

On Keeping One's Commitments Or: Why an Eventful Year Ended Inconclusively in Afghanistan

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Introduction

The new year got off to a promising start in Afghanistan: in January, participants in an international conference in London renewed their commitment to the common effort and – with much fanfare – adopted a new strategy: the »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign.« When, shortly afterwards, the largest military operation in Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion got under way in Marjah, a new spirit of optimism was clearly in the air: the commanding general of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Stanley A. McChrystal, confidently predicted that »we'll make real progress in 2010« (quoted in Shanker 2010). US President Barack Obama was »encouraged by the progress that's been made,« when visiting the country in March (quoted in British Broadcasting Corporation 2010). And more detached observers also started talking about »glimmers of hope« (Borger 2010) and »encouraging signs« (Walt 2010) emanating from Afghanistan.

In a matter of months, however, such optimism has given way to a renewed and profound sense of uncertainty: »We're not winning. It's not worth it,« Richard N. Haass wrote in *Newsweek* in July (Haass 2010). The Director of Policy Planning in Colin Powell's State Department and current President of the Council on Foreign Relations is far from being the only foreign policy expert to harbor second thoughts about Afghanistan nine years after coalition forces first entered the country in 2001. His predecessor at the Council, Leslie H. Gelb, recently proposed to reduce the number of Americans stationed in Afghanistan from the current 100,000 to about 15,000 within the next two years (Gelb 2010). Likewise, a self-appointed Afghanistan Study Group, comprising the above-cited Stephen Walt and 45 other eminent »realist« thinkers, made recommendations to »[d]ownsize and eventually end military operations in southern Afghanistan, and reduce the U.S. military footprint« (Afghanistan Study Group 2010: 3). 40 years after Lyndon B. Johnson left

office, a long-forgotten quote by the Vietnam-era President is making the rounds again in Washington: »I can't win, and I can't get out« (quoted in Gelb 2010).

At this critical juncture, it is the purpose of this article to shed some light on the developments and circumstances that have shaped and determined the coalition's shifting fortunes – the reasons, in other words, why yet another eventful year is ending inconclusively in Afghanistan. Building on a brief review of the past year's key events, the analysis takes General McChrystal's observation that it is »a crisis of confidence among Afghans – in both their government and the international community – that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents« (McChrystal 2009: 1–1) as starting point for a more thorough examination of the key factors that have caused things to go so terribly wrong in recent months. In this manner, it identifies a persistent lack of political commitment to the goals and strategy commonly agreed by the governments in Kabul and coalition capitals as the most significant impediment to progress in Afghanistan. The study thus concludes with the observation that the most promising way to achieve the stated goal of stabilizing Afghanistan as an Islamic democracy neither threatened by, nor threatening to its neighbors is not a premature revision, but the full and vigorous implementation of the present strategy. This, however, will require a commitment by the governments involved that goes beyond mere rhetoric.

Hope and Delusions

Off to a Promising Start: Comprehensive Counterinsurgency

In August 2009, the new commander of the International Security Assistance Force sent a wake-up call to Washington. Unless they renewed their commitment to Afghanistan, Stanley A. McChrystal told his superiors and allied governments around the world, the international coalition might well lose a war it had been pursuing with diminishing enthusiasm in recent months: »This,« the General wrote, »is an important – and likely decisive – period of the war. Afghans are frustrated and weary after eight years without evidence of the progress they anticipated. Patience is understandably short, both in Afghanistan and in our own countries. Time matters; we must act now to reverse the negative trends and demonstrate progress« (McChrystal 2009; 1–4).

To turn the tide, General McChrystal proposed a »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign.« Building on the positive experiences General David H. Petraeus had had with a similar approach in Iraq, the new strategy called for a substantial expansion of ISAF's size and clout as the requisite foundation on which to build an operational culture geared towards winning the support of the Afghan people rather than defeating the insurgency: in an environment characterized by increasing instability, violence, and turmoil, the most critical objective would have to be the restoration of Afghans' confidence in the ability and will of their government and the international coalition to provide for at least basic conditions of physical security, political stability, and economic opportunity. »Our strategy,« McChrystal reasoned, »cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective must be the population. In the struggle to gain the support of the people, every action we take must enable this effort« (McChrystal 2009: 1-1).

