

Afghan Imperatives

■ Strategy

Strengthening Afghan governance, **bolstering a shaky alliance**, and denying insurgents safe havens are absolute musts.

KABUL, Afghanistan—What Gen. David McKiernan, the commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force, most wants Americans to understand about Afghanistan is that insurgencies historically take a decade or more to defeat. Afghanistan also has few peers in terms of challenges and complexity, something that McKiernan understands as the former commander of all land forces in Iraq.

“In some ways, bringing sustainable security to Afghanistan is more difficult than in Iraq, starting with the fact that this is one of the poorest countries on Earth, with a literacy rate estimated at only 30 percent,” McKiernan said in an interview at his headquarters in Kabul.

Outside major urban areas, he said, literacy rates drop to less than 10 percent in many cases. “So there is a lack of human capital in Afghanistan to do the things you expect of government, whether that’s serving as mayor or policeman, or running a budget, or managing a labor force. In comparison, Iraq is a fairly rich and literate society, which is why I don’t find comparisons between the two conflicts all that helpful.”

In meshing the demands of nation-building in Afghanistan with the tenets of counterinsurgency operations, McKiernan has identified three imperatives that he believes will prove crucial to success. The first is to dramatically improve the capabilities of Afghan security forces and government institutions so that Afghans themselves can step in and perform the crucial “hold” and “build” phases of a counterinsurgency.

“Building Afghan security and governance capability, from the bottom up at the local level and from the top down at the national level, will be one of the most important factors to winning in Afghanistan,” he said, citing the need to greatly improve the ability of institutions such as the Afghan army, the national police, government ministries, and the judicial system. “Military capability by itself won’t win this fight. After security is established, we have to build governance and have reconstruction and development to meet the needs of the Afghan people. Only when all three of those lines of operation work together in tandem will we get the right outcome.”

Also on McKiernan’s list of strategic imperatives is strength-

ening the will of NATO, and the international community writ large, to supply the resources necessary to prevail in Afghanistan. “There is no doubt that Afghanistan has not received the resources from the international community needed to meet its requirements for security, governance, or development,” he said. “Militarily, we have never had enough forces to conduct a proper counterinsurgency campaign across Afghanistan. To do that—clear out insurgents, keep them separated from the population, and set the conditions for reconstruction and development—all of that translates to boots on the ground, and we are short of them.”

Although NATO member-states have relaxed some of the restrictions they put on the use of their forces, McKiernan says these “caveats” continue to hamstring allied operations. “I’m happy to take contributions from as many partner nations as possible, but what these national restrictions do is limit NATO’s inherent advantage in speed, mobility, intelligence-gathering, firepower, command-and-control, and logistics. When nations restrict the use of their forces, it decreases those advantages.”

Unfortunately, the strategic priority that McKiernan puts at the top of his list is one over which he and other allied commanders have the least control—denying the Taliban and Al Qaeda safe haven across the border in Pakistan. In late August, McKiernan joined the incoming U.S. Central Command chief, Gen. David Petraeus, and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, in talks with their Pakistani counterparts aboard the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*. The message that the Americans delivered in the Indian Ocean was that more had to be done to crack down on insurgent and Qaeda sanctuaries in Pakistan’s tribal regions.

“The United States intervened in Afghanistan after 9/11 precisely because we needed to deny Al Qaeda sanctuary, and now they and the Taliban are sustained from safe havens in Pakistan’s tribal areas,” he said. “From there they can recruit, protect their leadership, command their forces, and logistically sustain operations, and that situation is deteriorating over time as those sanctuaries become more powerful.”

“At the end of the day, you have to ask this question: Can we get to a positive outcome to the Afghanistan campaign without some resolution of this problem of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan? And my answer is, while I won’t say it will be impossible, it will be very, very difficult.” —J.K.

■ David McKiernan



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