The Coming Catastrophe: the American War in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Summary

By virtually every measure, the war in Afghanistan is getting much worse for both the western coalition and for the Afghan civilian population. The strategic benefits are minimal to non-existent, the risks of a widening war alarming, and the moral and humanitarian consequences appalling. Strategic confusion, institutional inertia and self-interest provide most of the answer as to why the US remains in Afghanistan. Australia's commitment shares the same strategic confusion, mixed with a diffuse paternalistic enthusiasm not too far distant from a nineteenth century imperialist ideal of civilising the natives. The US, and its allies, will leave, without any definable or honourable victory. The Afghans will stay. If the current logic of expansion of the war engulfs Pakistan, withdrawal and defeat will take place eventually, but later, and after an infinitely more catastrophic and dangerous war. Could a new US administration transform these outcomes?

Introduction

On September 22, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1833 (2008) extending the authorization of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan for a further year until 13 October 2009.[1] Yet the matter was barely mentioned in the Australian press, and no peace organisation put its head above ramparts to note the legal extension of the war. This resolution and its predecessors, invoking Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, binding on all member states, provide the legal basis for the deployment of Australian military forces in Afghanistan, and those of its partner countries operating as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or in the parallel United States-commanded Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). This overwhelmingly western military coalition now fields 52,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, up from 36,000 at the beginning of 2007, including almost 1,100 from Australia.[2]

Defence officials of Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain and the United States regularly cite three reasons why their troops are still fighting and dying in Afghanistan, in increasing numbers and with increasing numbers of civilian casualties.[3] Two of those reasons are essentially arguments about strategic interest: preventing the return of safe havens for international terrorist networks in Afghanistan, and ensuring that country does not become a narco-state. In the language of UNSC 1833, like that of both the Howard and Rudd governments, coalition forces are mandated to combat the increased violent and terrorist activities by the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, illegally armed groups, criminals and those involved in the narcotics

trade, and the increasingly strong links between terrorism activities and illicit drugs.

The third rationale for the continuing western presence in Afghanistan, seven years after the destruction of the Al Qaeda bases and overthrow of the Taliban government, is based less on strategic interests than a claim of moral or humanitarian responsibility for Afghan democracy and protection of human rights. This now amounts to unquestioning support for the Karzai government in Kabul, elected under UN auspices in 2004.

By virtually every yardstick, the war in Afghanistan is getting much worse for both the western coalition and for the Afghan civilian population.[4] The number of districts under Taliban influence[5], the number of "security incidents"[6], the number of suicide attacks[7], the number of regions that are "No Go zones" for UN and aid workers[8], the number of coalition dead[9], the number of civilian dead and wounded[10], the number of insurgent attacks on civilians[11], the number of coalition air strikes[12], the number of insurgent roadside bombs attacks[13], the number of insurgent attacks on government officials, especially police, the size of the opium crop[14], the number of households involved in opium production[15], the size and sophistication of transnational heroin production and export networks[16] – all have increased or worsened markedly in the past two years.

Taliban fighters. Photograph Nir Rosen

This shorthand summary of an extremely complex political and military situation is taking place in a country larger than Iraq, with a bigger population, a far poorer economic base, and a more complex ethnic formation.[17]

And perhaps most important of all, all of this is happening in a country sharing a border with an already fragile state rendered vastly more so by pressure from the United States, and between whom, the colonially-derived border has almost no meaning in social reality. The Afghanistan War is now the Afghanistan-Pakistan War. Unless western coalition policy changes rapidly, Pakistan as a political entity will be threatened – a matter that India cannot ignore.[18] The survival of Pakistan now depends on a reversal of course in Afghanistan.

Given the war's incipient eruption into the core of the Indian sub-continent, and given the stated western goals of democracy and human rights, no return of sanctuaries for international terrorism, and preventing the emergence of an Afghan narco-state, three questions need urgent debate in all countries contributing forces to the ISAF in Afghanistan:

* Are the stated goals of the US and UN intervention being achieved?

* Are these the real drivers of coalition policy?

* What should be done to move towards peace in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Progress on the stated goals?

