

Mis-steps in Afghanistan

In his final report on January 6, 2009 to the Security Council, the senior UN representative to Afghanistan, Ambassador Kai Eide of Norway, highlighted two issues that will determine events far into the future. The first of these was development aid and the second is building a military capacity for the central government. He and others have argued that failure to accomplish one or both is likely to result in what General Stanley McChrystal called “mission failure.” Eide may be right, but history suggests that even more danger may result from success.

The Vietnam War tells us why. Then as now we engaged in the “civic action” programs Eide urges that we increase. Also then as now, our adversaries regarded them as hostile moves. The Viet Minh deliberately destroyed not only the beneficial contributions – clinics, schools, and bridges – but also targeted those Vietnamese and foreign aid workers who were trying to help the people. If proof were needed for the diabolical nature of the Communist guerrillas, this was surely it. At least that was what many of my government colleagues then thought. It is also what many people today think of the Taliban and their similar actions. What could have made them act in this way?

The obvious but rarely mentioned reason is that insurgents see civic action programs as a counterinsurgency tactic. In Vietnam they were designed to “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese and so win them away from the insurgents. The insurgents regarded our civil aid as more dangerous to their cause than our bombs.

Ironically, they were partly wrong. Neither we nor the Viet Minh then recognized a fatal side effect of our program: because the South Vietnamese government was hopelessly corrupt, any aid we turned over to officials was apt to be stolen or even sold to the Viet Minh. So we took on ourselves the task of delivering the aid direct to the villagers. Since our officials were honest, the program worked.

But, without realizing it, we sidelined the very government we were dedicated to supporting: by our intervention, we literally became the government of South Vietnam. Of course, we remained foreigners – indeed a study made during my time in government showed that many villagers thought we were a new batch of French colonialists, perhaps Foreign Legionnaires. But, since we were doing the “good things,” and the Saigon government continued to do the “bad things,” in part through our aid efforts, we further weakened its claim to legitimacy.

How does this experience in Vietnam relate to Afghanistan? Those who point out that there are major differences are right, but the general context, dealing with a hopelessly corrupt government, is what we now face. Few competent observers think we can reform that government. So, while we at least talk about trying, we effectively bypass it just as we did in Vietnam. Consequently, while history does not exactly replay, knowing it can sometimes stimulate our thinking. What might Vietnam teach us to question Ambassador Eide’s recommendations that we increase our civic action program?

Like the Viet Minh, the Taliban have understood the purpose of civic action. Simply put, it is a counterinsurgency weapon. Indeed, we told them it was. As General David Petraeus said, “Money is my most important ammunition in this war.” To implement this tactic, the U.S. Army published “the Commander’s Guide to Money as a Weapons System” (Handbook 09-27 April 2009) which tells officers how to use money and civic actions programs to defeat insurgents. This is the basis of a training program at the Combined Arms Center at Leavenworth, Kansas.

Our civic action program not only was informed by the Vietnam War, but mirrors the large-scale program undertaken by the Russians in Afghanistan. (It is odd that in his manual on counterinsurgency, General Petraeus never mentions the Russian program. Did he or the actual authors of the manual not know of it? As Philosopher George Santayana warned, those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it. Perhaps

that explains the manual.) During their occupation of Afghanistan, the Russians poured in hundreds of millions of dollar-equivalents to civic action. It did not win Afghan hearts and minds.

Will ours? After conducting some 400 interviews, Andrew Wilder of Tufts University concluded that “Afghan perceptions of aid and aid actors are overwhelmingly negative.” More concrete than polls or interviews, a Sunday Times reporter found that “The cracks on the vehicles’ windows from rocks thrown almost every time they [British officials venture out of their fortified compound] are a measure of the locals’ appreciation.”

This background and these findings explain, I think, both why the Taliban blows up the facilities we build and why the general population allows them to do so: what we see as generous help to needy people, they see as part of a campaign by foreigners to subdue them.

But it is clear that the Afghans need help. Without aid from abroad, the future of the people of Afghanistan would be grim and the chances for the reforms we have set as our goal would be unlikely. So can civic action programs be configured in a way that would make them acceptable? I believe they can. This is how:

Once we set a firm and believable date for actual withdrawal the psychology of the war will change. This was not, of course, accomplished by President Obama’s vague statement that the process will begin in July 2011, particularly after what he announced was further weakened by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s definition of “withdrawal” as amounting only to a “handful” of the occupation forces. To be effective the date must be firm and comprehensive -- and be believed. Then, particularly if they can at least partly be made multi- or inter-national, aid projects will gradually cease to be seen as “ammunition in this war.” At that point, the traditional councils (known in various

parts of the country as jirgas, ulus and shuras) that exist in and essentially govern virtually every one of Afghanistan's approximately 23,000 villages) will begin to seek those things that will heal their sick, feed their hungry, repair their destroyed or decayed infrastructure and generally make their lives easier.

