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PTP5143

PAGE 01

KABUL 03594 01 OF 02 091656Z

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SECRET SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003594

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SUBJECT: LOOKING BEYOND COUNTERINSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: KABUL 3572

SECTION 01 OF 02 Kabul 3594

Classified By: Ambassador Karl W. Sikenberry, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

Madame Secretary,  
My previous cable addressed concerns about taking a decision too soon on a proposed counterinsurgency strategy that relies on a large, all-or-nothing increase in U.S. troops. I now propose that the White House commission a deliberate process to lay out the range of strategic options on Afghanistan and Pakistan, broadening the analysis beyond military counterinsurgency doctrine.

There are three purposes for doing so:

First, to make sure that we have tested every assumption behind the Afghan-focused military counterinsurgency proposal;

Second, to examine non-military alternatives or companion requirements to a major troop increase;

Third, to develop U.S. political understanding and support, as well as Afghan and allied public commitment.

After such a process, the standing COMISAF proposal may prove exactly what the President will decide is needed, but the time and effort put into this further deliberation will yield benefits far offsetting the costs, in my judgment.

I support COMISAF's military analysis and recommendations as logical and compelling, within his narrow mandate to define the needs for a military counterinsurgency campaign within Afghanistan. But the problems confronting our own strategic purposes, as laid out by the President on March 27, are broader, and we must consider a wider set of variables before reaching a final decision.

These unaddressed variables include Pakistan sanctuaries, weak Afghan leadership and governance, NATO civil-military integration, and our national will to bear the human and fiscal costs over many years. The current military proposal properly sets aside each of these issues and many more because they are outside COMISAF's counterinsurgency mandate. Yet, in reality, each has the potential to block us from achieving our strategic goals, regardless of the number of

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additional troops we may send.

We Have Time

Some argue that we must decide on the full-up troop deployment now. The military, a long lead time, the requirement to bring along our NATO allies, and the need to signal decisiveness and resolve are adduced as compelling reasons to announce the full troop request quickly. I disagree. We have the time we need—certainly into early next year. We must take that time to decide on the right course.

As serious as the security picture in Afghanistan is today, it is not so dire that we need to announce or commit ourselves to sweeping changes immediately, either in our military or civilian posture. For example, additional combat brigades could be designated for possible deployment and begin training without requiring an immediate decision on whether to send them all. They would be arriving in increments, in any case.

To show resolve, the President could announce that he was immediately ordering a smaller contingent of U.S. forces to mentor ANSF and to protect the population, while emphasizing that further deployments would be conditioned on specific steps by the Afghan government, such as a commitment and a plan to take full responsibility for national defense on a specific timeline. Afghans, allies and others in the region would see this not as indecision, but rather as seriousness of purpose.

Why We Must Take the Time

We have not yet conducted a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of all our strategic options. Nor have we brought all the real-world variables to bear in testing the proposed counterinsurgency plan. We agree that more troops will yield more security wherever they deploy, for as long as they stay. But the last time we sent substantial additional forces—a deployment totaling 33,000 in 2008-2009—overall violence and instability in Afghanistan intensified. Also, neither ANSF nor the Afghan government has demonstrated the will or ability to take over lead security responsibility—much less governance—in any area cleared and held by NATO-ISAF. Experience with troop increases, therefore, offers scant reason to expect that further increases will permanently advance our strategic purposes; instead they will dig us in more deeply.

We also need time to work with President Karzai and his new team, many of whom may not be in place for several months, to test whether they are both able and committed to lead the counterinsurgency mission we are defining for them. In fact, Karzai explicitly rejected the counterinsurgency basis

SECRET

SECTION 02 OF 02 Kabul 3594

and purpose of the COMISAF proposal when first briefed on it in detail two months ago, and he has not embraced it since then. Rather, in a PBS interview on November 7, Karzai sounded bizarrely cautionary notes about his willingness to address governance and corruption. This tracks with his record of inaction or grudging compliance in this area. We need an intense, high-level dialogue to judge whether we can gain enforceable commitments from the Afghan government to build their own capacity and to assume responsibility for security and governance in cleared areas. Absent such a judgment, we cannot presume that another large infusion of U.S. troops necessarily will give us leverage over them.  
Recommendation

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Hence, we recommend a comprehensive, deliberate and interdisciplinary re-examination of our strategic options, carried out by the end of the year, to decide how best to accomplish the President's March 27 strategy. This should go beyond a war game or red team, yet not become a month-long Baker-Hamilton-style commission for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rather, the White House could appoint a panel of civilian and military experts to examine the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy and the full range of options. It could include eminent, bipartisan political figures, such as former senior U.S. government and congressional leaders. Among the issues this panel should examine are:

- the potential that reintegration/reconciliation program has for taking insurgents off the battle field (the only approach holding attraction for Karzai and the mass of Afghans);
  - the prospects for the Pakistani security services putting meaningful pressure against the Afghan Taliban, the insurgent sanctuaries and leadership, and al Qaeda;
  - the impact of increasing U.S. and international aid and development programs on long-term stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan;
  - the second- and third-order effects within Afghanistan and the region of sending more U.S. troops;
  - the U.S. and allies willingness to bear the costs in lives and treasure over the timelines in the ISAF proposal;
  - and whether our definition of the strategic problem in purely military terms of counterinsurgency within Afghanistan is sufficient to address the President's strategic focus on al Qaeda with both Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- This strategic re-examination could either include or lead to high-level U.S. talks with the Afghans, the Pakistanis, the Saudis and other important regional players, including possibly Iran, as well as NATO, its component nations and even the United Nations. Such a process of rigorous internal U.S. government deliberations, leading to deeper political-military consultations with allies and other stakeholders, could powerfully build support at home and abroad for the President's eventual decisions about the way forward.

The Risks

COMISAF has laid out the risk we face in not sending the full complement of additional troops right now. But there are competing risks—for example, that we will become more deeply engaged here with no way to extricate ourselves, short of allowing the country to descend again into lawlessness and chaos. Also, the demand for U.S. and allied civilian efforts in Afghanistan will only grow with the deployment of large numbers of additional U.S. troops.

To mitigate such countervailing risks, I believe there is no option but to widen the scope of our analysis to consider alternatives beyond a strictly military counterinsurgency effort within Afghanistan.

Respectfully,  
Mark  
BIRNBERG