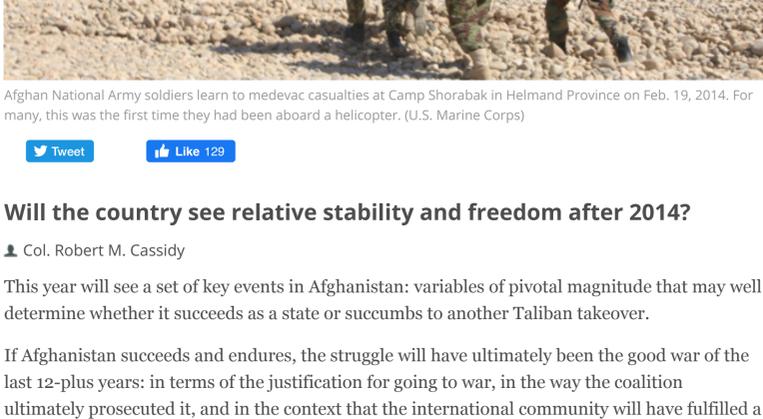




Features

April 2, 2014

Afghanistan or Talibanistan?



Afghan National Army soldiers learn to medevac casualties at Camp Shorabak in Helmand Province on Feb. 19, 2014. For many, this was the first time they had been aboard a helicopter. (U.S. Marine Corps)

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Will the country see relative stability and freedom after 2014?

Col. Robert M. Cassidy

This year will see a set of key events in Afghanistan: variables of pivotal magnitude that may well determine whether it succeeds as a state or succumbs to another Taliban takeover.

If Afghanistan succeeds and endures, the struggle will have ultimately been the good war of the last 12-plus years: in terms of the justification for going to war, in the way the coalition ultimately prosecuted it, and in the context that the international community will have fulfilled a post-war moral commitment to the Afghan allies we supported and fought alongside.

The value of the political object, the morality of the war, and the perception of victory or defeat comprise the most compelling logic of the contest of wills there. There are impediments that increase the risk of failure, yet also momentum that favors success. And there is history, and the history of wars in Afghanistan does not suggest that catastrophic failure is inevitable – if the coalition continues to support Afghanistan after 2014.

The political object, and its perceived value, guide war. The value of the political object of the Afghan War – dismantling, defeating, and denying al-Qaeda sanctuary – derives from the horrific consequences of the 9/11 raids. The political object, when achieved and sustained, will prevent this from happening again. However, the perceived value of the object has diminished in the eyes of the supporting polities because of the costs and duration of this war. In other words, the political and domestic will to persevere have waned.

The Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Islamist zealots of similar cloth have endured significant disruption, displacement and dismantling of their capacity to carry on, yet their will to continue has not relented. This is because of the fanatical religious creed that animates these enemies, and because of the physical and materiel sanctuary and support they benefit from in Pakistan’s border areas. Generous funding from Saudi Arabia and other gulf states also helps. For the likes of the Quetta Shura and the Haqqanis, their mantra is ‘Islam or death.’ For Western polities, it is, ‘bring the troops home.’

Pakistani security elites believe they can counter their existential nemesis, India, by supporting the Taliban and using the Haqqanis to foment insurgency in Afghanistan. Although this notion of strategic depth is a figment of these elites’ febrile and fertile imaginations, their cost-benefit strategic calculus is not likely to change unless there is a huge shift in how the U.S. and the West confront Pakistani duplicity. In other words, in the minds of the Pakistani security leadership that decides strategy, the benefits of supporting and protracting the insurgency in Afghanistan outweigh the costs.

Starkly, there are still two potential, but not inevitable, outcomes: a revived Talibanistan or a strengthened Afghanistan. Giving up potential victory by quitting the field precipitously might see the Taliban eventually overwhelm and undermine the Afghan government and its security forces. And, if the Taliban were to revive an Islamist emirate in Afghanistan, there is every reason to forecast a future with more attacks against the West, planned and prepared, with increasing scope and intensity, from Afghanistan’s and Pakistan’s tribal areas.

