

Beyond the Surge: Policy Options for Afghanistan

Seminar Report

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The surge in the US presence in Afghanistan, announced by President Barack Obama soon after taking office, is unfolding rapidly. The first contingents of additional troops started arriving in early 2009 and will bring the total US military to 68 000 by the end of the year. That is exactly double the figure in late 2008. The US administration is also preparing to send numerous additional civilian advisors to speed reconstruction and improve public administration. In neighboring Pakistan, the Administration has pressured the government to launch a military offensive against Pakistani Taliban ensconced in the eastern areas, supplemented with US airpower in the form of strikes from unmanned drones.

What does this 'surge' signify? Is it a commitment to achieve what Obama calls 'the achievable objective' in US strategy towards Afghanistan, namely to eliminate Al Qaeda's base in the region and ensure that the organization will not be a source of terrorist threats to the West and its allies? Or is it the beginning of an exit strategy from a controversial war, aiming to gain a position of military strength from which to negotiate a favorable compromise? In a longer time perspective, is it a step to secure a strategic US presence in the region, or a prelude to strategic retrenchment? What are the implications for Afghans who are deeply concerned about the escalating violence in their country, disillusioned by the pace of reconstruction, and apprehensive about the future?

CMI and PRIO recently invited a small group of experts to a workshop and a public seminar in Oslo to assess current developments in light of these larger issues.¹ The discussion centered on three main themes: the role of the US and the UN, the role and perceptions of Afghans, and the dynamics of a negotiated settlement.

The US and the UN

The discussion of the early role of the UN brought out some uncanny historical parallels. Unlike the United States, the United Nations showed some staying power in Afghanistan after the Soviet military withdrawal in 1989-90. The Geneva Accords that facilitated the Soviet disengagement also gave the UN a monitoring role and, to this end, established a UN military observer mission (UNGOMAP). The mission dispatched 50 military observers to Afghanistan who verified that the Soviet military withdrawal proceeded quickly, on time and without incidents. The other main task of UNGOMAP was more difficult. The Geneva Agreement bound Afghanistan and Pakistan not to interfere in each others' internal affairs, but UNGOMAP could barely keep up with the numerous allegations of violations from both sides. The Afghan government (still headed by Najibullah) complained of attacks from insurgents based in Pakistan, and Pakistani authorities accused Afghan communists of cross-border strikes.

UNGOMAP's brief mandate was not renewed, but the UN stayed. A successor mission (UNSMA), headed by a Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, was mandated to fill the gaping hole in the Geneva Agreement, i.e., the lack of provisions for a political transition to secure stability in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal. UNSMA proposed a traditional mechanism, a *loya jirga*,

¹ The workshop and a public seminar were held at PRIO on 26-27 May 2009. The invitees included two independent Afghan analysts, Orzala Ashraf, founder and director of Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA) and a Yale World Fellow; Waliullah Rahmani, director of the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies and editor of *Kabul Direct*; Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh of l'Institut d'Etudes Politiques (Paris), an expert on Central Asia; and Susan Woodward of the Graduate Center, City University of New York, a scholar of Balkan affairs and transitions from war to peace. Other participants came from Norwegian research institutes (NUPI, FAFO, FFI) and the organizing institutions (CMI and PRIO), and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The events were organized with financial assistance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This report was written by Astri Suhrke, senior researcher at CMI, with contributions from Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary and Susan Woodward..

and a transitional government, just as the Bonn conference of 2001 did after the Taliban regime was overthrown a decade (and three wars) later. The decisive difference was that the UN in the early 1990s supported a government of national reconciliation which would include the communists. That proved to be the stumbling block. Although Najibullah agreed to step down, the US and Pakistan refused to include any representation from what they considered a defeated party. As in 2001 in Bonn, the victors insisted on a government composed of only themselves. In the event, the Afghan victors in the early 1990s could not agree but turned on each other in a vicious civil war that paved the way for the Taliban.

When the US reengaged in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks, the UN was initially sidelined. There was no UN resolution specifically mandating the military intervention (Operation Enduring Freedom), only general-text resolutions that endorsed the Charter-based right to individual and self-defense or that called on members to combat international terrorism. The UN did authorize a security assistance mission (ISAF) and a multipurpose post-war reconstruction mission (UNAMA). As the insurgency revived around 2004, and the entire post-Taliban project of building a stable, democratic Afghan state seemed increasingly problematic, the United States resumed a more active and leading role. At the same time, the proliferation of international actors and aid organizations in the country, and growing strains in their relationship to an Afghan government widely considered uncooperative, led the US and the British in early 2008 to advocate the appointment of a 'super envoy' to better coordinate all the relevant parties. When that initiative failed, the fall-back position was to strengthen the UN mission. The March 2008 re-authorization by the Security Council increased the budget of UNAMA and specified its somewhat enlarged mandate in great detail.

