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Time to Listen to the Afghans

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For success to be achieved in Afghanistan, NATO and the Coalition Forces must go back to first principles and remind themselves that the Afghanistan mission is about poor Afghans, not rich Westerners. There is a need to move beyond the theoretical 'Afghanisation' and listen to the Afghans themselves.

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV, surveying the wreckage of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan famously said: "We have been fighting in Afghanistan for six years now. If we don't change approaches we will be fighting there for another 20 or 30 years." Whilst a very different operation to Moscow's brutal occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, it is a sad fact that NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is slowly reaching the same point in the minds of some Afghans.

The Threat of Self-Delusion

Put simply, the yawning gap between what the NATO capitals regard as success, and the reality on the ground is in danger of becoming an exercise in political and bureaucratic self-delusion. Money is paid, projects are sanctioned, bureaucratic boxes are ticked and progress is declared. Everybody is happy – except the Afghan people. Far too many of the initiatives that are launched on behalf of the Afghan people pay scant regard to their views, perspectives and experience. It is little wonder then that so many of them see little evidence of progress. Therefore, if anything like success is to be achieved, it is time for the NATO allies and partners to go back to first principles and remind themselves that the Afghanistan mission is about poor Afghans, not rich Westerners. To that end, a new and novel Jirga must be convened as a matter of urgency. And for the first time, it must properly seek the views of senior Afghans from across the country on how best to proceed, including members of the moderate Taliban.

ISAF has made some progress. The Provincial Reconstructions Teams (PRTs) are conceptually sound. However, with the best will in the world, armed forces are not the best instruments to lead complex change beyond the initial phase of forced entry. The military can create the security space, but they are incapable of filling it. Afghanistan's most challenging province Helmand, is a case in point. Nominally, under British 'control', it is led by a British diplomat. Indeed, it is one of the very few PRTs led by a diplomat. Unfortunately, he only has 29 other civilian colleagues in support. Such imbalance generates two contrasting dilemmas.

First, the over-militarisation of the presence on the ground which prevents the subtle management of necessary and complex change. Contacts with key tribal elders too often take place within a military context, rather than a development context. When relationships are going well much can indeed be

achieved. However, when Afghans are killed in friendly-fire incidents the collective nature of Afghan society rapidly turns an ISAF uniform from an emblem of solidarity into a symbol of threat.

Second, decisions are taken in distant capitals that have more to do with Western political correctness than local needs and which lead to projects that the Afghan people regard with at best disdain and more likely contempt. The most notorious example was the creation of a US\$ 1 million Women's Park. This was understandably met with derision by local people and undermined all credibility. Still, a box was ticked in London.

The Theoretical Afghanistan

However, the most pressing need is to move beyond the theoretical 'Afghanisation' so beloved of politicians, diplomats and military commanders. Sadly, the international community at large has singularly failed to understand the culture, history and faith of the Afghan people. For all the talk of progress the fact is that investment in the Afghans is the lowest per capita of any development programme by the international community since World War Two. Indeed, the Taliban pay their forces three times as much as the Afghan National Army pay their own, funded by the burgeoning narco-economy and Middle Eastern money that continues to flow to Al Qaeda in copious amounts.

Foreigners have always been treated with suspicion in Afghanistan, especially if their presence is defined by the gun. Consequently, NATO has reached a critical juncture in the ISAF mission. It has extended its 'footprint' across the whole country, but if the tread is to be sure it is vital that Afghans learn to see the presence as good. That will mean striking a delicate balance between convincing Afghans NATO is there to stay but not to occupy, that NATO must act against the extreme elements of the Taliban but the road to dialogue is open, that NATO will leave, but not just yet. To strike that balance will require a fundamental shift in the character of the mission backed up by demonstrable improvements in the daily lives and well-being of ordinary Afghans.

Such progress means listening far more intently to the people who matter in Afghan society as how best now to proceed, particularly in the south. Specifically, the views of senior Afghans officials and tribal elders must be sought as to how best they think Afghans and NATO jointly can progressively civilianise the ISAF mission. Most importantly, tribal leaders and elders must be invited to give their leadership over how best to proceed in Afghanistan, what works and what does not. In particular, NATO and the Americans need a far better understanding of what role traditional institutions can play in Afghanistan's future and then act on it.

Afghanistan is winnable

Afghanistan is winnable. However, on the current trajectory the mission will bog down as the gap between what NATO is trying to achieve and what needs to be achieved becomes unsustainably wide. 'Success' in Afghanistan will thus need proper and sustained investment in the Afghan people, rather than bureaucratic exercises in NATO capitals. The three D's – defence, diplomacy and development -- and Comprehensive Approach are all well and good in theory, but the devil as ever is in the detail. And, that 'detail' is Afghan. It is time to listen to Afghans. After all, they are the people who know.

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