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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

How to Surge the Taliban

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Kandahar, Afghanistan

“DONT worry, we are not going to lose this war.”

These were the parting words to us from Brig. Gen. Sher Muhammad Zazai, commander of the 205th Corps of the Afghan National Army in Kandahar. He was echoing the sentiments of a group of village elders we had met days before in Khost Province, who assured us that they would never allow the Taliban to come back.

It is odd that the Afghans felt it necessary to reassure American visitors that all was far from lost. It reflected the fact that even in a country where electricity and running water are scarce, word of the defeatist hysteria now gripping some in the American political elite has spread.

No one in Afghanistan — from the American commander, Gen. David McKiernan, to those village elders — underestimates the difficulties that lie ahead. But no one we spoke to on an eight-day journey (arranged for us by Gen. David Petraeus, the head of the military's Central Command) that took us from Kunar Province on the Pakistan border to Farah Province near the Iranian frontier doubted that we can succeed, or that we must do so.

The main challenge is to overcome years of chronic neglect in terms of economic development, government services and above all security, which has allowed the insurgency free access to large swaths of the country. The good news is that the Taliban holds little appeal for most Afghans — a BBC-ABC News poll last month showed only 4 percent desired Taliban rule. The Sunni and Shiite insurgencies in Iraq, by contrast, maintained much greater support in their respective communities until they were defeated.

Even without much popular backing, Afghan insurgents are staging an increasing number of attacks, but major cities like Kabul and Jalalabad, which we visited, are relatively safe and flourishing. The civilian death toll in Afghanistan last year was 16 times lower than that in Iraq in the pre-surge year of 2006, even though Afghanistan is more populous.

There is no question that we can succeed against these much weaker foes, notwithstanding the support they receive from Pakistan and to a lesser extent Iran. President Obama's recent decision to send 17,000 additional troops is a good start. While increased security operations will result in a temporary increase in casualties, that spike should be followed by broad reductions in violence, just as with the Iraq surge.

Efforts to develop a countrywide strategy will no doubt be hampered by the confused and often counterproductive NATO command structure. A big part of the problem is that, unlike American headquarters staff members who train together for a year before deploying into a combat zone, NATO staff members from many nations come together for the first time just a few weeks before heading out to Afghanistan. And most of them rotate out after six months; a lack of continuity means a lack of cohesion. A NATO officer even admitted to us that his headquarters is “partially dysfunctional.”

To see the impact of the splintered command structure, look at the drug interdiction. NATO’s forces can’t do antidrug missions, but they can provide assistance like air support and medevac units to American military advisers embedded with Afghan Army units involved with poppy eradication. Thus NATO plays a key role in individual antidrug operations, but there is no way to integrate its forces into broader counternarcotics efforts.

American and allied officers are trying to work around such obstacles, and should be aided by the recent creation of a United States Forces-Afghanistan headquarters in Kabul to coordinate with NATO. Still, more needs to be done to develop a comprehensive counterinsurgency plan, even if that risks alienating some of the 41 coalition countries.

Such a plan will probably require American forces beyond those already on their way, but the overall requirement will remain well below that of Iraq. Seven American ground brigades are likely to be in Afghanistan by the end of the year — two of them focused on training and the rest on combat. Two or three more might be needed next year to provide security in western Afghanistan, which has almost no United States forces. That would result in 45,000 to 55,000 ground troops, plus support units, as compared to more than 160,000 (22 brigades) in Iraq at the height of the surge.

In addition to sending more soldiers, we must also increase our efforts to expand the Afghan security forces. It may be impossible to speed up the pace of building the Afghan National Army, but the current proposed end-strength of 134,000 troops is far too low. We should immediately commit to a goal of 250,000 troops for the army, and a substantial increase in the national police as well. Afghan troops also need lots of better equipment — everything from armored vehicles to night-vision goggles.

One glaring lacuna in the international effort is the lack of focus on developing a justice system. NATO forces are not authorized to detain enemy combatants for more than 96 hours, after which they must be turned over to Afghan authorities. Some American forces have more latitude, but they are holding only 621 detainees, compared to the 24,000 detained in Iraq at the height of the surge. Insurgents taken prisoner by Afghan forces are generally released by the ineffective judicial system.

The lack of a functioning legal system not only makes it harder to quell the violence but provides an opening to insurgents who run their own Shariah courts. So, while the long-term solution is to help Afghanistan build a court system (something that isn’t getting the attention it deserves), the American military should also expand its detention facilities and press for

expanded detention authority.

There are many who claim that a large-scale commitment isn't necessary. Some say we have no interest in making Afghanistan a functioning state — all that matters is preventing Al Qaeda from re-establishing safe havens, and we can do that by killing terrorist leaders with precision air strikes or covert raids.

The key question for those who advocate pulling back is this: Where will we get the intelligence to direct the raids? If we have few troops on the ground, we will have to rely on intercepted communications. But seven years into the fight, the terrorists have learned a thing or two about keeping their communications secret. The only way to get the intelligence we need is from the residents, and they won't provide it unless our troops stay in their villages to provide protection from Taliban retribution.

This struggle is not just about Afghanistan. It is also about tracking and effecting what is going on in Pakistan's tribal areas. That is where the global Qaeda leadership is. It is the nexus of terrorist groups including the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is implicated in the Mumbai, India, attacks last November; the Tehreek Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammadi, which now has control of the Swat region in Pakistan; and Baitullah Mehsud's Pakistani Taliban, which are said to have plotted the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the former Pakistani prime minister.

From their positions across the border in Afghanistan, American forces can literally see these areas. They can also gather invaluable intelligence from, and spread our influence to, the tribes that straddle the frontier. But we get that vantage point only as long as we have something to offer the Afghans — security, improved quality of life, hope for a better government. If we abandon them, we will become blind to one of the most dangerous threats to our security, and also hand our most determined enemies an enormous propaganda victory — their biggest since 9/11.

Make no mistake: there is hard, costly fighting ahead in Afghanistan. But the fight is worth pursuing, and the odds of success are much better than they were in Iraq when we launched the forlorn hope known as the surge.

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