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Reintegration versus Reconciliation in Afghanistan

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In the wake of the London conference on Afghanistan there has been much discussion of possible reconciliation with the Taliban. Such a strategy is unlikely to work. Instead there should be a shift in the present counterinsurgency strategy towards reintegrating the rank and file of the Taliban.

IN LATE January, a conference was held in London involving 70 countries concerned about the future of Afghanistan. It was co-hosted by the United Kingdom, the United Nations and the Afghan government. In the aftermath of the London conference, there has been much discussion of the possibilities of seeking reconciliation with the Taliban under the right circumstances. This strategy, sadly, is fraught with multiple pitfalls. To begin with, such a strategy assumes that the ideologically-charged Taliban leadership is even willing to entertain any form of genuine power sharing. Any form of reconciliation would, of necessity, involve a willingness on the part of the Taliban to accept existing constitutional arrangements, to compromise on their religious zealotry and not to use their entry into a reconstituted regime to undermine it. Without these minimal guarantees, any notion of sharing power with the Taliban leadership becomes all but untenable.

Flaws in Current Strategy

Worse still, this proposition has other significant flaws. The United States and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) embarked upon this war in Afghanistan principally to overthrow the scrofulous Taliban regime. After nearly a decade's expenditure of considerable treasure and no small amount of blood, what sense, if any, does it make to reconcile with those one had decided to eviscerate to restore some semblance of order and law to Afghanistan?

Instead of this deluded strategy of reconciliation with the Taliban leadership, the principal goal instead should be one of reintegration. This is not a mere verbal ploy. A strategy of reintegration would not focus its efforts on the irreconcilable leadership. Instead it would be directed towards weaning away the rank and file of the Taliban. These hapless foot soldiers do not necessarily share the lofty

ideological goals of the leadership. Instead they joined as a consequence of the lack of other employment opportunities, the chance to acquire loot and what a prominent American political scientist, Elizabeth Woods, based upon her field work in El Salvador, calls “pleasure in agency” --- namely notions of personal esteem and efficacy through participation in insurgent actions.

Grid, Build and Hold

A carefully-crafted counter-insurgency strategy can wean away many of these members of the rank and file and thereby deprive the insurgency of much of its steam. To that end the ISAF may have to alter its current emphasis on “clear, build and hold”. Sadly, the clearing of areas of the Taliban has all too frequently caused much collateral damage and has alienated significant segments of the Afghan population because of the sheer scope and ferocity of the force used to accomplish the goal of clearance.

Based on our collective knowledge of and experience with counterinsurgency operations in Indian-controlled Kashmir, it is possible to proffer an alternative counter-insurgency strategy -- one that focuses on the creation of grids, successfully holding them and then building upon them. Though hardly flawless, it has enabled India’s counter-insurgency forces to bring about a substantial degree of order and some law to regions where the writ of the Indian state had nearly evaporated a decade ago. Despite the differences in terrain and political context, the lessons learned from the Indian experience may well have some applicability to the present Afghan theater.

To draw away the rank-and-file one must first recognise that many have organic ethnic and local ties with entire swaths of territory in Afghanistan. It is the existence of these links that enables the insurgents to thrive in a host of areas. Consequently, the creation of a grid system does not rely on quick and harsh sweeps through a particular region seeking to rid it of insurgent hideouts. Instead it involves a steady, firm presence of counter-insurgency forces in the grid and with periodic calibrated, intelligence-based operations to keep the insurgents on the run. This strategy is far more likely to win favour with the local inhabitants.

The trust of the civilian population within the ambit of a grid can be obtained as they feel more secure and are less exposed to the ancillary damage of clearance operations. As trust between the ISAF and the affected Afghan population increases, the rank-and-file, let alone the leadership of the Taliban, are likely to find fewer sources of succour. As their ability to find refuge and sanctuary dries up, the less ideologically-charged members of the movement will inevitably look to other avenues of employment. Holding these areas, where support for the Taliban is steadily waning, will then become that much easier. In turn, at this stage, the “build” component of the strategy can be set in motion. Various forms of local governance can be encouraged, small sums of money transferred toward developmental activities, employment opportunities to former insurgents can be proffered, and more large-scale projects initiated as overall security improves.

The Proof of the Pudding

In fairness, this strategy will probably require more time, patience and manpower. However, the success of a grid strategy is almost bound to have positive demonstration effects. The experience of the Indian security forces in Indian-controlled Kashmir suggests that the success of the strategy provided the basis for its steady extension to other parts of the insurgency-wracked state. Obviously, this counter-insurgency strategy is not a complete panacea for the many ills that now plague Afghanistan. However, it offers a far better prospect for drawing away many of the foot soldiers of the Taliban from the insurgency and integrating them into the normal fabric of Afghanistan’s society. The chimerical attempt to entice the Taliban leadership into the fold of the fragile Afghan state is little more than a fool’s errand. The sooner it is abandoned the better.

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