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ISAF, NATO and the Quest for Stability in Afghanistan

By

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“...we must return to time honoured principles and terminology that our forces have tested in the crucible of battle and are well grounded in the theory and nature of war. At the same time, we must retain and adopt those aspects of effect based thinking that are useful. We must stress the importance of mission-type orders that contain clear Commander’s intent, unambiguous tasks and purpose, and most importantly, link ways and means with achievable ends. To augment these tenets, we must leverage non-military capabilities and strive to better understand the different operating variables that make up today’s complex operations environments”.

General J.N. Mattis, US Joint Force Commander, 14 August, 2008

Summary

NATO’s ISAF is entering a critical phase. The arrival of the Obama Administration and the crafting of the AFPAK strategy affords the NATO mission in Afghanistan four vital new departures: a balanced regional strategy that considers Afghanistan and Pakistan; a more coherent overall strategy, an audit of effect in Afghanistan; and an all-important new approach to political reconciliation. Hitherto ISAF has been Afghanistan-lite. The new effort will help to ease that in the short-term but will only bear fruit if the three strategic phases envisaged in planning (security by end 2011, Afghan capacity building by end 2014 and Afghan civil primacy by end 2017) are bound together by a strategic campaign plan worthy of the name, that includes Asian partners first and foremost and an enhanced role for the UN.

Introduction

The NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has often been painted as the inadequate in pursuit of the impossible. However, ISAF is more victim than culprit. There are three basic contradictions (amongst several) which have prevented and continue to prevent the

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rate and pace of desired progress. First, there is a dangerous confusion of values with interests. Trying to re-model Afghanistan (and now Pakistan) to deal with Al Qaeda is the equivalent of turning a garden into car park to deal with moles. The final result is unlikely to be pretty and whilst the pest might be dealt with in one's immediate environment it will no doubt simply move elsewhere. The Coalition is only endeavouring to re-model Afghanistan as part of a strategic counter-terrorism strategy because Europeans can go nowhere outside Europe in force without leaving a place better off than when they arrive. Consequently, strategic political correctness pollutes and then destroys strategy because the means to fund a value-laden strategy simply does not exist. Put simply, there ain't nothing like enough boots, military or civilian to offset the tension between values and interests that exist in a place like Afghanistan. Second, only the Americans think big about the overall solution and yet they only invest a relatively small part of themselves in the communal effort which is ISAF. This has enabled too many European allies to use provincial reconstruction teams to detach themselves from the overall strategic objective – a relatively stable Afghanistan as a counter to Al Qaeda style terrorism. Focussing on their bit of Afghan real estate thus becomes the strategic equivalent of re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic. Trying to follow American strategy on European resources has thus created a profound tension for many Europeans which has tended to exacerbate European weakness. Third, such has been and is the softness of public support in contributing nations governments have repeatedly raised unrealistic expectations about the time, money and human cost involved in re-modelling Afghanistan. Some eight years on from the initial deployment stabilisation cynicism has established itself, particularly in Europe, at a time of acute financial crisis.

The bottom line is this; NATO, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the international community as a whole are at a tipping point in Afghanistan with an under-resourced effort, poorly organised in pursuit of a definition of success that would challenge the strategic patience of even the most powerful and committed. Sadly, the coalition is wracked by differing levels of commitment which makes sound campaign planning, the *sine qua non* of effectiveness virtually impossible. Moreover, too many governments do not want to consider adjustments to their respective strategies for fear it would give the impression that the sacrifice of service personnel has been for nought. The fear in capitals is that an already soft public opinion might collapse dooming governments with it. That is utterly misguided. The US policy review initiated by the new US Administration must move to create a much more coherent NATO strategy along two axes: first, much more efficient use of military forces in-country within the constraints of national caveats; and second, a much greater level of co-operation between civilian efforts (governmental and non-governmental) across the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in pursuit of a definition of success that all can agree is achievable within a reasonable but realistic timeframe.

