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Afghanistan: A Time for Review

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The Future Directions International Indian Ocean Dialogue co-sponsored Curtin University's Second Annual National Security and Strategy Workshop on 29 October 2010. Titled "Afghanistan: The Old-New Geopolitical Black Hole", FDI's Institute Director and CEO, Major General John Hartley AO (Retd), gave the keynote address, which is reproduced below.

Nine years ago, the United States worked with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban government in Kabul. The cause for war was clear and President George W. Bush enjoyed widespread national and international support. Now, however, all that seems like a long time ago.

Today, the war is a controversial conflict. Fewer than half the American population supports it, despite the fact that about 100,000 of their service people are in harm's way.

Although some 47 countries contribute troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), fewer than ten of these countries have troops deployed in the turbulent and dangerous south and east. A major contributor, the Netherlands, has recently withdrawn, and Canada remains committed to doing so next year.

Local polls also suggest that Afghan support for the coalition has declined to less than 50 per cent from a high of 80 to 90 per cent earlier in the decade.

In Australia, we have had a predictable parliamentary debate in which both major parties support a commitment until at least the US begins a major drawdown in troop strength. Having made this declaration, however, there is still considerable debate over the efficacy of our commitment, especially in academia, the media, the Greens and amongst former senior officials.

So, what caused this change?

There is little doubt, at least in the public eye, that the mission has lost its clarity of purpose. While few would oppose the idea of denying al-Qa'ida a safe sanctuary in Afghanistan, many are convinced that al-Qa'ida is a spent force or that a return of the Taliban would not necessarily result in an al-Qa'ida revival. Others point to the use of new tactics, such as the widespread use of drones or UAVs that do not need the presence of large numbers of troops on the ground. Others stress that the rebuilding of Afghan military and security forces, and the generally held belief that many Afghans dislike the religiously fundamentalist Taliban, are indications that the ISAF mission is coming to a close. All this also suggests that the government of President Hamid Karzai is up to the challenge of governing his divided and fractious country.

To add to the confusion, President Obama's policies appear to lack clarity. While his decision to deploy an additional 30,000 troops led some to believe that his determination to defeat the Taliban had hardened, the deliberate and protracted nature of the debate leading to this decision caused others to see uncertainty. The situation was not helped when media leaks suggested significant disagreement among senior advisors.

Others saw Obama's decision to begin to withdraw US forces in July 2011 as a case of having his cake and eating it as well. Was he attempting to promote the idea that a short, sharp upsurge would win the war? Or was this designed to appease the war's critics?

His message also had an impact on the Afghan people and Pakistan.

While the imminent withdrawal of American troops might motivate the build-up and lead to an improvement in the performance of Afghan security forces, it may also lead many Afghans to hedge their bets. Equally, it would not be unreasonable for some Pakistani leaders to consider the Afghan Taliban to be their best defence against the consequences of a premature US withdrawal.

Perhaps more significantly, the withdrawal statement could only embolden the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, giving them a propaganda victory that had no positive effect on the Karzai Government or its allies.

Of course, we know that many of these fears may be incorrect or exaggerated. Obama's statements are open to interpretation and any withdrawal is likely to be gradual.

But there is no doubt that the allied strategy lacks clarity at least in the public domain. Exactly what are we attempting to do and how will we achieve this objective are yet to be clearly defined. Nor is this being helped by a perception that there has been little progress in the last nine years.

Neither is the civil situation improving. Most people in Kabul, for instance, do not have a reliable, continuous source of power. More significantly, the food security outlook has worsened and the number of displaced people had risen from 235,000 in 2008 to 328,000 today. HIV is said to be on the rise, there are more children out of school than in school and one in eight women still dies in childbirth.

There is little doubt, at least from the American perspective, that the initial deployment was to destroy al-Qa'ida and to prevent another September 11. This would require the al-Qa'ida hardcore

to be destroyed and a governing regime established in Kabul that would prevent the emergence of another al-Qa'ida-type force.

But the Taliban were not defeated. Indeed, from 2005 they began an impressive comeback. As a result, in early 2009, more than 30,000 additional troops were deployed and a few months later military commanders were again asking for tens of thousands more troops.

