



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ 1820 Jefferson Place NW ♦ Washington, DC 20036

New America Foundation: "A New Way Forward? Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan"

September 8, 2010

The New America Foundation held a panel discussion today to introduce the Afghanistan Study Group's paper, "A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan". (PDF [here](#)) The panel members were all members of the study group, although not all of them signed the finished product making for an interesting discussion. The panel included **Paul Pillar** (Director of Graduate Studies, Center for Peace and Security Studies, Georgetown University and former intelligence officer), **Matthew Hoh** (Former Foreign Service Officer and Marine, Director, Afghanistan Study Group), **Steve Coll** (President of the New America Foundation), **Brian Katulis** (Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress), **Charles Kupchan** (Whitney Shepardson Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, Professor of International Affairs, Georgetown University, Author, *How Enemies Become Friends*), **Darcy Burner** (Director, American Progressive Caucus Policy Foundation), **Robert Pape** (Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago Director, Chicago Project on Suicide Terrorism Author, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*), and the event was moderated by **Steve Clemons** (Director, American Strategy Program, New America Foundation Publisher, *The Washington Note*).

Clemons began the proceedings by noting that the group was made up of individuals with a variety of political beliefs. The impetus of the project was to discuss what would happen if President Obama's strategy review and subsequent adjustments failed to succeed. Pillar was the first panelist to speak, and focused on the "cost/benefit" of America's continued involvement in Afghanistan. He stressed that the Taliban were a "rural based insurgency" and not an international terrorist organization. He called the paper a "**redirection**" of U.S. policy in Afghanistan and called for a "**decentralization**" of **political power along with compromise and power sharing among the various stakeholders**. Pillar ended by extorting the U.S. to not let "sheer momentum" dictate policy.

Hoh's introductory statement reinforced one of the main ideas of the paper; **the U.S. is failing to achieve what it set out to achieve in Afghanistan**. From record high coalition casualties every month, to a drop in Afghans confidence in their government since the implementation of Pres. Obama's strategy, Hoh pressed the point that civilian leaders had abdicated their responsibility to question the military when assurances of victory had fallen flat.

Coll joined the event by telephone from New York. He was the first panel member to express concerns about the end product of the study group. Coll stated that he believed most of the recommendations of the group were compatible with U.S. policy, and agreed with the emphasis on political reconciliation; an effort he said was underfunded and under-emphasized. Coll's main concern was about the report's calls for troop withdrawals in the south of Afghanistan. He asked whether the withdrawals would be U.S. and ANA (Afghan National Army) or just American. The paper doesn't address the question. He also took issue with the assertion that, should the U.S. mostly or totally withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban would be unable to take control because the conditions were fundamentally different than

in the 1990's. He also **emphasized that to call the Taliban "non-revolutionary" would be "ahistorical" considering the fact that they identify themselves as revolutionary.**

Kupchan also did not sign on to the report, although he was an original member of the group. However, he said that the paper made several strong arguments about how to change the policy towards Afghanistan. First and foremost, he mentioned **that staying the course is not in the U.S. interest: "Costs are running ahead of interest" at this point in the conflict.** He also agreed with the report that there is no military solution in Afghanistan. Kupchan stated that the fractured social structures of the country make the use of force unlikely to compel stake holders to negotiate. He criticized the report for giving Pakistan short-shrift by describing our interests there as solely concerning that countries nuclear weapons. Kupchan said he believed that, due to its size and complexity, Pakistan should loom much larger in any calculations.

Burner began her statement by noting that there has been a **"false dichotomy" in discussions on Afghanistan; either we withdrawal completely or we stay committed forever.** She claimed the war was over "distribution of power" and any thought of the U.S. walking away completely was "delusional". She emphasized the fate of women in Afghanistan and pointed out that there is evidence to suggest that, in the long run, **"...as goes the women of that country, so goes that country."** She put forward micro lending and encouraging education of children by providing school lunches as two simple ways to help women.

Pape focused on the evidence he has found that military occupations produce suicide bombers. He said that the number of suicide bombings in Afghanistan had increased with the number of troops; the result of the "Ink Blot" strategy of COIN (counter insurgency). He also noted that, of the suicide bombers in Afghanistan that were able to be identified, 90% where Afghan Pashtuns. He advocated an "off shore balancing" approach of air power and aid to fight the insurgency.

