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Post-ISAF Afghanistan: The Need for a 15:20 Program?

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Post-ISAF Afghanistan: The Need for a “15:20 Program”

As the withdrawal of US and allied forces continues, the post-2014 allied manning and assistance levels in Afghanistan have yet to be defined. The absence of a plan, inadequate media coverage, and our upcoming presidential election have created ambiguity, confusion, and drift, harming the war effort and giving comfort to our adversaries. The United States and the leadership of the NATO alliance need to define the future of their commitment to Afghanistan and discuss future burden sharing.

The Afghanistan story is fading. According to the Pew Research Center, Afghanistan accounted for only 2 percent of the news stories in 2011, down from 4 percent in 2010. Executives blamed tight budgets, concern over reporter safety, and perceived indifference on the part of the public for this situation. With the public focused on the economy and the upcoming elections, potential presidential candidates also find little advantage in talking about the war. There seems to be an agreement among both parties: the less said about the war in Afghanistan, the better. The leadership of the Department of Defense has been busy with the huge issue of the new Strategic Guidance, which has 3 lines dedicated to our overarching goal in Afghanistan, but no mention of futures.

US allies have also said little. They too have significant economic problems, not to mention populations less keen to fight in Afghanistan than the United States has been. Alliance contributions to the war effort --- 29 percent of the troops --- have been significant, overall, but many allied leaders have hesitated to volunteer a post-2014 commitment, despite bold talk at the Lisbon summit. Some leaders clearly intend to opt for free-riding, letting other members of the alliance bear the burden.

This ambiguity over future commitments gives incentives to the Taliban --- battered during the surge --- to continue the fight, hoping that the United States and its allies will fade quickly after 2014. The ambiguity and drift have also given Pakistan another reason to doubt our long-term commitment, hold back support for reconciliation, and continue its support for the insurgents.

In two years, the ISAF-centered expeditionary force will be gone, and the Afghans will be in control of security across their Texas-sized country. The Afghan national security forces --- soon to be 350,000 strong --- have grown in quantity and quality, but they will still need logistical support and financial aid, as well as advice on operations, training, and force management. The Afghan government is worried about abandonment and is eager for our help. We should not give it altruistically, but rather because it is in our interest to do so.

Allied assistance will allow the United States to avoid the catastrophe that followed the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, when we turned our back on the Afghans and allowed the fighting there to be controlled by

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warlords supported by various regional powers, most notably, Pakistan. The “victors” in the civil war were Pakistan and its local client, the Taliban, which later ran one of the most repressive and least effective governments in the history of mankind. By the dawn of the new century, the Taliban were close and symbiotic allies of Al Qaeda. To this day, the Taliban has never disavowed Al Qaeda. The devastating 9/11 attacks, a decade of war, and the expenditure of more than a trillion dollars were the US “reward” for failing to remain engaged in Afghanistan in the 1990s. We quit the “great game” in the seventh inning.

Blowing the endgame in Afghanistan could be as bad after 2014 as it was in the 1990s. A civil war in Afghanistan or a Taliban victory there would court disaster, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 1996, the Taliban victory was followed by the slaughter of thousands, especially the Hazaras, a Shia minority group. In a Taliban victory in the coming decades, the score-settling alone would produce tens of thousands of dead Afghans. The routine abuse of women and the mismanagement of the economy would begin all over again. A Taliban victory could create a civil war along ethnic lines.

Ambassador Ron Neumann wrote in his book, *The Other War*, that if we fail in Afghanistan, it will again become a terrorist base for those who have attacked the West, and it also “will become the strategic rear and base for extremism in Pakistan,” a nuclear power with a powerful Army and a population approaching 200 million people. “This will allow and facilitate support for extremist movements across the huge swath of energy-rich Central Asia, as was the case in the 1990s.” In short, US vital interests in Afghanistan did not disappear with the death of bin Laden, and they will continue after the ISAF expeditionary force has gone home.

Our interests dictate the need for a secure, independent, decent Afghanistan, an ally in the war on terrorism and a force for good in its troubled region. Moreover, there is never a good time for a great power to lose a war. In order to reap the fruits of progress, the United States and its allies must develop a plan to provide targeted economic and security assistance to Afghanistan after 2014. Our government must begin an active dialog with the Congress, all of our allies, and the American people about helping the Afghan government to stand firmly on its feet against its well-supported opponent.

Before Nato’s May 2012 summit in Chicago, the Administration should develop a draft plan, and share that draft with key leaders in Congress and US allies. Allies who can’t for one reason or another participate on the ground should be asked to contribute to a security fund to assist the more able allied nations in helping the Afghans.

Here is a concept plan, a mark on the wall, which could be used to begin discussions. Assuming that reconciliation and peace is at least 5 years off (2017), the “15:20 Program,” calls for an allied commitment of 20 billion dollars per year, and more importantly, the stationing of 15,000 allied military personnel on the ground for military assistance, air and logistical support, and counterterrorist activities. As the Afghan government strengthens and peace spreads, or as Afghan revenues grow, manpower and funding can be reduced.

Financially, this initial 20 billion dollar allied commitment will include 6 billion to support the ANSF, and 4 billion dollars for economic assistance to the government and people of Afghanistan, much of which for accountability can be routed through international trust funds and mechanisms that put money under the control of local community *jirgas*. The remaining half of the funds will go for equipment and the support of allied men and women in uniform.

The 15,000 personnel would include 6,000 unit and training advisors; and 4,000 headquarters, intelligence, and logistics personnel. The remaining 5,000 would be split among an international helicopter support unit, a Ranger-like quick reaction force to protect allied personnel and embassies,

counterterrorist forces, and a robust air support element. Economies can be made by consolidating all US-NATO-ISAF headquarters into one entity, merging NATO support elements, continuing to provide part of the air support from carriers, maximizing the use of UAVs, and working hard to obtain the maximum amount of international support. Logistically, the much-reduced flow of men and materiel into Afghanistan could avoid Pakistani bottlenecks and pilferage, and go solely along the northern distribution network through Central Asia.

Fiscal hawks will say that this is too large a financial stake in a country like Afghanistan. Fifteen thousand troops and twenty billion dollars, however, represent only 11 percent of the strength of the current expeditionary force, and less than a sixth of the current US outlays. Other critics will say that the “15:20 Program” is too much for a country with such a weak government and a small GDP. This is an inappropriate metric. The long-term importance of a country can’t be judged by its in-conflict level of development or its lack of wealth.

In 1952, the Republic of Korea was as poor, as corrupt, and as looked down upon as Afghanistan is today. Our investment in security and stability there stopped communist aggression and allowed for the development over decades of one of the world’s greatest democracies and vibrant economies. Afghanistan may never become another South Korea, but, with a trillion dollars’ worth of strategic minerals and better security, it can clearly become much more than it is today.

The United States failed to finish the job in Afghanistan in 1990 and tragedy ensued. We must not make that mistake again. A plan along the lines of the 15:20 Program can help us exploit hard-fought progress, contribute to the defeat of international terrorism, and foster peace and security in Southwest Asia. We need to complete our strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan and begin now to line up support for the post-2014 assistance effort in Afghanistan.

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