

REWEAVING THE GORDIAN KNOT: DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY FOR THE UNITED STATES IN AFGHANISTAN

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By Lt. Col. Susan F. Bryant*
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OVERVIEW

“Cutting the Gordian Knot” has become synonymous with a daring, previously unimaginable action that slices through an intractable problem and reframes it entirely. It symbolizes not only success achieved unconventionally, but also success achieved boldly and decisively. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States retaliated with astounding swiftness using a stunningly light footprint heavily reliant on Special Operations forces that were well supported by airpower. The initial results exceeded all expectations and propelled the US military to a position of unquestionable global pre-eminence. The Taliban were overthrown, Al Qaeda was all but destroyed and those who managed escape were in utter disarray and forced deep into hiding on Pakistan’s frontier. OEF seemed a stunning, elegant “Gordian solution.”

The military task now complete, “all” that remained was to reconstruct a state shattered from decades of fighting and seemingly eager to rejoin the community of nations. Seven years later, Afghanistan is governed by a corrupt and largely ineffective central government that has little ability to influence the lives of the majority of its citizens. The country is also increasingly rocked by violent attacks in the East and South from a resurgent Taliban. Further, Afghanistan is now the world’s largest producer of opium and by some estimates, the narco-economy surpasses the legal one.

To further complicate an already outrageously knotty situation, the future course and perhaps continued existence of the NATO alliance is also tied to the outcome in Afghanistan. Since assuming the mission in October 2006, NATO ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) has struggled both politically and militarily to come to terms with the scope and nature of the mission.

This development has exposed two critical and uncomfortable facts with which NATO must come to terms. First is the lack of consensus on what the alliance is today and should become in the next decades. The second glaring issue is the stunning gap in military capabilities and resources between old members and new and, more fundamentally, between the United States and everyone else. Afghanistan has forced NATO’s long-bubbling existential angst uncomfortably front and center.

It is the intent of this monograph to explore the development of an Afghan strategy in separate, but interrelated blocks. First, will be issues, implications and recommendations directly related to NATO. Second, this paper will consider issues and make recommendations for U.S government strategy and actions in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

INTRODUCTION

According to Greek legend, long ago in the kingdom of Phrygia, located within Asia Minor, an oracle made a startling prophecy. It said the next man to come into town in a wagon

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would become king. And so, the next man who drove into town in a wagon was proclaimed King. Gordius, the new ruler tied his wagon to a pole in a shrine as an offering to Zeus for his good fortune. The knot he tied was extraordinarily complex and intricate and reportedly contained no exposed ends.

Years passed and the oracle spoke again. This time it stated that the man to untie this knot would rule all of Asia. Given the complexity of the knot, many attempted and failed. Thus, the legend of the Gordian knot grew until 335 BC, when it enticed Alexander the Great. Unable after an attempt to untie the knot conventionally, Alexander drew his sword and sliced through it, and did in fact become king of all Asia for a time.¹

“Cutting the Gordian Knot” has become synonymous with a daring, previously unimaginable action that slices through an intractable problem and reframes it entirely. It symbolizes not only success achieved unconventionally, but also success achieved boldly and decisively. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States retaliated with astounding swiftness using a stunningly light footprint heavily reliant on Special Operations forces that were well supported by airpower. The initial results exceeded all expectations and propelled the US military to a position of unquestionable global pre-eminence. The Taliban were overthrown, Al Qaeda was all but destroyed and those who managed escape were in utter disarray and forced deep into hiding on Pakistan’s frontier. OEF seemed a stunning, elegant “Gordian solution.”

The military task now complete, “all” that remained was to reconstruct a state shattered from decades of fighting and seemingly eager to rejoin the community of nations. The United Nations sanctioned the actions and NATO stepped forward to undertake what it considered to be principally a stabilization and reconstruction mission.²

Seven years later, Afghanistan is governed by a corrupt and largely ineffective central government that has little ability to influence the lives of the majority of its citizens. The country is also increasingly rocked by violent attacks in the East and South from a resurgent Taliban. Further, Afghanistan is now the world’s largest producer of opium and by some estimates, the narco-economy surpasses the legal one.³ Turning to the border, Afghanistan’s relations with Pakistan are profoundly troubled and Pakistan itself teeters on the edge of becoming the world’s first failed nuclear state. Disorder in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is endemic and its spillover into the remainder of the country was spectacularly displayed with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. In fact, the violence in Pakistan has reached such a pitch that this conflict may be better understood as the Afghanistan-Pakistan Taliban insurgency.

The two countries are strongly linked by history, as well through tribal affiliations. The “Durand Line” that delineates the border between the two states is artificial however, having been constructed by the British in 1897. The surveyors ignored ethnographic and linguistic lines and divided tribes and in some cases, even villages.⁴ Today the Durand Line is disregarded by those who live in the border region and rejected outright by the Afghan government.⁵ Thus, there is no possibility of “solving” the Afghanistan problem without also stabilizing Pakistan, including the (FATA) and the Northwest Frontier provinces. This is a task that grows more difficult with each passing day, as these areas have become increasingly radicalized.

To further complicate an already outrageously knotty situation, the future course and perhaps continued existence of the NATO alliance is also tied to the outcome in Afghanistan. Since assuming the mission in October 2006, NATO ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) has struggled both politically and militarily to come to terms with the scope and nature of the mission. Given this would be the NATO alliance’s largest out of area mission ever, the initial thought process in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) was this was a predominantly stabilization and reconstruction operation. In fact it has become a full blown counterinsurgency mission in addition to being an enormous and challenging reconstruction operation.

This development has exposed two critical and uncomfortable facts with which NATO must come to terms. First is the lack of consensus on what the alliance is today and should become in the next decades. This has manifested in a lack of political will on the part of many member countries to allow their soldiers to be involved in direct combat missions. The second glaring issue is the stunning gap in military capabilities and resources between old members and new and, more fundamentally, between the United States and everyone else. Afghanistan has forced NATO’s long-bubbling existential angst uncomfortably front and center.