The arrival of the Obama administration and the Comprehensive Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan (AFPAK) thus affords an opportunity for four vital new departures without which NATO efforts will fail. First, a properly balanced regional strategy that at one and the same time seeks to de-Westernise the identity of the effort in and around Afghanistan so that regional partners can be given a greater say, and along with the UN, a much higher profile. Second, a much more coherent overall strategy is needed in pursuit of reasoned and reasonable goals as part of which the tired burden-sharing arguments must be put to one side and much more cogent effort is undertaken to make the most of what states can offer. Third, a thoroughgoing review of strategy in-country based on an audit of effect across Afghanistan, starting in Regional

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Commands South and East which will be the crucibles of contest. It is still too difficult to measure true progress because the metrics used by each coalition member are incompatible. Fourth, (and above all), a political reconciliation strategy is needed that pushes the Kabul government towards better governance, whilst at one and the same time taking a more discerning view of the insurgency by distinguishing between the Taliban (and strains therein), other insurgents and Al Qaeda. Finally, the coalition must endeavour to craft a single narrative with which to engage not just Afghans, but also the region. The conceptual expansion of the mission to include Pakistan (two countries, one challenge) means a far more realistic concept of challenge. That will mean first and foremost Americans and Europeans not only harmonising diplomatic efforts to a much greater degree, but ending the inherent tensions that exist between counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and stabilisation and reconstruction operations. ISAF must and will remain at the forefront of the search for security, without which stability will be a still born child. However, the focus must shift rapidly to reinforcing state capacity and good governance and ultimately Afghan civil primacy. That is why it is important a) to de-militarise the Afghan story; b) emphasise the critical ground that is the Afghan people; but c) make it clear that a continued effort can only be sustained by the coalition if the government and governance move to reduce corruption and criminality at high levels.

Strategy and Organisation

The focus of this paper is ISAF and Afghanistan and given AFPAC ISAF (or rather the Coalition) strategy and organisation must be re-considered. All strategies evolve on contact with on the ground reality. It is the refusal of governments to face this basic reality that has given ample and fertile ground for journalists and academics of a more excitable persuasion to paint the picture as unremittingly black with the word failure bandied around as though it is a dye on wool certainty. It is therefore important to be reminded of the ISAF mission: "To conduct military operations in the assigned area of operations to assist the Government of Afghanistan in the establishment and maintenance of a safe and secure environment with full engagement of Afghan National Security Forces, in order to extend government authority and influence, thereby facilitating Afghanistan's reconstruction and contributing to regional security".

US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has already signalled a shift on the part of the new US Administration by stating that, "Afghanistan is where the war on terror began and that is where it must end". Therefore, Afghanistan, rather than Iraq, will likely become the main focus of American strategic stabilisation efforts and rightly so. However, some caution must be advised because Afghanistan is not Iraq. Therefore, whilst a Petraeus-inspired security and stabilisation surge might not have the same immediate impact it appeared to have in the Sunni heartland of Al-Anbar province in Iraq it is entirely appropriate that the Coalition supports such a surge. That is why a continued commitment to crafting a partnership with the Afghan people is vital in pursuit of a proper balance between governance capacity-building, a functioning and properly sustained Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and, of course, credible security.

This is especially important now as a more realistic definition of 'success' is now emerging from the new Administration. Thankfully it is one that is no longer tinged by the manic neo-

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conservative creed of democracy at any cost that made success so elusive for the Bush administration. It may sound hard, and the Afghan people are indeed the critical ground because of the strategy adopted by the Western democracies, but their well-being is not the primary reason for the Western presence (nor indeed is the Taliban, they are just in the way). Rather, it is the denial of potential bases to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan from which further attacks similar to those on Washington and New York could be launched. The attacks on Madrid and London were much more of home grown origin, which raises questions about overall strategic rationale for spending so much time, money and, of course lives on Afghanistan. However, that is another story which sadly so few seem willing to confront. Like it or not the West is committed to state-building in Afghanistan as part of a strategic counter-terrorism effort and only when something that looks like success therein is generated will efforts elsewhere have credibility.

The 2001 plan was always ambitious given Afghanistan's history. The aim was nothing less than the realisation of a functioning democratic state, in which the central authority of the state was recognised by all and corruption was no greater than that with which any functioning state can cope. Whilst all Coalition members mouthed their support back in November 2001 it was only the Americans who seemed to believe in such an end. The result was a sovereignty trap by which the Coalition pretended the Afghan Government was the sovereign body, even though the Afghan Government was as much the problem as the solution. Moreover, the main motivation of many NATO allies was apparently to do the minimum commensurate with supporting the US to keep the Americans interested in the security and defence of Europe. Unfortunately, very few of the European allies ever believed a stable Afghanistan was really achievable and it was only at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit that something like an Afghan-wide strategic campaign plan of sort was fashioned. Even with such a plan it is evident from the lack of concrete support that many NATO allies still regard such an objective as unattainable, as many of them try to shift the heaviest burdens onto allies, mainly the Americans and British.

