

President Barack Obama's Counterterrorism Strategy and Legacy: The Case of Afghanistan

Leonard Cutler, *Siena College*

US STRATEGY VERSUS REALITY, 2009–2014

In early May 2012, on the one-year anniversary of the death of Osama bin Laden, President Barack Obama made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan to sign a Strategic Partnership Agreement (BSA) with President Hamid Karzai that established broad conditions for Afghan-US relations after the phased departure of American fighting forces in 2014. The president's withdrawal of 33,000 troops by September 2014 was designed, in part, to resonate with Americans' weariness with the war. Obama's emphasis was on stabilizing Afghanistan, defeating the Taliban and al-Qaida, establishing longer-term cooperation between the two countries, and laying the groundwork for Afghans to accomplish two narrow security missions beyond 2014: counterterrorism and continued training.

Under President Obama, Afghanistan had become the military's top priority in the war against al-Qaida and the Taliban. It was to become a principal part of his legacy as the single largest, longest, and most costly counterterrorism initiative. The number of troops had surged to well more than 100,000 and counterinsurgency and nation-building had become the early core strategies. Obama's principal goal had been to promote good governance and legitimacy in the eyes of the local population (Cutler 2011).

The Obama administration had to narrow its goals to make the case that America had achieved limited objectives in a war that was, in any traditional sense, unwinnable. President Obama declared that the surge had accomplished its mission: it reversed momentum on the battlefield and dramatically increased the size and capability of the indigenous Afghan National Security Force (ANSF).

What the administration did not want to discuss was giving up on many objectives that Obama had promised the Afghans during his presidency: securing all of the regions and provinces of the country, rather than only major urban areas such as Kabul; reconstructing the nation's infrastructure and ensuring high agricultural and energy production; promoting health clinics and education for all young Afghan women; and securing the entire governmental system of justice by eliminating waste and fraud in the process. Afghanistan's political system was permeated by an endemic state of corruption at all levels of government. There was a crisis of confidence among the Afghan population in their own government as well as the

international community, which undermined the credibility of the United States and also emboldened the insurgents.

In his published memoir, Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense in the Obama administration, questioned Obama's commitment to his Afghanistan war policy, criticized how political calculations influenced national-security decisions, and complained about the president's distrust of the military command. During a heated March 2011 meeting, the president suggested that he was possibly being gamed by the military. According to Gates, "The president doesn't trust his commander General David Petraeus, can't stand the Afghan President Hamid Karzai, doesn't believe in his own strategy, and doesn't consider the war to be his. For him, it's all about getting out" (Gates 2014). Although Afghanistan had definitely become Obama's war, he escalated the conflict while simultaneously doubting that it could ever be won.

AFGHAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2014

America remained a vital lifeline for Afghan President Hamid Karzai's control of the country as well as that of his successor after the disputed presidential elections held in the spring of 2014. Given Afghanistan's long history involving waves of conflict shattering the internal fabric of the country, resiliency was pivotal to the Afghan character. Having survived Soviet occupation, a brutal civil war, years of Taliban terrorist attacks, and rounds of violence and charges of corruption around the election, an estimated 70% of 12 million eligible voters were not deterred from casting their ballots. Doing so demonstrated their faith in democratic processes and a desire for continued self-determination after years of turmoil.

Afghanistan's two rival presidential candidates, former Finance Minister and World Bank official Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, came to an agreed-upon deal brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry to abide by the outcome of a complete audit of their contested election to determine the victor and to establish a national-unity government. It was reassuring that both candidates agreed to respect the result and that the winner would immediately form a distinct democratic government that would replace years of a highly centralized presidency. The new prime-ministerial model, which was a principal priority of Abdullah Abdullah, indicated a change to a parliamentary system, unifying the country in a political environment fraught with crises and factional disputes.

The preliminary agreement meant that the victor would become the president of the Afghan government and, in the following two to three years, the Constitution would be amended to form a parliamentary democracy with a prime minister as head of the government and a president as head of state.

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In late September 2014, the official winner of the audit, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, formally signed the power-sharing agreement with Abdullah Abdullah, placing the latter in the newly created post similar to that of a chief executive. However, supreme executive power remained in the office of the presidency.

US MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

Even before the runoff election to determine President Karzai's successor, President Obama announced that the United States would seek to keep 9,800 troops in Afghanistan after the war finally ended later in 2014. His decision essentially reaffirmed the position taken by US military commanders and was contingent on the Afghan government signing the BSA once the election outcome was determined. The president's strategy was to force the Afghan government to assume full responsibility for its own security after the United States markedly reduced its military presence there. He envisioned a partnership with the Afghan nation that focused on continued targeting of terrorists while also supporting a viable sovereign Afghan governing structure.

During 2015, the number of troops was to be reduced by half and then consolidated in the capital of Kabul and at Bagram Airfield, the principal US base in Afghanistan. Most of the remaining forces would be withdrawn at the end of 2016, leaving a contingency group of approximately 1,000 to staff a security office in Kabul. In advance of his announcement, President Obama discussed his plans with and received support from the leaders of Germany, Great Britain, and Italy. He also reached out to President Karzai of Afghanistan.

One day after the formal swearing in of Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai—Afghanistan's second elected president in its history—the BSA was signed, putting to rest any speculation about the continued presence of American and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF)¹ led by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops in that country after 2014. The pact was signed almost one year after the Obama administration imposed its initial deadline.

OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL

In 2015, the Obama administration announced Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which considered a new two-pronged counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan involving training, advising, and assisting the Afghan army while continuing to

mount counterterrorism operations against the Taliban and others who posed a threat to the two governments.

The ANSF suffered from a host of problems: attrition, drug abuse, desertion, illiteracy, poor recordkeeping, lack of management and logistical skills, poor intelligence, shortage of top-level leaders, less-than-optimal cooperation between

police and the military, and significant levels of terrorist infiltration and ethnic strife between Pashtuns and other competing groups. At stake was the more than \$60 billion US investment to build, equip, train, and sustain the Afghan forces.

As US troop levels were reduced from almost 100,000 in 2012 to 65,000 in 2013, to 40,000 in 2014, and to only 9,800 in 2015, it was evident that Afghan security forces were not prepared to step up as expected by President Obama. Throughout 2013 and 2014, US Department of Defense officials consistently warned that the Afghan military was permitting the Taliban to regain its initiative. Civilian fatalities, which had declined in 2012, rose to an all-time high by the end of 2014, and the number of displaced persons in Afghanistan had almost doubled from 352,000 in 2010 to more than 630,000 in 2013.

The Afghan economy was crippled, growing by a mere 1.7% in 2014. There was rampant unemployment, which was due in part to the Obama administration's reduction in reconstruction aid. Moreover, the country's economy was besieged by accelerated capital flight, massive revenue shortfalls, and diminished foreign investment. The only expansion was in illicit poppy cultivation and endemic smuggling, which were at an all-time high in 2014.

President Obama began to rethink the pace of troop withdrawal for 2015 and 2016 and to reevaluate details of the US counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan, including the timing and sequencing of US base closures. President Ghani Ahmadzai personally requested that Obama slow the troop drawdown. The unity government of Ghani Ahmadzai and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah offered new hope for a far more effective partnership in stabilizing Afghanistan. However, there had been considerable bickering between them that produced extensive delays in making major cabinet-ministry appointments.

It became clear that many of the estimated 10,000 American troops and thousands of civilian contractors in Afghanistan would be needed well into 2016. President Obama made it official in a joint news conference with President Ghani Ahmadzai held at the White House in March 2015.

THE PAKISTAN-CHINA AXIS IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

Increasing instability and turmoil would make it irresistible for outside actors, including Iran, Russia, China, and India, to

cultivate their favored proxies to prosecute their objectives in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region. With a population of more than 180 million people, Pakistan has an active insurgency, boasts an expanding nuclear arsenal with a stockpile of more than 120 nuclear warheads, and is developing light nuclear weapons that can be easily transported to its border with India. Perched at the crossroads of the Middle East and South Asia, Pakistan is susceptible to terrorist attacks; this vulnerability to Islamist extremists presents a considerable concern and threat to US national security—much more so than does Afghanistan. Pakistan's arsenal is growing at a rate faster than any other nation, and it has the potential to become the world's third-ranked nuclear power.

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American intelligence agencies have invested heavily in monitoring the Pakistani arsenal. President Obama also was aware that longer-term stability in the region and any attempts to support a viable peace and reconciliation process to end the violence in Afghanistan depended largely on working cooperatively and effectively with Pakistan.