It is not the aim of this monograph simply to blame NATO for the present situation in Afghanistan. The current problems there and in Iraq for that matter also point to glaring capability deficiencies within the United States government. The same compound security dilemmas⁶ that have exposed critical weaknesses in NATO, have equally exposed the U.S. government’s inability to deal with problems that cut across departments, i.e. “interagency” problems. Whether looking at NATO or at the United States effort, there is no one really “in charge” in Afghanistan. Specifically, there is no one with the authority or responsibility to coordinate ongoing US and international efforts across the Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic arenas. Given the combination of alliance stovepipes, UN stovepipes, national stovepipes and functional stovepipes, there is no agreement or comprehensive framework that even begins to approach a strategy for “winning” in Afghanistan.

The United States military has been alternately praised and castigated for its performance over the past seven years. In many respects, the United States military has made remarkable strides in adapting to the tactical and operational requirements of the “Long War,” particularly with regard to prosecuting a counterinsurgency campaign. These adaptations however, often have the flavor of interim solutions for addressing critical and aberrant problems rather than true attempts to match military capabilities to a changing global system.

The enormity of the problem in Afghanistan is matched only by the enormity of the stakes. As the 9/11 attacks proved, Afghanistan is no longer an isolated space of little global consequence. It is a lynchpin to a strategically vital and historically volatile region. Failure to stabilize Afghanistan will reverberate throughout Central Asia, as well as in Iran, Pakistan and India and will also profoundly impact the future of the NATO Alliance. American strategic planning about and commitments to Afghanistan must be viewed through this prism.

It is the intent of this monograph to explore the development of an Afghan strategy in separate, but interrelated blocks. First, will be issues, implications and recommendations directly related to NATO. Second, this paper will consider issues and make recommendations for U.S government strategy and actions in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

Clearly given the magnitude of the problems faced, there is no silver bullet or simple sound bite that will provide a comprehensive strategy or solution. Nonetheless, Afghanistan can no longer afford to remain an “economy of force effort” for the United States. What must in fact occur is that the “Gordian Knot” that was cut in Afghanistan by swift and necessary military action in 2001 and 2002, must now be rewoven in a slow, deliberate and strategic and comprehensive manner.

AFGHANISTAN: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In an after action report upon his return from Afghanistan in July 2008, General (retired) Barry McCaffrey stated

Afghanistan is in misery. 68% of its population has never known peace. Life expectancy is 44 years. It has the second highest maternal mortality in the world. . . . Terrorist incidents and main force insurgent violence is rising. . . . The Afghan government at the provincial level is largely dysfunctional and corrupt. . . . The security situation. . . the economy. . . the giant heroin/opium criminal enterprise and Afghan governance are all likely to get worse in the coming 24 months.⁷

This writer can attest this is a vivid and accurate summary of the state of affairs in Afghanistan closing on seven years after initial military action.

Supplementing General McCaffrey’s comments, a short description of Afghanistan’s most pressing problems follows:

Food

Although the subject does not generally make newspaper headlines to the extent the insurgency does, Afghanistan is experiencing a significant food shortage as a result of increased prices in the region. Pakistan and Kazakhstan, former major exporters of food to Afghanistan have curtailed their supplies in order to feed their own populations. Flour prices in Afghanistan have tripled in the last year. According to UN Food Program officials in Afghanistan, the average Afghan family now spends 75% of its income on food.⁸ Although less alarmist in his predictions, World Bank Group President Robert Zoellick recently called the winter food supply in Afghanistan “uncertain.”⁹ It goes without saying that a starving population is an unstable one, and that a government incapable of seeing that its citizens are fed is an inadequate one.

Drugs

One of the principal difficulties in building effective governance at all levels in Afghanistan is the thriving criminal narcotics trade. It is endemic. The revenue it generates supplies the insurgency, corrupts government officials at all levels, and provides a level of income much of the rural populace could not earn legitimately. Less tangible, but equally insidious is the effect of real fear of coercion by narcotics traffickers. President Karzai has stated that the narcotics industry is Afghanistan’s single greatest threat.¹⁰

Afghanistan is currently the source of 93% of the world’s illicit opium, with poppy being cultivated in 21 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. Helmand province alone produced 42% of the total in 2007.¹¹ The trade is also a major source of revenue for the Taliban. The Executive Director of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, acknowledged the Taliban earned between \$200 and \$400 million through a ten percent tax on poppy growers operating within that span of control.¹² He also estimated that the opium producers earned about \$4 billion last year. This accounts for half of the country’s national income.¹³

There is no hope for a legitimate and functioning state so long as Afghanistan remains dependent on a narco-economy. Unfortunately, there has not been a significant amount of aid devoted to an alternative livelihoods program, nor has NATO had a coherent policy to deal with the situation. Without legitimate alternatives for the population, Afghans will continue to cultivate poppy to survive, or, if not survive, then to better themselves and improve the lives of their families. Regardless which explanation for participating in narco-trafficking is more correct, both lines of reasoning provide a powerful motivation.

NATO does not involve itself in counter narcotics operations, nor does it have a policy for weaning Afghanistan of its opium addiction. Paralyzed by disagreement upon the best way to approach the problem at the political level, NATO ISAF troops do not participate in counter

narcotics missions. “By mutual agreement [with the Government of Afghanistan (GOA)], ISAF does not engage directly in eradication or interdiction operations, but may provide support by improving Afghan force protection capabilities.”¹⁴ Although the United Kingdom has assumed responsibility for the Counternarcotics mission in Afghanistan¹⁵, the effort remains underfunded and paralyzed by GOA corruption and international disagreement. As long as narcotics production remains rampant and the international community remains fractured on how to deal with it, there will be no solution to the problem of developing a legitimate and capable governmental structure in Afghanistan.

