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September 14, 2009

Answering Questions About Afghanistan

By **Stanley Kober**

President Barack Obama is reviewing strategy for the war in Afghanistan - a war which the President has declared a necessity. The administration hopes that it can drive a wedge between the Taliban, thereby reaching a deal with the group's more "moderate" elements. In doing so, the coalition forces can marginalize the radicals, with whom no negotiation is possible.

Those who support this approach frequently point to the resolution of the Irish "troubles" via the Good Friday agreement. But even if that assessment of Northern Ireland is correct, it is not the only way such conflicts have ended. The Vietnam War ended when North Vietnam sent virtually its entire army into South Vietnam in 1975; achieving a decisive military victory that overturned the negotiated Paris Accords it had approved just a couple of years before. North Vietnam then proved that its military approach was no fluke by invading Cambodia and crushing the Khmer Rouge.

In short, sometimes there is a military solution. Some questions need to be addressed however, as the U.S. increases its military forces in Afghanistan to determine if that is the case in Afghanistan.

The first has to do with supply lines. Afghanistan is a land-locked country. Supplies have been transported through Pakistan, but those supply lines have been increasingly threatened. Accordingly, the U.S. has been seeking other routes. As General David Petraeus - the former military commander overseeing the war in Afghanistan - explained, "all roads do lead through Uzbekistan and into Afghanistan."

But Uzbekistan is also landlocked. A quick look at the map shows that any supply lines that use Uzbekistan will be dependent on cooperation from Russia; both politically and logistically.

Moscow has offered cooperation, but we should have no illusions: whatever Russia's weaknesses, they are immaterial so long as the U.S. and its NATO allies need its assistance in Afghanistan. With the safety of tens of thousands of troops at stake, risks need to be minimized.

The success the Taliban have had in interdicting supply lines also raises an interesting question: why hasn't it happened to their supply lines? It is extraordinary that an insurgency with no state sponsor is able to supply itself against the mightiest alliance in the world. Who is providing their ammunition? How does it get to their fighters?

Another set of questions grows out of the effort to accelerate the growth of Afghanistan's security forces. This is seen as imperative since any strategy for defending the population needs "boots on the ground," and there is simply no way that the United States and its allies can provide the requisite numbers. Moreover, it is the Afghans' country, and they have to assume the responsibility for protecting it.

But if the forces are expanded quickly, how could infiltration by enemies be prevented? In August 2008, a French unit was ambushed while patrolling near Kabul. According to Army chief of staff General Jean-Louis Georgelin, the French had entered "a well-organized trap." A French newspaper claimed the interpreter had disappeared shortly before the encounter, which would explain why the Taliban were able to organize such an effective ambush.

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Additionally, the Taliban's ability to recruit effectively remains intact. According to public opinion polls, their popularity has declined. NATO forces have also been inflicting casualties on them. Yet they seem to have no difficulty replacing their losses, which is one reason NATO and the U.S. feel compelled to build up their forces.

Even if the Taliban can exploit a poor economic situation to attract new followers, the ability to thwart this strategy by building up the Afghan economy is extremely limited. Afghanistan is still an agricultural economy, and if it is to earn money from agriculture, it must be able to export (the poppy trade is lucrative because there are foreign purchasers). Yet Afghanistan's location and poor transportation infrastructure are not suited to export. Any economic improvement is bound to be gradual.

Finally, there is the question of training. As Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently acknowledged, the Taliban "has grown much more sophisticated in the last two or three years."

They are being trained somewhere - but where? Why is it so difficult to discover those locations and destroy them?

At the end of 2001, it all looked so easy. The United States has traveled a hard road since then. Americans, along with their NATO and regional allies, need to answer these questions - and others like them - to gain a better idea of how they got where they are, and where they are heading.

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