China, which had ties to the Taliban dating back to the 1990s when it controlled Afghanistan, maintained close relations with Pakistan, and China's Foreign Ministry expressed support for Afghan peace efforts. Chinese interests were clearly manifested in avoiding radicalization of the Muslim population—principally located in the Xinjiang region bordering northern Afghanistan—and in its long-term goal of developing petrochemical and mining sectors. Pakistan's principal objective was a strong political representation in the Afghan government, including power for the clerics in the constitution or a *de facto* Taliban-controlled paramilitary force.

In the summer of 2015, China and the United States participated as observers at the first formal meeting between Afghan-government representatives and Taliban officials. The host was Pakistan and the meeting was held in its capital city of Islamabad. The talks were designed to establish a framework for further discussions that would include a list of possible issues for negotiations toward a peace agreement. Because the Taliban was achieving military success on several fronts, it was possible that political efforts and activities might lead to progress on that front as well. Pakistan was attempting to serve as the honest broker in this effort, with its objective to establish conditions to bring the Taliban groups to the negotiation table to persuade them to stop their violence. The Taliban, also known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, refused to participate in any talks until their unconditional demands were met: ending the occupation of Afghanistan, eliminating all blacklists, and freeing all innocent prisoners.

Even with the targeted-drone killing of the hardline Taliban leader Mullah Mansour by the US military's Joint Special

Operations Command in late May 2015, any hope for a moderate successor inclined to participate in a political dialogue to promote national reconciliation with the Afghan government was quickly put to rest when Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, former Chief Justice of the Taliban and a hardliner deputy to Mansour, was selected.

THE ROLE OF THE US IN AFGHANISTAN BEYOND 2016

The principal problem for the struggling government of President Ghani Ahmadzai was the inability of his army and national police to maintain even a stalemate against the Taliban. Desertions had become critical, and the casualty rate increased 50% in 2015 compared to the previous year. Taliban

insurgents increased their influence in many areas—even major urban centers—which made negotiations from a position of strength unrealistic. Afghan police forces numbering approximately 185,000 of the total 353,000 Afghan military were thinly stretched in several key provinces of the country.

Although the ANSF was able to repel attacks from the Taliban, the fact remained that about 4,000 soldiers defected every month. The reality was that Afghanistan was not ready or able to defend itself without some form of military assistance from the international community. There still existed limited aviation capabilities, poor intelligence-gathering and analysis abilities, and ineffective management of rank-and-file troops.

That point was driven home when the Taliban, with support from al-Qaida forces, launched a coordinated and stunning surprise attack on the city of Kunduz, seizing the prison and airport as President Ghani Ahmadzai completed his first year in office. With a population of 300,000 and one of the largest and wealthiest cities in Afghanistan, Kunduz is strategically situated, connecting Afghanistan to Pakistan, China, and Central Asia.

The United States immediately retaliated with an airstrike to recapture the city as the Afghan military rushed reinforcements into the region to stabilize the situation. Although Kunduz was returned to government control within a couple of weeks, the question remained about how the Taliban—overwhelmingly outnumbered by Afghan security forces—could establish control of the city so quickly. Kunduz was the first provincial capital to fall to the Taliban since it was evicted from power in 2001.

As a result of the capture of Kunduz by the Taliban, General John Campbell, Commander of the ISAF, announced that he wanted to keep at least 5,000 American troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016. This position directly contradicted President Obama's announced plan of leaving only an embassy-based security presence of approximately 1,000 military personnel by the end of his second term.

General Campbell's options included keeping as many as 8,000 troops in Afghanistan through 2016 and maintaining several thousand troops as a counterterrorism force into 2017. The White House indicated that various factors were to be considered, including conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, remaining threats, and resources that the United States could provide. After President Obama sought input from his national-security, intelligence, and diplomatic advisors, as well as advice from the Pentagon's leadership and NATO allies, he formally announced his decision to keep 5,500 US troops in Afghanistan when he left office in 2017. The pace of withdrawal was to be determined by US commanders, predicated on changing conditions in the country.² The troops remaining in Afghanistan were to continue to focus on counterterrorism missions and training and advising Afghan security forces. They were to be based at Kabul and Bagram Airfield, as well as at bases in Jalalabad and Kandahar.