Corruption

Government corruption is rampant at all levels, but particularly at the provincial and district level. Opium plays a significant role in this problem. Another critical facet of it is a lack of personal security and a reliable local police force. Between January and August 2008, more than 1,400 civilians were killed in Afghanistan.¹⁶ There is no effective police force to protect the citizenry and no effective judiciary and legal system to punish the offenders. Although much has been accomplished to improve police capacity in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Police (ANP) is under extraordinary stress. They are increasingly being attacked and killed by Taliban insurgents. In the six months between March and September 2008, 720 police officers were killed by the Taliban.¹⁷ If the choices are to remain honest and at your post and probably die, or to flee with no means to support your family, or to become corrupt and work with the narco-traffickers and/or the Taliban, local corruption is easy to understand. This fundamentally undermines the efforts to establish a functioning police system in the country.

Corruption at the national level is also pervasive and has equally significant consequences. In addition to the obvious harm this does to the population, it also dramatically impairs the flow international aid. Fear of corruption makes international donations directly to the government problematic in the extreme. “Donors, fearful of fraud, channel two-thirds of their aid outside the government, making it impossible to use the national budget to organize a countrywide effort and to build institutions.”¹⁸

To succeed in building a functional state in Afghanistan, corruption must be tamed. Again however, this returns to the issue of the lack of legitimate alternatives. If there are not sufficient opportunities for legal gain, then illegal means will no doubt be explored. This is a vicious cycle that must be broken. Leaders at all levels must be held accountable for their actions. Unfortunately, accountability requires a functional judiciary and legal system.

The Insurgency

Considered destroyed in 2002, the Taliban today are inarguably resurgent and strengthening on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. No longer “America’s Forgotten War”, attacks on US forces in Afghanistan exceeded those on US forces in Iraq in July 2008.¹⁹ According to Los Angeles Times reporting, attacks in the Eastern portion of Afghanistan rose over 40% in the first half of 2008.²⁰ Although these figures shocked the American public, they were unsurprising to those who had been following the trends in Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2006, insurgent-initiated attacks increased by 400 % and the lethality of these attacks rose by over 800%.²¹

NATO and Afghan troops have dealt with these insurgents well, killing more than 7,000 during the year 2007.²² However, one can not literally “kill” this insurgency to extinction. The Taliban remains and is growing. NATO and Afghan forces’ lethal response has done little to dampen the insurgents’ ardor. In fact, the collateral damage in the form of civilian casualties, resulting from NATO and US attacks on the insurgency has actually increased support for it among the Afghan people. According to a *NightWatch Report* from September 2008, the Taliban has been able to shift from insurgency tactics to the beginnings of an open insurrection.²³

This shift is significant because it shows a substantial increase in both the capacity of and the support for the Taliban. The report came to the following disturbing conclusions with regard to the Taliban operating on both sides of the Durand Line:

The July and August fighting data show three clear effects of the increased involvement from Pakistan. Manpower is not a constraint. Sustainment is greater. There are no shortages of supplies, especially for bomb making materials. The strong anti-US swing in Pakistan ensures that these conditions will continue. The increased resources will enable the Taliban to threaten and defeat modern well equipped and well trained western units near the capital. The resources will determine who is winning and they clearly favor the anti-government forces. Resource increases promised for the allies are not likely to arrive in time to prevent a further rise of Taliban capabilities. Even the amounts promised will not match those now becoming available to the Taliban as the result of an aroused Pakistani population that is hostile to the US.²⁴

What must be understood, is that although the Taliban are certainly linked to and operating with Al Qaeda, they are not Al Qaeda. They should be viewed as an Islamic movement in Afghanistan and also as a nationalist one. Unlike their Al Qaeda guests, the Taliban is a local phenomenon rather than a transplanted one. They are natives of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, defeating them will ultimately be up to the Afghans and should not be viewed as a task the US or NATO is capable of accomplishing.

This insurgency is fed by failures of governance, corruption at all levels and a profound lack of basic human security. Successful military action on the part of NATO and the Afghan forces will not end the insurgency. Destroying or co-opting the Taliban will ultimately require a

predominantly non-military effort and depend on the legitimacy and capacity of the Afghan government.

Progress to Date

Despite the bleakness of the preceding assessment, it would be incorrect to conclude there has been no progress in Afghanistan in the past seven years. Much has been accomplished. Thousands of schools have been opened, miles of roads have been paved and health care has improved dramatically for many Afghans. According to recent statistics from the 82d Airborne’s End of Mission After Action Review (AAR), there have been some stunning successes in development and reconstruction.

ACTIVITY/AREA	Progress in Afghanistan	
	TALIBAN ERA	TODAY
Road Network	21,000km with many damaged	34,782km of upgraded or repaired road
Schools	~ 1000	~ 9000
Attendance	~ 1 million boys; no girls	~ 6 million total (2.2 million are girls)
Teachers	~ 20,000	~ 160,000: 800% growth
Availability	Few had access to schools	~ 97% of boys; 68% of girls (RC-E)
Basic Health Care Access	Only 8% of people had access	78% of the people now have access
Infant Mortality Rate	Highest in the world	25% reduction saved 89,000 lives
Banking System	No system and 3 currencies	1 globally recognized currency
Licit Exports	\$80,000,000	\$471,000,000 – an increase of 588%
District Centers	No Centers of Government	85 new District Centers, and 53 under constr
Telecommunications	1 mobile phone company	4 companies serving 3.5 million subscribers
Gov Comms Network	Non-Existent	64% of Districts linked to Central Government
Radio & TV Stations	Virtually non-existent	104 Radio Stations and 6 Television Stations
Electricity Production	430 Mega-Watts	754 Mega-Watts
Irrigation Canals	60%-70% were destroyed	440km are rebuilt and serving 240,000 acres 2

As illustrated by the chart above, much work has been done and much progress has been made.