The stage was thus set for a careful recalibration of US and UN efforts when the Obama Administration decided to significantly increase US presence in Afghanistan and appointed a noted diplomat, Richard Holbrooke, as its special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The process of working out a division of labor and coordination between the UN and the US is still ongoing. For instance, the US Administration appears to define regional diplomacy as being primarily within its gambit and leaving little room for the UN's SRSR. Yet India – a critical piece in the regional puzzle – is not as a matter of policy included in Holbrooke's mandate.

The international presence in Afghanistan continues to be characterized by a multiplicity of often contradictory objectives and an extraordinarily complex structure of actors. A more effective streamlining of policy between the US and the UN is essential to handle the challenges posed by 'the surge' as well as its broader implications for war and peace in the region.

Afghan perspectives

In most discussions of Afghanistan, the Afghans often seem invisible or not heard. The internationals must think they are discussing an empty land, as one Afghan participant said. In fact, Afghan civil society, particularly NGOs, have had an important and continuing role during the past two decades of upheaval. While basic services such as health and education were provided by the state during the communist period, at least in the cities, services collapsed during the civil war in the 1990s and in the Taliban period, the infrastructure of public administration crumbled as well, in places literally when furniture was used for fuel. Into this void stepped the NGOs, although working under the watchful eyes of the Taliban. After 2001, international NGOs and other aid agencies quickly moved in, although their projects often were quick fixes. The Afghan government, for its part, lacked the capacity to monitor and report on international reconstruction activities. This was above all so in the case of the aid projects undertaken by the mixed military-civilian Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Neither the PRT concept nor the activities of the various teams have been developed in cooperation with the Afghans. The Afghan military has not been involved with the PRTs. Afghan NGOs have deep reservations about the PRTs. To whom are they accountable? Are their projects sustainable? PRTs are commonly criticized for failure to consult and generate local ownership in the projects they promote. “The military just come in and build”, as one participant said. As a result, their projects readily become targets of the insurgents. Militarization of aid thus gives development projects a bad image. However, local communities are likely to provide security if they are consulted and participate in building the schools. The challenge, therefore, is to work with local communities to create a sense of peace and ownership so that the schools are not burnt down and girls are not poisoned in the classrooms. Several positive experiences of bottom-up development projects demonstrate that reorientation is possible.

The current ‘surge’ of civilians has also raised questions in Afghan civil society. A very large number of additional international experts are now arriving. Is this a good thing? Were Afghans consulted? To whom are these international experts accountable? The situation, it is feared, will become similar to the Soviet period, when each government office or department had an ‘advisor’ who in reality decided matters.

The strategizing of reconstruction must be turned over to the Afghans, particularly if the current ‘surge’ is part of a US exit strategy. This means entering the aid discourse with adequate knowledge of its parameters, including the dangers of romanticizing ‘local voices’. Afghan civil society, it was argued, needs to re-link with the government as well as continue working with the local communities to make reconstruction serve stability, security and Afghan concepts of the state. As for the concept of the state, donors promote the concept of a lean state, which is also embodied in the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS). Some studies show, however, that Afghan perceptions of the state favour a strong and effective one.

Negotiating peace?

At present, the formal conditions set by the Afghan government and the Taliban would seem to exclude meaningful talks. The government demands that the insurgents accept the constitution and lay down arms; the Taliban demand that foreign forces withdraw and that *sharia* law is introduced. Moreover, one Afghan participant argued that the Taliban were not interested in negotiations but had exploited previous offers by the government merely to strengthen their position. The Taliban were now united, gaining strength, and tied into the global jihad. As a result, the participant concluded, there was no room for negotiations. The Taliban had to be defeated. This assessment was disputed by another participant who argued that the government until now had made no serious offers to negotiate, and that programs for reconciliation in effect were calls for surrender. The growth of the insurgency was at least in part due to the increasing number of foreign military forces and the escalatory dynamic of the war, as well as a poor governance record. Moreover, Taliban constituted a heterogeneous movement, made up of several different groups. While some have ties to the global jihad (e.g., importing tactics of suicide bombings), since 2001 no Afghans have been visible in jihad fronts outside the country.

The unpromising preconditions for talks notwithstanding, informal talks have recently been held between the government and some insurgent groups, as the seminar participants noted. The possibility of talks is likely to resurface again, whether in connection with the political contest preceding the presidential and provincial elections in Afghanistan in August this year, or when the military results of the US ‘surge’ becomes clearer. If so, what are the procedural conditions that can

mobilize greatest support for talks among the Afghans? Three basic points were noted by the participants.

