

Keynote Presentation

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‘Threats and challenges stemming from Afghanistan and the OSCE’s contribution to stability in the region’

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Introduction

It is a privilege to have been invited to speak to the OSCE with representatives from many countries whose soldiers, diplomats and development workers are working so hard to bring peace and prosperity not only to the citizens of Afghanistan -- but, by extension – to those in South West and Central Asia, the Euro-Atlantic community and beyond.

Thank you to the Kazakh chairmanship of the OSCE for inviting me to address today’s proceedings.

I am also grateful for the opportunity to work, once again, with Ambassador Ian Cliff; our paths first crossed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, at a time when the country was emerging from conflict, in part with the assistance of the OSCE.

Without any further adue, let me turn to the topic for discussion today, the state of Afghanistan; and the role for international community, including that of the OSCE.

Failing Strategy

I don’t have to remind anyone here as to why the international community has such a presence in Afghanistan today.

But after nine years of warfare, it is clear that the international community’s aims for what could be achieved in the country were over-ambitious, under-resourced, and insufficiently clear.

It is also clear that the organizational structures used by the international community to steer its efforts -- both the military and civilian sides -- lacked the kind of unity of *effort* and *command* necessary for success in stabilization missions

Nine years after the ouster of the Taliban, six years after NATO took charge of ISAF and five years after the alliance's move to the south of the country, the international community has not recovered from these early errors.

Or to put it differently, while there is now talk of an "exit strategy", the international community is still suffering from the absence of a thought-through "entry strategy".

In recent years, while the international community -- and the US in particular -- has worked hard to re-think its strategy, many of these early mistakes have actually been compounded not addressed.

A Catalogue of Failure

Afghanistan is not progressing from any particular phase to another; rather, it is regressing.

Fraudulent elections in 2009 have further discredited the democratic process in the eyes of many Afghans.

Though President Karzai pledged to address corruption, the patronage politics associated with the formation of the Cabinet and the presence in government of notorious warlords raise concerns about its ability to provide the kind of effective, fair and impartial governance needed to regain the public's trust.

The international community has often been accused of focusing too much on Kabul to the detriment of the provinces, but it now faces the worst of all worlds -- its billion-dollar efforts to build the state are in many cases unsuccessful, while the efforts to extend the state's remit to the provinces are in many cases fueling rather than addressing tensions.

Few experts believe that the forthcoming parliamentary elections will be any better than the presidential elections -- and some worry they may even be a lot worse. Four times as many candidates have been disqualified for standing in the elections, than last time.

If the presidential elections have weakened the government, the international community is also divided and weak. It may no longer be as divided as before, with UNSR Staffan de Mistura and NATO Senior Civilian Representative Mark Sedwell

forging a much closer UN-NATO bond than previously. It may even have developed well-functioning mechanisms, such as 100-person British-led PRT in Helmand.

But it still remains too weak to take decisive action with the list of countries needing to be consulted on any matter – and the energy required to do so -- far outweighing any operational benefit from their participation in NATO's force or the UN's various committees

Taliban insurgency

The insurgency, headlined by Mullah Omar's Taliban but drawing in a variety of powerbrokers, disenfranchised tribesmen and criminals, has expanded out from its primary bases in the south and east of the country and widened into the north and west; military casualties have been rising and likewise civilian casualties.

Though recent ISAF operations have put pressure on insurgent groups, the actual impact on the insurgency and the sustainability of any gains made, for example in Marjah, are very unclear.

Even the ISAF commander General Stanley McChrystal is said to have referred to Operation Moshtarack as an "ulcer" on his campaign.

The next phase of NATO's plan -- the pacification of Kandahar -- has been reduced from a much-heralded "offensive" to a much-downgraded "process" – a sure sign that even the military are concerned about the possibilities of success.

The ANA has made strides and in some areas have improved far quicker than expected, but the extent to which these changes are sustainable remain in doubt.

As a recent report by the think tank ICG noted: persistent structural flaws meanwhile have undermined the military's ability to operate independently, while ethnic frictions and political factionalism among high-level players in the Ministry of Defence and the general staff have also stunted the army's growth. As a result, the army is a fragmented force, serving disparate interests, and far from attaining the unified national character needed to confront numerous security threats.

The ANP, in turn, has made little progress and remains a security problem in most parts of the country rather than a security solution – despite the billions of dollars spent on the organisation

Recent programmes to work with informal armed groups to provide security, particularly in remote rural areas where the Taliban are gaining ground, have also had mixed success.

Not everything is of course going wrong.

The bright spot is economic and social development - with strong growth, rising government revenues and improvements in access to education and healthcare.

