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Chapter 10: Afghanistan: A Mission in Search of a Strategy

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Note: This chapter was written largely prior to the December 1, 2009 speech by President Obama announcing his new strategy in Afghanistan. The goal is to provide unbiased background on the issue in Afghanistan. Chapter 11 addresses the implications of President Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan; and Chapter 12 addresses American foreign policy in Pakistan.

After eight years, Afghanistan has become the primary war focus for the United States. There are approximately 68,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. President Barak Obama has inherited the Afghan war from President George W. Bush, and this is an opportunity for the president's administration to develop, announce, and implement a new strategy.

President Obama must grapple with the George W. Bush legacy and clarify the administration's objectives for Afghanistan *prior to forming a strategy*. The current objectives for America's presence in Afghanistan are not clear, nor are they effectively communicated to the American public. Instead, President Obama has re-implemented the policies of the previous administration.

A principal understanding is the breadth of the battlefield. The war in Afghanistan is broader than currently conceived and should be defined as "Af-Pak" to take into account the link between

two countries. A reexamination of American objectives, strategies, and tactics is required to achieve victory in Afghanistan.

An Inherited Legacy

President George W. Bush made the decision to invade Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. His objective was to protect the U.S. homeland from future terrorist attacks. The decision was made to kill al Qaeda operatives and to defeat the Taliban.

Lack of a strategy gave the George W. Bush administration only partial and temporary victory. Under these policies, the U.S. temporarily suppressed the Taliban and made it more difficult for al Qaeda to operate in Afghanistan. However, al Qaeda is not limited to Afghanistan; it also operates in ungoverned spaces in Pakistan and abroad. While American troops had suppressed the Taliban, it has subsequently reconstituted itself with greater strength and zeal.

Linking Strategy To Objectives: Is There a U.S. Objective in Afghanistan?

President Obama's objective in Afghanistan is similar to the previous administration's: *to protect the U.S. homeland from terrorist attacks.*

Although President Obama has made a series of statements regarding Afghanistan as the "good war" and the "necessary war," these statements include a mixture of undefined assumptions, aspirations, and premises that do not meet the test of being an actionable strategy.

Objectives precede strategy. The reason for strategy is to fight wars effectively, and to make sense of war for the troops who fight, and for U.S. citizens who are called upon by government to support war. Tactics are the implementation of strategy, such as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Without a clear objective, strategy and tactics are misleading and cannot be formulated. The Obama administration is addressing the military tactics without first defining the strategy. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are not a strategy: they are tactics that implement strategy.

Based on the frequently iterated statements of President Obama, the objective of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is to launch a comprehensive and effective counterinsurgency mission. The rationale is that by so doing, U.S. national and personal safety and security, including defense of the U.S. homeland, will be strengthened. The strategy of developing and protecting the Afghan critical infrastructure, nurturing a politically stable Afghan government, and encouraging economic prosperity are subsets of the counterinsurgency tactic.

The focus of the present discussion is the increase of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. General McChrystal has requested 40,000 or more additional troops. While this issue is being pursued, it is necessary to consider when, how, and why the U.S. will eventually withdraw from Afghanistan. However, public discussion of withdrawal alongside consideration of expanded

troop strength is confusing and counterproductive. There is a palpable sense that media commentaries and public opinion are trending towards withdrawal.

Afghanistan and Pakistan: The Af-Pak Connection

Is counterinsurgency the correct tactic in Afghanistan? President Obama endeavors to make Americans safe at home by implementing counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. The gist of his statements in this regard are:

This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting — this is fundamental to the defense of our people. The Taliban must be met with force and they must be defeated, because if they take over a country, it may become a base for terrorists who will kill U.S. citizens. The U.S. should attempt to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.

President Obama believes that Afghanistan is a necessary war, one that defines the enemy as al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. What is lacking is a clear definition of how the Taliban fits into the picture. Is al Qaeda the only threat to U.S. national security? Does the Taliban pose a threat to U.S. national security?

The war in Afghanistan is directly related to the political stability of Pakistan. Roughly 40 million Pashtuns live on both sides of the Af-Pak border. There is a high degree of ethnic nationalism among the Pashtuns, who do not welcome U.S. troops. The best outcome would be Pashtun neutrality. The smaller the U.S. military footprint, the better. A larger footprint could be tolerated by the Pashtuns for a short period of time, but a protracted counterinsurgency campaign could result in vigorous and widespread Pashtun religious and nationalistic hostility to the U.S.

On balance, the U.S. stake in Pakistan is much higher than in Afghanistan. Pakistan is a major political player in the region; Afghanistan is not. The U.S. objective in the region should be to support Pakistan's political stability. An imminent Taliban takeover of Pakistan is unlikely, but it suggests the possibility, albeit distant, of nuclear weapons being acquired by terrorists. In this context, one of the U.S. objectives is to prevent the Taliban from using Afghanistan as a base to attack Pakistan.

