandahar and Khost. The former is the priority target for the Quetta Shura Taliban, while the latter is the priority target for the Haqqani Network.

Politically, the United States and its allies face a short window of opportunity with the Karzai administration. The United States has leverage over Karzai so long as he and his allies believe a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan remains a real possibility. As a condition for continued or greater U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, then, the Obama administration

should communicate to Karzai a “black list” of those Afghans whose participation in an Afghan government would endanger continued U.S. support for the Karzai administration. Karzai’s government may claim this kind of demand subverts the Afghan political process, but the Afghan political process is already subverted by the presence of a large international force. The Karzai government’s ability to maintain power in Afghanistan, in fact, is entirely dependent on the U.S. presence in the country.

Aid in Afghanistan, meanwhile, should be shifted away from large-scale development projects and toward those projects that address issues – such as irrigation rights and land disputes – driving conflict at the local level. U.S. military units in southern and eastern Afghanistan have already begun such efforts. But for this reason, conducting a census and building a land registry are more important in many areas than building schools and hospitals. It is difficult, in fact, to overestimate the degree to which these two measures would stabilize the country. Such efforts support the establishment of the rule of law and enable ISAF and Afghan units to resolve disputes the Afghan people currently rely on the insurgent “shadow” government to adjudicate.

Regardless of what the United States does or does not do in Afghanistan, problems in Pakistan will remain. For starters, policy makers in the United States and Pakistan will continue to disagree as to whether India or Islamist insurgents represent the greater threat to Pakistani society. In part due to these differences, the state of Pakistan, worth supporting in its fight against a domestic insurgency, could remain a problematic actor in the region, threatening both the Afghan state and U.S. interests.

At the least, Pakistan will continue to employ a hedging strategy that empowers Afghan insurgents in the event U.S. and allied forces depart the region. Many U.S. analysts of Pakistan have further internalized the Pakistani narrative that Indian activity is

driving Pakistani behavior toward Afghanistan and its insurgent groups. This may be partially true, but it is unclear what acceptable change in U.S. and allied policy toward Afghanistan would make Pakistan a more cooperative partner. And changing established strategic culture is difficult – especially when political and economic incentives are in play. The Pakistani military establishment has much invested in its conflict with India and would lose political and economic clout if India no longer presents a serious threat to the state.

Rather than further empower a military and intelligence establishment that has played both sides in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States should support institutions – such as police forces in Punjab and Sindh Provinces – which have no stake in conflict with India yet serve on the front lines in the fight against domestic insurgent groups.

Conclusion

These three scenarios offer possibilities for what Afghanistan might look like two years from now. None of them should appeal to either the Afghan

or allied publics, and all of them involve risks and resources that would strain an already exhausted NATO alliance and Afghan people. The most dangerous scenario, often invoked by those arguing for a more robust U.S. commitment, is unlikely. The most likely scenario condemns Central Asia and Afghanistan especially to endless conflict and fails to realize what were, both in the spring and now, core U.S. objectives.

A better scenario is still possible but will almost certainly require a further commitment of precious U.S. time and resources, to say nothing of the human cost. Ultimately, the president must select the option he considers least undesirable. But an Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors is not the ahistorical fantasy some critics would like the public to believe. Until the Marxist coup of 1978, Afghanistan was at peace for half a century – an anomaly among Asian states in the 20th century. Returning Afghanistan to a similar state of peace should remain a goal of the United States and the rest of the international community.

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U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, right, and U.S. Army Lt. Col. Joey Tynch, the commander of the Kunar Provincial Reconstruction Team, review current projects in the Kunar region at Shigal, Afghanistan, May 16, 2009. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Carl L. Hardy/Released)