

The Afghan Strategy Checklist:

How to Evaluate the Effectiveness and Credibility of a Defining Test of Obama's Leadership

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President Obama must now make a decision that will define his presidency. President Obama will have to take personal responsibility for the outcome of the war in Afghanistan, betting his historical reputation and second term on the outcome.

At the same time, far more is at stake than the President's reputation. Once the President's choices are put into action it is unlikely that events will offer another chance to reinvent the US approach to the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The situation is too critical, the need for action too critical, and support for the war too uncertain.

Obama must choose a strategy and a set of plans and actions that will determine the outcome of the war in Afghanistan and shape much of the course of the struggle against Jihadism and the search for regional stability in Central and South Asia over the next decade and beyond.

Real Leadership Means Real Plans, Real Honesty, and Real Transparency

The President is the commander-in-chief. Someone must be in charge, someone must lead, and coherent and well-managed action must replace the debate over concepts and options. Yet, at the same time, the US and its allies cannot afford to give President Obama a blank check or accept leadership and decisions that do not meet certain key tests.

No matter how charismatic President Obama may be to many Americans, and to much of the world, no President deserves trust in such matters. President Obama must earn every bit of the support he now needs, and continue to earn it on a case-by-case basis. He must both "validate" his decisions in depth and provide the basis to "verify" them. If there is any lesson to be learned from both the Bush Administration and President Obama's initial failure as a wartime leader, it is that true leadership must be earned and constantly validated.

In fairness, President Obama inherited nearly eight years of "spin" and inspirational intellectual vacuum from the Bush Administration. There was no meaningful strategy or even threat assessment for the war; not honest effort to create an effective civil-military plan, or achieve more unity of effort from our allies in NATO/ISAF or UNAMA and the international aid effort. The Bush Administration's national security team had shown no ability to manage one war, much less two. Progress, when it came in Iraq, came from outside advice and from an extraordinary country team on the ground.

Nevertheless, President Obama cannot be excused any repetition of the mistakes he made this spring. He let himself be rushed into announcing what he said was a strategy, but was

actually little more than a set of broad concepts. The months of effort within the US national security community that have followed have shown that the President spoke before there was any meaningful reassessment of the threat.

His strategy lacked plans to address how to deal with the corruption and lack of capacity in the Afghan government. It simply carried forward earlier plans to raise US troop levels to 68,000 men without an integrated civil-military plan to shape US manpower and spending. It did not describe how to create effective Afghan forces. It did not show how to deal with national divisions and caveats on NATO/ISAF and the PRTs. And, it made no meaningful effort to address the massive failures and corruption in the UNAMA-led international aid effort. The end result was that President Obama came all too close to repeating the mistakes of his predecessor, relying on “spin” and efforts to “control the narrative.”

Earning Trust Rather Than Asking For It

President Obama must now show that he has a complete and effective “strategy” and that he now has an effective plan to actually implement it. He must define all of the necessary resources and show that they can be provided. He must openly and explicitly recognize each critical problem and risk, and show how he plans to deal with each one. He must provide a broad schedule for action and well-defined measures of effectiveness. He must define the end goal of his strategy -- “victory” -- in detail

Furthermore, he must do all this in a way that speaks convincingly to the world. The President must conduct a massive and concerted effort at strategic communications directed at Americans, our friends and allies, and the leaders and people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He must show where he intends to lead and how his administration plans to act.

He does not need to provide all of the details in each of the previous areas, give away classified information, or expose every problem in dealing with the Afghan and Pakistani governments, NATO/ISAF allies, or UNAMA and aid donors. He must, however, support his initial decisions with most of that information and with a continuing level of honesty and transparency that has been dismally lacking for at least the last eight years. He must then provide regular reporting and analysis that is honest, objective, and has the depth to build lasting credibility.

Admitting the Time, Cost, and Sacrifice Necessary to Win

President Obama must make it clear that there is no easy or rapid route to success, and be realistic in everything he says about the time, human and financial cost, and risk of failure. His plans must take into consideration that in the best case, it is unlikely that the insurgency and terrorist threat can be entirely defeated in Afghanistan and Pakistan within the next decade.