Certainly, the strategy remains high-risk being hostage to many fortunes. First, a thoroughly stable Afghanistan is highly unlikely, not just because it is Afghanistan but also due to tensions between India and Pakistan. Given the serious decline in Indian-Pakistan relations after the November 2008 Mumbai bombings much effort will need to be invested in repairing that relationship. Much will also depend on the September 2009 elections. If they are captured by the Narco-Khans (and other warlords) Afghanistan maybe on the slippery slope back into civil war in which circumstances the Coalition will fail as the state-building strategy collapses in ruins. In such an eventuality the West will look far weaker than it actually is because it chose to deploy its strength in such a way that its weakness has been accentuated.

ISAF is a product of this inherent tension between strategy and performance as relatively small forces are dissipated in the search for a centre of gravity between security and stability. Put simply, ISAF has become less a force and more an attempt to lead an armed Whole of Government approach that is so complex in practice that the credibility of the military presence is daily undermined. Indeed, organising civil-military relations at the national level in the absence of a real campaign plan at the Coalition level (that is worthy of the name) is in danger of sucking the life out of coalition force generation and operations. ISAF is not itself the Comprehensive Approach but too often it is being asked to be so with too few forces and too little resources built around commanders with too little access to real levers of power. Rather, given the context and the mission, ISAF is a flawed attempt at the Effects-Based Approach

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dangerously weakened by a capability-capacity crunch imposed upon it by insufficiently capable forces, inadequate numbers of forces and imbalanced rules governing the engagement of those forces, and an ever-expanding task-list.

Hitherto ISAF has been Afghanistan-lite and if the Alliance does not grip this fact it could indeed fail. ISAF today is in effect a series of fiefdoms which tie forces to space ceding manoeuvre and mobility to the enemy thus rendering the creation of a true security space nigh impossible, particularly in the south. According to the theology of stabilisation and reconstruction the Comprehensive Approach can only start WHEN the space has been secured and therein lies the paradox of NATO's version of the Comprehensive Approach, the CPA or Comprehensive Planning and Action of Civil and Military Activities. In fact the real world demands stabilisation and reconstruct IN conflict, not after it. However, with insufficient resources to a) do the job; and b) convince partner organisations, such as the UN, EU and/or partner states to invest in mission success ISAF has been unable to create either security or stability. The basic problem is that a dangerous grey area exists between the security role and the stability role in which the transition from security to stability requires both sufficient armed forces to ensure security and sufficient civilians to build stability. Whilst ISAF lacks sufficient troops, it is the lack of sufficient numbers of robust civilians on the ground where the mission really falls down.

The ISAF Tipping Point

With the accession of the new US Administration the ISAF mission is at a tipping point. It is a tipping point where all the old tensions must be put to one side and a new dynamic formed that makes far better use of what ISAF has, rather than re-iterating the debate about what ISAF has not. To that end, the Alliance will need to craft much better synergy of effort within the frameworks of caveats (every nation has them) rather than remain trapped in a spiral of mistrust. At the same time NATO's role will need to be de-emphasised and the Coalition effort de-Westernised to create more space for more partners to fill the civilian reconstruction lacunae under an expanded UN banner. That is why NATO's 60th anniversary summit will be important because it should provide the baseline for a new effort under the leadership of President Obama. NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008 agreed the Comprehensive Political-Military Plan that formed the basis of a strategic campaign plan without which there can be no sustained progress. The plan was focused on what is a reasonable end-state to expect, and what timetable and resources were to be required to achieve it. At the same time NATO nations in effect gave the Afghan authorities an idea of what they expected from them and for how long they were prepared to commit. That plan, which has become strangely subdued with the change of administration in the US, needs to be re-energised, de-westernised and sold to new partners, not least Japan.

Front and centre is the need for a detailed stabilisation and reconstruction campaign plan that civilians (both Afghan and non-Afghan) help to craft. Strange though it may seem the Afghanistan-lite approach prevented the crafting of anything remotely like such a plan until 2008. In effect, therefore, the current plan is only a year old and some would argue it is far too early to measure its success or failure. The real question is this; given that the lines of operation explicit

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in ISAF's Campaign Design: Vision of Resolution are unlikely to bear real fruit until 2014 or 2015 what progress could be deemed sufficient before 2011 (when the Canadians leave) to justify nations committing to go the extra five years or so that are explicit in the campaign designs.