Terrorism

The opposition to the Karzai administration and the western coalition is now a diverse set of groups ranging from warlords such as Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddun, Al Qaeda, and a Taliban split between the south and east of the country and Pakistan. It is important to distinguish between terrorist tactics in the sense of attacks on non-combatants for political ends and armed guerrilla resistance to specific government. All of these groups have attacked civilians as well as government officials and the use of suicide attacks on both government representatives and civilians is increasing.

However, two things are clear. The first is that insurgency is being fed by Afghan and Pakistani anger at the civilian casualties resulting from coalition combat tactics, especially the rising number of air strikes. In other words, far from diminishing support for those using terrorist tactics against Afghan civilians, western policy is increasing such support.

The second is that the stated strategic interests of the western coalition really do not concern these attacks: they concern the likelihood of a return of an Afghan government that will tolerate or encourage the use of its territory for acts of international mega-terrorist attacks such as the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. While Al Qaeda has recovered from the initial assault, and has an important presence beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan, such sanctuaries no longer exist in Afghanistan, or even in Pakistan.

The real strategic question is whether there are means other than a very counter-productive war to ensure that a future Afghanistan government does not tolerate such sanctuaries again.

Afghanistan
-Pakistan
physical
map

Narcotics

In reality, far from this war being fought to prevent Afghanistan becoming a narco-state, it is a war that protects the beneficiaries of the narco-state that has already emerged. Apart from a small recent dip attributable to bad weather, opium production continues to expand, feeding the budgets of both sides of the conflict. While the Taliban government in the years just before its fall banned opium production, Islamist groups, as well as government figures (including those close to the president, such as his brother-in-law[19]) now embrace expanded opium production and heroin export. The "farm-gate"

value of the opium harvest is now estimated to amount to about 13% of GDP, with about half a million households now dependent on opium production, under economic and security conditions that offer little alternative for survival.[20] Eradication policies worsen the situation, and many "drug-policy" programs simply serve to enrich a fabulously corrupt few and impoverish many.[21]

The new golden triangle. Afghan opium production

For members of the western coalition, the emergence of a new Golden Triangle in southern Afghanistan raises a short-term Afghanistan question and a long-term question of domestic policy in their own countries.[22] In the short-term, is there any alternative to the proposal of the International Council on Security and Development (formerly Senlis Council) and others to legalise opium production for medicinal morphine?[23]

In the long-term, every coalition country afflicted by the consequences of unending and increasing import-fed heroin addiction must ask whether there is any alternative to shifting from a US-led prohibition policy on heroin to a harm-reduction approach which considers the controlled

legalisation of heroin. This is no simple question, but there is little doubt that the strategic and political disaster in Afghanistan is closely linked to long-suppressed questions about domestic drug policy.[24] Internationally, United States insistence on United Nations and allied alignment with its strict prohibitionist approach has now generated a bloody counter-productive dynamic linking Afghanistan with the streets of NATO and its partner countries.

Democracy and human rights

Hamid Karzai's government, elected in December 2004, and facing re-election in 2009, is caught between the United States and its coalition partners on the one hand, and his domestic allies on the other.[25] The writ of the government extends little beyond Kabul[26]. It has repeatedly protested against American military tactics, especially air strikes[27], and against the presumption that more foreign troops will solve the country's problems.[28]

One of the key issues driving international support for the original invasion was the appalling situation of women and girls under the Taliban regime. Yet despite constitutional changes, and many examples of extraordinary courage, even a cursory scrutiny of reports from the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and other Afghan organisations makes appallingly clear that the March 2008 International Women's Day communiqué by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) is no exaggeration:

"In reality Afghan women are still burning voraciously in the inferno of fundamentalism. Women are exchanged with dogs, girls are gang-raped, men in the Jehadi-dominated society kill their wives viciously and violently, burn them by throwing hot water, cut off their nose and toes,

innocent women are stoned to death and other heinous crimes are being committed. But the mafia government of Mr. Karzai is tirelessly trying to conciliate with the criminals and award medals to those who should be prosecuted for their crimes and lootings."[29]