Scoring any definitive form of victory that eliminates a major organized threat in both states and provides the people of both Afghanistan and Pakistan with security and stability will require years of effort that extend well into the President’s second term – if he is reelected.

He must prepare the US and the world for the fact that the present level of US, allied, Afghan, and Pakistani casualties will almost certainly double and probably more than tripled before something approaching victory is won. He must be honest about the long-term financial cost of both the fight and the aftermath. The US and its allies will need to provide aid and advisors years after the peak periods of combat are over – if we win. Terrorism and extremism cannot be defeated directly; they require the creation of effective states and a level of governance, political accommodation, and economic security that will build lasting popular support.

Being Frank About the Complexity and Enduring Nature of the Threat

He must not repeat the mistake of demonizing Al Qa'ida, Bin Laden, and the Quetta Taliban. He should support his speech with a detailed and unclassified analysis of the threats in both countries and the region, and how they affect both the spread of terrorism and regional stability.

He must provide follow-up reporting that shows sheer complexity of the efforts needed to meet the threat, and how this relates to the tasks and the cost of armed nation building. He must openly recognize that the internal problems of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the lack of cohesion and will among our allies and within the US, each poses major risks of their own. He must stop taking the easy route of focusing on international terrorism and deal with how the wars affect the broader challenges of regional instability to the west, north, and east.

The President must be frank about the fact that any form of victory in Afghanistan and Pakistan will be part of a much wider and longer struggle. He must make it clear that the ideological, demographic, governance, economic, and other pressures that divide the Islamic world mean the world will face threats in many other nations that will endure indefinitely into the future. He should mention the risks in Yemen and Somalia, make it clear that the Iraq War is not over, and warn that we will still face both a domestic threat and a combination of insurgency and terrorism that will continue to extend from Morocco to the Philippines, and from Central Asia deep into Africa, regardless of how well we do in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At the same time, the President must warn that the US may still lose in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan in spite of his new strategy and honestly address the cost of defeat or withdrawal. He must prepare the American people and our allies for the possibility of defeat. It is time that everyone heard from the President that an exit is not an exit strategy. Every exit has a destination any form of defeat will force the US and allies to fight elsewhere on less favorable terms.

A Check List for Action

How should we judge the President's decisions? Much will depend on just how much information the Obama Administration provides in explaining and justifying the President's decisions. Ironically, the least important substantive part of this explanation and justification will not be the President's speech – although his words will be absolutely critical in shaping US and world opinion.

No matter how well the President presents his choices, one set of statements and concepts will sound too vague and too much like the concepts that have failed in the past in any

address that runs under an hour. Trust must be built on the details that follow. If the President's National Security Advisor and domestic policy advisors do not yet understand this, they will do him great damage – as well as great damage to the US national interest.

Both the President and his Administration must show they have now come firmly and honestly to grips with the need to correct the problems created by our past plans and threat assessments that failed to resource both military and civil efforts, never properly came to grips with the actions of Pakistan, did not confront the failures of UNAMA and the international aid effort, and allowed NATO/ISAF to become an uncoordinated mess incapable of executing effective and coordinated military efforts.

The Need to Correct Failures in Intelligence and Net Assessment

Part of this effort must be to admit and correct intelligence failures that helped allow the Taliban and other insurgents to exploit the de facto power vacuum that emerged out of an over-centralized and incapable Afghan central government that US actions did much to create. From 2003 onwards, the US systematically underestimated the scale of insurgent success and growing control and influence over the Afghan population and countryside. From at least 2004 onwards, it focused resources and attention on Iraq, while it systematically losing the war in Afghanistan.

Worse, the US never fully addressed the ways in which the various elements of the threat interacted and became progressively more international at the top. It never properly addressed the scale of the penetration into the Afghan government, forces, power brokers, contractors, aid, and narcotics efforts; the growth of shadow governments and networks; and the creation of near sanctuaries in parts of Afghanistan as well as Pakistan.

There was virtually no meaningful net assessment of how developments in the threat directly compared -- and interacted -- with the quality and lack of presence of Afghan governance and justice systems. There was a lack of net assessment in comparing the threat to the in the quality and presence of the ANSF, similar limits to NATO/ISAF and PRT coverage and efforts; and failure in the aid effort to reach out broadly to the Afghan people, particularly in high-risk areas.

