

Is there a better strategy for Afghanistan?

David García Cantalapiedra

»» Afghanistan is approaching a tipping point. Its stabilisation hangs in the balance. Increased international commitment has been forthcoming for the August 2009 elections.

The strategy for Afghanistan which President Barack Obama presented in March – and which was accepted by the allies at NATO's Strasbourg-Kehl Summit in April – amounts to a step-change. However, it comes a year too late. The 2008 Bucharest Summit could have agreed new contributions, above all from Europe. Another year has been lost in Afghanistan's stabilisation.

Neither the US's counter-terrorist operation *Enduring Freedom* nor the European reconstruction strategy has so far proved effective. The approval of Obama's new *Comprehensive Approach* in Bucharest offered the first framework that brings together political, economic, social and military aspects. In this regard, the EU has missed out on the chance to position itself as a key player in this conflict.

ADVANCES

The new US strategy reflects some of the lessons learned in Iraq. Nobody should overlook the fact that the ultimate aim of the new strategy, according to the document itself, is the defeat and dismantling of Al Qaeda in Pakistan. Efforts are to be focused on disrupting and destroying terrorist networks in Afghanistan; building a capable and effective Afghani government and local institutions; and developing security forces capable of taking on the insurgency with minimum international help. The new strategy is predicated on an *integrated*

HIGHLIGHTS

- While the new US strategy for Afghanistan includes some encouraging moves towards a more integrative approach, shortcomings remain.
- The new strategy has implications for European policies far beyond the headline-grabbing question of new troop commitments.
- The areas of policy related to governance and security sector reform are particularly in need of improvement on the European side.
- Effort is being made to link the Afghanistan and Pakistan questions, but these fall short of the fully regional approach needed.

»»»»» *approach* which aims to coordinate all international institutions located in Afghanistan.

The objective is to achieve a united front in carrying out the goals of the *Comprehensive Approach* in every district of the country. In this regard, the integrated approach is based on three inter-connected objectives – development, security and governance. This view accepts as its starting point the argument that a purely military solution does not exist. Any solution must be political and be put in place by the Afghans themselves. Whilst this process is underway, the security forces must protect the population by providing a secure zone, good governance and development. The security forces carry out their operations following the dynamic of “Shape, Clear, Hold and Build”.

The integrated approach respects the principles of the new form of counterinsurgency designed in the wake of Iraq. This is a kind of COIN-plus strategy: unity of effort, prioritising the political, understanding the environment, intelligence guided operations, isolation of insurgents, security under the rule of law, and a long term commitment. Besides, it is vital that there is significant adaptability to situations on the ground in the political, economic and military spheres. Capacities and powers must be conferred to those working at the grass roots level. ISAF PRTs and United Nations teams, along with provincial authorities, are to develop a vision more in tune with the needs of the local population.

The increase in troops is only part of an integrated approach which must be sought equally in terms of development, security and governance. Besides, it must have the Afghan population at its centre. Without security, it will be impossible to establish development programmes or create institutions - fundamentally local government, the army and police. ISAF commander, General David McKiernan, has made it crystal clear that the whole strategy is focused on the Afghan population. This is not just “Afghanisation” in terms of granting

increased capacities and responsibilities to the Afghans themselves. It also comes in the shape of needs-oriented institutions.

The problem with putting the integrated approach into practice is that whilst “Afghanisation” is taking place, a substantial contribution in terms of security is required. But that contribution is not only necessary in terms of the number of troops on the ground. Providing more troops by itself is not enough. Troops must be deployed in certain areas, charged with carrying out specific functions. To a large extent, the lion’s share of the combat forces will be deployed in the south and east of the country. Some of these forces will be earmarked to train the Afghan army and police, above all through the new programme *Focused District Development* (FDD).

IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEMS

The application of the integrated approach will encounter serious problems arising from existing institutional dynamics and the insurgency. The early phases of the strategy have run into three basic problems: a lack of coordination; the need to prioritise “more government” as opposed to “more governance”; and the lack of emphasis on the broader regional context.

First, the integrated strategy must solve the problem posed by a lack of coordination and cooperation between ISAF, the UN, Afghan institutions and governments still in command of PRTs. A dearth of unity in effort and command can be observed. There is a reluctance in some quarters to accept ISAF’s leading role. In the security-development-governance trinity, in theory ISAF should only be responsible for the first of these three aims. But in practice it has led on all three elements due to its enhanced capacities, established presence in the country and superior coordination with the Afghan institutions; and, of course, because guaranteeing security has imposed itself as the priority objective due to the situation on the ground.

Many training programmes are of little practical use for the kind of situation the Afghan police is most likely going to encounter.

