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Our Road out of Afghanistan

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Singapore's contribution to the stabilisation and reconstruction to Afghanistan is growing. We must be clear of our policy and strategy to meet pragmatic goals and be wary of an open-ended commitment.

SINCE THE inaugural deployment of a five-man dental team from the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) three years ago, *Operation Blue Ridge* – the codename for Singapore's contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan – has grown steadily. Today, ground units with various combat support (engineer, artillery), and combat service support (medical) specialisations operate in two provinces, together with liaison elements at Kandahar Air Field and Headquarters ISAF in the Afghan capital, Kabul. Recent announcements by the Government of Singapore indicate the possible deployment of a KC-135 aerial refuelling tanker and an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Task Group.

Afghanistan is our concern

The *raison d'être* for *Operation Blue Ridge* is simple. "The global terror threat is a key reason why Singapore contributes to international security," explains Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean, and "Afghanistan is at the frontline in the global fight against terrorism". Singapore is part of a 43-nation, 86,000-strong coalition operating under the United Nations-mandated ISAF umbrella with the aim "of assisting the Afghan government in extending its authority and creating a secure environment". However, two issues deserve to be addressed.

The first is Singapore's policies – "actions designed to accomplish political goals" – toward Afghanistan. Deploying troops, providing training programmes and briefings for Afghan officials on healthcare, judicial matters, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, aviation, water, and waste management, illustrate responsibility and the policy of helping others in need. Establishing diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in June 2006 reflects the policy of friendship. The concern here is on the clarity of policy relating to *Operation Blue Ridge*. We cannot remain in Afghanistan perpetually; what

is the ‘end state’ we seek?

We must be cognisant that Afghanistan is unique. As Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew notes, “nobody has ever made sense out of Afghanistan” and “trying to make a country out of Afghanistan is a distraction [for America]”. Our policy must incorporate tangible goals to benefit Afghanistan. Furthermore, our policy must be based on goals set by ourselves, perhaps in consultation with partners, but never ones dictated to us. Meeting the goals we set for ourselves is our ‘end state’. But what can we really do as a small state? The fact is we can make a difference by leveraging on our strengths. We can build, train, mentor, and advise.

Matching means and ends

The second outstanding issue is our military strategy. If our policy is to build, train, mentor, and advise, then our strategy – “the distribution and application of military means to fulfil the ends of policy” – must be clear. In Bamiyan province, for example, we can leave a legacy to the people by helping to pave – either by hand or by pocket – the Pul-i-Mattak–Bamiyan–Maidan Shar road. Since 2002 the central highlanders have asked for this road, more than anything else, to realise their economic potential but to no avail. We can also train and mentor the Afghan National Army (ANA), not in the arena of war-fighting, but in combat medicine, for instance.

By training the ANA trainers, we can help them help themselves. Our Medical Corps possesses the training, education, and operational experience which makes it second to none in SAF, perhaps one of the best internationally. We can also advise our coalition partners, not how to fight a counter-insurgency or to eradicate drugs, but on culture and values. There is more in common between Afghan and traditional Asian culture and values than meets the eye.

In helping Afghanistan, we also help ourselves. The SAF is a learning organisation and Afghanistan is a combat zone with rich pickings. The question is whether we are willing to pick the fruits (lessons) hanging from the Tree of War. Once we meet our tangible goals, it is time to bring our soldiers home with the satisfaction that we have completed the mission with a clear conscience. In directing such a policy and initiating such a strategy toward Afghanistan, Singapore is not being selfish. It is acting simultaneously in its own interest and in the interest of the Afghan people. It is working within our means to reach ends we have dictated for ourselves.

Managing expectations

But what of victory? The reality is that the best the international community can hope for is ‘non-victory’ – no victory, no defeat. As long as ISAF remains in Afghanistan, the Kabul-government will not fall but the insurgency will also not end either. Then again, ISAF will leave one day, perhaps one day sooner than later. As US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates recently announced, the transfer to Afghan security forces will commence “no later than July 2011”, predicated on ground conditions.

Patience, however, is a virtue on the insurgents’ side. “The Americans have all the wrist watches but we have all the time,” so they say. Besides, where else have they to go? Victory then becomes the prize in a clash of wills between the Afghan government and its opponents, a contest where “the conventional army loses if it does not win, and the guerilla wins if he does not lose”. That contest, however, is not for us to decide. Our duty is merely to help the Afghans help themselves, one reflected in the timeless words of the legendary British officer T.E. Lawrence: “It is better to let them do it imperfectly than to do it perfectly yourself, for it is their country, their way, and your time is short.”

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