Mr. Obama’s Pitch to NATO

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By Guest Authors Michael Barton and Gabriel C. Lajeunesse

General David Petraeus testified last week that militant extremists in Pakistan could “literally take down their state” if left unchallenged. Meanwhile, suicide bombers continued to strike unabated in Afghanistan, even as the international community committed their support to the fledgling democracy at the Hague. The President now has a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. It wisely marshals resources by centering on a core goal: fighting, dismantling, and defeating al-Qa’ida and their supporters. This strategy also hedges against European NATO members’ reticence to offer additional combat forces by providing them the “out” of instead providing trainers, funding, and other military support.

The real challenge to this strategy will be in the execution. This battle, much like the battle for Baghdad during the Iraq surge, will be won or lost by Commanders on the ground, soldiers in the field, and their civilian counterparts. In the years since 9/11 the U.S. has demonstrated the capability and willingness kill or capture senior al-Qa’ida operatives in Pakistan. The network of low-level facilitators, however, is an order of a different magnitude, with its geographic area and scope too vast for a conventional mission with only 21,000 additional troops.

With these additional troops, Generals David Petraeus and David McKiernan can focus on identifying and destroying the al-Qa’ida facilitation networks near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. These networks remain the backbone of al-Qa’ida, moving people, passing information, and acquiring equipment to enable the targeting of civilians and American, coalition, and Afghanistan troops - as well as U.S. supply routes. These networks also use criminal and narcotrafficking enterprises as force multipliers in their efforts to co-mingle with civilians, which remains one of the single most important elements of any successful terrorist organization. A significant amount of intelligence is needed to effectively dismantle such an extensive network, and it will only come as the Afghans begin to trust that the security gains are not fleeting. To be successful, this requires a targeted and fully resourced counterinsurgency effort.

After years in Iraq our Soldiers and Marines are seasoned in counterinsurgency and the community policing that it entails. Living among the civilians, protecting them, and demonstrating our commitment to them as individuals and improve the quality of their lives. Successes like those seen in Brigadier General Shawn MacFarland’s Anbar, or Colonel David Sutherland’s rough and tumble Diyala, will only be seen if the new U.S. forces and partnered Afghan forces are concentrated along the key pipelines that al-Qa’ida depends upon for its survival. Once forces in Iraq moved from secure forward operating bases to exposed combat outposts in the heart of troubled areas, security there improved. One year after applying these techniques in the Iraq surge, violence had decreased 70%. Weapons cache seizures - a good indicator of a cooperating population - increased 60%. The Pakistani’s likewise must learn to adopt these approaches and training missions if they are to build a
capable counterinsurgency force. Without such capability, Pakistani leadership and civilians will continue to be picked off, and the Pakistani Army’s status of guarantor of national security will be even further eroded.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan counterinsurgency approach is a means to an end. The goal has never been to establish a Switzerland in Central Asia, rather, it has been to deny al-Qa’ida a base from which it can freely plan and execute terrorist attacks. Applying these additional forces to attack al-Qa’ida’s vulnerability will keep them running, hiding, and on the defensive until the backbone of this network is broken for good.

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