

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Afghanistan: The 2011-14 Campaign

Thank you. It is a great privilege to be here at the Institute for International Affairs and to have the chance to speak before such a distinguished audience. What I want to do today is to set out for you my assessment of where we stand in the campaign to stabilize Afghanistan at the beginning of 2011, our priorities for the year ahead and what we might expect to achieve by 2014. I will also set out some challenges we have to meet. And, appropriately, one of those will sound familiar to historians of this city: establishing a regional framework for domestic political reform. More of that later. First, let's look back at 2009 and 2010.

Introduction

A year ago, security, governance, regional relations and coalition cohesion were in poor shape. In 2010, we regained the initiative against the insurgency and restored confidence across the coalition. Governance, and domestic and regional politics remain challenging. So in 2011, as the military campaign gathers pace and transition begins, the diplomats, politicians and civilians must step up.

2009 was tough year. Security, which had worsened for several years, continued to deteriorate as the insurgency gained momentum, deepening their grip in the south and east and spread into the north and west, regenerating during the winter months in their sanctuaries in the lawless border areas of Pakistan. Governance had stalled. The controversial 2009 presidential election was internally divisive and damaged trust between the international community and the Afghan political leadership. Public support across the international alliance was eroding fast: despite tripling the US commitment, President Obama's West Point speech in December 2009 was widely interpreted as signalling withdrawal beginning this year, and several Alliance leaders were pressing publicly for reconciliation as an alternative to the counter-insurgency campaign rather than a component of a successful comprehensive strategy. It was clear to me, as NATO's political representative, that 2010 was not only a pivotal year but the last opportunity to re-boot the campaign, with the Lisbon summit as the moment of decision.

Security

With the military surge just beginning, our effort to regain the initiative started in early 2010 in central Helmand with Operation Moshtarek - "Together" – the first truly partnered major offensive. The security operations went well but we had underestimated the political challenges. The iconic moment was the liberation of the derelict town of Marjeh after years of Taliban control so complete that their flag was flying over the district centre. The people were traumatized, less by the Taliban, who were repressive but orderly, than by the period beforehand when they had suffered under a brutal and predatory police force led by local tribal warlords, who were engaged in the drugs trade and could buy influence in Kabul. Marjeh illustrated that, while people in war-torn areas appreciate schools, clinics and roads, their allegiance is determined by the core function of the state: the rule of law provided by accountable institutions.

With Helmand improving, our focus moved to the Taliban's heartlands in Kandahar, where we sought to learn the political lessons of Operation Moshtarek by preparing communities and political leaders in advance, including power-brokers whom we sought to co-opt and constrain. This is controversial to many in the west who believe instead that they should be excluded and punished. But, in a society like Afghanistan, where after decades of conflict people retrench to their clan, tribal or ethnic identity for protection, the reality is that power-brokers offer that protection and in return

command allegiance, not only of the individual but of a family or wider group. These are collective not individual societies.

I recall many years ago pressing Yasser Arafat to take action against a Palestinian. His response was: "Yes! I have arrested his brother". To the western ear that sounds nonsensical, but in the social circumstances then prevailing in the Palestinian territories, it made sense. Similarly, in Afghanistan, my obligation is your patronage is his corruption. That does not mean that Afghans are any more tolerant of corruption or the abuse of power than we are, but their perspective is different and they must determine the thresholds and the answers: as Lawrence of Arabia said: "it is their country, their way and our time is short".

In Kandahar, with the military surge complete by the autumn, we cleared the insurgents from the key districts – the birthplace of Mullah Omar and thus the cradle of the Taliban. Kandahar is critical. As most Afghans will tell you, if you hold Kandahar and Kabul, you hold Afghanistan. Kabul was calm throughout 2010, primarily because of the intense tempo of special forces operations against the networks which target the capital: notably the Haqqanis from their base in north Waziristan. Elsewhere, we held the insurgency, although they probably gained some ground in parts of the north-east by exploiting longstanding ethnic tensions there.

The NATO training mission had a successful first year: the Afghan security forces exceeded their growth targets, implemented new programmes to raise quality and institutional capability, and sharply improved training effectiveness.

However, progress was not just due to bigger and better Afghan and international forces. In Gizab district, on the borders of Daykundi and Uruzgan, the locals expelled the Taliban and kept them out with help from US special forces' village stability teams – small groups of soldiers who live and operate among the people. This was perhaps the best example of one of the most important innovations of 2010: the Afghan Local Police. For the same reason that it took months of effort to gain the people's confidence in Marjeh, in the contested rural areas, Afghans want to be secured by locals and policed by outsiders. And initiatives like this pass the most important test: they are Afghan-authentic.

