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How Much Longer Can We "Endure"?

A Seven-Year Assessment of Operation Enduring Freedom

By [Austin Knuppe](#)

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ctober 7, 2008, marks the seven-year anniversary of Operation Enduring Freedom — the beginning of U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan. Since 2001, U.S. and NATO troops have fought a long and arduous war against Taliban insurgents and other foreign fighters. While some ground has been gained, recent history has shown an escalation in violence between soldiers and civilians alike. Earlier this fall, U.S. combat casualties passed the 600 mark and 3,000 civilians have been killed in the crossfire.[1]



Operation Enduring Freedom began seven years ago this week.

In addition to the current administration, both presidential candidates have a vested stake in the war in Afghanistan.[2] Senator Barack Obama supports scaling down our troop commitment in Iraq and transferring two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan. John McCain does not differ that much from his Democratic counterpart. Last July, McCain stated, "It is precisely the success of the surge in Iraq that shows us the way to succeed in Afghanistan." [3] During the first presidential debate at the University of Mississippi last September, both candidates agreed that additional time and resources are required for the effort in Afghanistan to ensure that it doesn't devolve into pre-9/11 levels of chaos.

Election 2008 demonstrates that both presidential candidates are overwhelmingly committed to improving America's prospects for success and Afghanistan's prospects for a stable government. With General Petraeus serving as the newly installed leader of U.S. Central Command, our new president will have a competent commander that knows what it is like to fight a complex counter-insurgency. Even with a consensus on renewed action and a strong commander providing oversight, the next president will have to make several key decisions about what U.S. involvement in Afghanistan will look like from 2009 into the future.

Defining Victory: What Does It Mean, How Do We Get There?

Just like President Bush's "New Way Forward" (also known as the "surge") defined new parameters for security in Iraq, the next president will need to define new considerations for the future security of Afghanistan. Perhaps the most important of these decisions is how to define American "victory." Our next president should abandon the neoconservative dream of a flourishing Afghan democracy and settle for a stable and cohesive national government that can prevent Islamists (from al-Qaeda to the Taliban) from using its territory as a safe haven for terrorism. Speaking to one of Washington DC's leading think tanks, Afghan Defense Minister General Abdul Rahim Wardak defined success using three parameters: the ability of the Afghan National Army to secure the country, the competency of the Afghan national government to provide sound governance, and the assistance of the international community to pressure Afghanistan's neighbors from becoming terrorist safe havens. The rest of this paper will focus on these metrics as the foundation for the future security of Afghanistan, as well as look at the United States' domestic considerations. First, we will look at how an increase in manpower and finances will improve Afghanistan's prospects at security. Next, we will look at the Afghan National Army's role in bringing stability to the country. Following that, we will analyze what role America's NATO allies and Afghanistan's neighbors can play to aid in Operation Enduring Freedom. Finally, we will conclude by examining some of the domestic considerations the next president will face at the onset of his new administration.

Increasing Manpower: the Effects of "Boots on the Ground"

Regardless of the election of either senator, the next president will need to commit more troops and financial resources to Afghanistan. While the Bush Doctrine sought to take advantage of the "Revolution in Military Affairs" by relying on strategic air assets and bombing operations, the recent months have proven that the Air Force can't win this war alone. Commenting on this trend, military analyst Anthony Cordesman stated, "Much of the reporting on the Iraqi and Afghan wars focuses on the ground dimension... The fact remains, however, that Iraq and Afghanistan are air wars as well, and wars where airpower has also played a critical role in combat." [4]

In order to bring a true foundation of security to Afghanistan, the air war will need to be supplemented by a healthy increase of "boots on the ground." One simple reason for this is to increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of rooting out Taliban and al-Qaeda. Because the terrain and tactics of the enemy, simply bombing insurgents from 40,000 feet up will not do the job. Bush lamented this fact in late 2001 when he scoffed at the U.S. Air Force using "2 million dollar missiles to hit a \$10 dollar tent that's empty." [5] In addition, careless bombing raids along the Afghan-Pakistan border have created resentment among local communities that have been caught in the crossfire.[6] In order to root out terrorism from these areas (especially Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area [FATA]), ground troops will need to replicate their comrades in Iraq's efforts at winning "hearts and minds."