Hopefully, by that time, negotiations with the Taliban – which even President Hamid Karzai has called vital and which he promised in September 2009 he would launch -- will begin. On his side, the Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Umar, has also agreed to negotiate once the foreign forces are withdrawn. He too should be driven by the announcement of a firm date. In December he even “signaled” that the Taliban would not allow aggressive action by al-Qaida on other states from Afghanistan. We have said, essentially, that we are not interested.

If we get interested and the war winds down, the Taliban will cease to oppose a redefined form of civic action. The Taliban will have to permit it because, if they continue in the new context of the winding down of the war to destroy what the villagers want, they will lose their most important asset, the support of the people. And without that support, as Mao Zedong memorably put it, they will become like fish stranded without supporting “water.”

So the setting the date of withdrawal is absolutely crucial. It must be the first step.

Now what about the call Ambassador Eide and almost everyone in the American and British governments and our military leaders have sounded to create a much expanded security apparatus for the central government?

I do not believe this is in either ours or the Afghan national interest. Again consider what history can teach us.

For many years before the Russian invasion in 1979, Soviet training missions worked with the almost entirely Pashtun Royal Afghan Army and took many officers and

trainees to Russia for advanced instruction and indoctrination. By world standards, the army was not an impressive force, but it existed, had coherence and was disciplined. So when the Russians invaded and occupied the country, they and their puppet government “inherited” a standing army. To it, they added approximately 100,000 well-paid militiamen. These forces actually performed reasonably well for the Russians during at least the early part of their occupation. But they did not enable the Russians to “win.”

Contrast this with our current position: we have not inherited an existing army. The old royal army was compromised by its relationship with the Russians and virtually disappeared in the aftermath of their withdrawal in 1989. Thereafter, the resistance forces, particularly the “Northern Alliance,” the Tajik-based guerrillas who had operated from the Panjshir valley under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud, and their Hazara and Uzbek rivals fought one another for dominance all over the country. They had nearly destroyed Afghanistan when the Taliban moved in and defeated them. Most of their leaders, the “warlords,” ran away. When the United States invaded in 2001, and defeated the Taliban, it began to rebuild the power of the warlords as the cheapest way to control the country. Helped by America, these warlords decimated what remained of the Taliban. Out of this turmoil, the local winners were mainly the Tajiks.

Today, Tajiks who number about one in four Afghans (roughly half as many as the traditionally dominant Pashtuns) hold most of the key positions in the government including intelligence and political police and command seven in ten of the army’s battalions. Unwittingly, therefore, we may have laid the basis for a civil war. That is a long-term potential danger, but other aspects of what Ambassador Eide has recommended and General McChrystal intends to implement are more immediately worrying.

Because today’s soldiers are without a background of training and, according to NATO advisers nine in ten are illiterate and three in ten are drug addicts, turning them into an army will justify – indeed require, as both the American and British military commanders agree – our forces to remain in Afghanistan for years, or more likely,

decades. Such a program on such a timetable will not only convince the Afghans that we have become a colonial power but will also serve to convince the adherents to the party line of al-Qaida that Usama bin Ladin is right to target America and Britain.

The second effect is that emphasizing the army will inhibit the negotiating process that nearly everyone is beginning to see as the only hope of ending the war on acceptable terms.

The third result is that the army will become a major drain on the limited resources of the country. Pentagon planners are already calculating how soon we can off-load the costs onto the Afghans. Pursuit of this objective necessarily will clash with the plan we must also try to implement of making Afghanistan reasonably secure and reasonably prosperous. Today they can barely feed themselves: an estimated 42 percent live on the equivalent of about 7¢ a day. It will be decades, if ever, before they can shoulder the sort of war we want them to fight.

The fourth result is (mercifully perhaps) a future danger: it is that since balancing civil institutions are weak and will take years to become strong, a military force on the scale General McChrystal is beginning to build is likely to lead once again to a dictatorship of the kind that destroyed the earlier attempts in the 1920s and 1960s to build a reformist, modern state.

Thus, it seems to me that the message Ambassador Eide has delivered and which many of the new “experts” on Afghanistan also espouse would lead us in precisely the wrong direction – toward a period of greater threats of terrorism, further damage to our society, economy and legal system, and will result in virtually unending war.

January 15, 2010

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