These failures must be publicly corrected, within the limits imposed by protecting sources and methods. There must be credible threat and net assessments that push declassification to its limits. NATO/ISAF must address the full range of the threat – its efforts to control and influence the population, and its efforts to conduct a war of political attrition seeking to cripple the Afghan government and drive US and allied forces out of the region. It must show the successes and failures of the Afghans and NATO/ISAF relative to the threat, and assess the war in civil-military terms rather than simply tactical terms.

Providing Enough Detail to Prove We Can Win: The Credibility Checklist

Far more, however, is needed than honest assessments of the threat. The President's address, and the supporting papers and analysis, must explicitly address in each key area of a functional strategy:

- ***This includes the key elements of any “population-centric strategy,” and any effort to implement “shape, clear, hold, and build.”*** Buzzwords and slogans will not enough. It must be clear that sufficient mixes of troops and civilians will be provided; what implementing lasting security and giving the population economic hope and minimal government services really means; and how a phased plan of action will be executed.
- ***The same is true of improvements in the effort to destroy insurgent and terrorist networks by attacking key leaders, communication structure, and key cadres.*** It is far too easy to talk about success as if “counterterrorism” is a magic form of decapitation, and is a practical substitute for counterinsurgency. Both can be forms of “mowing the grass” and courses of action that simply create a more experienced and adaptive threat over time – and do so in a two-country area in an area two to four times larger than in Iraq with a mix of threats that is much more diverse and embedded in the population. A successful strategy needs to reflect just how complex and massive a mix of technical, intelligence, strike, SOF, and host country efforts is needed to make such campaigns work. It also needs to reflect the severe limits to such an approach when it is not tied to broader counterinsurgency efforts.
- ***It must be clear how the US, NATO/ISAF, and aid donors will deal with corruption and lack of capacity in the Afghan government.*** The Karzai election has made it all too clear that much of the Afghan central government is now as much of a practical threat as the Taliban and Al Qa’ida, and no foreseeable outcome of the election can fix the government system that has done so much to create these problems. It must also be clear, however, that the US and its allies will adopt a strategy based on finding practical ways to use and reinforce the effective elements of the central government; to build up parallel capacity at the provincial, district, and local level; and to bypass and eliminate corrupt leaders and officers and reduce the influence of power brokers.
- ***At the same time, the US must admit its own mistakes in shaping the failures in Afghan governance and show how it will take responsibility for them.*** The US went to war in both Afghanistan and Iraq seeking to avoid nation building, and was therefore unprepared for conducting nation building and counterinsurgency campaigns. It failed to assess the problems in trying to change foreign cultures, governments, economies, and security structures. It then failed to understand the nature of the insurgencies and developing levels of conflict it faced, the complexity of the actions needed to succeed, and the resources it required. It mirror-imaged values and goals that Afghans and Iraqis did not broadly share with Americans, and never properly assessed its own ability to staff, resource, and manage the actions it did take – particularly at the civil level.

The problems in Afghan governance are to a large extent the product of this heritage. The US confused holding elections and creating new formal structures of central government with the need for effective governance and political accommodation and stability, and failed to address the real world problems of governance. Political legitimacy in counterinsurgency is the product of the quality

of host country governance; how that government is chosen is only of secondary importance.

The US focused on central governments to the virtual exclusion of efforts to create provincial and local governments and structures that actually represent the people of given areas and regions. Its approach to instant democracy, unrealistic approaches to the rule of law, and medium and long-term development rather than meeting short-term popular needs laid much of the groundwork for failure in both countries and helped to empower both insurgencies. The legacy of these problems has reached the crisis point in Afghanistan and is still serious in Iraq. The US owes the Afghan people the efforts necessary to create more effective and representative governance, and at the provincial and district level – not simply at the center.

- ***There must be an honest plan for building up Afghan security forces that does not seek impossible goals in size and time, sacrifice quality for quantity, and waste Afghan lives and hopes in a rush to substitute for US and allied forces.*** The US and its NATO/ISAF allies must take responsibility for the fact it took years to see the importance of creating large and effective host country forces, and that serious funding only came in FY2007. They then focused on developing the Afghan Army as a support for their operations rather than making them true partners that could take the lead and replace the US and NATO/ISAF forces.