In addition to the progress noted by the 82d Airborne Division, the National Solidarity Program instituted by the World Bank has also done significant work. The program sponsors more than 20,000 elected community development councils. These fund smaller projects such as micro-hydroelectric generators, schools, roads and irrigation and water supply projects. It is estimated that projects have assisted more than 17 million Afghans and touched each of the 34 provinces.²⁵

Another significant success story for reconstruction and stabilization in Afghanistan has been the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA). This task falls principally the role of the Combined Security Transition Command –Afghanistan (CSTC-A). Its mission is to train and equip the Afghan National Security Forces. CSTC-A’s task is to “plan, program and implement

the development of enduring national military forces and police services that contribute toward national stability, spread and strengthen the rule of law, defeat terrorism within the borders of Afghanistan and provide a foundation for subsequent security sector development.”²⁶

As of March 2008, the ANA was comprised of nearly 55,000 soldiers and on target to be 80,000 strong by October 2009.²⁷ The ANA is an infantry centric force operating at the battalion level.²⁸ In combined operations with US and NATO forces, the ANA has been acquitting itself increasingly well.

The ANA is built to be more than simply a capable military organization. It is also designed to inculcate a sense of national identity in its members. According to international agreement, the ANA is an ethnically balanced army that is accountable to the Government of Afghanistan.²⁹ In a country that is ethnically and tribally fragmented, the ethnic balance of the ANA provides a uniquely useful method of creating not only esprit de corps, but also a sense of national identity that is desperately needed.

Creating, operating and maintaining such a force is not cheap. Developing the ANA has been a United States led task. Between 2002 and 2006, the United States spent \$3.6 billion developing the ANA. During the same time frame, NATO contributed \$106 million and the remainder of the international community contributed \$245 million.³⁰ The US spent an additional \$2.4 billion developing the Afghan National Police during the same period.³¹ The figure for NATO was \$158 million and the remainder of the international community contributed \$401 million.³²

Although the ANA appears to be on the correct trajectory, the Afghan National Police Force (ANP) remains in turmoil and rife with corruption. Originally a German led task, the United States has funded the majority of police reform since 2006.³³ CSTC-A has been working on reform of both the ANP and the Ministry of the Interior that oversees it to develop a viable Afghan Police force that is competent, accountable, effective and coherently managed.³⁴ Afghanistan can not become be a stable state with a secure environment for its citizenry until there is a functioning and honest police presence at the local level.

Despite significant work and tremendous progress in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) development and reform in the last several years, the question of sustainability looms large. How will the Government of Afghanistan afford the military the United States has built for it? When this question is posed in Washington DC, the answer is unanimous: It is far less expensive for the United States to develop Afghan Military capacity to fight the Taliban than it is to deploy and employ additional American military forces in Afghanistan. This may be true; However, it hedges the fundamental question. How will these forces be paid for over time?

A former political advisor to the Commanding General in Afghanistan framed the question in this way:

Stability also demands that we pay much greater attention to meshing components of the existing state-building plan with the economic and financial realities of Afghanistan's future. For example, how will Afghanistan maintain the 80,000 man Afghan army and the 82,000-strong Afghan police force absent external and off-budget support from donors? The answer no one wants to hear, because of the putative counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency value of these forces, is that Afghanistan will not be able to support them. There is no serious consideration being given to building smaller forces, and even less attention to the potential future volatility and de-stabilization that could result when the government can no longer pay them.³⁵

The ANA is doing yeoman's work against the Taliban; however, the ANA cannot win the war in Afghanistan, because ultimately victory will be achieved through non-military means. Further, there must be a serious discussion of how to sustain the ANSF over the long term and avoid creating a force dependent on international donations to operate.

NATO IN AFGHANISTAN

Background

NATO's decision to take over the mission in Afghanistan was significant. The ISAF mission represents the largest out-of-area mission in NATO's history. It signaled alliance resolve to undertake actions designed to benefit the wider international community and not simply in furtherance of European collective defense. In many ways, the ISAF commitment was NATO's first real "Post Cold War" mission and a significant test of its resolve. Bluntly stated however, some NATO members are failing this test on multiple levels, while others, by carrying a disproportionate share of the burden, are turning their populations against participation in Afghanistan and probably future NATO operations like it.

This state of affairs is a consequence, at least in part, of "mission-creep." The NATO ISAF mission in Afghanistan operates under a United Nations Chapter VII peace enforcement mandate. Currently forty countries contribute troops to the ISAF mission.³⁶ In August 2003, NATO took command of the ISAF mission. Originally, this mission was confined to Kabul. However, in a four part expansion plan, NATO assumed command of the mission nationwide in October 2006.

According to the NATO website, ISAF has responsibility for six principle tasks. These are:

1. Conducting stability and support operations in coordination with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF);
2. Assisting in the development of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and structures, including training the new Afghan National Army (ANA) and National Police (ANP);
3. Identify reconstruction needs, such as the rehabilitation of schools and medical facilities, restoring water supplies and providing support for other civil-military projects;

4. Support the Afghan government to Disarm Illegally Armed Groups (DIAG);
5. Provide support to the Afghan government and internationally-sanctioned counter narcotics efforts through intelligence-sharing and the conduct of an efficient public information campaign, as well as support to the Afghan National Army Forces conducting counter-narcotics operations. ISAF, however, is not directly involved in the poppy eradication or destruction of processing facilities, or in taking military action against narcotic producers; and
6. Support humanitarian assistance operations³⁷

What should strike the reader is that there is no mention of counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism operations anywhere on the foregoing list. This is not accidental. The United States maintains control of the Counter Terrorism mission through its Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) mandate. Further, when NATO agreed to assume the battle space in Afghanistan, it did so under the auspices of assuming a stabilization and reconstruction mission. Counterinsurgency was not an issue. Therefore, in many European countries, there is a sense that the Afghanistan mission was a “bait and switch operation.” NATO members agreed to reconstruction. They never would have agreed to undertake a complex counter-insurgency mission.³⁸

The Existential Issue

The difficulties facing NATO in Afghanistan highlight the larger issues facing NATO generally. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, NATO has been somewhat vague as to its *raison d'être*. Oddly, consensus is maintained because of this vagueness rather than in spite of it. The fundamental issue has been that of two competing security visions for NATO. The first is for NATO to assume a broader, global role for military operations. The second is for NATO to retain a limited, regional role that is defensively postured.³⁹

Those who want to expand NATO's role go so far as to see NATO becoming a global alliance of like-minded states, or a “Concert of Democracies.” Those aimed at limiting NATO's role are seeking to avoid “over-entanglement” in global affairs, but maintain a core capability to manage military matters in its traditional sphere, i.e., Europe and the Former Soviet Union.⁴⁰ Clearly, these visions are incompatible, and thus they are carefully ignored to maintain a façade of consensus. Indeed this vagueness has been deliberately maintained for so long that there are those who routinely assert that NATO works in practice, rather than in theory. While this may be true for missions in the Balkans, the lack of “theory” is significantly reducing the chances of long-term success in Afghanistan.

