Feb 26 2010

Afghanistan: Can the troop surge be effective?

LSE Ideas

By Karl Sandstrom

The surge and connected strategy are logical when viewing the situation through Westernised lenses but pose a number of issues. General McChrystal explained the strategy of expanding bubbles of security that the surge will support in a recent interview. NATO/ISAF forces would provide a slowly expanding security presence and gradually be replaced by Afghan forces. Under this security umbrella farmers would chose to grow wheat instead of poppy and go to the market instead of to the gun. This makes perfect sense in a Western perspective. The war however is in Afghanistan.

Firstly, the surge is limited in time and there are questions about the capacity of the Afghan security forces to eventually assume responsibility. The main concern seems to be technical and numerical capacity but there are more serious issues in the shape of ethnicity. The focus of General McChrystal's plan is on the Pashtun South of the country but the Afghan National Army is controlled by non-Pashtun groups. Government representatives have already made themselves very unpopular among other power-holders in the South. Add to this a 'security force' controlled by non-Pashtuns in an ethnically fragmented and violent environment and there is a distinct risk that the insurgency will grow. Ethnic mobilisation has a long shelf-life as shown, for example, in Bosnia. In Afghanistan, the civil war in the 1990's, the ethnic divisions, and the 'Northern Alliance' ousting of the Taliban with outside help makes the violence recent and close to the surface. The atrocities committed against Pashtuns by other Afghans under the guise of targeting the Taliban are not likely to be forgotten any time soon. Not in Balkh, not in Kunduz, and certainly not in the South when the surge now goes on the offensive partnered with a non-Pashtun Afghan army.

Secondly, the assumption that farmers will choose the market over the gun – if surge forces provide security – assumes that mobilisation of insurgents is largely economic. This may be a contributing factor but there is also pressure from local leaders and loyalty issues involved. There exist local conflicts that put families or other factions on opposing sides and there is no reason to assume that the pattern will be different than in, for example, the Kapisa province. While the smallest of the Afghan provinces, the Southern part of it is the scene of a violent competition between a number of shuras as well as several ongoing feuds. The scale in the South of the country however will be much larger. Social constraints are very much present for local commanders but less so for outside Taliban fighters. Some local commanders have shown that they are willing to allow schools and clinics under some conditions if the population so demands. One example of local mediation is increasing Islamic teachings from two to five hours per week making a school 'acceptable'. Understanding these dynamics at the fragmented level required, after close to 40 years of war and displacement, will be time consuming but necessary. Localised conflicts should be addressed and the surge may create a window of opportunity for doing so. If this happened it could reduce the capacity of outside insurgents and other elements to use these conflicts to gain a foothold and support in areas where they were previously not welcome. Such an effort requires understanding of the context of the local conflict and concentrated planning which unfortunately is unlikely to be in place.

Thirdly, with providing security also come a need to apply repressive pressure but the intelligence quality generates problems. Major General Flynn has criticised the capacity of the US Army for social analysis and understanding of networks and drivers in Afghanistan. There are many accounts of interpreters and others using this weakness to manipulate NATO intelligence and, for example, airstrikes can be provoked by false intelligence in order to settle local disagreements. While less trust is now placed in limited sources, the capacity to contextualise the information appears to be as weak as before. Confusingly there is a function, the Human Terrain System, created to provide social analysis and context. If this situational and operational understanding is lacking then what is the strategy of the surge and the assumptions of Afghan responses based on?

Fourthly, will US/ISAF unit commanders pull in the same direction? A few incidents involving incorrect targeting or raids on women's wards in hospitals will jeopardise any gains. Overall NATO/ISAF command may be onboard but if unit commanders can run their own boots-through-the-door-operations the 'security' provided will hardly endear Afghans. While the knee-jerk modifications of reality seem to have been replaced by a standard statement along the lines of taking all allegations of misconduct seriously, will it be enough to sway the remarkably fast Afghan word-by-mouth? During research in Kabul there were repeated protests in reaction to an alleged burning of the Quran by foreign forces in Wardak. An independent Afghan investigation had reportedly concluded that the rumour was not true but it still generated large protests weeks later.

This conflict is largely about perceptions and contextualising action and intent. It is about not being perceived as an occupying force, a threat, an imposition. This has obviously been understood, but something happens between realisation and implementation in both military and civilian strategies. The right questions are there after eight years but the answers seem removed from local reality. The possible respite created by the surge should be used to understand the social context and dynamics but time appears to be in short supply. The surge looks more like an 'Iraqification', the propping up of the situation to create the illusion of stability and facilitate an exit.

But the perceived broken promises left behind will not be forgotten and abandonment is not likely to be forgiven. Not again.

Karl Sandstrom is currently in his final year of his PhD thesis at the University of St Andrews' School of International Relations. He is informed by field research in the US, the UK, Somaliland (NW Somalia), and Afghanistan. Karl continues to keep a close watch on the developments in these regions and how they affect strategy formation and implementation.

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