Katulis called the report a "constructive critique", but said that the report ultimately had an "identity crisis". He said it was hard to tell if the report was an actual policy paper, or simply a collection of talking points to be used in a discussion on Afghanistan policy. He boiled his critique down to four main points: 1.) The report suffers from wishful thinking about political reconciliation. The enormity of the challenge and intractability of some parts of the insurgency make it unlikely. 2.) **Regional considerations are extremely important due to the land locked nature of the country and its current economic malaise.** He said that the report should have focused much more heavily on this aspect. 3.) Katulis said he had a hard time understanding how the troop withdrawals would help, considering the reports stated desire to see more NGO involvement. 4.) The report neglects to address the "sunk cost" problem here in the U.S. and Katulis wondered how any leader would be able to deal with the domestic political ramifications of withdrawal. As Katulis put it, "Americans need to feel that they did something good", and it is **hard to make a domestic audience understand that we would be doing more harm than good by staying.**

At this point in the proceedings, the panelists were given an opportunity to respond to each other's previous statements. Pillar agreed that Pakistan was not given enough consideration and asked what the alternative was to seeking reconciliation. Hoh followed by noting that, in the end, how the Afghan Army and government look is up to the Afghans. He noted that the current make up of the security forces is weighted towards Tajiks and Uzbeks who then serve in the mainly Pashtun south causing tension. He called for a more inclusive security service. Kupchan agreed with the "sunk costs" argument made by Katulis and emphasized the necessity of humility. Kupchin went on to say that

reconciliation is going to be hard, and there is no way to guarantee a government that treats women well.

The panel then moved on to questions. The first question dealt with the reconciliation process and whether or not the Afghan government was competent enough to handle it along with the bevy of other issues that are now facing the country. Hoh answered **that there is a lack of competency on the institutional as well as individual level in the Afghan government.** Pape added that the problem starts with **the Afghan constitution, which gives the president the power to elect provincial and local governors, leading to corruption and inefficiencies.**

Another questioner asked about the upcoming "Peace Jirga" that President **Hamid Karzai** put together. Katulis answered that there is some power sharing among the different ethnic groups, but that he had little confidence in Karzai's ability to carry out actual reconciliation. He went on to say that Americans do not understand power relations in Afghanistan well enough. Pillar lamented the fact that the process to reconcile with individual Taliban had fallen into disuse. Hoh pointed out that this is where the U.S. needed to take the lead. He related the story of how Pakistan imprisoned a Taliban leader to keep the man from negotiating with Kabul and how the incident showed that the U.S. "hands off" policy with respect to negotiating with the insurgency was ill conceived.

The next two questions dealt with women's issues. The first question was about what kind of analysis the group did on women in areas under Taliban control and what the panelists thought about the issue. Burner responded that the report attempted to address issues important to women's rights in Afghanistan and that in order to build domestic support, the administration needed to focus more on those issues. Pape said that he thought they should have focused more on the issue of women, but pointed out that women's rights issues are often used to justify the "Ink Blot" strategy which he opposed. He suggested that money and resources go to women in areas that the U.S. already controls, who also face many hardships. The next questioner wanted to know how reconciliation and women's issues could be dealt with in the absence of security. Hoh answered that, in his experience, **the issue of how women are treated is a feature of rural, Pashtun culture and that it is not going to be changed by "men with rifles".** He said that many of same practices; stoning, not allowing women outside unaccompanied, and beatings, occurred in areas with a heavy foreign, or even American, presence. Hoh ended his reply by saying that he does not believe we should go to war in order to change another countries culture. Pillar pointed out that **in the case of Iraq, women are actually worse off now than they were under Saddam Hussein.** He also emphasized that it was not a Taliban versus non-Taliban issue.

The next questioner wanted to know how we "dive deeper" into how Afghans think. Kupchan responded that native sources of political order do exist, but that we have put them in "abeyance" in order to get cooperation in other areas. Katulis pointed out that different U.S. agencies have different, and sometimes competing, clients in Afghanistan making things more complicated than they needed to be. He also called for the creation of a "political map" of the country.

The next questioner asked how to create metrics that would actually measure something like native sources of political order. Hoh drew a comparison to Iraq, where State Department employees were told not to work with tribal leaders even though that was how Saddam Hussein maintained control. He added that **understanding the narrative behind the metrics was also very important.** Pape responded that it was relatively easy. He asked, rhetorically, if after giving the militias in Iraq 300\$ a

month, did attacks go down? They did. Pape said he believed a similar metric could be used in Afghanistan.

The final question dealt with NGO's and their interactions with the people on the ground. Hoh backed the use of NGO's strongly; he referred to a study that showed spending by government agencies actually lead to more conflict. He said that the U.S. government had spent 50 billion dollars and gotten practically nothing, while NGO's were non-political and tended to be more focused on providing services to the people.