NATO's current mid-life crisis dates to just after the fall of the USSR. In the early 1990s, the Clinton administration used the prospect of NATO membership as a carrot to propel its engagement and enlargement agenda. Politically, this may have been a sound policy decision. However, it has had significant negative implications for military interoperability and readiness.

By extending the possibility of membership to former communist satellites, it could further the goal of democratization. By admitting these former Warsaw Pact countries, the US driven expansion of NATO has resulted in glaring military capability gaps among its members.⁴¹

Generally, alliances work best when they are “against” something. They become far more problematic when placed in a positive construct. What is NATO for? There is no single or clear answer to this question. In the 1990s NATO succeeded in reinventing itself politically-- it is for democracy-- but it has no corollary military consensus.⁴²

NATO Financing

The United States sees NATO as its premier military alliance. In certain respects this remains true. NATO currently has 26 member countries and more aspirants. There are common standards for NATO operations that make interoperability much simpler than in the case of coalitions of the willing. However, if one analyzes the military capabilities of member countries and the resources they are investing in the alliance, a radically different picture emerges.

For better or worse, the United States is the military goliath of the alliance. United States defense spending is approximately half the global total.⁴³ Stating this a different way, the US defense budget for research and development in FY 2007 exceeded the entire defense budget of the United Kingdom. The UK has the second largest military budget in NATO.⁴⁴

The argument can be made that comparing the defense spending of the United States with that of small European countries is inherently unfair. However, the trend is equally true when using percentages of GDP rather than raw numbers. On average NATO members spend 1.75% of their GDP on defense. Only five of the 26 NATO members achieved the target of 2% spending.⁴⁵ Given this fact, it is hard to argue that the issue is simply one of order of magnitude. The majority of NATO members are not meeting their minimum targets for defense spending. Since 2002, there has been no substantial growth in military expenditures for any NATO nation except the United States. In fact, there has been a corresponding decline in force structure in 15 of 26 NATO countries.⁴⁶

Demographic Trends

The European Union and the United States are facing very different demographic realities in the coming decades. According to a Rand Corporation study, nearly all of Europe is facing long-term “downtrends in fertility” and consequent aging of their populations. The fertility rates in nearly all European countries are below the rate necessary to replace existing populations. Moreover, immigration rates in Europe are not offsetting the declining fertility rates.⁴⁷ In contrast, the US demographic trend is relatively healthy projected out to the year 2030.⁴⁸ These

divergent trends will have significant impact upon the willingness and ability of our European allies and partners to develop and maintain an expeditionary defense force.

Europe will face result significantly increased costs for medical care and other social programs over the next several decades. This trend will have a significant negative impact on its ability to raise and maintain an expeditionary defense capability. The focus in Europe will be to offset the economic consequences of an aging population, rather than to maintain an expeditionary fighting force. Further, there will be fewer young men to draw upon who would comprise such a force. When considering the future of the NATO alliance, it is imperative that this fundamental reality be taken into consideration and that its significance not be underestimated.

Public Support for NATO in the United States and Europe

Public support for NATO and for operations in Afghanistan declined steadily from 2002-2007. However, the recently released Transatlantic Trends assessment for 2008 shows a small increase in support for the Alliance:

Fifty-seven percent of Europeans agreed that NATO is still essential to their country's security, an increase of four percentage points since 2007, with increases in eight of the 12 countries surveyed. This halted the trend of declining support for NATO in Germany and Poland for the first year since 2002 and brought French support for NATO back to the level of 2002.⁴⁹

In the United States, 59% of respondents stated that NATO is essential for security. Unlike in Europe, this figure has hardly moved in recent years.⁵⁰

Despite the gain in support for NATO in Europe, there is still considerable dissent among member countries about the utility of NATO operations in Afghanistan and the missions it should undertake there. While a majority of Europeans believe that NATO should undertake reconstruction and stabilization missions in Afghanistan (79% in support), only 43% supported NATO soldiers engaging the Taliban in direct combat operations. In contrast, 76% of Americans supported NATO engaging in combat operations against the Taliban.⁵¹

The Issue of National Caveats

Looking at the lack of support for direct combat operations, one can clearly see the genesis of the national caveats that currently hinder the operational effectiveness of the ISAF mission. National Caveats, which are restrictions individual countries place on the types of missions their troops can conduct, have had significant operational impacts in Afghanistan. Although the full caveat list is a classified document, at the time of the 2006 NATO Summit in Riga, there were approximately 50 caveats impacting the ISAF Commander's ability to employ NATO troops on the ground in Afghanistan.⁵² One can get a sense of the caveats nations place on

the employment of their forces by looking at where they are deployed. The US, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada have consistently stationed their troops in the Southern and Eastern portions of Afghanistan and have engaged in the majority of the combat operations. One can only wonder at how long national populations will watch as their soldiers bear a disproportionate burden while other countries engage only in relatively safer reconstruction operations.

