

Assisting Afghanistan: Will Aid Progress, Adapt, or Wither?

Written by James Flint

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JAMES FLINT, NOV 4 2014

The wind-down of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and cessation of Operation Herrick and the British combat mission in Afghanistan has spurred a chorus of political commentary concerning both the British effort and the wider state of Afghanistan today, in contrast with the previous Taliban administration. On Tuesday RUSI's Professor Michael Clarke overviewed Britain's 'Fourth Afghan War', and how Britain and America became 'wilfully impaled' over the dilemma of intervention in achieving strategic objectives, leaving some attained and others left to 'political chance'. In retrospect, it is doubtful that counterinsurgency in Afghanistan will be held in the same regard as the manner in which the UK handled Malayan Emergency.

Nonetheless, on Sunday twenty-sixth October, after more than thirteen years, the Union Flag (and American Stars and Stripes) was lowered in the Camp Bastion-Leatherneck complex with great decorum. Whereas American forces had previously assumed the lead from Britain in Helmand Province, the Afghan National Army's (ANA's) 215 Corps now possess the Camp. There will be no commemorative plaque left behind.

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon declared 'we leave with our heads held high'. But questions are left unanswered with regard to the greater future of overseas aid and assistance towards Afghanistan, and furthermore, popular focus is tilting towards the Middle East theatre and ISIS.

A New Phase

The 2014 presidential election was broadly a success with President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah possessing significant legitimacy derived from the ballot. As of Saturday, the much-delayed provincial election results were also announced, including ninety-seven women elected. Moreover, the September decision to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with America and the NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) is of utmost significance for future assistance, at least for the short-term.

The UN mandated ISAF, under NATO leadership since 2003, is drawing to a close to be superseded by supporting and sustaining institutions of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) under the 'Resolute Support Mission', as affirmed at NATO's 2014 Wales summit. However, Afghanistan requires more than just military assistance and oversight. Growing consensus finds security and development to be intrinsically linked.

The Contemporary Rise of ISIS

Assisting Afghanistan counter the Sunni Taliban-led insurgency is not completely isolated from developments in the Sunni ISIS-led insurgency in Iraq and Syria. There has been a palpable shift in overt attention away from Afghanistan and towards the threat of ISIS. Of course, this is not the first time that attention has shifted away from Afghanistan and towards the Middle East, as seen with the 2003 Iraq War.

It is further symbolic that factions of the Taliban have declared support for ISIS and the purported caliphate. Although it may be a conceptual stretch to relate the two movements to Rumsfeld's notion of 'global insurgency', as President

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Ghani recently noted in his meeting with Turkey's President Erdogan- extremism is not a problem of one country alone.

Just as Tom Keatinge recently noted of ISIS' financial insecurity and the associated long-term hindrance to the provision of governance, the same can be applied to Afghanistan. The Taliban-led insurgency and 'shadow governance' cannot compete with what the Islamic Republic can achieve in areas such as infrastructure provision. However, if aid assistance to Afghanistan becomes insufficiently low, the legitimate government in Kabul will become starved, just as Tom Keatinge explained of ISIS and their financial hindrance to governance.

Furthermore, the damage ISIS inflicted upon the new Iraqi Army should be considered as an alarm-bell for the precedent it sets a resurgent Taliban combating the ANSF. While a superficial comparison, on paper the ANA is no more impressive than the Western trained Iraqi Army, whose recent performance in the face of ISIS has been heavily criticized.

Politicised Aid

Counter-insurgency as witnessed in Afghanistan is popularly theorised to require 20 percent military and 80 percent non-military means. As such, overseas aid features within Irregular Warfare (IW) strategy, stability operations and aiding indigenous forces. The development of the ANSF is indicative of this.

American aid has long been politicised, and even 'weaponized', as a mode of influence within foreign policy in accordance with perceived threats, as the Cold War era support of pro-Western regimes demonstrated. As Maria Ryan noted, prominent American officials such as Natsios and Rice have been overt in utilising aid in the service of security objectives within the Global War on Terror. The official Civil-Military Operations Guide, published by the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Office of Military Affairs, now declares that USAID's staff are to 'reevaluate mission portfolios through a lens of national security'. If the ISIS-led insurgency escalates as a perceived threat, the future of aid towards Afghanistan risks becoming deprioritised.

The EU's aid frameworks serve a different purpose. It is less politicised and more concerned with poverty alleviation and development. However, aid remains a broadly intergovernmental policy area where 'Europeanization' has been shallow amongst some member states. Furthermore, with budgets under pressure from the recent economic crisis, Afghanistan is not without competition for aid funds amongst less developed states.

Uncertain Futures

Speaking in the House of Commons on Monday, Prime Minister David Cameron and the Labour Leader Ed Miliband declared it time to remember those British servicemen sacrificed, stating that they would not be forgotten. This has been a popular sentiment within contemporary political commentary. Yet, the failure to adequately support the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan into the future would risk undermining what past efforts and little victories have attained. Similar Afghan precedents from the nineteenth century underscore this risk, as does the more recent example seen in the floundering of Najibullah's aid-deprived Communist government. As has been said a multitude of times on Afghanistan, while much has been achieved, there remains much to be done. The absence of a commemorative plaque left behind in Camp Bastion may signify a lack of confidence in the ANSF, and Afghanistan's greater future.

About the author:

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