

## **Strategies for Enhancing Regional Security**

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I am here to give you a journalist's view of the situation in Afghanistan as one of the longest serving foreign correspondents in Afghanistan. I have been working there since shortly after 9.11, from November 2001, and I have seen the Taliban insurgency crushed in 2001 and 2002, and then steadily re-emerge in the years following, until in 2006 the movement came back in force. Since then, as you all know, the insurgency has intensified so that half the country is in conflict, thousands of families displaced and humanitarian activities severely hampered.

I am passing on here my impressions from the ground, I do not really have strong opinions or policy ideas, I want to tell you some things that I have seen; that is, a journalist's account of what it looks like from the ground. I am to speak on regional security, but am adapting my speech somewhat since earlier speeches covered a lot of the ground, and there is one aspect that has not been covered, American military operations and strategy, which I have seen close up and can talk about here today.

2008 has been the bloodiest year since the American military intervention in 2001 – and with the current trend it may not get better soon. For the first time this summer American soldiers were dying at a greater monthly rate in Afghanistan than in Iraq. All the different forces, NATO, Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police saw casualties reach a peak in 2008. NATO forces in southern Afghanistan combating the Taliban insurgency are stuck in a stalemate, to use the words of a senior American military official. In the East, where the American military has been working for five years and pumping in money and resources, they have seen heavy fighting again, attacks and clashes with insurgents are up over 30 per cent, and there have been nearly daily attacks on the border all summer, the heaviest in the area across from the Pakistani tribal areas of North and South Waziristan.

There has also been a perceptible collapse of government in many areas, with loss of confidence in the government, and in the foreign forces. You often hear of comparisons with the end of the Najib era, of 1990 to 1992, people leaving their posts, police, judges, administrators and so on because of threats from the Taliban and disillusion with the government's ability to protect their own people. And in one of the saddest developments for me in seven years of reporting, in Afghanistan, the most hospitable of countries, I have found longtime friends asking me not to come to their homes, for fear of having a foreigner seen visiting them, and saying they would rather come to meet me in my hotel. It is the worst situation I have seen in the last seven years of reporting there.

I have been asked to look at strategies for enhancing regional security – we have touched on most of them in the previous sessions.

I have spent a lot of time reporting in Pakistan too since 2006 – and if we are looking at regional strategies, Pakistan is the first stop. President Karzai has been repeating it endlessly – there is a tendency of Afghans to blame the outsider, but I would say that the situation in Pakistan is very alarming, the Taliban and militant groups are there, deeply entrenched, and are showing a readiness to go to war against their own country, and their own government, a drastic step that cannot be contained easily. There is a slowness, even reluctance, among Pakistani leaders to see what they have among them and to act against it, and there is a strong resistance in Pakistan against being told to fight America's war. It is a country of 160 million, with a strong anti-west feeling, and a tendency to extremism and sectarian violence that is much more marked than in Afghanistan. Nor are they tired of war, as the Afghans are, they have not yet learnt the dangers and debilitating results of fighting jihad in your own home. Pakistan needs engagement, assistance, education, wooing, European clout, diplomatic pressure, whatever you can think of, it is needed. As much as Afghanistan, Pakistan needs the full attention of the West and the new American administration.

American involvement in Afghanistan is the critical element of the equation and of any outcome in Afghanistan and the region, so I want to touch on that.

There are two things that really stood out for me this year -

One was an embed I did with the American Marines in Garmser, in southern Helmand in May. Second, in September I met General David Petraeus, who as the commander of US forces in Iraq masterminded the surge and Sunni Awakening that broke the back of the Al Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq, and who at the end of October took over command of all US forces in the Middle East and Asia at Central Command, therefore taking over responsibility for Afghanistan as well as Iraq.

I was embedded with the 24<sup>th</sup> Marines Expeditionary Unit in Garmser, southern Helmand, a military term which means I was travelling and living with the unit for ten days. They were a unit that had fought in Ramadi, the heaviest fighting in Iraq in the worst time, when every garbage heap contained a roadside bomb, and going out, meant getting hit. But by the end of their 8-month tour there, they were strolling down the street with local officials, shaking hands.