The US and NATO/ISAF never properly addressed the real world problems police face in surviving and fighting an insurgency, or the reality that the mission priority was paramilitary local security rather than a conventional rule of law. US action only began to have a major impact in developing Afghan forces more than half a decade after the start of the conflict. Until then it failed to realistically address the problems in creating a police force through at least early 2008, and still; set force goals roughly 50% short of need in mid 2009.

President Obama must now take the lead in showing there are detailed and realistic plans for shaping and funding Afghan force development. It must be clear that there will be adequate trainers, embedded mentors, partner units, and enablers; and that the US seeks to create a true partnership that will produce joint, effective higher-level commands and the ability to transfer roles to the Afghans as soon as possible.

It must be clear that Afghan forces will be sustained and supported, not used up and sacrificed. The US must show how corruption and leadership problems will be addressed. It must also be clear how the problems in the police and militias will be addressed, and how these efforts will relate to efforts to make a formal and informal local justice system work, and support the hold and build functions of a population-centric strategy.

- ***The roles US troops and civilians will play, the rationale behind changes in these roles, and the nature of plans to increase US efforts and personnel, must be fully justified and explained.*** It is time to rise above the over-simplistic focus on military man power levels that has shaped the public debate over strategy in recent months, and explain why given levels and types of US forces will needed,

and show how they will interact with plans to provide more civilians. It must also be clear that the US will reduce its overdependence on unqualified contractors with uncertain integrity.

- ***Plans to increase US military forces must be explained in terms of how many military personnel are needed to train and mentor Afghan forces and how many must perform civil-military, PRT, and other aid functions that US troops are not ready or willing to perform.*** The presence of some extraordinary civilians in the US embassies and aid efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq cannot disguise the fact that the State Department as an institution is still unable to plan and execute an effective civil effort in both countries.
- ***There must be a serious, detailed, and transparent integrated civil-military plan for US action.*** The US needs to achieve true unity of effort and focus after eight years of stovepiped, poorly coordinated, and constantly reinvented efforts. It needs to force effective plans and management on the entire country team, not declare victory, issue a cosmetic effort, and send the real planners home. It needs to create truly meaningful joint management and measures of effectiveness, not see how many ambassadors can be deployed to one country and dance on the head of a pin.

Talk of integrated civil-military plans and joint campaign plans cannot disguise their lack of reality, the lack of coordinated and well managed civil efforts, the stove piping and lack of basic accountability in most aid efforts, and the near chaos in managing the overall foreign aid effort within the State Department – an issue that Secretary Clinton has raised but so far done nothing to address.

- ***It must be clear how the US will seek more effectiveness and unity of effort within the NATO/ISAF alliance and the related Provincial Reconstruction teams that are the face of aid and de facto governance that most Afghans will see during at least the initial phase of any population centric strategy.*** The issue is not making impossible demands for “more,” it is making credible demands for “better” – hopefully persuading our allies to say.
- ***There must be some effort to address just how badly led the UNAMA effort has been, and how irrelevant and impractical much of the economic and other international aid effort has been.*** A workable strategy and plan must make efforts to reduce the levels of waste and corruption within Western donors and contractors; and rectify the detachment of far too many aid programs from the reality Afghanistan is at war. It must reorient the flow of aid to meet the day-to-day needs of the Afghan people for security, freedom from corruption, prompt justice, minimal government services, and basic economic survival. In many ways, the international aid effort – UN, national, and NCO alike – has been and remains as much an enemy as Al Qa’ida, the Taliban, and the lack of capacity and integrity in the Afghan central government.
- ***There must be a clear strategy for counternarcotics. It is not enough to talk about moving away from eradication to attacking traffickers and networks.*** There must be a clear plan for US, NATO/ISAF, and Afghan governments to deal with such issues.

- ***The logistic realities of the new strategy must be clear:*** It must be clear that there are credible plans to handle the problem of moving the necessary personnel and equipment and securing key facilities and lines of communication.

