

Losing Afghanistan?

To stop the country sliding out of control, the West needs more men and a better strategy.



AFP

This is the just war, the “war of necessity”, as Barack Obama likes to put it, in contrast to the bad war, the war of misguided choices in Iraq. But as a deeply flawed election went ahead in Afghanistan this week, there were echoes, in the mission by America and its allies, of the darkest days of the Iraq campaign: muddled aims, mounting casualties and the gnawing fear of strategic defeat. Gloomy commentators evoke the spectre of the humiliations inflicted by Afghanistan on Britain in the 19th century and the Soviet Union in the 20th.

Americans, relieved to be getting out of Iraq, and caught up in a national row about health care, are paying little attention to the place. But if things there continue to slide, Afghanistan could turn out to be the biggest blot on the Obama presidency.

Why the West is there

The war is going badly. Much of the south of the country is out of government control. A scattered, disparate insurgency has gained strength and risks turning into a widespread insurrection against Western forces and the elected government they are backing (see article). In Britain, a sceptical public wonders what its soldiers are dying for. And as the costs and casualties continue to mount, Americans too will ask that question increasingly loudly (see article).

Western governments use a lazy shorthand to justify this war. Its purpose, they say, is to deny terrorists the base and haven that Afghanistan under the Taliban provided to al-Qaeda. But al-Qaeda’s surviving leaders are reckoned to have decamped across the border to the tribal areas of Pakistan, where Western forces do not tread. The other reasons that Western governments keep their soldiers in Afghanistan are harder to sell to voters: first, because a precipitate departure would damage the West’s global clout, and, second, to stop the country becoming the theatre for a war which could destabilise Pakistan and draw in other powers, such as Iran, India and Russia.

As the West struggles to maintain its weak hold on Afghanistan, so its ambitions there are narrowing. Early aspirations to bring peace, prosperity and decent government to the country have been replaced by the hope of establishing a functioning state and of improving security. By that measure, success in the short term will look much like stalemate. But the chance of achieving even these modest aims is being jeopardised by too few troops and a flawed strategy.

The shortage of soldiers has hampered the generals’ ability to hold territory and forced them to use air power to make up for the lack of numbers. The civilian casualties that are the inevitable consequence of conducting a war from the air are, in turn, damaging the war effort. The generals need more troops both to regain territory from the Taliban and to fight the war in a way that does not breed hostility to the West.

Yet swamping Afghanistan with foreign soldiers will never bring outright military victory. The surge that helped secure Baghdad was carried out in a smallish, densely populated area. Such tactics cannot be contemplated in a country as mountainous and rural as Afghanistan. If the West is to stop the place slipping further out of control, it needs not just to direct more resources to the place, but also to use them better. That means different approaches to three elements: the opposition, the government and aid.

The opposition, casually described as "the Taliban", is far from a unified force in a country of great ethnic complexity. It includes not just religious zealots but all manner of tribal warlords and local strongmen. Many have alarming ideas and repellent social attitudes. But if Afghanistan is to be stabilised, the West will have to hold its nose and encourage its allies in government to do deals with them.

On the campaign trail, President Hamid Karzai has appealed to his enemies to make peace. But his government—inept, corrupt and predatory—does not look like a trustworthy partner. In parts of Afghanistan where insurgents have been driven out and the writ of the government has been restored, residents have sometimes hankered for the warlords, who were less venal and less brutal than Mr Karzai's lot.

Cleaning up government is not just an end in itself but also a means to building a functioning state, for Afghans will not support an administration as corrupt as the current one. The West should therefore use its leverage over the government to insist that the next cabinet is dominated by competent technocrats, rather than thugs owed a favour.

How to spend it

The West is spending a fortune in aid to Afghanistan. As the new head of Britain's army recently pointed out, it is likely to have to go on supporting the country for decades. Yet the roads that are foreign development's proudest boasts also serve to meet the insurgents' and drug-dealers' logistical needs.

That is inevitable: infrastructure serves the wicked as well as the righteous. But the West has not spent its money as well as it could have. By giving too many contracts to foreigners, it has created grudges instead of buying goodwill. To most Afghan eyes, watching heavily guarded foreign aid-workers glide by in their Landcruisers, it is obvious that much of the money is going straight back out of the country. To a degree, this is forgivable: in such a poor country it is difficult to build the capacity to manage huge volumes of aid, and channelling more of the cash through the government may mean that more of it gets stolen. But that is a risk that needs to be taken to build support for the West and the government.

Taking even the rosier view, the war in Afghanistan is likely to get more expensive, and worse, before it gets better. The mini-surge this year to enable the election to take place in most of the country will probably be followed by another to try to contain the growing insurgency. For the moment, Mr Obama is better off than George Bush was when Iraq went bad, because he enjoys broad political and popular support for this commitment. But as casualties mount, political pressure in America to announce a timetable for military withdrawal will intensify. To resist it, Mr Obama will need more men, a better strategy and a great deal of luck.

LOSING Afghanistan? **The Economist**, New York, Aug. 20th 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 24 ago. 2009.