I was wary of the Marines coming back in force to Afghanistan. The last unit of Marines I had come across in Afghanistan were responsible for one of the worst incidents of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, when a convoy killed 19 civilians along a main road east of Jalalabad after a suicide bombing attack in March 2007. But the 24<sup>th</sup> MEU I travelled with were powerful, equipped with an astounding amount of fire and air power, but were in practice restrained, experienced, and overwhelmingly successful.

I saw that there is a combination of confidence and restraint that comes with the possession of immense firepower and strong discipline. Other NATO forces are struggling, British troops in Helmand are skirmishing daily and using artillery and air strikes, Canadians in Kandahar are hunkering down and doing less and less, but the US Marines got out there and made it all look so easy. They were extremely serious, would brook no opposition, but they cleared the area south of Garmser of Taliban in three days and showed how with overwhelming force they could keep

security and bring the population back in peace. Their security was so good that there were no suicide bombings in the area in the six months they held the peace there. They paid out compensation for damaged houses fast, got things moving quickly with cash for work projects which they instituted along the lines that aid organization use. They knew all the pitfalls of handing out aid, paying people individually not just giving it all to the local boss. They basically gave back the district to the people and the local government leaders and left, handing over security to Afghan police and Army, and British troops, which was their aim. They showed how it could be done, but it took 2,500 Marines six months to clear and secure an area of 10 square kilometres – which serves as a reminder of how difficult and intensive counter-insurgency is in Afghanistan.

In September I met General David Petraeus, the commander of US forces in Iraq, architect of the surge, the commander who is credited with turning things around in Iraq. He has just taken over as chief of Central Command, and his first trip was to Pakistan and Afghanistan, one day after taking over, a sign of the importance of the region to him. He is the man who will have the most influence in the political interim period – the president elect, Barak Obama, will not be in charge for two months, and President Bush is fading fast into the background.

There is no doubt that General Petraeus is very impressive. As one Afghan presidential aide said – he is so “deep”. It actually pained me to meet him and realize how much Afghanistan had been short-changed over recent years, in the calibre of commanders sent here, and in the level of resources and high-level attention given to the country. Petraeus has a grasp of the whole picture, he does not look at Iraq, or Afghanistan and Pakistan from a purely military standpoint, and he sees military action as only playing a small part of a comprehensive approach to combating insurgencies that involves diplomacy, economic assistance, jobs, as well as intelligence and surveillance.

Petraeus said several things that struck me as important.

You can read his book on the internet – it is a manual for fighting counterinsurgency and is entitled COIN. Among the points in it, he says police, not army, or foreign military, but indigenous

police are the first force that should be handling an insurgency. The book recommends ending foreign detention centres and prisons, and stopping foreign troops from raiding houses. These are two of the things that most anger Afghans. So by his book, there should be more training, more input into local forces, more “Afghanisation,” which of course NGOs such as the Swedish Committee have long supporting in the aid world.

It is clear to me that Petraeus will oversee a surge in Afghanistan – that is an increase of troops and he warned that the security situation will get worse in Afghanistan before it gets better – but he knows how to do it, and it will be a comprehensive approach. He has a diagram that lays out the elements of counter-insurgency. It is in the form of a clock and shows that military operations and counter-terrorism represents only 10 minutes on a clock dial. Intelligence and surveillance takes up another 20 minutes. But the rest of the dial is engagement of tribal councils, religious leaders, reconciliation, employment, education, regional diplomacy, even the use of the internet. This is not someone who will just use military force in Afghanistan.

On replicating the Sunni Awakening in Afghanistan, he is being cautious – but he is clearly exploring that. He calls for a thickening of forces, giving the thin Afghan army and police forces added strength from local support. I remembered the Marines talking about how they found suddenly every able-bodied Sunni turning out on street corners, young men who had no weapon but just wore an armband, so keen were they to be part of the neighbourhood watch, to keep their neighbourhood safe. In Afghanistan there is obviously a need to mobilize the population, and pull them together to stop the lawlessness in the regions, and reconcile the insurgents. President Karzai cannot seem to do it, and I would suggest that it needs a combined Afghan-international effort, but that especially the Americans need to stand up and organize it, and back it with the weight of their military and diplomacy. There are conspiracy theories in Afghanistan that argue that the Americans actually want the Taliban to succeed, because why otherwise are they not finishing them off decisively, the way they did so quickly in 2001. The US needs to put an end to that confusion with decisive action.

