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## America's Afghan Dilemma

By David J. Keeling

Like Bush before him, President Obama faces an unwinnable war in Afghanistan. This conflict is not conventional, in the sense that a clear, state-based military threat to U.S. national security does not exist. The Afghan state is not at war with the U.S., or with anyone else for that matter. Within Afghanistan, however, three clear threats exist to the viability of the Afghan state, and to regional and global security. These threats cannot be countered with traditional military might and tactics. Like the British and the Soviets before them, the U.S. cannot win in Afghanistan even if it had a million troops at its disposal. The best outcome that the U.S. could hope for using traditional military approaches is some sort of uneasy stalemate, with security around the Kabul core and a relatively lawless periphery. Herein lies Obama's dilemma. A massive military surge, à la Iraq, has no possibility of success, but neither do any other military options. The key to resolving the Afghan problem lies in a clearer understanding of the country's geography.

Putting the threats in geographic perspective can shed light on viable strategy options for the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan. The first major threat comes from a resurgent Taliban, with new tactics, new weapons, and a better understanding of how to destabilize the region. Witness the recent events in Pakistan's Swat Valley, where fundamentalist fervor threatens the very survival of a nuclear-armed, Western-leaning state. A second threat exists with the continued actions of Al Qaeda in the region, bloodied and somewhat fragmented but still with its philosophical and military leader in play. Al Qaeda remains a global threat, but its ideological and military power is centered in the southwest Asian region among politically and socially disaffected groups. There is little democracy, too few economic opportunities, and a corrupted world view in this region that fuels anti-U.S. and anti-West militancy in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The third threat is rooted in the poppy fields of Afghanistan but shaped by a global demand for heroin that sees little sign of abating. In the poppy growing areas of Afghanistan, the threat is fundamentally economic. What other crop or resource can displace poppy production as a source of income for the impoverished and brutalized rural residents of this region?

A raw truth for Afghanistan and the U.S. is that ending or blunting the military insurgency in the region will not resolve the underlying problems. Afghanistan is one of the world's most impoverished countries, desperately in need of basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, hospitals, electricity, and potable water. More importantly though, and by far the thorniest issue for the U.S., Afghanistan has no basis for viable statehood in a Western democratic framework. It has no political core identity around which to build democratic institutions, and it lacks a sense of shared political or national identity that could coalesce into a functioning government representing all social groups.

Again, its geography matters. Afghanistan is inhabited by eight major and myriad minor ethno-linguistic groups with geographic boundaries that are both clear and murky. Could a modified Swiss-type federal system bring order and stability to Afghanistan? Perhaps its ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical geographies could support a loose affiliation of regional power centers with no national political capital, where representatives (the Loya Jirga) meet on a rotating schedule at each of the regional centers.

Another more radical option is to dismantle Afghanistan completely as a political entity. After all, its creation was artificial in nature, built around a Western conception of a political state rather than around a local desire for political unification. The Pushtun region could be absorbed by Pakistan, the southwestern territories by Iran, and the ethno-linguistically complicated northern provinces could be absorbed by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan respectively based on distributions of tribal groups. Of course, significant cultural, ideological, and social challenges would face the newly expanded countries, but the responsibility for regional security would rest more squarely with these countries and not directly with the U.S.

. There are no easy solutions to America's Afghan dilemma. What remains clear is that the current military approach cannot and will not eliminate radical groups from the region, or bring lasting peace and a stable democracy to Afghanistan. A different strategy offers the only possibility of meaningful success for the long term.

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