

IN AFGHANISTAN, REAL LEVERAGE STARTS WITH MORE TROOPS

By Kimberly Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2009

The president will soon announce the deployment of additional U.S. forces to Afghanistan, in a speech likely to emphasize the importance of political progress there. Legitimacy is the most important outcome of a counterinsurgency strategy, not, as some have suggested, an input. It is unfortunate that much of the debate has ignored the role that additional military forces can play in building legitimacy and effective government in a counterinsurgency. Adding forces gives us leverage; military forces are vital to the success of any political strategy because they contribute directly to improving governance as well as to improving security.

The recent American experience in Iraq illustrates how U.S. forces and diplomacy helped correct the behaviors of a sometimes malign government in ways that helped neutralize insurgent groups. In early 2007, many Iraqi leaders were using instruments of state to support sectarian death squads. The dysfunctional government could not secure the population, pass laws or provide services to its people. The implementation of a fully resourced counterinsurgency strategy -- enabled by the deployment of nearly six additional U.S. combat brigades -- transformed Iraq's government within 18 months. Opponents of the surge argued that Iraqis would "step up" politically and militarily only if they knew that U.S. forces would leave. Instead, before committing to the fight, political leaders and populations throughout Iraq assessed whether U.S. forces would stay long enough to secure them. Iraqis stepped up precisely because of the absence of conditionality and time limits on U.S. force levels.

If the Afghan government were fully legitimate, there would be no insurgency. U.S. and international actions must aim to improve the Afghan government's ability to provide basic services such as security and dispute resolution nationwide, building the legitimacy of the government in Kabul sufficiently to dampen a large-scale insurgency. They must persuade and even compel Afghan leaders to stop activities that alienate the people and create fertile ground for insurgents.

Adding American forces in large numbers would help. It is critical that the Afghan people be provided security. Continuous violence, insurgent intimidation and propaganda campaigns create a pervasive sense of insecurity that undermines the government. As we have seen in Iraq and some parts of Afghanistan, a reduction in violence can slow or stop the erosion of the government's legitimacy. It can also create space in which to resolve underlying tensions that had fueled the violence, through negotiation or the construction of more effective governmental structures, neither of which can occur without security.

But American military forces also contribute directly to efforts to improve Afghan institutions. In Afghanistan, as in Iraq, international troops will partner with army and police units. Afghan forces can learn by listening to the exhortations of mentors and by seeing the world's best military perform those tasks. Partnered American units also hinder illegal activities, such as extortion, that Afghan units might otherwise undertake.

American military forces can also help restrain politicians' abuses of power. U.S. forces can develop a picture of local power structures, including those through which Afghan officials abuse their power and exacerbate the insurgency. American commanders can collect evidence on individual offenders that a reformed Afghan

judicial system would one day be able to use. In the short term, such evidence can be published, embarrassing the official and others involved. Since much of the corruption involves narcotics, the United States and its partners can use international legal mechanisms to pursue Afghan officials in more reliable court systems. We can also threaten to add the worst offenders to our target lists when abuse of power directly supports the enemy. Used systematically, as happened in Iraq, this leverage can dramatically alter the behavior of networks of people misusing their power.

Making the deployment of forces conditional on the behavior of the Afghan government is counterproductive. Withholding forces reduces our ability to control the violence and to spot the networks of corruption. It encourages Afghan leaders to avoid committing to support our objectives. Declaring that our military commitment depends on things not under our control undermines the confidence Afghans have in our staying power, dramatically reducing the likelihood that they will side with us against enemies who would otherwise kill them.

Conditionality makes more sense when applied to financial aid, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently indicated. Afghanistan is desperately poor and depends on international aid to function. Threatening to withhold all aid would be foolish. But donor countries could establish specific targets for reducing corruption and improving the effectiveness of particular ministries and local governments. Continued aid to those institutions could be made dependent on their progress toward specific transparency and effectiveness milestones. Aid could be suspended or reduced to ministries or localities known to be run for the advantage of important members of the corruption networks, as a way to cajole President Hamid Karzai into removing them from power. This approach places the conditionality where we want it -- on our support to the Afghan government -- rather than on our ability to pursue our own security objectives.

Afghan governance will not improve as long as American forces are unable to provide security to the people and improve the capabilities of Afghan forces. It will not improve as long as Afghans think that the United States is not serious about the effort. Since 2005 the United States has failed to provide the military effort with enough resources, yet expected an effective Afghan government to blossom. This strategy helped bring us to the current crisis. President Obama should embrace and resource the counterinsurgency approach that Gen. Stanley McChrystal has proposed.

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