After some intense soul-searching within the administration,¹ President Obama eventually signed on to the »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign,« adopting its basic premises and fundamental tenets as the conceptual core of the new approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan he announced in December 2009 (see Obama 2009). By the time of the London Conference in January, the strategy had also won the support of America's major allies in NATO and ISAF. With that, the stage was set for its first deployment in a major operation on the ground.

Towards a Disheartening End: Operational Disappointments

On February 13, about 15,000 international and Afghan soldiers embarked on operation »Moshtarak« in and around the insurgent stronghold of Marjah. Only five days later, the national flag was once again flying over the town's bazaar. But while the military part of the maneuver thus appeared to be a considerable success, the civilian follow-up proved unable to sustain politically what had been achieved by force: local government and administration were inefficient, the performance of the police and justice system generally failed to meet people's expectations, and – to top it off – the person appointed district manager turned out to be a suspected criminal. Under these conditions, large parts of the

1. The controversial debates within the administration in the process of formulating the new strategy have been chronicled by Bob Woodward (Woodward 2010).

insurgency's network and support-base in the area remained intact. In April, the *New York Times* reports, »members of the Taliban visited an old man late at night and made him eat his aid registration papers, (...) a Mafia-style warning to others not to take government aid« (Gall 2010). Three months later, only one out of 97 individuals surveyed in the Marjah district still felt that operation »Moshtarak« had been »good« for the region (International Council on Security and Development 2010: 8).

Against this background, the merits of a similar campaign scheduled for the summer months in Kandahar came under increasing scrutiny. At a »shura« meeting in April 2010, President Karzai thus felt compelled to grant local leaders and tribal elders an effective veto over the maneuver: »There will be no operation unless you are happy,« the President said (quoted in Baron 2010) – apparently without having previously consulted with General McChrystal, who was sitting at the back looking »distinctly apprehensive« (Grey 2010).

As the offensive was repeatedly postponed thereafter to allow for »further preparations,«² a prolonged and bitter argument developed between Karzai and members of the international coalition over the right strategy to be pursued vis-à-vis local strongmen and insurgents.³ By early summer, the Afghan President had apparently resolved to try conciliation instead of confrontation vis-à-vis the insurgency and – with the reluctant support of his international allies – convened a »National Consultative Peace Jirga« in June. To the assembled local leaders and tribal elders he proposed a »grand bargain«: economic incentives would be offered to those insurgents willing to stop fighting and abide by the constitution. The Taliban's response was prompt and unequivocal: just as Karzai was outlining his initiative, they fired rockets and grenades at the »jirga's« meeting place.

A month later, another major meeting took place in Kabul: the follow-up to the international London Conference. But although it was the first such event actually held on Afghan soil, its pronouncement of a 2014 deadline for the handover of power and responsibilities in the security sphere to authorities in Kabul appeared to be dictated more by public opinion in coalition countries than by realities in Afghanistan. The »lofty goals« (Moreau and Yousafzai 2010) set by the conference were thus widely perceived by commentators as »another show of farcical progress«

2. The campaign finally began in September 2010.

3. It allegedly culminated in an outright threat by Karzai to actually »join« the Taliban himself (Biddle 2010).

(Arbabzadah 2010) »featuring the defeated Western allies in competitive denial« (Warner 2010).

Amid the diplomatic frenzy, the passing of another deadline went almost unnoticed: Having announced in August 2008 that it was imperative for ISAF to »gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the (...) next 12 months« (McChrystal 2009: 1–2), Stanley McChrystal was no longer accountable for the progress made towards that goal one year later. The General had been relieved of his command by President Obama in June, following the publication of an article citing members of the military leadership making disrespectful remarks about Vice President Biden and other members of the civilian team (see Hastings 2010). Even more so than the change of command, the public exposure of what appeared to be a deep rift between the two branches of the operation was of grave concern in the context of a »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign« relying on close civil–military cooperation.

