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Afghanistan: It's Not Over

James M. Dubik

In May, 2007 I deployed to Iraq to become the Commanding General responsible for accelerating the growth of the Iraqi Security Forces in size, capability, and confidence. Prior to deploying, I made a series of rounds in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill. I was met with more condolences than congratulations. The general feeling, no pun intended, was that the war was lost and it was only a matter of time before we would admit our defeat and withdraw. I am getting the same “all is lost” attitude about Afghanistan from what I read and hear around the Washington, D.C. Beltway. We were too quick to declare defeat in Iraq then, and it's too soon to declare it in Afghanistan now.

We are at a crossroad in Afghanistan, no doubt about that, but the future—success or failure—is not predestined. Our enemy may have a vote, but so do we. What we do, primarily in Afghanistan but based upon decisions in Washington and other Capitols, in the next 12 months will determine our future direction.

Afghanistan is not a “war of choice” as some have recently declared it. It is a war of necessity derived from our self defense. The choice has been how we execute the war that came to us with the 9/11 attacks.

Unfortunately, the war was characterized as a “Global War on Terror.” It was never that. The war that was thrust upon us is a war against Al Qaeda, their ideology, and their affiliates—one of whom had been, and may still be, the Afghan Taliban.

Our initial operations in Afghanistan did evict the Taliban and force Al Qaeda into Pakistan, did not finish the job. The eviction was temporary. By itself, it could not accomplish the strategic goal of self defense because inherent in eviction is the notion of prevention.

Prevent what, though? First, prevent Al Qaeda from returning to use Afghanistan as a base to attack the US and our allies. Second, and a necessary consequent, prevent the formation of an Afghan government that would allow such a return—otherwise, we will have to be there in some capacity much longer than we want or is necessary.

The Bush administration chose to define prevention only in the first sense. They chose not to commit resources—troops, funding, attention—to the second prevention task. So we spent nearly a decade doing half the job. Why they made that choice is immaterial except for

historians and pundits. Wikileaks shows the results of this choice: the Afghan situation that we are now in. We must deal with reality as it is, not as it could or should have been.

The Obama administration correctly understands the necessity of both senses of “prevention.” Hence at West Point the President articulated our strategic aims as denying al Qaeda a safe haven, reversing the Taliban's momentum and denying it the ability to overthrow the government, and strengthening the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government. To accomplish these aims, the administration understands that we must take the fight to the Taliban . War is not won on the defense.

Our self defense demands both senses of prevention. Walking away from our own self defense would be strategic folly. So, the essential strategic matter before us now concerns “how” to accomplish both senses of prevention.

We must ask ourselves some hard questions. Is it the case that a return of the Taliban equates to a return of Al Qaeda? If so, why? If not, why not—since the two were essentially connected in 2001 and have been close since? What are the alternative Afghan political arrangements that would accomplish both senses of prevention? Which would be “good enough”? What kinds of security and diplomatic actions are necessary to facilitate the creation of the “good enough”? How long will these actions be necessary? How will they likely improve, or degrade, over time? What kinds of American and allied commitment is necessary to affect these security and diplomatic actions? Do we, the United States and allies, have the strength of will to make these commitments? If not, how do we explain the billions of “sunk cost” to our citizens? And how do we explain the “wasted” lives and sacrifice? Further, how do we assess the psychological gain to Al Qaeda, their affiliates, and the attractiveness of their ideology? Finally, what does such a gain mean to our security and that of our allies?

We can act in the next 12 months to improve the situation in Afghanistan. We can get to a point where a way forward that assures our self defense, and that of our allies, by accomplishing both senses of “prevention.”

In Pakistan, we can help the Pakistani government and military sustain their offensive operations against Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban. And we can insist on separating Pakistani Intelligence Services from insurgents inside Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, on the security front, we can maintain aggressive attacks on Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and their supporters. We can also create the conditions for favorable negotiations by (1) finishing the counter offensive in Kandahar and Marja, if possible before the winter, then making daily life better for the local Afghans, however incrementally; (2) continuing the counter offensive; (3) killing as many of insurgent leaders as possible throughout Afghanistan—attrition of one's enemies helps one's negotiating position; (4) continuing to accelerate sufficient Afghan National Security Forces, with emphasis the Army and Afghan National Civil Order Police and on local police only where areas are free from Taliban influence; (5) using “local forces” where they can be incorporated properly into a national Afghan force—army or police; and (6) securing as much of the Afghan population along the East and South as is possible, making daily life better for local Afghans, but not taking more than what we can do properly.

On the Afghan political front, we can identify which Taliban can be incorporated into an Afghan political arrangement that assures both senses of prevention and are acceptable to Afghans. We can also help create a center-to-periphery political arrangement that fits the Afghan history and culture and is, therefore, sustainable in Afghanistan. We need not be bound by imposed solutions that work only in other social, political, and cultural settings. We may be able to unveil this arrangement by the end of this year; then work to alter whatever political or legal documents necessary.

In Europe, we can continue to strengthen allied resolve with respect to what is necessary near-term and work our way forward as an alliance. European success matters, to them and to us. And in the region, we can ensure that the AF-PAK solution that emerges does not put India in a more questionable security situation or Iran in a stronger one.

The essential strategic matter is not “how do we get out.” Rather, it is “how do we assure our self defense given the realities we face.” To consider courses of action that do not assure our own security is, again, the height of strategic folly.

This matter is not a political one—Republicans vs. Democrats, doves vs. hawks—though some will want to make it that. It is a national matter. This matter is not about “fixing Afghanistan.” It is a matter of securing our strategic self defense.

If we can accomplish the above in the next 12 months, opportunities that are not visible now will emerge. Our actions matter with respect to which future evolves. The future is dynamic, not static. And we are part of the dynamic.

“Stay the course” or “withdraw” is a false dilemma. As in all previous wars, we must adapt as necessary to achieve our strategic aims, but achieve our aims we must.

We backed away from both senses of prevention before, and we are now reaping the consequences of that decision. We need not back away again.

I certainly understand that “Afghanistan is not Iraq,” and I have operated in enough countries in my 37 year career that I know solutions that work in one context cannot be applied uniformly to another. I also know the difference between having resolve and being obstinate. But this much is clear: with respect to our national self defense, all is not lost until we give up. We rang the death bell too early with respect to Iraq, and we are now ready to ring it too early with respect to Afghanistan. We can adapt, we can persevere, and we can succeed in securing our nation.

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