A major factor to emerge from the subsequent debate was that Afghanistan was a poor prospect for counter-insurgency tactics. The goals of protecting the populace, establishing effective governance and developing the Afghan security forces were inconsistent with the tribal society and weak traditions of loyalty to the state.

Nor was this situation helped by the apparent sanctuaries offered in Pakistan's remote tribal areas that were subject to minimal government control.

The Taliban had also become more effective. By late 2009, the Taliban were thought to have at least 25,000 fighters – nearly as many as they had before 9/11 and many more than they had in 2005. They had also developed a shadow government in much of southern Afghanistan and especially in the rural areas. This allowed them to provide an alternate system of justice. The Taliban also sought to develop a kinder, gentler face than it had before 2001. But it conducted enough violence to be feared. It rarely targeted civilians with widespread, indiscriminate bombings, but it made life dangerous for ISAF soldiers and for Afghan security forces and government officials.

In 2009, for instance, 500 ISAF soldiers were killed. This was nearly half the number killed in the combined totals of the previous seven years. Nearly 1000 Afghan security personnel, most of whom were police, were also killed. Assassination of political, business, civic and tribal leaders also increased.

I think it would also be useful to consider the nature of guerrilla warfare. Little has changed over the decades with regard to this form of warfare and yet we continue to relearn its lessons.

The guerrilla lives in the country. He isn't going anywhere, as he has nowhere to go. By contrast, the foreigner has a place to which he can return. This is the core weakness of the occupier and the strength of the guerrilla. The former can leave and in all likelihood, his nation will survive. The guerrilla can't. Having alternatives undermines the foreigner's will to fight, regardless of the importance of the war to him.

The strategy of the guerrilla is to make the occupiers' withdrawal option as attractive as possible. A further strategic goal is simply to survive and fight at whatever level he can. Tactically, the guerrilla survives by being elusive. He operates in small groups in hostile terrain. He denies his enemy intelligence on his location and capabilities. He forms political alliances with civilians who provide him with recruits, supplies and intelligence and misleads the occupiers about his own location. The guerrilla uses this intelligence network to decline combat on the enemy's terms and to strike the enemy when he is least prepared. The guerrilla's goal is not to seize and hold ground but to survive, evade and strike, imposing casualties on the occupier. He thus actively avoids anything that could be construed as a decisive contact.

Those of us who are Vietnam veterans are well aware of these issues and so too, increasingly, are

those who currently serve in Afghanistan.

But the occupation force is normally a more conventional one. Its strength is in its superior firepower, resources and organisation. If it knows where the guerrilla is, and can strike before the guerrilla can disperse, the occupying force will defeat the guerrilla. One of the major problems the occupier faces, however, is that his intelligence is normally inferior to that of the guerrillas who rarely mass in ways that result in decisive combat. But their tactical capabilities allow them to impose a constant low rate of casualties on the occupier. The occupation force, of course, will always win engagements, but that is never the measure of victory. While the occupier is not winning decisively, even while suffering only some casualties, he is losing. While the guerrilla is not losing decisively, even if suffering significant casualties, he is winning. Since the guerrilla is not going anywhere, he can afford far higher casualties than the occupier, who ultimately has the alternative of withdrawal.

Of course, we are somewhat taken with the idea that we will train an Afghan army to replace the coalition and that it will deal effectively with the Taliban. This is happening in Oruzgan Province where the Australian Army is training the 4th Afghan Army Brigade. When we finally do withdraw, will the 4th Brigade be capable of dealing with the Taliban threat? Will the threat have been reduced to the extent that it can? Or will the Taliban have withdrawn into a neighbouring province where it will recover its strength and, over time, reduce the effectiveness of the Brigade. All this assumes that the increasingly beleaguered Karzai Government will be prepared to leave the relatively well trained and equipped 4th Brigade in Oruzgan Province.

This situation is not helped if the occupiers' strategic value of the war is ambiguous or if the occupier does not possess sufficient force and patience to systematically overwhelm the guerrillas. The outcome is further confused if the occupier has either political or military constraints that prevent operations against sanctuaries such as exist in Pakistan. Indeed, to my knowledge, no occupier has ever defeated a guerrilla force that had sanctuary in a neighbouring country.

