



[Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#) - Ben Heineman Jr. has held top positions in government, law and business. He is the author of *High Performance with High Integrity* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).

The Afghan Black Hole: Governance and Corruption

Oct 24 2010, 12:20 PM

In the year since President Obama announced his troop build-up in Afghanistan, reported events show that the mirror-image issues of governance and corruption have worsened, and that their improvement continues to pose "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma" for the United States.

A very recent example: the [lead story](#) in Saturday's New York Times reports that the Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan, to drive a wedge between the Afghan government and the U.S., has been giving millions of dollars to President Karzai's chief of staff. Karzai and his allies have used this money to bribe officials, tribal leaders, and even some Taliban commanders in exchange for fealty.

Addressing governance and corruption in a failed state like Afghanistan would be enormously challenging if they were "just" issues of development, but the "development" of Afghanistan, of course, takes place in the midst of a fierce civil war and intense regional rivalries and interference under what most experts consider a wholly unrealistic deadline (progress by next summer).

Yet, despite the obvious difficulties of the war, reducing corruption, enhancing Afghan governance, and securing support of the country's ethnically and tribally diverse people have been absolutely central to the Obama administration's ultimate objective of degrading the Taliban and keeping Al Qaeda from returning to Afghanistan. Under current counter-insurgency doctrine propounded by General Petraeus and adopted by the Pentagon in its debates with President Obama, rampant corruption and poor governance are seen as some of the most important factors--on par with Pakistani meddling--dividing the diverse Afghan people and creating Afghan instability.

After the congressional elections and as part of the December reassessment of our efforts in Afghanistan, the administration finally needs to clarify past vague statements and subsequent contradictory developments. Leaders need to be straight with the American people about what, if anything, can realistically be accomplished on governance and corruption issues in this historically failed state and how that relates, if at all, to objectives regarding the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Pakistan.

Does failure here, or the impossibility of "success" in the near term, require a change in strategy--whether that be withdrawal, or containment and deterrence, or reconciliation, or partition, or decentralization--as diverse experts are now arguing? Will Afghan governance and corruption problems bedevil even those alternatives?

To understand the U.S. conundrum on these issues, it is useful to go back to President Obama's now famous memo bringing the 2009 intra-administration debate on Afghan strategy to a (temporary) end. In this memo, Obama fashioned an uneasy compromise between his own doubts about Afghanistan and pressure from the Pentagon to add troops for counterinsurgency purposes:

- "United States goal in Afghanistan is to deny safe haven to Al Qaeda and to deny the Taliban the ability to overthrow the Afghan government. The strategic concept for the United States, along with our international partners and the Afghans, is to degrade the Taliban insurgency while, building sufficient Afghan capacity to secure and govern their country."
- "Given the profound problems of legitimacy and effectiveness with the Karzai government, we must focus on what is realistic. ... Working with Karzai when we can, working around him when we must, enhancing sub-national governance, strengthening corruption reduction efforts; and implementing a post-election [Afghan] compact. ... Specifically, have we and the Afghans generated sufficient civilian capacity to partner with our military forces in the [clear], hold, build, and transfer phases."

Yet, said the President: "This approach is not fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation building...." (because the time and resources required were too great).

Ten months later, the Afghan commander, General David Petraeus, reiterated his article of faith in a lengthy *Der Spiegel* [interview](#):

"Corruption undermines the legitimacy of governance at all levels. ... The core objective ... is to make sure that Afghanistan is not becoming a sanctuary for

terrorists and other extremists who intend to attack European and other societies.”

For this to happen, Petraeus continued, Afghanistan must be able to "secure and govern itself."

General Petraeus was, of course, repeating the dictates of his counter-insurgency doctrine and restating the views of his predecessor and protege, General Stanley McChrystal, whose famous [memo](#) on the state of play in Afghanistan--and his strategic needs--was leaked in the middle of 2009 to put pressure on President Obama to support McChrystal's position.

The second pillar of McChrystal's four-pillar strategy was "accountable governance" based on effective anti-corruption efforts, but he was more blunt and explicit about the problem. (See my October 2009 Atlantic piece, "[Corruption--The Afghan Wild Card](#)").

General McChrystal noted that in a society where illicit drugs are 30 to 50 percent of the economy, corruption and criminality among government and other leaders--in the economy, in judicial, administrative, and political entities, in international aid programs--creates overlapping, illicit networks between government, criminal, and insurgent groups that create anger and disillusionment among the population. This dynamic, in turn, empowers the insurgency.

According to McChrystal, in his [memo](#):

“Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objection must be the population....and there is a crisis of confidence among Afghans--in both their government and the international community ...”

Since President Obama's November, 2009 Afghan strategy decision, many news stories have reported significant and continuing governance and corruption issues (although this may not be the whole story). For example:

- Recent parliamentary elections, like the presidential elections a year earlier, have been characterized by significant fraud (including ballot box stuffing, votes at gunpoint, and corrupt election officials).
- The Kabul Bank collapsed, due in part to phony loans and other corrupt payments to the Afghan elite, threatening the weak Afghan financial system.
- The U.S. military, after years in Afghanistan, recently announced it was going to craft better procedures for contractors so that money (about \$14 billion a year) did not flow to bad actors and get used for unintended purposes. A little late?