Disunity of Command

The Command and Control structure for NATO operations in Afghanistan is not only bewilderingly complex, it is chaotic and ineffective. To quote the current U.S. Army Vice Chief of Staff, “the current command and control (C2) arrangement in Afghanistan is beyond comprehension even to military professionals.... Exacerbated by the national caveats of some coalition members, our Afghan C2 sacrifices unity of command and obviates theater operational awareness and meaningful strategic communications.”⁵³

Much more has been written about the NATO command structure in Afghanistan and none of it has been any more flattering. There are abundant practical problems that impede unity of command. First, there are multiple mandates and multiple chains of command operating in Afghanistan. There is the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan. Then there is the continuing OEF mission in Afghanistan run by United States Central Command (USCENTCOM). There is the counter-terrorism Mission in Afghanistan that falls to United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are national assets and there are various other G8 Lead Nation efforts ongoing, such as UK counter-narcotics efforts and the German efforts at enhancing police capacity. This list does not even begin to touch on the interagency efforts of the United States, nor the national efforts of various NATO allies on reconstruction and development. Keeping track of the variety and locations of the international players operating in Afghanistan is nearly impossible, never mind coordinating and deconflicting these efforts in a meaningful way. In his recent report, General McCaffrey accurately described the situation:

There is no unity of command in Afghanistan. A sensible coordination of all political and military elements does not exist. There is no single military headquarters tactically commanding all US forces. All NATO military forces do not fully respond to the NATO ISAF Commander because of extensive national operational restrictions and caveats....There is no accepted Combined NATO-Afghan Military Headquarters.⁵⁴

Strategic Drift

There is no comprehensive NATO strategy for Afghanistan. This problem is a logical outgrowth of the lack of consensus at the political level on what should be done in Afghanistan.

Like the fundamental issue of NATO's future, the fractious and potentially consensus-destroying issue of an Afghan strategy remains unaddressed. Although politically expedient in the short term, in the long-term it condemns the mission to failure. Military contributions and international aid must be coordinated supra-nationally, and must moreover be rational. Current efforts are more reminiscent of a pot luck dinner to which everyone has brought salad than of a counter-insurgency campaign and nation-building effort.

Conclusion on NATO

The United States has placed the fate of an incredibly complex, strategically vital mission in the hands of an alliance that is incapable of handling it militarily and unwilling to handle it politically. This is a recipe for failure. It unnecessarily binds together the future of Afghanistan and the NATO alliance and virtually condemns the two in the process. Both are problematic. They should be disentangled as quickly as possible and worked on as separate issues.

The repositioning of US military forces from Iraq to Afghanistan recently announced by President Bush is absolutely necessary and should be seen as a long term commitment rather than a stop gap measure. Although the US military is stressed from seven years of war, the reality is the war is not yet over. Afghanistan has been too long on the back burner of United States foreign policy and for that there is a price, which is currently being paid, too often in blood, by the forces operating in Afghanistan, as well as by the Afghan people.

This operation is beyond the NATO alliance's capacity to effectively prosecute. This should not be a surprise. In fact this is not the operation NATO "signed up" for. There is significant consensus in Europe on employing NATO forces in support of stabilization and reconstruction operations. NATO forces should be employed in this capacity, while a coalition of the willing, led by the United States, manages the counterinsurgency campaign. Given the national caveats in effect, this is essentially what is happening anyway.

In sum, this is a recommendation to return to "Phase II." NATO expansion in Afghanistan occurred in four phases. During Phase II, NATO forces took control of the battle space in Northern and Western Afghanistan. The US should reassume control of operations in Southern Afghanistan under an OEF mandate and the NATO ISAF mission should revert to the Northern and Western portions of the country (Regional Command North and Regional Command West). This would simplify the command structure and enhance unity of command in the areas where the counter insurgency and narcotics problems are worst. It will also provide for easier coordination between USCENTCOM and USSOCOM forces in the conduct of the counter-terrorism mission, which is mainly located in those areas.⁵⁵ It also eases some of the

complications of dealing with Pakistan, as this move places the border areas under the unified OEF Command. It by no means obviates or simplifies the underlying problems with the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It does however, allow for a single mandate, that of OEF, rather than NATO to deal with the two countries in terms of the border issue. Providing this off-ramp for NATO may not be politically simple to accomplish, but it is a necessary undertaking.

That said, returning NATO to Phase II in terms of battle space management does not immediately fix Afghanistan's problems. There are still considerable coordination issues associated with the international aid effort that must be addressed. Comprehensive planning for strengthening governance and coordinating reconstruction and development programs must be undertaken. ISAF therefore should return to planning a campaign to fulfill the six tasks of its mandate.

There also must be greater unity of purpose when dealing with the Afghan government. Too often, NATO nations are approaching their interactions with GOA on the basis of their specific troop deployments rather than with NATO coherence in mind.

Currently NATO nations prosecute separate foreign policies and interactions with the GOA. This leads to considerable dissonance. The GOA may technically be a fully sovereign state. Nonetheless, it is an extremely weak one. Without international assistance, it cannot continue to exist in its current form. NATO should work as a collective entity to strengthen and enable the GOA. By speaking to the GOA with a single voice, that of the ISAF commander, NATO can convey conceptual unity, rather than the dissonance resulting from the cacophony of national ambassadors and special representatives. This may be an impossible recommendation to implement and a politically naïve one to make. Nonetheless, NATO nations should at least attempt to approach the GOA with a unified voice and position on major issues.

The future of the NATO alliance with or without the problem of Afghanistan is uncertain. Recent events in Georgia make it conceivable that NATO may return more and more to its traditional role of checking Russian power; however, that is far from certain.

Asserting the alliance is incapable of managing the magnitude of the challenge presented in Afghanistan is not the same thing as relegating it to dustbin of history. NATO continues to serve several powerful functions. First, it lends legitimacy to international efforts. The flags of the troop contributing nations in front of the ISAF headquarters in Kabul are a powerful symbol of international unity regarding the commitment to Afghanistan. Second, NATO is performing well in the former Yugoslavia. It should certainly continue the stability operation in its own "backyard." Third, NATO does promote democracy among former Soviet satellites. Fourth, it provides a ready made forum for raising a variety of issues that arise among NATO's members.