There is dispute about just how many more troops will be needed to bring security, and estimates are difficult considering Afghanistan has never hosted a stable imperial government since the time of Alexander the Great. Admiral Michael Mullin of the Joint Chief of Staff testified before the House Armed Services Committee that redeploying troops from Iraq to Afghanistan this winter was "good" and that the "risk of not sending them was too great." [7] Inside the Beltway, military experts suspect that a multinational ground force of as high as 500,000 troops is needed; this would be a dramatic increase from the combined NATO and U.S. force of approximately 65,000.[8][9] General David McKiernan, the U.S. commander of NATO forces in theater, stated that at least 10,000 more troops are needed in addition to the 3,700 scheduled to arrive in January 2009. Regardless of the precise amount, an increase of boots on the ground is essential for reclaiming lost territory and reclaiming the trust of local communities.

Increasing Financing: the Power of the Mighty Dollar

With the proper degree of diplomatic finesse a new administration may also be able to convince more of our NATO allies within Afghanistan to transform their forces from logistic support to active combat. Freeing up more combat troops would show that our European allies have a vested interest in the success of the mission, and it would lighten the load for current U.S. troops. If our friends in NATO will not or cannot commit more ground troops to the fight, they may be convinced to help fund the efforts more fully. A perfect example of this financial alliance was Gulf War I where Saudi and other Arab allies footed over \$10 billion of the costs.

Additionally, the new Congress would be wise to move funding for the War on Terror generally, and Operation Enduring Freedom specifically, to the general defense budget. Currently, the Congress funds Iraq and Afghanistan through a series of supplemental and emergency spending bills. Since October 2001, the Congress has approved \$800 billion in supplemental appropriations for the Defense Department for Operation Enduring Freedom.[10] By moving war funding to the regular budget process, lawmakers can make the appropriate funds available while also leaving supplemental funding open for unforeseen emergencies in the future.[11]

Afghan National Army: Winning "Hearts and Minds"

Even with an increase in troops, materiel and funding, Afghan Defense Minister Wardak is precisely correct — at the end of the day, this is the Afghan National Army's fight to win or lose. Only a popular and nationally legitimate military can win the allegiance of local Afghans. Fred Kaplan argues that unlike the sectarian-ridden Iraqi Army, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is actually a monolithic, national institution.[12] A good short-term goal would be to increase the size and competency of the ANA from 86,000 to 130,000 troops by the end of 2009. With the proper oversight and training, the ANA could win the allegiance of local communities by showing that they are committed to Afghanistan in the

long haul.

Regional Diplomacy: A Walk Around the Neighborhood

Similarly to Iraq, the security problems in Afghanistan do not exist in a geographic bubble. Even with an increase in foreign and national troops, America's next president will need to develop a diplomatic framework for dealing with Afghanistan's neighbors, primarily Pakistan. The bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad last month illustrates the necessity for strengthening existing security arrangements between the Afghan and Pakistani governments. The primary obstacle preventing this relationship from maturing is the civil unrest within Pakistan's borders. While the government of Asif Ali Zadari does have the popular support of the people (for now), Zadari has not taken any steps to reform the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) that is teeming with Taliban sympathizers.[13] The federal government also has no control over the FATA province, the chief safe haven for Taliban as they cross the border to attack Afghanistan.

The good news is that both Zadari and Afghan President Hamid Karzai have accepted Turkey's proposal for a trilateral meeting in Istanbul with Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan.[14] Hopefully, these meetings will result in a new commitment between the nations to work in concert to fight terrorism. Turkey also has a vested interest in a security alliance considering their problems with Kurdish terrorism on Turkey's southern border with Iraq.