Governance and Development

Impressive though all that progress was, it came at a high cost. 2010 was the bloodiest year so far for the Alliance and for Afghan civilians. Several thousand Afghan civilians were killed, over three-quarters by the insurgents, mostly through the indiscriminate violence of IEDs, which threaten children especially. But the violence is not just indiscriminate. Some is targeted. Over the next few days you may see media reports on the Taliban conducting cold-blooded and brutal murders by stoning of a young couple who had pursued a relationship without permission. That is what all Afghans and many others would face if the Taliban returned to power. Although we focus on security, most Afghans are preoccupied with poverty. Infant mortality is staggering: one in five children will die before their 5th birthday, not through violence, but through the diseases of poverty: bad water and bad air. Diarrhoeal diseases kill almost a third of Afghan infants and respiratory diseases over a quarter. Although there have been dramatic improvements in access to healthcare, and education, however much we achieve by 2014, Afghanistan will remain a poor and underdeveloped country for many years to come. Indeed, that is one definition of success: if in 2015, we are talking not about violence, security and troop numbers, but poverty, healthcare and development, we will be talking about the issues which affect most Afghans in their daily lives.

Governance remains just as challenging. Afghanistan is lodged at the bottom of the transparency index, civil service capability remains weak, the rule of law is absent or predatory in many areas, many district posts are vacant and 200 district governors lack offices, facilities and administrative staff. There have been improvements: several of the key ministers have made progress against corruption and in building administrative capacity, notably in cleaning up the notorious customs service, which has also strengthened government revenues. Raising police salaries above subsistence levels has made a difference too. The economic highlight of 2010 was the unearthing of Afghanistan's extraordinary and diverse mineral wealth. While the opportunities are obvious, we mustn't ignore the risks: without effective efforts to forestall corruption, this too could become a source of conflict. Fortunately, one of the most effective ministers is in charge of this portfolio.

2010's worst moment was the Kabul Bank crisis which brought the Afghan financial system to the brink of collapse. Afghanistan's biggest bank handles the salaries of most Afghan public servants, including the security forces. Investigations continue in Afghanistan and abroad into allegations of moneylaundering and other criminal activity, so I must be choose my words carefully: but, in effect, it had been turned into a pyramid scheme at the expense of the millions of small depositors who had entrusted it with their savings. The IMF is demanding a credible plan to recover assets and restructure the bank in order to approve the next IMF programme, which itself is necessary for other multilateral and bilateral donors to continue funding Afghan government programmes. This is vital to maintain progress in the counter-insurgency campaign and transition, and have any prospect of reaching the London and Kabul Conference targets for delivering 50% of foreign aid through Afghan government systems and aligning 80% of it with their priority programmes.

Domestic and Regional Politics

Although nothing was quite as difficult as the 2009 presidential election, we faced several political crises in 2010. The latest, which has spilled into this year, was the parliamentary election. This election had a mixed impact. The electoral authorities performed well in the most challenging circumstances imaginable and with real courage under pressure from all sides. New candidates arose from business and civil society, loosening the warlords' grip on their constituencies. Moderate opposition groups also did well, reviving the prospects for a constructive opposition within the new Parliament to hold government effectively accountable. But the election also reinforced ethnic politics and reduced political inclusion, particularly among the southern Pashtuns, because of insecurity and fraud. However, despite all the wrangling and worries, the big news is positive: tomorrow, President Karzai should inaugurate Afghanistan's second democratically-elected Parliament. I hope that all of the parliamentarians – new and old – will understand that they must operate as national representatives for all their constituents.

To President Karzai's credit, the most important political development in 2010 was the Peace Jirga, which confounded those who feared a populist backlash against international forces or a chaotic non-event. Instead, the President and his team choreographed a national consensus which distinguished between irreconcilable militants and “disaffected compatriots” prepared to renounce violence and terrorism, and respect the constitution. In a charged ethnic atmosphere, reconciling the Taliban could be seen by other ethnic groups as reuniting the Pashtuns at their expense. So locking in the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and civil society, all of whom fear that reconciliation could be destabilizing, were substantial political achievements. Under the leadership of former president Rabbani, the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme is now beginning to generate momentum to reintegrate those disaffected compatriots before the next campaign season.

And Professor Rabbani's visit, with several of his colleagues from the High Peace Council, to Pakistan was a striking success. Despite contending with the assassination of the Governor of Punjab and the

withdrawal of a key coalition partner from the cabinet, the entire Pakistani leadership – president, prime minister, other cabinet ministers, army chief and intelligence chief – all had substantial meetings with the Afghan delegation, assuring them that Pakistan's own strategic interests depended on a stable Afghanistan, which means an enduring and inclusive political settlement, with a proper balance of power and resources between the executive and legislature, the centre and provinces, within Afghanistan's unitary state.