Clearly, things were not going according to plan for the coalition. When General David H. Petraeus assumed command of ISAF in July, his assertion that »we’re in this to win« (quoted in Partlow 2010) sounded more like reassurance to the coalition’s wavering supporters than a threat to the Taliban: in August, insurgent attacks left more than twice as many coalition soldiers dead than that same month the year before (see Nordland 2010b). Already by September, 2010 had become the year with the highest number of coalition fatalities in the history of the Afghan campaign (see iCasualties 2010). In such an environment, parliamentary elections »[m]arked by violence, ›irregularities,‹ modest turnout« and the violent death of at least 14 civilians (Nakamura and Londoño 2010) were a sad but vivid illustration of how little headway towards stability and democracy has been made since the presidential campaign of 2008.

The Causes of Decline

The Afghan Government

The September elections were only the last in a long line of events pointing to the resilience of cronyism and corruption in Afghanistan.⁴ For many years now, the President’s – allegedly casual – approach to

4. As many as 95 percent of Afghans still consider corruption a persistent problem in their area (See Langer 2010: 7–11).

distinguishing between his own personal well-being, on the one hand, and the welfare of the Afghan nation, on the other, has incited severe international and domestic criticism. At a time when less than 50 percent of Afghans perceive economic conditions in their country to be better than under Taliban rule (see Langer 2010: 7–11), many find it difficult to see the point in having a democracy that appears unable and – even worse – unwilling to provide for even the most basic standards of physical security, political stability, and economic opportunity (see International Council on Security and Development 2010: 46).⁵

What little credibility the Karzai government still retained with its critics, foreign and domestic, was shattered during the past year as a consequence of four parallel – and mutually reinforcing – developments: the first was the President's highly contested re-election in the fall of 2009 amid allegations of fraud and manipulation exchanged between Karzai, his major opponent Abdullah Abdullah, and the international community. The second was an increasing tendency among important coalition members to impose early and largely arbitrary deadlines for their withdrawal from Afghanistan. The third development was Karzai's failed attempt to arrive at a negotiated settlement with the insurgent leadership. The fourth, finally, was the significant increase in the frequency and lethality of insurgent attacks throughout the year.

By spring 2010, with its domestic legitimacy shattered in the fraudulent presidential elections and several of its most important external protectors clearly heading for the exit, Karzai's governing coalition found itself in a vulnerable position, »wondering who its protectors will be after 2011« (unnamed European diplomat, quoted in Cooper and Landler 2010). In this situation, the President felt compelled to adopt a kind of »hedging strategy« and to reach out to his opponents. Karzai's calls for »reconciliation« and his proposal of a »grand bargain« unveiled with much fanfare at the »Peace Jirga« in July, however, did not make much of an impression on an insurgency that correctly interpreted them as rather obvious and desperate attempts to bargain from a position of relative strength before the international withdrawal commences in 2011.

With the Taliban thus refusing to negotiate, President Karzai found himself stuck between a rock and a hard place. Unable to pursue a

5. A total of 55 percent of those surveyed in Helmand and Kandahar consider having a democracy in Afghanistan »not important«; 72 percent would, however, prefer their children to grow up under the rule of an elected government rather than the Taliban (International Council on Security and Development 2010: 45, 46).

conciliatory approach, his weak central government could not hope to succeed through confrontation, either. In Marjah, for example – an area supposedly cleared of insurgents during operation »Moshtarak« in March – the poor performance of the new Kabul-appointed government and administration soon reversed the initial momentum. By June, according to one poll, 89 percent of the population perceived the area to be firmly under Taliban control again; only two percent said the Afghan government was in charge (International Council on Security and Development 2010: 28).