A few months earlier, RAWA made clear its view of the consequences of the occupation for women:

> "The US government first of all considers her own political and economic interests and has empowered and equipped the most traitorous, anti-democratic, misogynist and corrupt fundamentalist gangs in Afghanistan."[30]

RAWA's views are not the only ones to be considered, but at the very least, they make clear the complexity and finally political character of the ongoing assaults on women in Afghanistan.[31]

Systematic and ongoing violence by the Afghan National Police towards detainees has led to widespread debate in the Netherlands and Canada about ISAF policy of handing insurgent prisoners over to the Afghan authorities, reflecting wider concerns, including those of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, about government agencies' attitudes towards a wide range of civil rights.[32]

It would not be true to say that there is nothing to choose between the warring sides, but it is certainly the case that this is no longer a conflict between two distinctly different and morally incomparable parties. Islamists, warlords, and

drug-profiteers are found in the ranks of both the government and the insurgency.

Why, then, are we in Afghanistan?

If western stated interests in Afghanistan – strategic and moral – do not make sense, why then is the war continuing into its eighth year? In late 2007, the incoming Rudd government in Australia made much of its demand to its NATO partners that the western coalition establish verifiable benchmarks to assess progress towards agreed objectives in Afghanistan, in place of what it saw as the prevailing acceptance of the status quo. Such technocratic demands for efficiency and accountability may well be beneficial in an organisational sense, but will only bring political benefits if they are tied to a close scrutiny of the reasons for ongoing commitment to an increasingly cruel and dangerous war. At present, the strategic benefits are minimal to non-existent, the risks of a widening war alarming, and the moral and humanitarian consequences appalling.

The United States does have some strategic interest in Central Asia, an area of increasing strategic competition among itself, Russia and China, especially for control over oil and gas reserves. Yet the war in Afghanistan is doing little to advance that interest, and in endangering Pakistan, much to damage it.

Why then do the US and its allies stay, and why has the president elect committed himself to boosting troop numbers after a withdrawal from Iraq? The second question may be easier to answer: perhaps Obama can see no other way of achieving the more important immediate political goal - persuading Americans to accept defeat in Iraq.

The question of why the US and its allies stay is more difficult to answer, but it is important to try, because it may point to a solution. For the US and its coalition partners, strategic confusion, institutional inertia and self-interest provide most of the answer. Military deployments create an institutional commitment that tends towards inertia until external variables intervene: once armies are deployed, rotations and budget allocations continue until they are stopped – by military defeat or political abandonment. The US has neither a clear strategic goal in Afghanistan nor rational strategic interest in perpetuating the war.[33]

Some realist critics of US and Australian policy have quite rightly spoken of the lack of an exit plan for Afghanistan – the lack of any strategic plan that culminates in a plausible pathway leading to western military wind-down by a specific date.[34] In fact however, everything we know about the Bush administration's almost eight years in office discounts the likelihood there ever was any kind of coherent rationale for the invasion of Afghanistan beyond the displacement of the Taliban government and the disruption of Al Qaeda's capacity for attack. Specifically, there never was an exit strategy.[35]

Now, with neither clear strategic goal nor interest in ending the intervention, it is likely that strategic confusion, aversion to admitting defeat, institutional inertia and self-interest in continuity, and political distraction by more urgent matters will all conspire to keep the US and its allies in Afghanistan.

Australia's commitment shares the same strategic confusion, mixed with a diffuse paternalistic enthusiasm not too far distant from a nineteenth century imperialist ideal of civilising the natives.[36] Most importantly, Australian commitment to ISAF is part of the Rudd and Howard governments' commitment to

maintaining the US alliance: the price of the perceived necessary strategic insurance premium.[37]