A better outcome, turning the stalemate of the previous decade into a semblance of victory, would see a resilient and durable Afghan state, with the government, the security forces and the population aligned against a marginalized Taliban. Success would see an Afghanistan that does not fragment and endures as a state inhospitable to al-Qaeda, the Quetta Shura Taliban and other extremists. The bar is not high and the international community does not aim to make Afghanistan into Austria. There will still be violence, poverty and underdevelopment, but an Afghanistan with its people, security forces and government cooperating in modest harmony equates to victory in this context.

There are also moral imperatives for a war to be a “good” one. Despite the missteps that characterized the early years of the Afghan war, this war is ostensibly the good war of the last 12 years. The proximate cause for going to war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban was justified in terms of self-defense. The methods of fighting the war saw the U.S. and the coalition killing enemy combatants and generally trying to avoid killing civilian non-combatants, however imperfectly carried out.

The coalition has intended to do the right things, to help Afghanistan and not to harm Afghanistan. Now, the question remains, will the international community do the right thing in terms of jus post bellum. The requirements for this would be to continue to help the Afghans who allied with us to protect the state and preserve the societal developments in the face of the insurgency and external threats.

Moreover, in a contest of ideas that juxtaposes two diametrical world views of reason versus extreme religiosity, of freedom to choose versus a tyranny of dogma and fear, victory or defeat are of huge importance to our cause and to the cause of our enemies. If the West quits the fight, or stops supporting the Afghans’ cause prematurely, this would likely vivify and embolden al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other militants who espouse a distorted Salafist-takfiri creed of sectarian violence.

In spite of the ambiguity that inheres in the present and future of Afghanistan, the last 12-and-a-half years have witnessed discernible momentum in important areas. Both the quality and the quantity of the Afghan security forces have certainly improved and increased, with the most notable changes occurring since the surge in 2010. What’s more, during the 2013 fighting season, the Afghan security forces were genuinely in the lead, bearing the brunt of the fighting and outmatching the enemy during most combat engagements. Also of importance: During the last decade in Afghanistan, most measures of human development and progress have improved and continue to improve in geometric terms.

The biggest impediment to enduring stability in Afghanistan is the Taliban’s sanctuaries in Pakistan. These give the Taliban a place to regenerate; they allow resupply of lethal aid and recruits. They allow the Taliban to protect its will – the senior leadership and the insurgency’s regenerative potential – thus protracting the war to exhaust the political will of the coalition, with the ultimate aim of making the tremendous capacity of the coalition irrelevant if it leaves the field before achieving its aims. As a consequence of the strategic paradox that Pakistani policy imposes on the coalition’s efforts in Afghanistan with its proxies, though the coalition has made significant gains at the operational level, those gains could very well end up being ephemeral and irrelevant. The crux is that the Afghans, with coalition support, cannot utterly defeat the Taliban by taking away both capacity and will because the insurgency’s political will remains protected in Pakistan’s sanctuaries.

The Afghanistan scholar Thomas Barfield has written that foreign invasions of Afghanistan have manifested a pattern in that, “former insurgent leaders found that success on the battlefield or rallying opposition against foreigners could not be transmuted into political authority once those forces departed.”

After more than 12 years of this war in Afghanistan, it is not likely that Pakistan will turn off its support and sanctuary to the Taliban in the next couple of years. Payments, persuasion, diplomacy and policy have all failed to compel Pakistan to modify the warped calculus that underpins its support to proxy insurgents in Afghanistan. However, it is also unlikely that the Taliban will threaten or seize Kabul outright, or other key population centers, when the coalition forces shrink to whatever post-2014 strength their political leaders decide upon. Whether the international effort devolves to a residual presence of 12,000, or even to a lesser number of forces for assistance, advice and counterterrorism support, historical precedent augurs a difficult future for the insurgents, even with Pakistani support. The one requisite is that the coalition continues to provide a degree of financial aid and assistance.