An administration that is perceived – on such a massive scale and on so many levels – as unable to assert its own authority, let alone to protect the civilian population and cater to its most basic needs, will naturally find it difficult to win over the allegiance and support of this population in the fight against insurgents.

The International Coalition

Few would expect the Karzai administration to be very popular under the circumstances just described. It is therefore all the more surprising to find that its international allies are even less well-liked by Afghans: while a recent poll found that the national government and security forces enjoy the trust of at least about a quarter of the population in the two critical provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, only two percent of the people there have confidence in international organizations generally. No more than one percent trust NATO and ISAF in particular (see International Council on Security and Development 2010: 54).

Again, several parallel and interdependent developments can be held accountable for the disturbing state of ISAF's credibility and reputation. First, after nine years on the ground and in the face of the mounting death toll, public support for the Afghan operation is rapidly eroding in coalition countries. Second, governments have responded to growing popular demands to »bring the troops home« by imposing strict limitations on the employability of their soldiers and on the duration of their deployment. Third, as already indicated, an insurgency emboldened by such signs of war fatigue within the coalition has decisively stepped up the rate of its attacks on international interests and soldiers during the past year.

The core problem that makes it increasingly difficult to escape the vicious circle so described is the fact that – nine years after September 11,

2001 – the terrorist threat is increasingly fading out of view, supplanted in the public eye by issues such as climate change, and economic and financial crisis. Consequently, the perceived need and urgency for hunting terrorists, fighting the Taliban, and stabilizing a distant Central Asian country are diminishing as well. But just as the underlying rationale of the Afghan campaign is increasingly coming under scrutiny, the risks and stakes involved are being raised by a resilient insurgency, on the one hand, and the operational requirements of a more pro-active »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign,« on the other.

Especially in those European countries still unfamiliar with the sight of body bags returning home, the mounting death toll is having a profound impact on popular support for the operation: the 2010 Transatlantic Trends survey found almost two-thirds of Europeans (64 percent) in favor of reducing or terminating their nation's commitment in Afghanistan⁶ (see German Marshall Fund of the United States 2010: 15).

In part as a consequence of such sentiments in the electorate, many coalition governments have now imposed firm deadlines on their presence in Afghanistan: Canada led the way in early 2009 by linking a two-year extension of its deployment to the prospect of a complete withdrawal in 2011. US President Obama followed suit in December, vowing to »begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011« (Obama 2009). At about the same time, the German government assured a war-weary public that »Bundeswehr« units would also start withdrawing by 2011. In the Netherlands, Prime Minister Balkenende's coalition government collapsed in February over the question of whether to extend the August deadline for the Dutch withdrawal by one year. Seeking to avoid a similar fate, leaders such as Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk have since insisted on discussing options for »ending this mission as soon as possible« at NATO's Lisbon summit in November (quoted in Borowski 2010).

With a full-strength force thus unlikely to be available much beyond the first half of 2011, it is all the more worrying that the rhetorical support for the »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign« voiced at the London Conference in January 2010 has still not been matched by

6. The United States was the only country in the survey in which a majority of the population (58 percent) supported either increasing or maintaining troop levels in Afghanistan (See German Marshall Fund of the United States 2010: 15-16).

material commitments. In response to General McChrystal's request for 80,000 additional troops, the Obama administration has made available 30,000 men and women. All other NATO members combined have pledged a mere 7,000 soldiers and many have also retained the severe restrictions imposed on their employability: out of a total of about 40,000 non-US troops on the ground in mid-2010, more than half were not allowed to operate at night, close to the Pakistani border, or more than two hours away from the nearest hospital, among other constraints. Of the remaining 19,000 fully committed soldiers, about a quarter were set to leave by 2011 (See Cordesman 2010: 47; McNamara 2009; Sheridan 2009). Such a feeble commitment hardly provides the necessary foundation for a »comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign,« which requires the soldiers to »get out in the field, away from the comfy forward operating bases and into the street« (Thomas 2009).