Prospects and pathways to peace

If the apparently remorseless military logic leading to a widening of the war to Pakistan can be slowed, there are some reasons to believe that there is a possibility of a pathway to peace from within Afghanistan itself. One reason is the similarities between the forces backing the government and those backing the insurgency. Some Islamist groups that once fought with the Taliban now support the government. Over the past year President Karzai and the Afghan parliament have called for talks with the Taliban and warlords such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.[38] Public opinion polls with some credibility have noted strong support for both a coalition government with insurgent groups and a negotiated peace.[39] There have been many reports of local truces in different parts of the country for substantial periods of time – some including coalition forces, to the distress of the United States.[40] The tribal- and clan-based character of much of the society provides some pathways across apparently rigid political divisions, and patronage politics always allows division of the spoils of office. Moreover, Afghans have seen foreign military occupation before – the British in the nineteenth century, and the Russians in the 1980s. The one certainty is that they leave and the Afghans remain, and that life must be negotiated with that in mind. For all of the ferocity of the attacks on civilians by the Taliban, the depths of ethnic cleansing that accompanied the hardening of Iraqi religious and communal division after the American invasion have not yet appeared in Afghanistan, leaving a small doorway of hope.

A flurry of mainstream media reports in October of Saudi-sponsored talks between Kabul and the

Taliban, led to suggestions that some in the American military, including the new Central Command theatre commander, David Petraeus, were beginning to look for the possibility of negotiations with the Taliban – or at least, with segments of that movement.[41] In a widely cited interview in Time Magazine Barack Obama indicated his own interest in such an approach.[42]

Some observers with long memories of the maneuvering of previous US administrations to extricate themselves from disastrous interventions pointed to the curious conjunction of these signals of an interest in negotiations accompanying a drive into Northwestern Pakistan and continuing bombings in both southern and northeastern Afghanistan. China Hand for example, the author of the blog China Matters, recalled the political cover for his plan to withdraw from Vietnam that President Richard Nixon achieved by escalating bombing of North Vietnam.[43]

Pakistan soldiers in Bajaur tribal region, November 2008

The slim possibility of peace and the probability of a longer, wider, more dangerous war

Such optimistic views are greatly to be encouraged, especially in order to in turn give

hope to those who are in coalition countries looking for ways to encourage their own governments to turn to negotiations and eventually withdrawal. Too many western reports of the conflict ignore frequent reports in reliable regional media of local truces and parlays across apparently rigid divides. Moreover, the possibility exists that President-elect Obama sees the possible conjuncture of American strategic interest and wider morality in a gradual move towards the exit in Afghanistan as well as Iraq, notwithstanding his emphatic campaign stumping for ramping up the Afghanistan war.

However, like the Nixon analogy, the odds are against this. There is no important US domestic political pressure for an Afghanistan withdrawal – though undoubtedly the fiscal and financial crises are concentrating the minds of the new elite on national and international priorities. At the moment, Afghanistan remains the good war for Americans, though rather less so in other coalition countries – especially Canada and the Netherlands. The Nixon analogy depends on the existence of a strong rationale – political, financial or military - in the minds of the president and his ministers, and at present, there is little sign of that. What is needed, as ever, is the slow build-up of peace movements in all coalition countries, limiting the political freedom of action of the war-makers.

There is a possibility of a path to peace in the near future, but most likely initiated from within Afghanistan, perhaps with Saudi assistance. It could well be that the impossible position that the Bush administration has placed the Pakistani government in, especially after the financial crisis, will hasten such an outcome. However, the odds are that this will be just more blundering on the path to bringing the war to the borders of India.

The UN, and the US in particular, probably have no role to play in the cultivation of such possibilities of a domestically generated Afghan peace. It is not possible for the US to play the part of honest broker in such negotiations. After years of knuckling under to the bullying of the Bush administration and providing the legal mandate for the US-led occupation, it will be difficult for the UN to play that role.

While Australian, British and Dutch officials and advisers speak of the need to "stay the course" for a decade or more into the future, this is impossible. The US, and its allies, will leave, without any definable or honourable victory. The Afghans will stay. The more serious question is whether the current logic of expansion of the war will engulf the core of Pakistan. If that happens, withdrawal and defeat will take place eventually, but later, and after an infinitely more catastrophic and dangerous war.

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part of this world and, as a rich and privileged
country, has obligations. Failure would have
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Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the
world and a fragile new democracy." We must be
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