



# Noref Report

## President Obama's Strategic Review of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the consequences for Nato Policy

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### Abstract

**An under-resourced intervention in Afghanistan has severely limited troop numbers, economic reconstruction and diplomatic efforts, resulting in a revived Taliban, a corrupt and weak central government, and a narcotics-ridden economy. The situation is deteriorating faster than anticipated. Solutions point to economic reconstruction, governance reforms and improved security for Afghans, particularly women. Yet, the debate continues to revolve around troop surges. What shape would a political solution take in Afghanistan? Where will the international community find the funding to augment and improve the Afghan National Police? What will happen if the alliance fails to halt the momentum of the Taliban within the timeframe of 12-18 months? These and other questions were debated with Bruce Riedel, of the Brookings Institute, in September 2009.**

After 30 years of war in Afghanistan, the situation in Afghanistan is far from a resolution. Many complex issues are inter-linked such as the future of the Afghan economy, narcotics, women's rights, and refugees and internally displaced persons. While recognising the importance of these issues, the seminar focused primarily on security, followed by a discussion of humanitarian concerns and lastly, of governance challenges in Afghanistan.

Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institute was the guest speaker. A former CIA officer, Bruce Riedel focuses on political transition, terrorism and conflict resolution. At the request of President Obama, he chaired an interagency review of policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan for the White House that was completed in March 2009. Mariano Aguirre, Managing Director of Noref, introduced the proceedings. Comments were provided by Kristian Berg Harpviken (The International Peace Research Institute, Oslo), Laila Bokhari (The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo), Ingrid MacDonald (Norwegian Refugee Council, Oslo), Arne

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Strand (Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen) and Robert Matthews (Noref consultant), who also moderated the debate. Participants included researchers from prominent Norwegian institutions, humanitarian experts, diplomats, policy makers and officials from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### Dire and deteriorating

Succintly, the situation in Afghanistan is dire and deteriorating, but, hopefully, not entirely lost. Dismantling and disrupting al-Qaeda is the primary objective of the international alliance, as outlined in the March 2009 Obama administration white paper. But, the reality is that eight years after 9/11, and the intervention in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's core leadership is intact, having moved from Kandahar to an unknown location, probably in Pakistan.

The situation is deteriorating at a pace faster than anticipated, according to General McChrystal. An under-resourced war effort has severely limited troop numbers, economic reconstruction and diplomatic efforts, resulting in a Taliban resurgence, a corrupt and weak central government, and a narcotics-ridden economy. It was also noted that the Taliban has become more militant and radicalised, apparently moving closer to al-Qaeda.

Some rays of hope were offered by the fact that the Taliban campaign is a Pashtun insurgency rather than a nationalist movement – Pashtuns make up about 40% of the Afghan population. The Afghan army and police are beginning to function more effectively under the new minister of the interior, Hanif Atmar. However, without a re-legitimised Afghan government, it will be virtually impossible to get the Afghan mission on course to fulfil the strategy objectives.

### Taliban and al-Qaeda

It was stressed that a viable strategy will only flow from a greater understanding of the Taliban insurgency and the objectives of its leadership. The top Taliban leadership has become heavily radicalised but the middle ranks are not necessarily ideologically convinced – some are Taliban by convenience – and this opening should be exploited. However, in the current environment, security guarantees cannot be maintained so it is hard to convince people that changing sides is a strategy for survival. One expert felt that only military operations could create a safer security environment.

### Pakistan

The same expert described Pakistan as the most dangerous country in the world with a uniquely combustible situation of more terrorists per square kilometre than any other country in the world and the fastest growing nuclear arsenal. Pakistan has an extraordinarily weak civilian government, a huge army and a weak economy. Other speakers disagreed and pointed to the Pakistani army offensives against Taliban strongholds, improving literacy rates, and also growing public opposition to the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Hopes have also been kindled by a vibrant civil society movement, spearheaded by lawyers, which brought down the military dictatorship of former president Musharraf.

