

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

‘Afghan Scenarios – A Nation in the Balance’

Global Strategy Forum in partnership with the Windsor Energy Group sponsored a seminar *‘Afghanistan: A Nation in the Balance’* on 8th March 2010. The seminar was held in Committee Room 4 of the House of Lords and included the following speakers (in speaking order):

- General the Lord Charles Guthrie, former Chief of the Defence Staff
- Professor Michael Clarke, Royal United Services College
- Mr Adam Holloway MP
- Mr Andrew Wilson, Sky News
- Mr Anthony Fitzherbert
- Mr James Clad, Senior Fellow, National Defense University, Washington DC
- Professor Anatol Lieven, King’s College, London

The two sessions were chaired by, respectively, Lord Howell, Chairman of the Windsor Energy Group and Michael Ancram MP, Chairman of Global Strategy Forum.

Overview

- In the course of the presentations, a lively debate emerged with opinions about the likely course of events ranging from cautiously optimistic (Guthrie, Clarke) to significantly more problematic (Holloway, Wilson, Fitzherbert). Differences were grounded in varying assessments of such factors as the effectiveness of Coalition strategy, the capabilities of the Afghan National Army, the credibility of the Afghan government, Afghan public opinion toward the Coalition, the rollout of civilian developmental aid, and the role of Pakistan.
- The virtues of a regional approach were stressed (Clad, Lieven) as well as the desirability of a more assertive British voice in Washington.
- While most speakers were able to identify some signs of progress, all were agreed that the situation remained precarious and that the “biggest tests” lay ahead. The key to defeating the Taliban lay not in military power but in delivering good governance to the Afghan population.
- All were agreed that the Western commitment to Afghanistan remained critically important both to defeat Al-Qaeda and to safeguard NATO credibility and that talk of early withdrawal was ill-advised.

The following main themes were covered:

Coalition Strategy

- While speakers acknowledged that the Coalition had made some “serious mistakes” (Guthrie) and had faced “strategic defeat” (Clarke), they argued that this phase had passed and that the new US “surge” offered more promising prospects. This was not to say that Coalition strategy was flawless. In the US, there now existed a “cottage industry” for “lessons learned” (Clad), but US strategy still remained self-referential, asserting that the US “owned” Afghanistan. Too much time had been spent on debating the relative merits of a “counter-terrorism” as opposed to a “counter-insurgency” approach. However, a new US leadership was now in place. On the back of these improvements in the direction of a “population-based” strategy, there were grounds for cautious optimism. Evidence lay in the BBC poll indicating rising optimism among the Afghans.
- Others (Holloway, Fitzherbert, Wilson) were less sure. They pointed to the complexities of Afghan tribal politics, to mistakes in Coalition tactical emphasis, to the overlooking of Pakistan, to the duplicity of the Afghan central government, to the lack of coordination in civilian aid efforts, and to the ratings-based coverage by Western media as serious impediments. Several speakers (Guthrie, Clad, Holloway, Lieven) cited the ambivalent commitment of Pakistan as problematic.

Governance

- Some speakers (Guthrie, Clarke) emphasized that the key to victory lay in “marginalising” the Taliban and building up the central government as the source of good governance. They argued that a reasonable start had been made on this track.
- Others (Holloway, Fitzherbert) agreed that, while this was the correct approach, it was less certain that success was assured. They pointed to the need for a more localised approach to tribal “deal-making” and to the need for a less militarised, less politicised delivery of aid.
- Any political settlement that was led by the central government in Kabul was condemned to failure, not because the Afghan people supported the Taliban but because they were traditionally opposed to direction from the centre.
- It was emphasised that if aid was viewed as a “weapon”, it rapidly became counter-productive.

The Afghan National Army

- One speaker (Clarke) stressed the “critical role” of the ANA. Numbers (currently 135,000 and destined to double) were on the right track, but deficiencies in equipment, training and ethnic composition still remained. If the ANA underperformed in Southern Afghanistan (Helmand and Lashkar Gah), it was still

possible that the Afghan war would be lost. The ANA had now completed its first “conventional” build-up phase. The next steps would be more challenging.

- Another speaker (Holloway) highlighted the underrepresentation of the Pashtun population in the ANA, the result being that the latter was regarded as an “army of occupation” in the Pashtun-majority regions. There was a lack of cultural sensitivity in the ANA approach.
- A vigorous debate between the speakers took place on this point, with the Afghan Ambassador intervening to deny strongly that the ANA was an ethnically based force.

The Role of Pakistan

- Speakers unanimously pointed to the central role of Pakistan. The profound suspicion of the West among the Pakistani people constituted a major obstacle to securing Pakistani cooperation (Lieven).
- Also, the perception in Afghanistan that Pakistan had replaced the British as the “imperial power” (Fitzherbert) added a severe complication between Kabul and Islamabad.
- The Pakistan civilian establishment and military are less hostile to the West and draw a clear distinction between the Pakistan and Afghan Taliban. They are resolutely opposed to the former while more ambivalent toward the latter.
- A major Pakistani concern (Clad) is that the Coalition will withdraw prematurely. Pakistani attitudes reflect deeply embedded doctrines, so are unlikely to change in the short term.

Afghan opinion toward the Coalition

- The BBC poll showing increased Afghan optimism was cited (Guthrie) as a positive indication.
- Other speakers (Holloway, Wilson, Fitzherbert) were more concerned. The Western media paid little attention to Afghan opinion and the traditional tension between central government and local opinion continued to hinder progress. The idea that “reconciliation” could be treated as a unitary policy was an illusion. Afghan opinion was simply too tribalised and local.

Aid Delivery

- This aspect remained problematic (Fitzherbert). Delivery was poorly coordinated and sometimes was subject to internecine competition between Western agencies. The need was to focus on long-term poverty reduction and infrastructure improvements.
- A less proscriptive approach was required, focusing on preserving Afghan capabilities, not undermining them. Aid needed to be in the hands of civilians, not the military.

The Role of the Media and Western Public Opinion

- Speakers (Guthrie, Clad, Wilson) mentioned the fragility of Western support for the War. A central problem lay with reporters being embedded with the military and the demand among Western television audiences for “bang-bang” stories that emphasised “kinetic” operations. These tended to be reflective of the military point of view (Wilson). This left little room for stories that were representative of Afghan public opinion. For example, it was difficult to convey the impression held by the Afghans that the NATO forces looked like an “occupation army.”

The Regional Context

- Speakers (Clad, Lieven) stressed the imperative of seeing Afghanistan in a regional context. Failure to do so (Guthrie) had retarded Western policy.
- Alongside Pakistan (which was seen as the “core” to Coalition success or failure), the roles of India and China were examined. The latter offers especial value as a “hedge” between India and Pakistan.
- The Iranian role was problematic for the US but also needed to be kept in mind (Clad).