While this visit reinforced the thaw in bilateral relations, notably the Af-Pak Transit-Trade Agreement under the tutelage of the late Richard Holbrooke, the circumstances remain challenging after years of distrust. The Pakistani Army is naturally preoccupied with militancy emanating from the tribal areas along the Afghan border which they are fighting hard to bring back under control: or, more accurately, under control for the first time. They are also having to re-examine the relationships between various militant groups – whether Pashtun, Punjabi or Kashmiri – which have burgeoned in the past two decades, fuelled by the spread of unregulated madrassas, which President Musharraf's government was struggling to rein in when I served in Pakistan five years ago.

I could talk about Pakistan for hours. But, for our subject today, what is clear is that to make the compromises to build the stable and inclusive politics both countries need, both Afghanistan and Pakistan require the institutional confidence that strategic partnerships with the west, notably but not confined to the US, could deliver. And standing here in Helsinki, it is almost trite to remind ourselves that the domestic and bilateral political settlements should be embedded within a wider regional and international framework.

International Relations

For diplomats working on Afghanistan, 2010 was dominated by a series of international events. Although we live for these things, there were probably several too many.

The themes of the most important – the London and Kabul Conferences and the Lisbon Summit – were transition and partnership. Lisbon's shift of focus to 2014 has changed the political landscape in Afghanistan, among their neighbours and across the international coalition. The Afghans and their neighbours are no longer planning for how to pick up the pieces after we leave, but how to make the most of our commitment to stay. The risk of the coalition unravelling as countries scrambled for the exit has been forestalled. The strong consensus in Germany ahead of the Bundestag vote this week on their mandate later this week is a heartening example of the resilience across the Alliance. I have attended many summits. But as I prepared to make my own intervention at Lisbon and listened to the statements of our political leaders as they made their commitments, I was struck that the confidence they expressed had real credibility, perhaps for the first time for several years.

Less public than summitry was the expansion of Richard Holbrooke's brainchild – the International Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan – to include several important Muslim nations, some of which are considering becoming ISAF contributors, and the addition of the Organization of the Islamic Conference – the OIC – to the international institutional framework with the appointment of their first ambassador to Afghanistan. This is truly an international campaign against militancy which respects neither religion nor borders.

Conclusion

In 2010, we focused on getting the inputs right, regaining the initiative against the insurgency, and restoring confidence and cohesion to the international coalition. In 2011, as transition begins, we must consolidate those gains – hard-won by the courage of international and Afghan forces – we

must manage the risks and inevitable crises, and we must improve the resilience of governance against the internal threat of warlordism and the external challenge from the insurgency. Rule of law and corruption are the priorities, and it is time for we the civilians to stand up and drive both forward, setting aside the stale old arguments about stabilization vs development by committing ourselves to design programmes which recognize that well-founded stabilization is the precursor to sustainable development in societies in conflict.

Now is also the time to exploit the political momentum generated by Lisbon's 2014 perspective to press forward on the Af-Pak relationship and thus create a platform for sustainable Afghan reconciliation and a durable internal political settlement, embedded, as any audience in Helsinki knows, in a regional security framework.

Four years from now, Afghanistan will be in political transition as President Karzai's second term concludes. By then, even if we have not brought the insurgency to an end, we should have reduced the threat enough to complete the process of transition, transferring security responsibility to the bigger and better Afghan security forces all of us are building, and transforming governance and development to a sustainable, Afghan-authentic model, underwritten by multilateral and bilateral military and civil partnerships of the kind NATO and Afghanistan agreed at the Lisbon Summit. That comprehensive transition from stabilization to sustainment will be the theme of 2011-14 and will require the civilians – politicians, diplomats, programme managers and activists – to build on the platform for which our military colleagues have fought so hard.

As you know, turning points are rarely apparent at the time, however inevitable they seem to the historians. How many of those who worked on, let alone those who signed, the Helsinki Final Act knew that within a decade, we would see a process begin that a few years later led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the extension of freedom throughout Europe? So I don't know whether we are at a turning point in Afghanistan. But I do know that 2010 was a critical year, a year in which, having lost both, we regained the initiative and restored confidence. I also know that 2011 must be the decisive year. If we can match the progress we have made in the past few months, by this time next year, the outcome should no longer be in doubt. While there will still be a long hard road ahead, that road will lead to the stable Afghanistan and safer world for which we have all sacrificed so much. Thank you.