Nor is it helpful that the Taliban is anything but a homogenous force. While most of the hierarchy share a common doctrine, this cannot be said for the rank and file. Although largely Pashtun, regional and tribal influences prevail. Radicalised foreigners are in their ranks. Local warlords, tribal chiefs and even criminal elements play their part. Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Directorate supports, and possibly directs, certain elements.

There are also many millions of Pashtun living on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border and recruiting does not seem to be a problem for the Taliban.

A further issue that requires consideration is the idea that the Taliban and al-Qa'ida do not share common views on all issues. Indeed, some analysts claim they have fallen out. Certainly, the Taliban is regional-based while al-Qa'ida had a global reach. But there is evidence to suggest that al-Qa'ida is also promoting the unification of factions that until recently opposed each other. This is certainly happening in Pakistan where various separatists are being encouraged to adopt an anti-Western attitude. It may be possible that Islamist terror is growing more united and is increasingly motivated to confront Western attitudes and ideals.

This also brings me to the different ways of thinking between the military and the government. In

some ways, I think this is more pronounced in the United States than it is here and the differences are most understandable. The military, after all, is involved in a war. It is institutionally and emotionally committed to winning the campaign. It will demand resources. For a soldier who has bled in that war, questioning the importance of the war is obscene. A war must be fought relentlessly and with all available means.

But while the military's senior generals and the civilian heads of the Defence Department should be responsible for providing the government with sound, clearheaded advice on all military matters – including the highest levels of grand strategy – they are ultimately responsible for the pursuit of objectives that support government policy. Generals must think about how to win the war they are fighting. Prime Ministers must think about whether the war is worth fighting.

A Prime Minister probably must take a more dispassionate view than the generals. After all, he or she must calculate not only whether victory is possible, but also the value of the victory relative to its cost.

A Prime Minister must also consider at least four other issues, three of which are strategic and one that relates to raw politics.

The first is whether a revived Taliban poses a threat to Australia, either directly or through proxies similar to Jemaah Islamiah. Will a Taliban victory assure a return of al-Qa'ida? This is not clear, although a number of commentators have suggested that the idea is far-fetched.

The second of the strategic issues is what the international impact might be of terminating the war in Afghanistan over and above the immediate consequences in that country. Will this result in a major upsurge in jihadist regimes elsewhere? Will there be a perception that the allied forces no longer have a willingness to intervene where necessary? Will these jihadist forces perceive that the allies have lost and will their movements increase in confidence and numbers? What might this mean for a number of Middle East, North African and South Asian governments?

The third strategic issue is what an Australian withdrawal would mean in terms of our relationship with the United States. On the surface at least, a total withdrawal before a significant American drawdown in troop numbers seems most unlikely.

The political problem is, of course, domestic. We have a government that has no margin for error. This means that our government is politically weak. It cannot be perceived to be anti-war or even pro-war. It would seem to me that, regardless of strategic analysis, the government is not going to withdraw forces, at least in any significant number, until the US does. Nor is it likely to increase the number deployed, certainly not in significant terms.

Another important consideration is the approach being taken by the US.

The official White House position appears to be that the troop surge, which has just been completed, needs to be given time to work. There is little sign that the White House position will change before the 2 November mid-term elections, or even the December review of the progress of the current strategy. But there are significant challenges to the current counterinsurgency-focused strategy. The senior Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, has gone so far as to declare that victory is close, although clearly he has ulterior motives for such a statement.

The bottom line is that the timetable dictated by US political realities is incompatible with the counterinsurgency strategy currently being pursued. Since the counterinsurgency strategy cannot be pursued to its end, political accommodation must be of central importance to US success in Afghanistan. But the Taliban are not being compelled to negotiate.

It is also quite likely that the claims that al-Qa'ida and the Taliban are increasingly seen to be ideologically and geographically separate are either incorrect or exaggerated. The former remains, and will remain, a focus of US counterterrorism efforts. This need not be the case with the Taliban. US efforts in Afghanistan and US national interests in terms of geopolitics and grand strategy may have diverged.

A recent report by a non-partisan Washington-based think tank, the New American Foundation, makes five recommendations for a new strategy that allows for a relatively rapid, though not complete, US drawdown.