Well aware of the problems so described, the Taliban have long identified potential weak links in the international coalition. In concentrating their attacks on soldiers from countries where popular pressure in the face of rising casualties is particularly great, the insurgents hope to force governments to lower their profile in Afghanistan, thus weakening ISAF from within and hastening its eventual – albeit political rather than military – defeat. In July 2009, for example, a German terrorism expert warned that »[a] Qaeda and its allies have noted that Germany is the weakest link among the major troop contributing countries« and that they might therefore consider a terrorist attack on the »Bundeswehr« a »worthwhile« undertaking (*Die Welt* 2009). Only two months later, insurgents pressured a German commander into authorizing a disastrous air strike on two hijacked fuel trucks, which accidentally left a large number of civilians dead and triggered significant political turmoil in Berlin.⁷ Likewise, a suicide attack killing 20 Italian soldiers in Kabul in September 2009 has been interpreted as »a test of Italy's resolve in Afghanistan« (Owen 2009).

Almost a decade after 9/11 and the removal of the Taliban from power, most Afghans thus have ample reason to seriously doubt the coalition's staying power; its ability and determination to decisively weaken – let alone defeat – the insurgency. In a poll conducted in the two critical provinces of Helmand and Kandahar in July 2010, 39 percent of those

7. In the process, the former Minister of Defense, a Secretary of State for Defense, and the Inspector General of the »Bundeswehr« were forced to resign.

surveyed thought the Taliban were winning the war.⁸ In Marjah, the site of operation »Moshtarak,« that number stood at a disturbing 65 percent (see International Council on Security and Development 2010: 55, 59).

Turning the tide will remain difficult, however, as long as the international community continues to be as ineffective as it currently is in developing a comprehensive strategic approach to a volatile, complex, and closely interdependent region. While the »AfPak« concept has received much publicity during the past year, support for the integrated approach it suggests so far appears confined to the domain of rhetoric. In practice, the coalition has remained unable or unwilling to provide effective assistance to Pakistan – even in the wake of last summer’s devastating floods (see Ignatius 2010). Beyond the mere provision of assistance, the international community has also failed to engage the most relevant regional powers politically and diplomatically. Until and unless nations such as Pakistan and Iran are given a meaningful role and stake in the process, however, it is likely that they will continue to be perceived by a clear majority of Afghans as having a negative influence on their country (see International Council on Security and Development 2010: 44).

A Way Forward

As the ninth year of the Afghan war comes to a close, a decisive victory of government and coalition forces appears more and more uncertain. Whatever modest progress has been made during the past 12 months is dwarfed in the eyes of many by the disappointments of an almost decade-long struggle, the fragility of the government’s domestic position, the weakness of the international commitment, and the ever-present threat of insurgent attacks.

Against this background, ordinary Afghans are increasingly resorting to their own »hedging strategies«: worried that »traitors« will be severely punished if the Mullahs should one day return to power, most people are reluctant to throw their support behind authorities they sometimes perceive as being only slightly less detestable, but decisively less powerful than the Taliban regime. Concerned about their lives and livelihoods,

8. A nationwide poll conducted in January found nearly a third of the respondents convinced that the Taliban had actually grown stronger throughout 2009 (see Langer 2010: 3).

many even consider it necessary or opportune to live according to the rules set by insurgents and to provide them with food, shelter, and intelligence. Until government and coalition forces can prove that they are able to protect civilians and their property, not only during the day and in the urban centers, but also at night and in the countryside, many Afghans will remain unable to cooperate openly with them. And unless the Karzai administration can prove that it is willing to broadly represent and effectively serve all members of society, many Afghans will remain unwilling to accept the government as legitimate and worthy of support.