The Pakistani political establishment has come to recognise the danger of jihadis and to identify the Taliban and al-Qaeda as a real threat to the future of Pakistan's own freedoms. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the state's failure to deliver basic services has enabled the Taliban to fill a services and security vacuum in the tribal areas.

### Security fears

Pakistani fears stem from a deep-rooted sense of lacking a security guarantee in the face of their much larger enemy, India. However, it was pointed out that no country would guarantee Pakistan's security until Pakistan redefined its position. Does it see itself as an irredentist state seeking the return of territory that belongs to India? The back channel between Pakistan and India needs to be revived and taken to closure as Pakistan cannot be stabilised without addressing the India issue.

Pakistan's relations with India also lie behind its involvement in Afghanistan. Therefore, the question arises as to how long the Pakistani establishment is willing to see the Taliban as a major enemy? The Pakistani military may still be interested in keeping some Taliban leadership in safe havens in Pakistan, which could have unforeseen consequences.

### The way forward

Afghanistan and Pakistan are two distinct countries in which the syndicate of terror and jihadism are intertwined. Thus, they should be viewed as two countries but one theatre of operations. Destruction of al-Qaeda is at the origin of troop deployment, but achieving this goal requires the participation of Afghans, and especially Pakistanis.

The path forward must be multi-pronged and requires realistic resources. Economic reconstruction in Afghanistan has been grossly under-funded in one of the poorest countries in the world, leading to the alienation of the Afghan people, and a security vacuum which allowed the Taliban to recover, and boosted the opium trade.

A sophisticated political strategy is needed to fracture and divide the Afghan Taliban and its allies. However, one expert considered that the Taliban will not be interested in political solutions as long as they are winning, hence the need to turn the situation on the battlefield. In addition, a credible and legitimate government is essential to implement a political strategy that could take advantage of any fractures in the Taliban.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the argument that the Taliban would negotiate from a weak position was not coherent, given that the international alliance is not willing to negotiate now when it is in a similar position confronting the Taliban offensive. Europeans wonder if the threat of al-Qaeda has not been exaggerated but it was underscored that the evidence in the classified world of security intelligence is overwhelming, and that al-Qaeda remains a serious threat not only in the region but in Europe and America.

### Prospects of success

The revised strategy has no guarantee of success and could as easily fail as succeed. A welcome innovation is the focus on metrics. It was stressed, however, that benchmarks should be based on the long-term needs of the Afghan population, rather than short-term military objectives.

The definition of success is not victory or surrender, but to halt the momentum of the Taliban and the insurgency. The goal is for the Afghans to take on the burden of tackling the insurgency, with minimal international military force on the ground, but backed by sizeable foreign economic support. This will take many years to achieve, and patience, pragmatism and constancy should be the hallmarks.

US military leaders want to see signs of improvement over the next 12 to 18 months. If there is no sign of progress in the battlefield by then, the alliance will be confronting a real problem. However, there may be a fracture in the international alliance before results become evident and Western public opinion may not be persuaded to renew troop commitments.

### Confidence crisis

Some participants debated whether the mission objectives were clear. Doubts were expressed about realistic goals in Pakistan and Afghanistan, funding capacity, the UN role, and whether a scaled-down mission might conflict with the long-term structural and development goals of EU countries like Norway. One participant questioned whether fighting in Afghanistan is the best way to fight al-Qaeda, given its transnational reach.

It was noted that there is a crisis of confidence among Afghans and Pakistanis regarding the objectives of the international alliance, and the intense debate over civilian casualties has crystallized this lack of confidence. An increase in troops will cause more civilian deaths – currently, 30% of US-Nato casualties are caused by ground forces – thus potentially providing the Taliban and al-Qaeda with a propaganda boon.

### Humanitarian programmes

The fundamental role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Afghanistan was highlighted, and the obstacles posed to them by military involvement in humanitarian work. In terms of the civilian surge, programmes implemented by NGOs have been among the most successful. But these programmes, including community reconstruction, massive reenrolment of girls, and outreach of basic health services, risk failure in 2010 because access levels have deteriorated significantly.