But, as Ambassador Sedwell himself has noted, to the Afghan villager, what matters is security and the standard is simple:

- Can he get his goods to market without being robbed;
- Can his wife go to the shops and is there anything to buy;
- Can his kids go to school and is the school open;
- Can he get a dispute with his neighbour resolved without paying a bribe;
- Does he see a policeman as reassuring, threatening or useless?

More than ever before the answers to these questions are not the ones the West would like to hear – and there are few signs that this will change.

Public Opinion

At home, Western governments have failed to make the convincing case that can be made for this war; or exhibited the determination to win it in a way that carries publics along.

Public opinion in all European countries continues to move steadily in the wrong direction. The Dutch and Canadian governments have declared they will be withdrawing their troops and 70% of Britons and 60% of Germans think they are right to do so. Only the Danes remain committed, but even there, parliamentary support seems to be declining.

In most countries – including Britain, France and Germany – the war is something leaders seek to manage, not win.

There is now a real risk that pressure will mount on European NATO allies to withdraw quickly (as they did from Iraq) -- thus precipitating a rift with the United States government, which will see the 2011 deadline set by President Barack Obama as a time to begin a tokenistic and symbolic withdrawal not a wholesale pull-out.

Regional Situation

If this was not bad enough, the West has failed to create the essential regional framework for its actions. Pakistan never signed up to the project and now sees India consolidating its position in Afghanistan.

It would be unfair to blame the West's role in Afghanistan for Pakistan-Indian tension, although it is true that conditions in Afghanistan have produced another proxy war between India and Pakistan.

It is also true that US pressure on Pakistan to deal with the Pakistan Taliban by diverting troops from the border with India has both made Pakistan feel more vulnerable and provided the excuse for not suppressing the Punjabi terror groups.

Bottom line is that there is still no meaningful regional context which could bring in immediate neighbours into a solution.

New Strategy

In sum, the multidimensional crisis in Afghanistan is severe and cannot be addressed primarily through a military surge, however large, well-conceived and executed, and however closely followed by governance and development activities.

Nor can a successful strategy be based on the assumption that the latest Karzai government will be more capable and trusted by the population than the previous one. It will also be insufficient to peel off low-level Taliban from their leadership through a reintegration programme, as proposed by the Afghan government.

Something else is needed – but what?

Before I go on to sketch out what that “something else” is, let me make a key point, which need to be borne in mind as a Plan B is developed:

The West's strategic enemy is not, and never was, the Taliban. It was and is Al Qaeda (AQ).

In the next couple of years, the aim should therefore be the one the US president articulated last year - defeating AQ and preventing it escaping from its safe refuges in the FATA.

What could a Plan B consist of to achieve this aim?

A new political settlement is needed that builds on the 2001 Bonn agreement, but addresses its failures and omissions.

A sustainable political settlement must broaden the tent to include those sidelined in the Bonn process after the ouster of the Taliban and outline the next stages of a more inclusive and sustainable political process.

It will also need to engage those Afghan actors who were initially on board in the post-2001 arrangement but who have since been alienated by patronage politics.

Preparing for such a process will therefore entail consensus building between the government and the population on the one hand, and within insurgent groups on the other.

In addition, a settlement among the Afghans will need to be underpinned by a regional deal for stabilizing Afghanistan and agreement about the transitional role of Afghanistan's international partners. So it will need the endorsement of Afghanistan's neighbours, the United States and Europe.

Ideally this process should only be begun from a position of military strength so that insurgents feel pressured to strike a bargain. But that option may no longer be available. The international community may have to accept that it cannot now create a victor's peace.

And that, in consequence, the Taliban will – at least until the Pashtuns tire of them again - dominate life in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, participate in the political structures of the country and pursue policies which will be unpalatable to the West.

Though only Afghans can make peace with Afghans, the international community has a role in creating incentives for an inclusive political process leading eventually to an enduring settlement.

International support can come in a number of ways, from direct mediation and proximity talks to regional diplomacy. No definitive mechanism for assistance has suggested itself to date, although there is talk in some quarters about a UN mediation mandate. Whatever the agreed mechanism, exploration of a number of key elements of a settlement should start now.

This includes developing an understanding of the options and tradeoffs related to issues such as power-sharing, negotiating with senior insurgent figures, police and army reorganisation, addressing local grievances, government graft, detainees, the shape of a regional deal, and future international troop presence.

As part of any deal, NATO would have its own conditions – but they are unlikely to be those often heard, such as the respect for the constitution or the rights of women. These are laudable long-term goals, but not the key aims for the West.