These are to:

- Emphasise power-sharing and political inclusion.
- Downsize, and eventually end, military operations in southern Afghanistan and reduce the US military foot print.
- Keep the focus on al-Qa'ida and domestic security.
- Encourage economic development.
- Engage global and regional stakeholders.

These are not revolutionary new ideas or proposals. But they cogently open for discussion the broad outlines of a potential alternative strategy in Afghanistan. These broad outlines are likely to be consistent with any shift in US strategy, and they reflect what appears to be an emerging consensus on what an alternative strategy might be. No matter how connected or unconnected the report is with the Administration and the Pentagon, both are likely to pay close attention to its public reception and criticisms of it in order to gauge the best way to present an actual alternative strategy to the US public.

There is also the cost to consider. Much effort is taking place to improve the effectiveness and strength of the security forces. There has been a dramatic improvement in the training, equipping and deployment of such forces in the last two years. ISAF and Afghan units now deploy together. A major challenge remains, however, in ensuring that corruption does not undermine the ability of such forces in the future. While the military forces are said to be improving, at best, the police force is in an early stage of development.

But this effort comes with a price. The current cost of Afghan security forces is expected to stabilise at about \$US6 billion per year, far in excess of the Afghan Government's entire domestic budget. Foreign military assistance will thus be required to sustain those security forces financially for the foreseeable future, even if one day they become an effective internal security force.

This, of course, leads to the next issue that requires careful consideration. Just how flexible is the Taliban and can it see an opportunity to achieve its objectives by other than militarily wearing down the coalition's will? Perhaps an indication of this was the decision by President Karzai to appoint a

former Afghan President, Burhanuddin Rabbani, to chair the new High Peace Council, the main vehicle through which Kabul will pursue peace talks with the Taliban.

Although talks with the Taliban have received media attention in recent weeks, they have been under way for several years. The High Peace Council is intended to provide some measure of transparency, but the critical question remains as to how willing the Taliban are to negotiate when they perceive themselves to be winning.

This is a complex issue. It involves not just the core Taliban leadership but also the Haqqani network, Pakistan, Iran and al-Qa'ida. So, while negotiations with Afghan jihadist insurgents involve several different domestic and international stakeholders, the Taliban are in control of the nature and substance of any talks, and they currently do not feel the need to engage in any meaningful dialogue.

The Taliban realises, however, that the circumstances in Afghanistan today are very different from the anarchy that existed after the fall of the Moscow-backed Marxist regime in 1992, when it was able to impose a military solution on most of the country. The movement is also not as monolithic as it once was when it first emerged in 1994.

Therefore, it may be in the Taliban's interest to avoid a civil war in the aftermath of a Western military exit. To this end, they are trying to maintain channels with the Karzai Government, which can be used for talks when they sense that the moment is right. For now, the Taliban is mostly concerned with underscoring its pragmatic credentials. This can be seen in a 23 July statement by an official Taliban spokesman offering to facilitate an orderly exit for NATO forces and another, a month later, saying that once in power, the Taliban will not pose a threat to Afghanistan's neighbours and will not allow militant forces to use Afghan soil for transnational attacks.

Clearly, some factions of the Taliban might be interested in a negotiated settlement. But the movement as a whole has maintained considerable internal discipline and is not being forced to the negotiating table out of fear of defeat. Indeed, this line sums up their position:

'The Taliban lose little by being at the negotiating table; they can always walk away.'

But negotiation and political accommodation can also stem from opportunity. Some form of political accommodation sooner rather than later could reduce the cost to the Taliban in terms of lives and effort. They no longer harbour illusions about being able to return to power and control the country to the degree they did at the turn of the century.

So, the question is not one of whether talks might take place. They already have and they will no doubt continue. The question is what concessions will be necessary to convince the Taliban to negotiate meaningfully and in a timely manner on a political settlement.

The Taliban may well believe that they are operating from a basis of strength. After all, ISAF is unlikely to expand, and the Karzai Government forces are rapidly approaching their final strength. A series of decisive military blows against them are unlikely to occur, particularly if they refuse major combat. The question, then, is what price will the Taliban demand and whether that price is one that Kabul and Washington will accept.