There are three strategic phases that any such short to medium term strategy must be founded on and three key elements upon which the ISAF Comprehensive Approach be established. The benchmarks are straightforward (at least in theory). By end 2011 strategic phase one must see a reduction of the military presence as a shift of effort takes place towards reinforcing state capacity and local governance. By end 2015 what is essentially a political phase must itself hand over to a new strategic phase which emphasises Afghan civil primacy.

However, the elements in question are demanding. First, Afghans as a whole will need to demonstrably support the ISAF role in the south with major advances in the counter-insurgency campaign. That will require the re-introduction of manoeuvre into Regional Command South (RC South) as part of a re-balancing between forces tied to PRTs and RC South as a single operating space. That in turn will only be done with the backfilling of Coalition forces by the Afghan National Army (ANA). The ANA will need to have some fourteen real brigades in place and capable of backfilling for NATO forces. In addition, some major elements of the Afghan National Police will need to be seen to operating effectively in at least one hundred of the 325 police districts. Second, effective governance by central government will need to be seen to be expanding to the majority of provinces through reliable governors backed by an emerging rule of law structure with supporting institutions in evidence. Third, some shift away from poppy production and some marginalisation of the Narco-Khans will be essential. Certainly, without progress thereon it is very hard to see how the 2009 elections can be held without having them bought by narco-dollars in the absence of all the aid money pledged being delivered to the farmers so they have an alternative source of income. There is one additional element missing. Afghanistan does not lack AT PRESENT for money being invested. The problem is aid and development is very poorly co-ordinated and eaten away by a mixture of corruption and by and large absent auditing of inputs and outputs. Rather, what is needed is much greater emphasis to ensure Afghanistan can absorb aid and development and much more cross-PRT projects. For example, before any of these efforts can really begin to gain traction some amelioration will be needed of the projected 60% unemployment across the country in 2009. That in turn will require a commitment to a major programme of road-building, electricity grid expansion etc. Given the current financial and economic travails of the West it is not only the weakness of the military effort that could end Coalition efforts, but Western willingness to sustain the development strategy that enhances the quality of life of all Afghans and which in turn gives them some reason to believe that a future other than conflict, corruption and tribalism might be theirs.

However, even a limited definition of success would require new and true partnerships and this is where the inter-agency challenge is at its most acute. The EU is a problem apart because in reality the continuing lack of performance of the Union demonstrates just how difficult it is for the EU's Crisis Management Concept to move beyond the purely rhetorical, particularly as it concerns the deployment of civilian capabilities. However, the UN is key. Indeed, ISAF is present under a UN Security Council mandate. The problem is this. Not only is Ban-ki Moon proving resistant to expanding the role of UNAMA, the political constellation within the UN Security Council does not augur well for the kind of political support necessary for UN agencies

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to play the vital role they should. As for the international organisations (IOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whilst many of them are excellent, too many of them are competing with each other for funds to do too little and are in any case retreating from areas of vital importance due to the lack of security.

Comprehensive Approach Basics

US Secretary of Defense Gates has called for an increase in NATO forces in the run-up to the elections, as well as additional long-term civilian personnel for the development of governance structures, with a particular emphasis on more police trainers to train the trainers. However, ISAF must be first equipped to play the proper oversight role of the NATO component, with a much closer working relationship with an enhanced UN role to oversee the all-important civilian effort, and therein lies a profound dilemma. Not only is the UN constrained the much vaunted Comprehensive Approach tends to emphasise national efforts at the expense of transnational efforts. Above all, that means bringing the US and NATO efforts far closer into synergy.

Therefore, ISAF's problem could be ascribed to what might be called Comprehensive Creep. UK Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 4/05 of 2005 states, "The Comprehensive Approach is...a conceptual framework which could be used to reinvigorate the existing, Cabinet-led, approach to coordinating the objectives and activities of Government Departments in identifying, analysing, planning and executing national responses to complex situations. Post-operational analysis of situations and crises at home and abroad has demonstrated the value and effectiveness of a joined up and cross-discipline approach if lasting and desirable outcomes are to be identified and achieved".

The Comprehensive Approach was thus envisioned as a means to the end of national strategic objectives reliant on a combination of diplomatic, military and economic instruments of power, together with an independent package of development and humanitarian activity supported by a customised, agile and sensitive influence and information effort. In other words the national Comprehensive Approach assumes a strategic campaign plan, influence over tools and instruments of power, a critical mass of relevant capabilities and capacities and control of the message vital to a strategic communications plan. It does not work at the national level, let alone the transnational level and a new approach is needed.