Certainly NATO's history is not one of unblemished military efficiency and effectiveness. However, it does still serve some rather useful purposes. In the words of former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Dr. Elizabeth Sherwood Randall, "Paradoxically, NATO is doing more than it ever has, yet less than it needs to be doing."⁵⁶

DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE US STRATEGY FOR AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

To discuss the issue of developing a comprehensive American strategy for Afghanistan requires two things. First, it requires a definition of the word "strategy." Second, it requires an exploration of the current strategies in place for Afghanistan and current US policies with regard to Afghanistan as a common point of departure. One concern with United States efforts is the abundance of "strategic" documents currently circulating on Afghanistan. There are many discrete "strategies" to deal with certain aspects of the problem.⁵⁷ However, for the United States, there is no single document that captures the national-level goals and vision for American efforts in Afghanistan.

Defining "Strategy"

For many in the military and policy communities the word "strategy" elicits a vague definition in the same way the word "pornography" elicits vagueness from Supreme Court judges. "I am not certain exactly what it is, but I will know it when I see it."⁵⁸ At its broadest, strategy is nothing more than a method to achieve a desired end. To improve upon this basic definition, this paper adopts the Army War College's formulation of strategy. It defines strategy as "the relationship between ends, ways and means. Ends are the objectives or goals sought. Means are the resources available to pursue the objectives. And ways or methods are how one organizes and applies the resources."⁵⁹ Using this definition as a starting point, one can determine some of the basic requirements for a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan.

Current Strategic Documents for Afghanistan.

Despite the lack of a comprehensive US strategy for Afghanistan, The GOA does have a clear vision of its desired end state and an articulation of interim goals required to achieve that end state. Undoubtedly, the capstone strategy document for the Government of Afghanistan is *The Afghanistan National Development Strategy* (ANDS). This document lays out a vision for Afghanistan and major goals for the nation during the years 2008-2013. These are:

1. **Security:** Achieve nationwide stabilization, strengthen law enforcement, and improve personal security for every Afghan.
2. **Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights:** Strengthen democratic practice and institutions, human rights, the rule of law, delivery of public services and government accountability.

3. Economic and Social Development: Reduce poverty, ensure sustainable development through a private sector-led market economy, improve human development indicators, and make significant progress toward the Millennium Development Goals.⁶⁰

These goals are concrete, lofty and laudable. However, they may be more than can realistically be expected from the GOA given the conditions in which it currently finds itself. In a recent speech in Great Britain, Lord Paddy Ashdown, an acknowledged expert on Afghanistan, who was in line to be the UN Special Representative in Afghanistan until President Karzai objected, made the following observations:

The realistic aim in Afghanistan, with current resources, is not victory, but containment. Our success will be measured, not in making things different, but making them better; not in the final defeat of the jihadists, but in preventing them from using Afghanistan as a space for their activity. These two aims will be difficult enough to achieve; but they are at least achievable.⁶¹

Given current conditions in Afghanistan and the magnitude of US involvement in Iraq, containment of jihadists and the slow improvement in the daily life of the average Afghan may in fact be all that can be achieved in the near term. Resources, particularly military resources available for deployment in Afghanistan are severely constrained by requirements in Iraq. Therefore, in addition to not having a clearly articulated national strategy for Afghanistan, the United States may also have a mismatch between its vaguely articulated desired end state and the resources available to achieve it.

Therefore, for multiple reasons, a review of the US strategy in Afghanistan and vision for Afghanistan is sorely needed. As previously stated, there is no overarching national level strategy for dealing with the country and the region. Further, many of the various departmental and international “strategies” that do exist are not coordinated, nor are they sufficiently resourced for actual execution in any case. Both of these issues are significant and problematic.

One of the “Overarching Recommendations” of the Afghan Study Group in 2006 pertained to the idea of an Afghan strategy. The final report stated:

It is clear that one of the key challenges that the [NATO] mission in Afghanistan now faces is the lack of a common strategic vision that will reinvigorate our efforts under unified attainable goals. This process has to be done comprehensively—involving both military and civilian aspects of the mission as equals—and in a cooperative fashion....⁶²

Thus, the United States has in large measure “given” the task of comprehensive strategy development to NATO, who will not and can not manage the task as a result of the lack of consensus among member states. To a large degree, the US government has abdicated responsibility for ensuring the development of a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan. In the words of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Afghanistan has become an economy of

force effort.”⁶³ Resulting from the degree of effort and troop commitments required in Iraq, the issues of Afghanistan and the surrounding region have not been given the attention they needed over the last five years.

Overcoming “The Strategization of Tactics”

In his book *Masters of War*, Michael Handel lays out a problem he calls the “Tacticization of Strategy.” This occurs when “the operational tail wags the political-strategic dog.”⁶⁴ Handel cites several examples of this phenomenon in recent military history. One particularly useful illustration given the focus of this paper is the aerial bombing campaign in OPERATION ALLIED FORCE against Serbia. In order to limit casualties on the ground and make use of technological superiority (specifically US technological superiority), NATO decided upon a bombing campaign in lieu of a broader strategic concept. Thus, the question “How?” overtook the question “To What End?”

What is occurring in Afghanistan is a variation on this theme. There is a void where a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan should be. Therefore, policymakers are looking at military operational planning and adopting it wholesale in lieu of national strategic direction. In essence, rather than the tail wagging the dog, the dog is looking to the tail for the solution. What is occurring then is the “Strategization of Tactics”. Operational planning is being substituted for strategic planning for the simple reason it is all there is. In the words of a senior defense official wishing to remain anonymous, “To a certain extent, we have boxed ourselves into the idea that additional troops is a panacea for revising strategy. . . . That in and of itself has become the strategy.”⁶⁵

Military troop presence in Afghanistan is certainly a major component for stabilizing Afghanistan. However, it is only one component of a broader national strategy. The instruments of United States power must be more comprehensively and rationally integrated.

Interagency Planning: Gaps and Seams:

Lamenting the deficiencies of the American Interagency Process has almost become a pastime inside the beltway in the years since 9/11. The U.S. government’s inability to overcome departmental stovepipes, share critical intelligence in a timely manner, maneuver around the legal differences delineating actions abroad vice domestic actions, restrict the personal fiefdoms of powerful secretaries, and overcome the rigid committee process for budget authority have become legend. Whether you are military or civilian, republican or democrat, if you have worked interagency coordination since 9/11, you have come face to face with a system designed for a world that no longer exists.