- The talks must be open and transparent, in particular with regard to concessions made and whom they will affect;
- A strategy that cuts a quick deal among those who control the instruments of violence and please outsiders can also be costly if it institutionalizes the conflict patterns of the war;
- Lessons from the disastrous aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal and the 1989 Geneva Accords must be heeded.

The first point – while difficult to observe in practice, as the history of previous peace negotiations indicate – was stressed in particular by participants from Afghan civil society.

The second point was brought out by comparisons with another famous peace deal negotiated by Richard Holbrooke, namely the Dayton Agreement in 1995. The Clinton Administration recognized that 3 years of covert support to the Bosniaks had not brought a military solution any closer, and a continued war would be a domestic liability for the Democratic Party in the mid-term 1996 Congressional elections. These considerations gave the process decisive momentum. After growing pressure on the warring parties from the Contact Group of major outside powers, the agreement itself was negotiated in the space of only 3 weeks at a secluded US Air Force base near Dayton, Ohio.

The American approach to secure an agreement had several elements:

- Offer selective incentives to bring to the table those who control the means of violence (whether ‘moderates’ or ‘extremists’);
- Demonstrate military power by launching a ‘surge’, designed not to win but to show the capacity to use force (bombing of Serb targets);
- Keep adversaries apart during negotiations and use shuttle diplomacy to facilitate but also control communications;
- In the substantive agreement, include a constitution that secures the interests and guarantees the safety of the parties who control the instruments of violence, and provide for an international stabilization force (a detailed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was annexed to the agreement);
- Harness the regional context by bringing in powers that militarily support local parties who control the means of violence.

The Dayton Agreement did end the hostilities. It also institutionalized the politicized ethnic divisions that were a by-product of the war, created an extraordinarily complex and partly unworkable administrative structure, and set the framework for a prolonged and intrusive international role in military, economic and political affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The agreement also cemented Holbrooke’s reputation as a tough and effective deal-maker.

The Dayton process has some obvious implications for how the present war in Afghanistan might be ended. The Geneva process that ended an earlier war in Afghanistan provides more direct parallels. The 1989 Accords were primarily designed to facilitate a Soviet withdrawal; this was their signal accomplishment, but the limited focus was a fundamental weakness.

Both the Geneva Accords and the Dayton Agreement point to the importance of a comprehensive agreement that addresses military stabilization, the political transition, and the regional context. In the Afghan case, the most obvious option is to maintain an international stabilization force to secure Kabul as a neutral political space, similar to the original mission of ISAF in 2001-2. Most

importantly, such a presence would help prevent renewed civil war, as happened after the Soviet withdrawal. As for the political transition, the greatest concern at present is that a peace deal will sharpen the ethnic divisions that became heavily politicized during the civil war of the 1990s. Non-Pashtun peoples – primarily the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek, who separately constitute minorities but collectively a majority – fear that a peace settlement with the Pashtun Taliban will mean consolidation of Pashtun control over the central state, and now even militant or nationalist Pashtun control. To safeguard the concerns of the minorities in this respect would mean reopening the constitutional issue and introducing amendments to reduce the power of the president and the central state apparatus. Opposition leaders in the parliament have already called for initiatives in this direction (e.g., elected rather than appointed governors, and parliamentary selection of a prime minister to serve alongside the president). Finally, the wider regional context is an essential dimension of the conflict in Afghanistan. While the main function of a peace agreement would be to reduce the US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan, a lasting peace agreement would also require a scheme for involving the regional powers that now support, directly or indirectly, the Afghan actors who control the means of violence.

Comprehensive peace agreements often take years before being finalized. While the Dayton Agreement was concluded in 3 weeks, this was only the last phase of negotiations and the first phase of implementation, and it was preceded by eight abortive peace plans and many more local cease-fires. Most commonly, peace talks and military offensives are intermingled, whether by design or happenstance, and are only gradually resolved in a clear preference for negotiations, or defeat. Neither prospect is at present readily in sight in Afghanistan.

SUMMARY

The surge in the US presence in Afghanistan, announced by President Barack Obama soon after taking office, is unfolding rapidly. What does this 'surge' signify? Is it a commitment to achieve what Obama calls 'the achievable objective' in US strategy towards Afghanistan, namely to eliminate Al Qaeda's base in the region and ensure that the organization will not be a source of terrorist threats to the West and its allies? Or is it the beginning of an exit strategy from a controversial war, aiming to gain a position of military strength from which to negotiate a favorable compromise? In a longer time perspective, is it a step to secure a strategic US presence in the region, or a prelude to strategic retrenchment? What are the implications for Afghans who are deeply concerned about the escalating violence in their country, disillusioned by the pace of reconstruction, and apprehensive about the future?

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