Less than a year before several key coalition members are set to start withdrawing from Afghanistan, merely glossing over persistent problems while emphasizing the little progress made – as has so often been done in the past – will no longer be enough. Neither is it adequate, however, to call for a complete and premature revision of the present strategy – particularly one resulting in a drawdown that effectively amounts to an abandonment of Afghanistan by the international community. Even – and in fact especially – against the backdrop of a complex regional environment, a resilient insurgency, a disappointed Afghan public, and mounting criticism of the war in coalition countries, the basic thrust of a strategy that seeks to reverse the tide of global terrorism »by working with local populations and the international community to help the vast majority of people who want to build society, not destroy it« remains fundamentally sound (Volker 2010). What the analysis has found to be lacking, however, is the will and determination on the part of both the Afghan authorities and the international coalition to implement and follow through what they have already agreed needs to be done. »We are,« as a distinguished former US diplomat puts it, »still not pursuing our own stated strategy« (Volker 2010). Doing so – that is, driving the Taliban out of their strongholds while establishing and sustaining the necessary conditions in the security, political, and economic spheres to ensure they do not return – will require that both the Afghan government and the international community honor their commitment to this strategy, even in the face of considerable political costs. In many ways, the operation that was finally launched in Kandahar in September 2010 can (and should) be seen as a crucial (and probably final) test of the seriousness of this commitment.

For the Afghan government, it will be crucial in the coming months to develop and assert its ability to (1) protect, (2) serve, and (3) represent the population. Afghan forces and authorities need to be adequately

trained, equipped, and paid to act as a reliable deterrent against insurgent activity in all parts of the country. For the legitimate institutions to be able to compete with the Taliban's underground arrangements, a culture of legality, efficiency, and public service needs to replace persistent networks of cronyism and corruption in the army, the police force, and at all levels of government and administration. Close cooperation between the respective institutions in coalition countries and their counterparts in Afghanistan modeled on the »partnering« approach in the security sphere that might help to build and sustain the necessary capabilities. Moreover, significant efforts should also be made to broaden the base of the political process by integrating rival powers at all levels of national, regional, and local government. Having backed Hamid Karzai as the – albeit controversially – elected leader of Afghanistan, the international community now has an obligation to hold him accountable by making all assistance explicitly contingent on the implementation of these and other concrete steps towards basic standards of good governance.

For the international coalition, it will be critical to ensure and prove that it is (i) strong enough to defeat the insurgency, (ii) persistent enough to »win the peace,« and (iii) responsive enough not to alienate the Afghan people in the process. Caveats attached to the employability of troops will thus have to be removed and reinforcements made available as required by the situation on the ground. At the same time, political deadlines for withdrawal should be reconsidered and made more explicitly contingent on the actual achievement of the stated goals. At the very least, to avoid a dangerous vacuum of power and purpose, a workable plan detailing the coalition's role in stabilization and counterinsurgency operations once responsibilities are transferred to Afghan authorities should be prepared and published as a clear sign of an enduring international commitment. Finally, strategic priorities and tactical approaches should be reassessed with a view to prioritizing those activities that address the immediate needs of the Afghan people. To this end, tribal and religious leaders should be more intimately involved in strategic and tactical planning (although not ultimately given a veto in decision-making).

As a precondition and enabler for all other measures, it is essential in an extremely volatile and interdependent part of the world to win the support of all relevant regional powers for the coalition's people-centered strategy and to direct their considerable influence with various factions in Afghanistan into productive channels. To this end, existing arrangements, such as the 6+2 framework comprising Afghanistan's

neighbors, the United States, and Russia, could be used and gradually expanded into a kind of »Stability Pact for South-Central Asia.« In this manner, Afghanistan's development as a stable and unthreatening Islamic democracy could be firmly anchored in a broader regional process geared towards reducing tensions and enhancing cooperation.

Many of the ideas outlined here are far from new. Few of them, however, have so far been employed in practice. The most pressing challenge in Afghanistan is therefore less of a strategic and conceptual, and more of a political and operational nature: having committed themselves to a new strategy a year ago, Afghan and international leaders will now have to honor this commitment and bring the new approach to life. More than just the provision of necessary resources, this also entails acceptance of the – sometimes daunting, severe, and very personal – political consequences that might emanate from their employment.

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