Maintaining impartiality is extremely important for the security of humanitarian workers. When a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is involved in similar activities, local actors tend to link NGO workers with military actors, thus exposing humanitarian workers to the risk of attack. Lack of security for local aid workers forces NGOs to pull out and stop providing these services.

NGOs consider that, at least in the areas where they can still operate, military or political organisations should not be involved in delivering aid, as this will ensure that NGOs can still operate and Afghans get the assistance they deserve. A policy expert considered that rather than abandoning the PRTs, it would be better to improve their effectiveness.

### **Fundamental contradiction**

The key goal of the white paper – to disrupt al-Qaeda and prevent its return to Afghanistan and Pakistan – creates a fundamental contradiction for humanitarian efforts, as NGOs work independently of political or military allegiances. Their work is based on the needs of the population, with no discrimination. When humanitarian development is linked to a counterinsurgency strategy, it is doomed to fail, because the objective is to win a war rather than help people based on their needs. And it underestimates the fact that Afghans and Pakistanis can make this analysis for themselves.

The UN should play a leadership role to ensure aid effectiveness, given the lack of strategy and consistency in donor implementation and contributions. Yet, if that role is put under the banner of counterinsurgency, it will become politicised and counterproductive.

### **Governance crisis in Afghanistan**

Any increase in the international presence, civilian or military, is likely to fail if not accompanied by a greater focus on improving the quality of Afghan governance, strengthening it beyond Kabul, improving security for all Afghans and increasing opportunities to secure livelihoods. These are the best guarantees to protect both the Afghans and the international community against the threat that brought about the 2001 engagement.

One researcher felt that the solution is not a strong central state in Kabul, but rather increased local decision making – accompanied by funding and professional training for Afghan administrators. A federal system of different ethnic groups should be discussed and could reduce centre-periphery tension. It was suggested that if the Taliban were granted greater control in the south, they might be dissuaded from conquering the whole of Afghanistan.

### **Afghan security and livelihoods**

The international forces need to recognize that security threats to the Afghans come not only from the “insurgents” but also from those who are defined as allies and friends. Improved training for the army and police is vital, as are adequate resources for improving the justice system. However, the creation and armament of local groups for protection against the Taliban could become a serious threat to the population.

Violence is a major threat for women, and they face the risk of rape on a daily basis, from their husbands, brothers and fathers. The Taliban and al-Qaeda are not the major threats in their lives. Moreover, it is not only the Taliban who attack the role of women. Pashtun legislators would also support extremely restrictive legislation for women. Consequently, donors should focus more on the grassroots perspective, while also supporting improved legislation, if they are serious about helping women.

Afghan livelihoods must be secured and the economy developed in order to reduce dependency on external funding. The fact that a majority of Afghans secure their income – or basic staple food – from agriculture has not been sufficiently recognised and acted upon. In general, there is a need for job-creation programmes that can improve infrastructure and irrigation and lay a foundation for sustainable development.

Most international funding is largely channelled outside government structures because of doubts regarding accountability and corruption. Yet, when donors set up their own programmes to fill the gaps, competing programmes lead to lack of coordination. Thus, there is a need to find a balance between Afghan budget support, with a system of checks and balances, and funding outside government channels.

### **Pending questions**

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the military campaigns against insurgents in Pakistan raise more questions than answers. The vision of a continued military offensive with dubious prospects of success cannot but raise the spectre of Vietnam. What shape would a political/ governance solution have in Afghanistan? Who will design and implement the sophisticated strategy necessary to fracture the Taliban? The need for more in-depth research into the Taliban and the internal reality of Afghan society was underscored.

What will happen if the alliance fails to halt the momentum of the Taliban within the timeframe of 12-18 months? How can progress be achieved given that the minimum timeframe for a possible solution should be at least 10 years? The serious and dramatic humanitarian problem (refugees, IDPs, women's rights and the living conditions of the population) must be tackled decisively, and benchmarks should focus on the needs of the people.