The President's decisions must be explained and supported in detail in later explanations and reports in ways that provide detailed metrics and reporting. There must be a clear picture of the scale of the tasks the US and its allies must address, and how these are being addressed in terms of tangible plans and goals.

The Problem of Pakistan

The problem in shaping and presenting a credible strategy for Pakistan is both different from that for Afghanistan and involves special sensitivities. Raising the key challenges and issues that affect the war in Afghanistan, and plans to address them, does present obvious political problems. Every such issue, however, is already a subject of open debate in the US, NATO/ISAF countries, Afghanistan itself, and the region around it. It is also clear that most Afghans do support the campaign against the Taliban, and do support US and NATO/ISAF efforts when they bring lasting security and stability and help create an Afghan military and government presence that helps them.

The situation in Pakistan is very different, although the struggle in the two nations is so closely related that it is a single conflict in many ways. Pakistani anger at the US, and lack of support for the war, poses very different problems. Pakistan has a weak and divided government, an even more divided civil political structure, and a military whose willingness to accept weak civil government is as uncertain as ever.

At the same time, Islamic extremist elements play a much stronger role at every level in Pakistan. There is a broad perception that the Pakistani struggle against Jihadists is the result of a war imposed by the US; which is a key source of broad distrust and anger against the US.

These problems are compounded by a continuing effort by some elements in the Pakistani government and military to win Pakistani influence over Afghanistan, particularly in Pashtun population, by manipulating the Afghan Taliban. These elements also maintain a focus on the threat from India, and deep internal divisions in areas like Baluchistan, FATA, and the Sind.

This does not mean that the President should not declare a strategy for dealing with Pakistan, or give up in trying to develop a more integrated Afghan and Pakistani approach to border security and dealing with a mutual threat. Many of the more detailed issues the US must address in presenting a credible strategy for Afghanistan affect the Pakistani side of the war in a modified form, and some open discussion of ways to deal with them is worth the political cost of Pakistani reactions.

The Obama Administration must find a way to show it has credible plans to deal with Pakistan. The level of transparency involved will, however, have to be different. This will be a key challenge the President will also have to address, although probably separately in many areas, and with a different level of reporting. Furthermore, no degree of Pakistani sensitivity can excuse a detailed US effort to justify and account for its civil and military aid efforts. Silence will not help us win; it will simply encourage corruption, misallocation, and waste.

Supporting Real Leadership: “Resources to Experiment” versus “Troops to Task”

Both Americans and our allies need to understand there is a time to follow as well as a time to criticize and judge. They must be prepared to respond to real leadership. Moreover, they must be aware of the risks involved and the fact that no strategy or plan can win by freezing any key aspect of the US and NATO/ISAF approach to the war, or by failing to constantly experiment and adapt.

President Obama does have to choose and implement a course of action, and show that the US, NATO/ISAF/Afghans and Pakistan make sufficient progress over the next 12-24 months to eventually achieve some meaningful kind of victory.

At the same time, Americans and their allies need to accept the fact that the level of troops and civilians, the way in which civil-military relations are conducted, the mix of tactics, the balance of effort between population-centric and counter-insurgent efforts, and how the US seeks to address all of the other issues in the President’s new plan cannot be static. The US, NATO/ISAF, and the Afghan government and ANSF will inevitably have to make a long series of shifts to find the best real world approach, and to adapt to changing circumstances in order to take the initiative from the enemy.

No one has fought exactly this kind of war before, or dealt with the same set of problems and complexities. There are no proven “troop to task ratios,” and the only choice in dealing with skilled and adaptive enemies is to improve the “resource to experiment” ratio. Now, and for at least several years, terms like “counterinsurgency” and “counterterrorism” are buzzwords that will have to be redefined in practice.

Americans and their allies need to understand that this combination of uncertainty and the need to adapt to a skilled and dedicated set of enemies means that there will be truly bad days, weeks, and months. The risks are too high, and the problems too complex, for any strategy not to experience serious reversals over the next few years. There can be no victory unless both the American people and the population of allied states accept this reality. As the US experience in Iraq has illustrated, panic and overreaction are no substitute for strategic patience.