Much of the system is legally codified. This is true. However, the size, scope and authority of the National Security Council Staff rest considerably at the discretion of the President. Every President has tailored and adapted the NSC and the interagency process to fit his personal style. The next President will no doubt do the same. Therefore, this monograph will not make recommendations for shifts in the interagency process to improve policy coordination for Afghanistan. Rather, it will attempt to describe broad outlines for a Comprehensive US strategy towards Afghanistan.

The Big Ideas

General Petraeus has spoken on many occasions about the importance of getting “The Big Ideas Right” with regard to stabilizing the situation in Iraq. His premise is that the details will flow and the strategy will succeed if the foundational assumptions and basic premises are correct. This logic is simple, reasonable, and the missing key to assembling a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan. The US government, thrown into war in Afghanistan by the actions of Al Qaeda on 9/11 and distracted by the magnitude of the ongoing efforts in Iraq has failed to assemble and then consistently refine the “Big Ideas” that should underpin a comprehensive strategy for the United States in Afghanistan and the region. In 2001, the big idea was simply to destroy Al Qaeda and prevent it from ever again being able to take refuge in Afghanistan or again use it as a base from which to conduct large scale terrorist attacks. This achieved, strategy in Afghanistan was placed on auto-pilot in favor of Iraq. The result has been predictable. The United States has risked the gains in Afghanistan over the last seven years and must now redouble its efforts on all fronts to stabilize a rapidly deteriorating situation.

Therefore, the following are offered as a starting point for determining the “Big Ideas” for an Afghanistan Strategy:

1. The Taliban is now an insurgency that threatens Afghanistan and Pakistan equally. This problem can not be addressed without considering the circumstances and effects on both sides of the Durand Line.
2. To succeed, any strategy must have a regional orientation. Specifically, Iran, India and China must be considered in both the formulation and the implementation of a strategy.
3. This is a generational fight. Any strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan must recognize the situation will require decades to truly stabilize.
4. The region cannot be stabilized by military action alone. Diplomacy and economic assistance are equally critical and currently insufficiently supplied.
5. Continued international military presence in Afghanistan will be required for the foreseeable future. This force will be predominantly US.
6. NATO troop contributions are at their zenith. There is no utility in continuing to construct requirements that will not be sourced.
7. The Afghan Central Government is too weak and corrupt to effect change in the lives of the average Afghan. To succeed, any strategy must be simultaneously top down and

bottom up. Afghan governance must be strengthened concurrently at both the local and national level.

8. The Taliban can not meet the needs of the Afghan people. Strategic success will result from meeting the basic needs of the population and providing a credible and preferable alternative to Taliban extremism and narco-trafficking.

Each of these premises could be followed by pages of explanation, amplification and guidelines for implementation. It is simply beyond the scope of this monograph to give each of these ideas the attention and consideration it deserves. Nonetheless, they are offered as a starting point for further debate.

Strategy vs. Coordination

Former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ronald Neumann recently published a paper debating the utility of a strategic review for Afghanistan.⁶⁶ His basic premise is that there is currently enough consensus among donor and troop contributing nations to achieve strategic success in Afghanistan. Rather than attempting to write a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan, he believes the international community should instead focus on improving coordination on the ground. As obstacles to a successful strategic review, he cites the practical difficulty associated with achieving meaningful consensus among all of the nations and supra-national entities operating there. This is sound advice for the international community. It is less sound when applied to the United States. As the largest troop contributing nation and the largest donor, it is imperative that a unified vision for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan be crafted.

Concluding Observations

Afghanistan can no longer be maintained as an “economy of force effort” for the US government writ large. To continue in this vein is to admit eventual defeat. That said, the military is only one of the four instruments of national power. Conceptually, Diplomacy, Information and Economics receive equal billing. They have not however received equally priority or consideration in dealing with the region generally and the Afghanistan Pakistan Taliban insurgency specifically. Development aid and comprehensive regionally oriented diplomacy are at least as important to the strategic outcome as military force.

CONCLUSIONS

The United States is a notoriously impatient country. American “Strategic Culture” favors speed and directness over measured guile. In combat, the United States military prefers overwhelming firepower and technological superiority.⁶⁷ None of these preferences augurs well for strategic victory in Afghanistan. As Mullah Omar reputedly stated, “The Americans may have all the watches, but we have all of the time.”

As Lord Paddy Ashdown suggested, perhaps victory at the juncture is impossible. Rather than victory, containment of the jihadists coupled with very slow but steady improvement in living conditions for the majority is a more appropriate goal for the region. This question is a fundamental one. The next administration has little time to determine a course of action.

The recent decision to send more American troops to Afghanistan was sound. However, it should be viewed as a stop gap measure until a comprehensive plan is put into place. Troop deployments are not a substitute for the development of a comprehensive regional strategy. As this monograph has hopefully demonstrated, the issue of Afghanistan is not discrete, nor is it even principally military. It crosscuts all instruments of national power and has profound implications for American foreign policy in South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Thus, the strategy for Afghanistan must be deliberately decided upon and consistently reviewed, not allowed to drift and accrete randomly. Reweaving the Gordian knot that was cut in 2001 will be a slow and painful process. However it is a necessary one. The first step is determining what kind of knot we would like to begin to weave and the materials available with which to weave it.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Thomas Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire,” *International Security* 32, no 4 (2008), 68.
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- ²⁶ Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. “Afghanistan Interim Campaign Plan.” 9.
- ²⁷ Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan. “ANSF Development Update,” April 2008. Slide 4.
- ²⁸ Combined Security Transtion Command-Afghanistan. “Afghanistan Interim Campaign Plan.” 11.
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- ⁵⁴ McCaffrey, 4.
- ⁵⁵ This idea is a slight variation on an idea proposed by LTG (R) David Barno in an interview with him in January 2008. In this interview, General Barno proposed dividing Afghanistan into two battle spaces, one consisting of the North and West and the other consisting of the South and East. The principal difference between this recommendation and that of General Barno is that his idea would be to continue the entire operation as a NATO mission.
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