- The narcotics trade continues unabated, fueling criminal and insurgent elements alike. And funds--including U.S. money spent on protection for civilian development and developments monies themselves (not just military expenditures)--find their way into criminal and insurgent hands.
- The campaign in Marjah earlier this year was generally not able to "build and transfer" to the Afghan officials because local governance was not possible.
- In the past six months, U.S. officials publicly upbraided President Karzai for lack of progress on corruption and then withdrew the criticism, recognizing that such out-in-the-open contentiousness only drove Karzai further away.
- Nonetheless, President Karzai then fired his deputy attorney general, who had sought to prosecute high-level members of the national government, and freed another aide jailed for allegedly soliciting a bribe. (Afghan anti-corruption units trained by the U.S. have detained some other high-ranking officials, but are obviously at serious risk of an override by Karzai, who has also sought to limit the U.S. role in Afghan corruption cases.)
- Recent reports indicate that the U.S. has concluded that, because of Karzai's recalcitrance, it cannot pursue corrupt economic and political elites, even though it has details on "malign actor networks." Instead, the U.S. has to focus more (although not exclusively) on governance and corruption at the local level. But the New York Times reported several weeks ago that, despite this broad decision, U.S. officials acknowledged that final "determinations have yet to be made about the extent to which specific types of corruption directly affect the insurgency and how the administration will counter them and how soon." This almost a year after President Obama's Afghan strategy decision.

Today, the governance and anti-corruption issues continue to present mind-numbing paradoxes.

Legitimacy is not possible without security, but security is not possible without legitimacy.

The central government is riddled with corruption but now the U.S. apparently has decided it must deal primarily with governance and anti-corruption at the local level.

"Sub-national governance," however, is characterized by ethnic diversity and tribal rivalries that make "governance" in any Western sense of the word highly questionable. Does the U.S. believe it can control, over time, local militias arising out of highly diverse cultural backgrounds? The *Der Spiegel* interview with General Petraeus quoted the Afghan deputy chief of staff for intelligence, Major General Michael Flynn, as saying that "eight years into the war in Afghanistan the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to

answer fundamental questions about the environment in which allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade."

Despite his rejection of full counterinsurgency and nation building, President Obama's 2009 Afghan strategy decision mandated counterinsurgency and national building "lite," as reflected in his appointment of General Petraeus to succeed General McChrystal. As development issues in failed and failing states have shown, these processes, even in their fully funded forms, are highly problematic and, even if change occurs, will take years to have a significant effect, requiring a frame far beyond the President's desire to start drawing down the U.S. presence next spring.

And, of course, there is the final paradox: even if progress were to be made on governance and anti-corruption with U.S. forces present in Afghanistan, how durable would any advances be after we have left, especially given the double game Pakistan is playing with the U.S. (being our "ally" but supporting the Taliban to keep Afghanistan unstable and out of India's sphere of influence)?

This question of meaningful, durable change affects not only our current strategy of counterinsurgency lite (in the recent *Der Spiegel* interview General Petraeus views our efforts as full-blown counter-insurgency, in contrast to the President). Whether the Afghan government is able to retain any loyalty of the diverse population and prevent the Taliban from partially controlling the nation and Al Qaeda from re-emerging also depends on other alternative strategies that are back on the table: whether withdrawal, or contain and deter, or reconciliation or partition or decentralization.

* * * *

Lieutenant General Douglas Lute has been President Obama's senior advisor and coordinator for Afghanistan-Pakistan on the National Security Council.

Despite his military background, he was highly critical of the Pentagon's request for additional troops to implement a counter-insurgency strategy in the 2009 Afghan strategy debates.

According to Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, Lute told Obama late in the 2009 decision process that there were four main risks of escalating the Afghan war: Pakistan (the heart of many Afghan problems without solutions in sight); governance and corruption in Afghanistan (huge problems with no practical answers readily available); problems with the Afghan security forces (which would take years to solve, if soluble at all); and lack of strong international support.

Lute said that these problems could not be looked at in isolation: "...look at them as a composite. Look at them as a set, and then you begin to move in my mind from a calculated risk to a gamble....if you add those risks up.....we're not going to a whole lot different [in July 2011] than we are today."

Certainly, events in the past 11 months seem to support Lute's position, and, while the other issues are vital, this is especially true of Afghan governance and anti-corruption efforts.

As the annual Afghan review approaches, it is imperative that the Obama administration explain with detail its goals, methods and timetables, and why its approach to improving governance and reducing corruption is a sensible strategy with calculated risk and not just a throw-a-dart gamble upon which national policy of this gravity and consequence should not be based.

Alternatively, the administration should admit the improbability of making headway on governance and anti-corruption and abandon the effort, as many leery of the U.S.'s ability to change an area with such a complex history and culture have argued for several years.

###