Petraeus is careful and is the first to say he does not know Afghanistan nor does he want to impose ideas from afar. One thing he said he could do was help regionally, that is engage the help of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon. An American general and head of Central Command talking about talking to Iran – that is impressive and would be good for the environment in Afghanistan.

Iran is supporting Afghanistan with reconstruction assistance but it also undoubtedly meddling. Diplomats and military officials will tell you that different Iranian entities are supporting Taliban groups, with money, weapons and explosives, some Iranians have been present on the battlefield or training militants. There were Iranian trainers in Garsmer, according to the British military.

Petraeus also showed respect for Pakistan. He said Pakistan had made it clear they would react hostilely to any intervention. They have made it clear they want to tackle militancy their way, and we applaud them for that and want to help them, he said. This is different from some who are frustrated by Pakistan's perceived foot dragging in engaging militancy in their own tribal areas, and it may be more effective.

### **On strategies for regional security:**

This regionally inclusive approach that Petraeus has talked of is badly needed and could give impetus to the several smaller efforts that have been started but which have made little headway.

### **Peace jirga**

One of those is the peace jirga, an idea first espoused by President Hamid Karzai in 2006 to bring Afghans and Pakistanis affected by the violence on both sides of the border, to find together a way to peace. President Pervez Musharraf was never enamored of the idea, but he agreed to it at a joint dinner with President George W. Bush in the White House in 2006. The first jirga of 700 Afghans and Pakistanis was held in Kabul in August 2007. The follow-up, which largely relied on Pakistan organizing the next meeting, was slow and moves to restart the process only began recently, delayed by a year of political upheaval in Pakistan – and only after the election of the new government and

a new president in Pakistan and the departure of General Musharraf. The peace jirga has so far not achieved anything, except some improved good will in Pakistan. Yet the process must be kept going – since it is one way to improve Pakistani understanding of Afghanistan’s situation. There is broad ignorance, in Pakistani government, tribal, and parliamentary circles, let alone among the public about what Afghans want and feel. There must be more and better contacts between the two countries, and the parliaments must be better used and involved by both governments. These are elected people, in touch with their people, more than the governments, and they should be more involved in bilateral relations.

The parliament in Afghanistan has for example been calling for peace talks, cessation of bombing, developing contacts with Taliban, for months, actually for more than two years – and no one appears to be listening.

### **Military assistance**

This has been the cornerstone of the American –Pakistani relationship and is critical within the region and regarding Afghanistan. You would think it is ahead of everything, but it is in fact very slow, even faltering at times in the last year or so. There has been mishandling of the massive funds given to the Pakistani military - \$10 billion since 2001.

On Afghanistan there is a tripartite commission (Afghanistan-Pakistan and US/NATO) to resolve border issues, intelligence sharing, border cooperation and so on - all good ideas, but work and building trust is painfully slow. There have been ups and downs, with more downs recently. An American was killed by a Pakistani paramilitary at one border meeting, Pakistan cancelled other meetings, 12 Frontier Corpsmen were killed in air strikes on the border this year further undermining relations. The US has made it clear that Pakistan cannot be an adversary, and they have to work together on combating militancy. But there is a long way to go in working through that to really tackle militancy and bring mutual security.

## **Saudi Arabia**

There has been some excitement recently over negotiations with the Taliban, and especially involvement of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in bringing a reconciliation between the Karzai government and the Taliban leadership. There is some movement – talks about talks, rather than a peace process, -- but there is greater interest on all sides including with the US government in finding ways, other than military, to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. The symbolism of Saudi Arabia's involvement in this is very important, this is the government that always supported the Taliban government and never took President Karzai's government very seriously. The Afghan government sees Saudi Arabia's support as very important. There have been signs that those who support the Taliban are upset – statements on jihadi websites indicating concern at Saudi Arabia's shift, and there is disquiet reported within the Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, long known for its links with militant groups.

As for Talking to the Taliban, nothing is going to happen soon, and some undoubtedly are irreconcilable. But the idea of many in Afghanistan, from military officials to parliamentarians and tribal leaders, is that if you can get some on your side, and maybe even the 70 per cent of those out there who are often described as sitting on the fence, or neither supporting the Taliban nor the government, that's far better than fighting them.

It will need a much greater engagement of the Afghan people, and this is where Karzai's government and his foreign backers have really fallen down and where they need to address their efforts.