Successful state-building is reliant upon a broad concept of security in which all constituent parts of society and a Whole of Government approach to their improvement are to be seen as lines of operation working towards that strategic centre of gravity. Consequently, effect requires a security continuum that includes establishing rule of law, education, commercial, humanitarian and health, information, military, economic and diplomacy and governance. Only through such a broad approach to security can the relevant objectives, resources and contributors be established. What has become known as the 'complex of actors' is thus deemed to be the key grouping for the successful management of process involving possibly other governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, as well as private and commercial interests. It is believed that crucial to the success of the Comprehensive Approach is the

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motivation and attitude of the indigenous and/or local population. However, avoiding a dependency culture is also deemed vital as is the control and marginalisation of opportunists who benefit from crisis and spoilers who seek to undermine the response.

Concerted action is thus vital for conflict resolution focused on four concurrent activities of prevention, intervention, regeneration and sustainment all of which are mutually interdependent, but none of which are dependent on or can be shaped solely by Commander's Intent. This is the basic dilemma from which ISAF continues to suffer. The factors vital for ISF success can be thus summarised:

1. The creation of a Strategic Communications Plan that lays out the why, where, how, what, how much and how long of the operation to a broad audience both in region and at home.
2. The proper and effective means by which to exert far more influence over the conduct and performance of the Afghan Government. They need to understand the price they could pay for failure to reform.
3. Increased pressure on the Afghan Government to inject urgency in the area of good governance, possibly through the creation of a monitoring body that can oversee the work more effectively.
4. The proper and systematic engagement with the Afghan political elite so that the Coalition can progressively separate the success of individuals from that of vital state institutions
5. The forging of a Model Provincial Reconstruction Team that can turn the theoretical benefits that the 3D approach (defence, diplomacy and development) enshrined in the Afghan Compact into a working reality.
6. Enhanced civilian control over (and help with) the creation of fourteen functioning army brigades by the end of 2009 which will and must be a vital milestone in the coalition strategy. .
7. The re-gripping of an effective strategy towards a functioning Afghan National Police (ANP) force that has gone badly awry.
8. The on the ground establishment of better and more relevant and more accurate metrics. Not the kind that tick boxes back in The Hague, Berlin, London or Washington but part of a strategic development plan that is co-ordinated, logical and above all impressive.

There are two more intangible and yet seemingly paradoxical commodities that ISAF also needs; strategic imagination and modesty. The arrival of the Obama administration might just afford that. Indeed, in many ways it is the failure of strategic imagination that has led to what is in places bordering on self-defeat. The successful re-building of Afghanistan is achievable given the mission of creating a relatively stable, functioning and legitimate state. However, such an objective will not be achievable prior to 2015 at the VERY earliest. Moreover, the international civilian and military effort is far too fractured and inefficient as currently structured to generate the effect and credibility that are the foundations upon which success must necessarily be built. There are simply too many actors doing too many (or not enough) things in too many different ways. The arrival of the Obama administration provides an opportunity for a fundamental re-think about the overall approach to the security continuum in Afghanistan to ensure plans for

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security, governance and development are built into a Strategic Campaign Plan that properly and necessarily harnesses all civilian and military efforts and investments in a co-ordinated, logical and sustained manner. However, European and other partners must enter into such a review with a spirit of openness and positivity and Americans must no longer impose realistic demands in pursuit of an unlikely end. If not, the review currently being undertaken by the US will be precisely that; a US review. Without positive engagement with the Americans now the danger is that the tensions between American strategy and the European effort will grow and the victim will be first ISAF (with more Americans thinking it stands for “I Saw Americans Fight”) and thereafter NATO.

The Shape of Success?

In spite of modest progress the insurgency is gaining ground in the South and around Kabul. Moreover, whilst the additional seventeen thousand US troops could help to interdict Taliban lines of supply and communication from Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Provinces (NWFP) unless there is a new political strategy then it is hard to see progress being sustained over one or maybe two campaign seasons. This is particularly the case if no more forces or civilians are found to engage. What then would be the shape of ‘success’ that all could accept as achievable given the constraints discussed above? At the very least it would need to reflect a new compact in with the Coalition offers a less ambitious objective that places stability-first in return for staying longer to achieve it.