Rather, the main condition would be for the Taliban structures in the South and East to provide no refuge for AQ and that NATO is prepared to exercise the

toughest sanctions – including punitive use of air power and the use of special forces– against both them and AQ elements, if this is not respected.

Unfortunately the Taliban ranks have now been swelled to include Punjabi terrorists and other Islamist groups. These elements cannot be part of the deal. The international community would need to work with Pakistan to filter them out.

In case such a settlement process could be advanced, NATO's engagement in the South and East could be ended or reduced, leaving it to concentrate on special forces and intelligence led air operations aimed at keeping AQ out, keeping Afghanistan together and preventing another Taliban march on Kabul. The only role for NATO's infantry soldiers would then become a training role with the ANA and ANP.

The return of the Pashtun Taliban to Afghan political life could win the West the (genuine) support of Pakistan. It would considerably reduce the influence of India in the South and East. With their proxies back in Afghanistan, Islamabad could focus on the 3 targets which threaten it most: AQ, the Pakistan Taliban and the Punjabi extremists (Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed).

This policy has its risks and difficulties, of course. The Pashtuns are not neatly confined to the South and East, but are spread, albeit more thinly, across the whole of the country.

It would not be easy to maintain a unitary Afghanistan against a de facto partition between the Pashtun South and East and the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara, North and West. And a number of questions remain unanswered:

- Could the West count on the ANA in these circumstances?
- Could the West keep AQ out of urban conurbations like Kandahar where they would be embedded in the people?
- Can we reassure Pakistan that cultivating the main Northern parties to ensure that we are welcome there, does not amount to the re-creation of the old Northern Alliance?

All these are problematic questions, some severely so.

Conclusion

This is not a pretty plan.

It replicates the old policy of Curzon – but run from Kabul, not Calcutta. It will offend many interest groups. And it will be portrayed as a NATO defeat by Jihadi extremists (and others) world-wide.

But it is rooted in the real bottom line interests of the West.

Everyone hoped the shock therapy of invasion would help moderates entrench a new way of life in Afghanistan, which would be more democratic, more humane and less likely to harbour international terrorists.

But after almost a decade of trying, this internationally sponsored project must be called to a halt – it cannot be done, at least not in the next 50 years.

The most likely scenario if matters continue, even after President Obama's surge, is a precipitous withdrawal of international forces and the return of a revanchist Taliban and their al Qaeda backers.

Far better, therefore, to focus on making the country reasonably stable, even if this means that parts of it will be run in ways and by people who NATO has - until recently - fought.

Far better to look at new ways of running the state, for example by decentralising power to a semi-autonomous southern region. Far better to cancel programmes that are culturally alien to Afghans and in so doing make it clear that the world does not wish to "westernise" the country, but make it stable.

A progressive, rights-respecting democracy is in the West's interest – and should be a long-term goal. But a stable, quasi-democracy, which, like Saudi Arabia, practices the Sharia law, and like Iraq shares power with former combatants, is far better than an internationally created polity which, by its nature, provokes resistance and precipitates its own downfall.

Such an approach should greatly reduce the casualty rate and with it the pressures on the home front. It could give the West new space to start turning things round. It would recognise a basic truth; that with AQ now in Yemen, Somalia and the Maghreb, the West cannot deploy infantry everywhere, least of all to hold territory.

The longer the West leaves it before making this move – or at least preparing for it - the more difficult it will get as the infection of insurgency moves North and Pakistan's fragility, together with Indo/Pak tensions, increase to the south.

Where does that leave the OSCE? This is a difficult question. A few years ago the answer may have been for the OSCE to develop a series of technocratic initiatives on par with the EU.

But if I am right, and the international community needs shift to a Plan B, then the utility of such initiatives may be in doubt. Therefore, I think it would be far better for the OSCE to look at three areas of support:

- Providing long-term assistance, including security advice, in and along the northern parts of Afghanistan, as the areas transition to local security control, NATO withdraws, but a political process makes non-Pashtun political factions nervous about their position.
- Contribute to better oversight mechanisms of the security forces, including in parliament, to ensure that both the formal and informal forces behave in a manner consistent with a COIN effort.
- Continue and expand the cross-border co-operation between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan, and enhance national law-enforcement capacities, particularly in training Afghan customs and border police.

I apologise if my assessment has been gloomy and my prognosis bad – but it is high time, in a constraining resource environment, and when publics in the West are suffering from “intervention blues”, that future strategies be based on our real interest and realistic prospects for change, not an expansive set of aims, belief in the military and a rosy-tinted assessment of reality.