The key goal of Pakistani-Afghani security should be to seal Afghanistan's eastern border. The next U.S. president should encourage this action by committing additional ground troops to aid the ANA in blocking the insurgent's access to the border via the Khyber Pass. While U.S. air strikes on the border, as well as in Northern Waziristan have been successful, these efforts must be paired with boots on the ground to ensure the local populations that the military is there to protect their communities instead of just bombing them.

Domestic Considerations: What Else is on the Table?

On the U.S. domestic front, President McCain/Obama will need to weigh the costs and benefits of increasing efforts in Afghanistan against our current commitments in Iraq. With \$10 billion a month being spent on Operation Iraqi Freedom and a commitment of over 130,000 troops, the only viable plan for ramping up efforts in Afghanistan is draw down the scale in Iraq. Because security conditions in Iraq have improved significantly in the last year, both presidential candidates, as well as Iraqi Prime Minister al-Malaki, have hinted at a drawdown. Considering the current facts on the ground, a gradual redeployment from Iraq to Afghanistan may be feasible, but only time will tell what actions a new administration will take. The current financial crisis is guaranteed to also be a large determining factor on how much U.S. efforts are ramped up over seas. Even with the Congress passing certain "bail-out" measures, if unemployment and inflation continue to rise, the president will not have the public's political will to continue expanding the War on Terror.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, counter-insurgencies are more often than not, expensive, long-term affairs (the average counter-insurgency lasts 10 years and results in an insurgent victory 40 percent of the time) and Operation Enduring Freedom is no exception.[15] If the American economy does not recover from its deep wounds, Americans may lose the political will to continue to pour money into foreign wars overseas. Keeping in mind these extemporaneous factors, our nation's next president will need a strong sense of foresight and discernment to determine America's next step in Operation Enduring Freedom.

End Notes

[1] Cf. <http://icasualties.org>

[2] USA Today, "Obama again vows to send 2 more Afghanistan brigades," 2008 Election Coverage, accessed at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-07-14-obama-afghanistan_N.htm (25 September 2008).

[3] Fred Kaplan, "Afghanistan Isn't Like Iraq," Slate, 19 September 2008, accessed at: <http://www.slate.com/id/2200406>.

[4] Anthony H. Cordesman, "Air Combat Trends in the Afghan and Iraq Wars," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 11 March 2008, accessed at http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/080318_afgh-iraqairbrief.pdf.

[5] Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities & Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2002), 234.

[6] For an excellent personal account of these exchanges see Dexter Filkin's article in the New York Times Magazine entitled "Right at the Edge," printed on 5 September 2008.

[7] Luis Martinez, "Military Brass: U.S. Running Out of Time in Afghanistan," ABC News, 10 September 2008, accessed at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2008/story?id=5769529&page=1>

[8] Analyst Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations argues that a combat ground force of 500,000 would be adequate to secure Afghanistan.

[9] Ben Feller, "Bush: More Troops to Afghanistan," TIME, 3 July 2008, accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1819992,00.html>. See also, "ISAF Fact Sheet" accessed at http://www.nato.int/ISAF/docu/epub/pdf/isaf_placemat.pdf.

[10] Amy Balasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, updated July 14, 2008, p. 16, at http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33110_20080714.pdf (September 18, 2008).

[11] For more information see: Brian M. Riedl and Baker Spring, "Time to Move Iraq and Afghanistan Funding into the Regular Budget," WebMemo, Heritage Foundation, published 19 September 2008, accessed at http://www.heritage.org/Research/budget/wm2068.cfm#_ftn1.

[12] Fred Kaplan, "Afghanistan Isn't Like Iraq," Slate, 19 September 2008, accessed at: <http://www.slate.com/id/2200406>.

[13] Interestingly enough, this is based on ethnic, not political allegiances. The Taliban and a majority of the officers in the ISI are both of Pashtun origin, a regional ethnic group that stretches from Pakistan into Afghanistan.