First and foremost would be the preservation of Afghanistan so that it posed neither a threat to its neighbours, its own people, nor the wider world. Some greater effort could of course be made to be more efficient. An awful lot more could be done to a) improve synergies between the PRTs, which are frankly awful; and b) develop better metrics to measure progress or otherwise of the development of basic instruments of Rule of Law and governance. Benign Balkanisation would probably be a good way to describe the way ahead, reinforced by a much looser confederation between Kabul and the regions. Such cantonisation would see the Coalition moving more into the business of balancing power between the Pashtun, Hazzaras, Uzbeks and Tadjiks.

There will probably need to be an implicit switch away from exerting pressure solely on the Taliban to exerting pressure on the government to talk to the Taliban. Maintaining pressure on the Taliban and at the same seeking a dialogue with those elements of who are seeking a return would be important. Indeed, outside the hard-core leadership in Quetta and Peshawar there is some evidence that significant numbers of Tier Two and Three Taliban could be enticed if property and other rights were restored.

This would probably need to be undertaken as part of a Regional Strategy with reconciliation front and centre and that seems to be part of Richard Holbrooke’s remit. However, in time Western troop levels will be reduced and any such reduction will need to be offset by an over-watch strategy using air assets and Special Forces backed up by the reinforcing of what passes for pro-Coalition elements in the country. Presentation of such a strategy would be vital, to avoid any sense that a shift represents failure. In return the Coalition would need to re-assure the

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Afghan people that the return of the Taliban to power is not an option. In effect, the Coalition would adopt a strategy of reinforcing weaker tribes and punishing transgressions. There have been suggestions that this could be achieved by arming local militias. To say the very least this would be a high-risk approach. Any new concept of success will thus require a mix of modesty and ambition. More modesty in fashioning a definition of success that is achievable, and more ambition in that all members of the Coalition commit fully over the next six to seven years.

Even a limited concept of success would still need to see all parties committed to basic but effective governance capacity-building, establishment of a basic but robust system of Rule of Law, and a meaningful Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) reinforced by much greater effort to ensure Afghanistan can properly absorb aid and development. The lack of credibility now associated with the effort is partly due to unrealistically optimistic forecasts at the outset of the time and effort needed to realise something like a stable Afghanistan.

A Regional Strategy

A Regional Strategy worthy of the name with reconciliation front and centre will be essential. Indeed, stabilising Pakistan is a pre-requisite for stabilising Afghanistan. Thus a far more coherent strategy toward Pakistan is needed. Such a strategy would at the very least include a coherent package of economic assistance that might necessarily require talking to the Chinese and Russians, and possibly the Iranians. A failing Pakistan will be unable to sustain any campaign against the insurgents in the largely ungoverned tribal areas that border Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan's state institutions must be reinforced and not undermined by Coalition action. The commitment of several western governments to increase aid to Islamabad is thus to be welcomed as is a more tailored approach to counter-insurgency operations and the focus on generating effective police forces, vital in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

India is in many ways the key to peace in the region, which will prove difficult after the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai. Unfortunately, the struggle in Afghanistan has become linked in the official Pakistani mind with the conflict with India over Kashmir. The appearance of several Indian 'consulates' in the south of Afghanistan has only fuelled Pakistani concerns. For the Pakistanis Afghanistan thus represents strategic depth in the event of a conflict with India. Plan B will thus demand new strategic partnerships with both Islamabad and New Delhi aimed at de-conflicting Kashmir and Afghanistan. This will not be easy as the Pakistanis are deeply suspicious of the new US-Indian agreement over nuclear technology and Europeans have an important role to play.

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NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is entering a critical phase. If by end 2011 demonstrable progress is not apparent across the security, stability and reconstruction spectrum it will be hard to justify to hard-pressed Western governments and peoples a continuing commitment apparently without end. The arrival of the Obama administration in Washington and Gen David Petraeus will mark the beginning of an intense period of US effort to put Afghanistan back on track towards something that the Coalition can call success. Even with an American security and stabilisation surge it is unlikely that Coalition partners will find many more additional military boots to deploy and any civilian 'surge' will thus be limited. Therefore, it is incumbent on all allies and partners to a) give the new administration a chance; b) be open to the better organisation of the existing effort as part of a strategic Comprehensive Approach; and c) help craft a regional strategy with Asian powers that enhances the legitimacy of the effort and reduces the Western identity of the force. Only then will ISAF find its proper place within the architecture of effort that will be needed to permit Afghans to find their own way forward in a way that threatens neither themselves, their neighbours and, of course, the broader international community.

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Tokyo, March 2009