

HSPI Commentary Series

MICRO-DIPLOMACY IN AFGHANISTAN: DISAGGREGATING AND ENGAGING THE TALIBAN

HSPI Commentary 01

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President Barack Obama has concluded that success in Afghanistan depends upon enhanced coordination along the entire range of national power. To achieve this, he has ordered former CIA officer Bruce Riedel, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Undersecretary for Defense Policy Michele Flournoy to lead a review of US policy. As they work through the mechanics of military, diplomatic, and developmental coordination, it is gravely important that their review not lose sight of key lessons learned from successful counterinsurgencies.

Success in Afghanistan requires additional forces and a greater emphasis on reconstruction. But simply adding troops and equipment will not bring victory. To protect the Afghan people and achieve long term success requires two fundamental changes in strategy. First, the US led coalition must learn to disaggregate the Taliban movement in to those elements holding an al Qaeda orientation from those with a traditional Pashtun orientation. Second, the coalition must become willing to politically engage those Pashtun oriented Taliban leaders who possess legitimacy and authority on the ground.

The coalition launched the invasion with four goals. Disrupt al Qaeda operations in Afghanistan and topple Mullah Omar's regime. Gain control of Afghanistan's territory. Establish a stable nation-state with generally democratic institutions and respect for the rule of law. Reintegrate Afghanistan into the international community. Superior military capabilities achieved the first goal. With a change in strategy, the other three remain attainable; yet they require sub-national and regional political partners.

The establishment of an Afghan nation-state with the legitimacy and authority needed to survive requires acknowledging Taliban motivations and a willingness to politically engage certain elements of the movement. This is of primary importance. But disaggregating the Taliban also requires engaging Afghanistan's neighbors, including Iran, and recognizing their stake and their role in coalition policies. The Taliban represents a regional problem and requires a regional strategy.



Political instability dominates Afghanistan's history. Successful nationwide rule is the rare exception, not the norm. No political entity has been able to govern the whole of Afghan territory since the coup that overthrew King Shah in 1973. Foreign powers and indigenous regimes alike have failed to establish bottom-up legitimacy and national authority. The result has been an Afghanistan pockmarked by ungoverned areas that to this day serve as incubators of unrest, instability, and criminal activity.

It is out of such ungoverned areas that the Taliban emerged; responding to a desperate need for order following the chaos created by Soviet withdrawal, a civil war, and an inattentive West. As a networked movement, the Taliban allowed local leaders to forge the authority needed to provide order. This won them legitimacy in the eyes of local populations; which in turn strengthened the Taliban's *de facto* authority. Such basic security was initially welcomed by the West. The US government even sought out Taliban assistance in drug enforcement and in the negotiation of transit rights for American energy companies.

But the Taliban never was, and is not now, a monolithic front. This is a point the new government of Pakistan has recently stressed. Although some elements have relationships with one another, there is little hierarchy. Moreover, they are divided by their differing orientations – those more closely aligned with al Qaeda interests versus those with traditional Pashtun interests. It is this division that provides a mechanism for disassembling the growing Taliban patchwork and preventing it from again becoming the network it once was.

Successful disaggregation depends on the Obama and Karzai governments' willingness to engage the Pashtun oriented Taliban. The coalition must open a dialogue with those Taliban leaders primarily motivated by a desire to provide the basic order sought by their local communities. One method of engagement would be to partner elements of the Pashtun Taliban with the work of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Such an approach, like any potential engagement, will be slow going. Pashtun leaders would initially resist open cooperation. Fear of retribution from pro-al Qaeda forces and suspicion concerning coalition resolve represent formidable barriers. Yet the coalition has little choice. Political engagement is the only way of splitting the Pashtun oriented Taliban from those favoring al Qaeda. Doing so represents a vital step in protecting the people, establishing legitimacy, and stabilizing Afghanistan. But ultimately there is another, perhaps simpler, reason for disaggregation and engagement.

Our current policy in Afghanistan is not simply anemic, it is failing. Last week's attacks in Kabul provide clear evidence of this fact. For the Afghan central government to gain the legitimacy and authority it needs to survive, it must facilitate local protection and provision. This is something it cannot achieve without Pashtun Taliban leaders. On the ground, they



are the ones in possession of legitimacy and authority. A condition that will become acute as Afghanistan approaches the presidential elections scheduled for August.

Which individuals to bring into the political dialogue will certainly be a matter of contentious debate. Thus far, the default response of the US led coalition has been to treat all enemy fighters as terrorists – if not in name, then in deed. Deciding who to engage should rest on criteria that evaluate motivation and intent rather than past actions. It would be unrealistic and self-defeating to limit engagement to those who have not fought against coalition forces.

The experience of individual unit commanders has been that success often lies in their willingness to engage in nuanced micro-diplomacy. In Iraq's Anbar Province, US forces found that political engagement split tribal leaders from al Qaeda and led to cooperation with coalition forces. Although the situations are not completely analogous, experiences in Afghanistan suggest disaggregation and engagement will bring about similar results.

In Afghanistan's Paktika province, US forces used hardnosed engagement to realign local Pashtun Taliban leaders. American forces employed military, political, and economic resources to disaggregate and engage the Taliban. Over time, Pashtun Taliban stopped resisting coalition operations and began working with the coalition. More importantly, they began to express allegiance to the government in Kabul. Such individual initiatives on the part of local commanders do not represent current coalition policy. And regional differences within Pakistan suggest that the specifics of any engagement policy cannot be uniformly applied. Engagement must be tailored to meet the unique characteristics of each community; and it must be continuously monitored and adjusted. Yet the Paktika province illustrates the potential of disaggregation and engagement.

Victory in Afghanistan requires a new strategy of disaggregating and engaging the Taliban. Although it requires moving beyond the past acts of certain Taliban elements; political engagement must not endorse nor reward previous actions. All engagement policies must ultimately strengthen the legitimacy and authority of Afghanistan's central government. Any policies that create shadow governments within the Afghan nation-state may prove disastrous. They run the risk of allowing insurgents to achieve victory via salami tactics -- a situation that may be unfolding in Pakistan given Islamabad's decision to allow for the establishment of Taliban backed Islamic courts in the Swat valley.

Insurgencies are not defeated by external armies. The core tenet of counterinsurgency is that the people themselves are the prize and that victory is achieved by putting the tools of government in the hands of domestic actors. Establishing the political institutions necessary for a stable Afghanistan requires finding political arrangements that local Afghans view as legitimate. Doing so will endow the central government with the authority it requires to



establish internal sovereignty. True internal sovereignty will strengthen Afghanistan's external sovereignty, bolster regional stability, and help extinguish the pro-al Qaeda insurgency.

Disaggregation and engagement of the Taliban movement is the key. It is the only realistic means through which the US led coalition can achieve its long term goal of a stable Afghanistan wedded to the rule of law, the international community, and free of the types of terrorist activities that led to 9/11.

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