President Obama was left with no other alternative because the Taliban had seized many districts and, according to the United Nations, its threat to almost half of the country's 398 districts was either high or extreme (Joscelyn and Roggio 2015a, 2015b). To further complicate matters for the United States, al-Qaida had reemerged as a formidable ally to the Taliban, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was establishing a presence in the southern Helmand province.

The Pentagon's quarterly assessment of Afghanistan for the second half of 2015 reported that security had deteriorated, with an increase in effective insurgent attacks and higher Afghan military-force casualties (Brooks 2015). This news only reinforced a grim outlook as the United States prepared for its counterterrorism-mission commitment for 2016. According to Afghan officials, the Taliban controlled an estimated 30% of districts across the nation at the end of 2015—more than in any year since 2001 immediately after the September 11 attacks (Brooks 2015). Because of untold numbers of “ghost” troops that were paid but existed only on paper, it was estimated that 40% of registered Afghan forces did not exist (O'Donnell and Khan 2016). According to Afghan lawmaker Ghulam Hussain Nasiri, who researched the problem for more than a year, the government was well aware of the situation but chose to ignore it. “When we have 100 soldiers on the battlefield, it

more “deliberate measured adjustments” (Garamone 2016) in US and allied military support provided to the Afghan military in 2016, the risk for further deterioration of the situation in the country and region would continue for the foreseeable future. He emphasized the plaguing issues of poor leadership and corruption in the central command. Training, advising, and assisting the Afghan military required the largest deployment of US forces outside major bases in Afghanistan since the NATO mission formally ended in 2014. General Campbell's assessment and recommendations emphasized building the capability of the Afghans to avoid bringing this war back to the US homeland. At his confirmation hearing to replace General Campbell, Lt. General John Nicholson expressed a similar concern that Afghan security forces were not self-sustainable, which was a position reinforced by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction in his report to Congress (SIGAR 2016).

After 15 years of war—eight of which have been under Obama's watch—it has become painfully evident that the president's successor will inherit this unfinished conflict despite any drawdown in troops. It also is clear that since the end of his first term, Obama's emphasis has been focused on withdrawing from Afghanistan, with the apparent goals of pressuring the corrupt Afghan government to reform internally and for its military to be able to effectively defend its citizenry. This has not happened. In part, it may be due to Abdullah's belief that the election audit and recount stole the presidency from him. It also was evident that each leader had his own constituency to whom he was appealing: Ghani Ahmadzai to the ethnic Pashtuns and Abdullah to the Tajiks. Critics accused Ghani Ahmadzai of running a dysfunctional government in which he alienated ministers and further factionalized a country with a history of decentralization and local, tribal domination.

The Obama mandate of “train, advise, and assist” has not worked to defeat the Taliban, al-Qaida, or ISIL. A remaining American force, whether it is 5,500 or 9,800 troops, is far too inadequate for the purpose given to them. Although ANSF has performed more effectively than in the past, it still requires substantial assistance and support, given the soaring attrition rates and a resilient insurgency.

More important, to achieve stability in Afghanistan, there must be an effective, credible, functioning government for the

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is just 30 or 40. It is an indication of massive corruption—the reason Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt nations in the world” (O'Donnell and Khan 2016).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In his final appearance before the House Armed Services Committee, General Campbell warned that unless there were

country. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Abdullah Abdullah—both of whom are considered progressive, capable, and certainly favorable toward the United States—have not yet established clear roles and boundaries between the office of the president and the chief executive to allow for a smooth-running unity government. This means that ongoing internal instability is at risk of spilling over into Pakistan, which could

have far-reaching consequences for US counterterrorism policy in South Asia and beyond.

Ultimately, history's verdict will be determined by what Afghans do for themselves to develop a viable state, to establish better governance, and to deliver vital services to the nation's citizens. Although we have the Obama administration's record for the past eight years, we are unlikely to know Barack Obama's full legacy until well after he has left office. ■

NOTES

1. The ISAF was created by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 in 2001.
2. See "U.S. Troops Are in Afghanistan and Will Be into 2016"; available at www.cnn.com/2015/10/09/world/us-troops-military-still-in-afghanistan-doctors-without-borders/index.html. See also "Troop Numbers and Contributions—Resolute Support Mission"; available at www.rs.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php. Accessed May 18, 2016.

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