So, how might we expect the Taliban to negotiate? Several analysts have attempted to explain how they might do this:

- Disavow that the Taliban commanders that were sent to Kabul in fact speak for the Taliban.
- Make totally unacceptable demands in the expectation that Karzai and the coalition will moderate their own demands.
- Exploit perceived divisions between the coalition and the Karzai Government.

A final thought is that the Taliban will never honour any agreement because its grievances are pretexts for seeking absolute power.

Certainly, the idea that the coalition might put the Taliban under sufficient pressure so that the movement might fracture, and that significant elements might somehow join the Karzai Government, seems far-fetched to say the least.

Pakistan also has a major role to play. After all, it has connections and leverage over some of the Taliban movement. Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Gilani made this explicit on 12 October, when he insisted that there can be no success in talks with the Taliban without Islamabad. 'Nothing can happen without us because we are part of the solution,' he said. 'We are not part of the problem.'

Washington also wants much from Islamabad: more intelligence, a greater Pakistani military effort in the border areas, a tolerance for US cross-border operations and help in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Above all else, it needs acquiescence in allowing supplies for ISAF to flow unimpeded into Afghanistan. Although a northern distribution network is in place and there is a major air bridge, these supply lines are meant to complement those that run through Pakistan and not replace them. It is unlikely, for instance, that ISAF could sustain operations on the current scale and tempo without Pakistan.

So, a key question is whether the United States and Pakistan can reach a durable accommodation on cross-border operations. This will be necessary not only for current operations, but also the eventual drawdown of ISAF forces. The movement of these supplies injects a substantial amount of money into the Pakistani economy. There also appears to be a strong constituency for this to continue. But the US may have to give up, or at least reduce, its cross-border operations in order to meet its logistic requirements.

Now, where does all this take us?

The coalition aim is, at best, ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the strategic aim that the coalition will remain in Afghanistan until the security situation is at a stage where the Karzai Government can take the necessary measures to survive a Taliban takeover for at least several years. Of course, there may not be a total withdrawal for some time. Afghan units may retain a mentoring force that might have access to air support and so on. There is also talk of aid and development forces remaining, but these will only be able to operate where and when the security situation allows that to happen.

Certainly, the troop surge will have some immediate positive impact. But it will also be seen as a last

ditch effort. Of course, removing the Western presence may also reduce the motivation for ordinary Pashtuns to join the Taliban.

But an effective government must also develop. Having capable military forces are of little use if there is not an effective government to direct them.

It seems to me, therefore, that two objectives need to be pursued.

The first is that there must be popular support to prevent al-Qa'ida from re-establishing itself. This may, or may not, require the removal of a possible Taliban revival. The second is that there needs to be a form of governance that can influence and mobilise forces and the means of persuading the populace to confront any attempt by al-Qa'ida to regain its former status. But how is this to be achieved in a fractured society, divided by ethnic, tribal and religious differences, with a weak and obviously corrupt central government?

And here is the dilemma. Critical to this outcome is the effectiveness of governance. Is it possible to have a strong central government? Or should we accept a series of strong regional governments that are prepared to support a weak national entity? Would a Taliban-delivered national or regional leadership be acceptable if it were prepared to prevent al-Qa'ida returning?

What role does the general population play in all of this? Clearly, many do not want to see a return of the Taliban, let alone al-Qa'ida. But can they be assured that they can deal with the Taliban once ISAF withdraws? Can they be convinced that they will be governed in a way that will assure their safety and provide services such as employment, health and education? Can Karzai, or whoever might replace him, develop a legitimate and effective form of government at all levels with a reconstruction programme that supports economic growth and food security? Based on current achievements, I would be most surprised if any of these outcomes were to occur.

To my mind, none of these questions has a conclusive answer.

The immediate prospects, therefore, are not encouraging. By some accounts, the Afghan Government is one of the most corrupt in the world. Piles of cash are said to find their way to Dubai every day. Government positions are routinely sold to the highest bidder. Even the delivery of ISAF logistics attracts bribes.

Herein lies the most significant challenge to a situation where the Taliban is prevented from returning to power, at least in southern and eastern Afghanistan. ISAF and a newly trained Afghan army may be able to contain the Taliban for a period of time but, unless supported by a strong government, the likelihood of this outcome prevailing is very unlikely.

Thank you.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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