Chandrasekaran Speaks on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

Members of the Cornell community gathered in Lewis Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall on April 2nd 2013 to hear Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Senior Correspondent and Associate Editor of The Washington Post, give a talk entitled “The Surge to Uncertainty: An Examination of America's Strategy in Afghanistan” as part of the Einaudi Center's Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series. Chandrasekaran’s talk ran the gamut from the origins of U.S. aid in Afghanistan to predictions on the eventual outcome of the current conflict, and included many insights he gained during the three years he spent in Afghanistan over the last decade of our “longest and most complicated war”.

Chandrasekaran said the Obama administration came into office vowing not to repeat the mistakes of the past in Afghanistan. By pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy known by the acronym of COIN, the U.S. sought to separate the “good” Afghans from the “bad” and to provide basic government services while protecting civilians from the Taliban. The U.S. military thought that the same “surge” approach of providing overwhelming force at the most opportune time to turn the tide in the war that had worked in Iraq would also work in Afghanistan. Vice President Biden, however, feared that although the military objectives were attainable, the civilian mission was less assured of success. In response, President Obama set conditions on the “surge” in Afghanistan, specifying that it could last only 18 to 24 months and would be followed immediately by a drawdown of troops.

Chandrasekaran also discussed the history of foreign intervention in Helmand Province, which he described as a “decades-old experiment in Afghan social engineering”. In order to help develop the local agricultural economy, Mohammed Zahir Shah used profits from the fur trade to build a network of canals around the town of Marjah. The local soil, however, was too salty to raise staple crops so the project ultimately failed. In 1961 the newly formed USAID sent teams of experts to develop the Helmand and Arghandab Valley Authority in what was to become one
of its largest initial projects. In 1970 the project was turned over to the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, but time ran out when the Afghan monarchy fell in the communist coup of 1973. According to Chandrasekaran, a lack of understanding of local conditions doomed these efforts to failure.

In describing the most recent U.S. involvement in the Helmand Province, Chandrasekaran laid out several preconditions for success and pointed out how these conditions were not met. First, the Afghan government needed to be willing participants in the operation. Afghan President Hamid Karzai never really supported the operation fully, since he had felt betrayed by a lack of NATO support when he had tried to rein in powerful warlords in the north of the country. Karzai also didn’t believe that the counterinsurgency strategy would be successful. Second, Pakistan had to be willing to crack down on the insurgency. Instead, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which had been providing support to the Taliban “at arm’s length” in 2009 shifted to policy of more direct and active support in providing arms, cash and intelligence to the Taliban.

Additionally, the U.S. government had to be fully committed to working with the Afghan army and willing to supply civilians with all of their material needs during the offensive. The U.S. ultimately failed in this endeavor, with an aura of operational distrust preventing full cooperation with the Afghan army and no “boots on the ground” on the part of the U.S. State Department to provide civilian aid, and certainly none of the small scale, long-term approach advocated by many of their more experienced staff.

Chandrasekaran contended that in Afghanistan, strategic disconnect had led to operational failure. “Kandahar is the spiritual capital of the Pashtun insurgency,” he said. The military “surge”, however focused on Helmand province where only one percent of the Afghan population lives. Furthermore, he said, The U.S. Marines wanted their own area of operations instead of sharing operations with the U.S. and Canadian armies. In Chandrasekaran’s opinion, the Marines also squandered the tactical advantage of surprise in the first wave of their assault by announcing their intentions to occupy the area.

The U.S. State Department was also supposed to provide its own civilian component to the “surge”. However, their “surge” arrived almost a year after the military operation, and most personnel involved in it stayed in Kabul without ever setting foot in Helmand province. Aid was provided via contractors rather than subject matter experts, hindering its effectiveness. Chandrasekaran felt that too much monetary aid was provided too soon for it to be absorbed, rather than building local institutions from the ground up in a sustainable way. Interagency infighting in Washington and on the ground in Afghanistan prevented much headway from being made in negotiations with the Taliban.

As to whether or not the ‘surge” was a smart strategy, Chandrasekaran summarized, “the foreseeable future will be messy and chaotic, but most Americans will see it as good enough.” He also cautioned that the U.S. shouldn’t miss the most important lesson from the conflict in Afghanistan. “For years we Americans had dwelt upon the shortcomings of Afghans. Instead, we should have focused on our own.” Chandrasekaran concluded.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part
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