The Afghan Ministry of Defence is requesting more cooperation and coordination of different national positions. It complains of a gap between real needs (for example, paramilitary training for the police) and EU donors' focus on implanting European standards of policing. Many training programmes are of little practical use for the kind of situation the Afghan police is most likely going

to encounter. Yet police bodies like the Spanish Guardia Civil, the Italian Carabinieri or the French Gendarmerie would be ideal for this task. The Afghan police has been offered training geared to policing security situations typical of western democracies operating under the rule of law. As a result it has found

itself in paramilitary and counter-insurgency situations which it simply has not been trained for. Casualties have been high.

The FDD is advancing towards a kind of training and assessment more focused on paramilitary situations. The creation of up to seven different police bodies dedicated to different tasks could be avoided by creating one body with similar characteristics to European police forces. However, the German GPTT and the EUPOL programmes would not seem to be appropriate to the environment in which Afghan security forces have to function.

GOVERNMENT VERSUS GOVERNANCE

Governance does not seem to be one of the priorities for the Afghan authorities so much as the creation of a "government" capacity. This means building institutions with capacities and resources sufficient for self-governance and a move to autonomy in relation to the current

dependency on international organisations. For Afghans, as well as some organisations on the ground, institution building is the first and foremost priority. The procurement of resources for security, infrastructure, regional and local government, and above all, the reconstruction of the economic and education systems are considered the first steps towards meaningful independence.

The dearth of institutions, and their dysfunctionality, is the most serious problem in the short term. The absence of the kind of security forces that would really protect the population, along with malfunctioning or poorly executed infrastructure programmes, creates a lack of trust among the population at large. This creates the sensation of a lack of commitment. Subcontractors in turn subcontract, leading to infrastructure of inferior quality, more accidents in the workplace and public work projects being abandoned owing to fear of the insurgents. ISAF forces quickly abandon secured areas, allowing insurgents to return, or even worse still, find it impossible to hold an area due to insufficient troop numbers. In cases like these, the return of the insurgency leads to terror being spread throughout the local community. The latter is dissuaded from supporting the government and international organisations, even though the vast majority of the population do not support the Taliban.

This identification of "more government" as a goal is reflected in the need to prioritise security both quantitatively and qualitatively. This matter has been identified as a priority not only by ISAF but also by members of PRTs, and even by NGOs situated in "hot spots" like Kandahar. Some PRT staff are aware that the approach which they wanted to project in their zones was erroneous (for example in Mazar-i-Sharif, under Swedish command). Making reconstruction the priority is called into question even by development advisors, who are increasingly giving security priority and have even denominated the PRT as the *Provincial Security Team*.

»»»»» **A REGIONAL APPROACH**

Debate is only now beginning on the need for a regional approach. The insurgency is not just a national problem, but a regional one too. Even if the stabilisation of the country is secured through the *Integrated Approach* and a policy of reconciliation and reinsertion of the Afghan insurgents, success will be elusive while a third of fighters have their command centres in Pakistan. Yet the *Integrated Approach* is not designed to tackle this aspect of the conflict. The Obama Administration's new strategy focuses on the need for a solution to the Pakistani Taliban Al-Qaeda insurgency. But the broader regional dynamics, involving Iran, India and the states of Central Asia, are still ignored.

SOME LESSONS

Carl von Clausewitz stated that the first thing that a commanding officer must do is correctly identify the kind of conflict he is going to take part in and then establish the right strategy to deal with it. Neither the US nor its European allies forecast the situation in Afghanistan accurately. Besides, fewer resources than those required were put on the ground.

Sending reinforcements to areas which are already largely stable as a temporary support over the election period will not help in the long term. Nor will it send a strong message to the insurgency in terms of NATO's commitment. We are witnessing an Americanisation of security and development aid. PRTs, like the one at Mazar-i-Sharif under Swedish control, are carrying out their projects thanks to money from USAID. The EU's absence and the incapacity of some member states to establish a coordinated strategy in Afghanistan could lead to the irrelevance of the EU as a key actor in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.

Besides problems in putting the new strategy into place, the reality amounts to a complex environment; several fronts at once, in both

Afghanistan and Pakistan; two conflicts, one top of the other, against Al Qaeda and the Taliban groups; different regional and international views and interests in the West and neighbours, above all Iran and India. If the Taliban insurgency continues to gain ground in Pakistan, all efforts will have been in vain, because a regional conflict in Asia would by then be a real possibility.

David García Cantalapiedra, Department of International Studies, Complutense University, Madrid. Dr Cantalapiedra has just returned from a NATO sponsored trip to Afghanistan.