When the Soviets departed Afghanistan in February 1989, even though the mujahideen, its Pakistani backers, and many others had forecast a quick insurgent victory and an imminent collapse of the Najibullah regime, this did not happen. The regime endured for another three years and two months, with continued Soviet financial, materiel and food support. Only when the Soviets stopped supporting the Afghan regime at the end of 1991 did the Afghan state begin to unravel. Without Soviet support, it ultimately fractured and yielded to the then-inexorable arrival of the various mujahideen factions in April of 1992.

Afghan scholar Joseph Collins has testified to the following reasons for the endurance of the Najibullah government: a disunited enemy; a transition plan that harmonized aid, military assistance and diplomacy; strong and effective leadership; modest reconciliation between the central government and the peripheral tribal militias; stronger Afghan security forces; and a steady flow of foreign aid. In Barfield’s own scholarly work, moreover, he observed several corollaries that accounted for the incapacity of the insurgents to defeat the Soviet-supported government: They were unable to modify their insurgent methods into an effective incapable approach; they lost their cohesion after their insurgent foes left the field; and they were incapable of making the transition from factional insurgent leadership to effective national leadership.

What does this mean for Afghanistan after 2014? Commentary from the Middle East Policy Council posits several forecasts for the current war. First, after the withdrawal of ISAF forces at the end of 2014, continued international military and economic assistance to the Afghan government may in fact help it retain power in the key population centers. Second, it is not at all inevitable that the Taliban will regain power, even though they will continue to receive Pakistani assistance and sanctuary. Third, opposition to the Afghan government will actually decline after the American and coalition presence diminishes. And, fourth, once the Afghans are responsible for their own survival, the effectiveness of Afghan government forces may increase discernibly. That is the good news.

The bad news is that if American and allied support for the Afghan state ends abruptly, it is probable that the Kabul government’s strength will decline precipitously. If this occurs, ethnic divisions within the Afghan government leadership are likely to worsen. There will then emerge a possibility, though not an inevitability, that the non-Pashtun officer corps might seek to usurp the power of the sitting Afghan government. In an extremely worst case scenario – -- a descent into chaos – the most critical fractures within Afghanistan are likely to be those between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns.

The protracted war in Afghanistan has not yielded smooth and unambiguous results for long-term stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan or the region writ large. Neither victory nor defeat are yet certain or inevitable. Indeed, success will never resemble those cherished victories over Germany and Japan during World War II. However, since 2010, the combined Afghan and coalition campaign, forces, resources and leadership have fought the Taliban inside Afghanistan with effect. What is even more compelling is that since the 2013 fighting season, the Afghan security forces were in the lead, have borne the brunt of the fighting, and indeed overmatched the insurgents in most of their battles and engagements.

It cannot be overstated that the biggest strategic risk to the stability of both Afghanistan and Pakistan lies in the fact that the Pakistani Army and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate, under the delusional and spurious notion of creating “strategic depth” on their western flank, continue to support proxy insurgents, just as they have over the last four decades. Al-Qaeda and like-minded militant groups that collude with al-Qaeda in the tribal areas on Pakistan’s western frontier are disrupted and diminished, but they are not fully dismantled and defeated.

In the end, any successes will be ephemeral unless there is continued international support to the Afghan state and its security forces. And violence will not ultimately abate until there is a strategic change inside Pakistan to turn off the sources of support to the insurgents. Without sanctuaries, indeed, the Taliban would wilt into insignificance. The somber reality is that the international community and the U.S. have not reimagined the means and ways to force Pakistan to alter its harmful strategic calculations.

Both the continuation of external support to Afghanistan and the reduction of the pernicious effects from the sanctuary in Afghanistan are a strategic necessity.

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