Although Pakistan has not regarded the Taliban as an existential threat in the past, it now has a new objective—the defeat of the Taliban. The long term consequences of this slow turnaround in Pakistan's strategy is that the Af-Pak tribal region has continued to be a relatively safe haven for al Qaeda and the Taliban, with little force being exerted in these regions until recently.

If the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign continues in Afghanistan, or if the U.S. abandons Afghanistan by substantially decreasing troop strength or withdrawing, the negative consequence for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is great. An unstable Pakistan would also create a major problem for India because of India's 150 million Muslim population, who could be the target of Taliban Islamist extremism.

Ungoverned space is another important consideration. Afghanistan's ungoverned space is very large because of its mountainous terrain and weak central government. The Taliban can operate without significant U.S. interference and it can control the local population by threat of retribution. When challenged, the Taliban can shift operations to other areas. Although there are virtually no spaces within Afghanistan where the Taliban can operate without interdiction, their advantage is that they are adaptive and can move relatively freely when pressed. In Afghanistan, al Qaeda and the Taliban may be confronted by up to 100,000 U.S. troops and a combined 400,000+ Afghan military and police force. However, the terrain in Afghanistan tends to equalize even a massive counterinsurgency force.

Ungoverned space need not be large to provide a safe haven for al Qaeda and Taliban to plan, gather equipment, and implement an attack on Afghan and Pakistan targets. Safe havens for al Qaeda could be located in Somalia or Yemen with varying degrees of difficulty. Al Qaeda could operate in virtually any place in the US, although there would be a very high degree of risk of interdiction. Terrorists can operate with a relatively small amount of money and a few trained operatives. The belief that control of ungoverned space prevents terrorist attacks is off the mark. Managing ungoverned space will suppress terrorists and make it more difficult for them to operate, but it will not completely eliminate the threat.

The Taliban–Al Qaeda Affiliation: Which is the Primary Concern?

Understanding the Taliban, as now configured, is the starting point for developing an Af-Pak strategy. The nature of the Taliban has changed since 9/11 when it provided sanctuary for al Qaeda and those who carried out the attacks on the World Trade Center. Its degree of religiosity has been moderated and it has become more of a countryside movement and revolutionary force, promising benefits to rural populations that are disenfranchised and exist in miserable conditions. The Taliban today is more of an opportunistic association of thugs, drug runners, ethnic nationalists, and tribal insurgents fueled in part by opium money, who are aligning themselves with the rural poor who do not have meaningful prospects of employment and who need basic human services. They are challenging forms of private and public authority in an attempt to bond with those outside the mainstream rural economy.

The al Qaeda objective is to encourage and to launch terrorist attacks in the U.S., although this basic premise is subject to scrutiny. In contrast, the Taliban, at this point, do not actively seek to attack the U.S. homeland. The Taliban objective is to force the U.S. to withdraw from Afghanistan and abandon its support of Pakistan.

Unlike the regionally focused Taliban, for which the counterinsurgency model seems to be gaining traction, al Qaeda is best dealt with globally through counterterrorism - the use of Special Forces for covert activity and rapid deployment, the focused use of force, and aerial drones. However, the conflict within Islam itself must ultimately be addressed in the long run, and for this ideological resolution, American support is of very limited value. Eventually moderate elements in the world of Islam will need to prevail against radical ideologies.

The Taliban's influence can ultimately be countered by economic reconstruction and the promise of a better way of life for the alienated rural poor. Rural construction projects, a robust role of international non-government organizations (NGOs), and the deployment of civilian experts to provide social services for the basics of life — shelter, foodstuffs, and public health for example. Until such time, there is a major role for the U.S. military and NATO coalition to contain the influence of the Taliban and to prevent it from achieving further penetration within Pakistan.

The Taliban is a formidable adversary, but they do have limitations: They do not have a conventional army, and the moderate Afghans fear them. The U.S. counterinsurgency campaign is based on “winning the hearts and minds” of the Afghan people. This requires meeting the goals of critical infrastructure, a politically stable central government, and economic prosperity. The most difficult task would be to overcome Islamist hostility to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

However, the Taliban have a significant advantage in the region because of their ethnicity and Islamic religious beliefs. In addition, their social service campaign has become effective, probably better than that of the Afghan central government. Because they thrive in remote regions, it is likely that the Taliban objective is to first control the outer provinces, but not the central governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Their strength is their proven ability to adapt to conditions on the ground. They are using the same “cultural anthropology” approach as the U.S. troops. The difference is that they have home field advantage, and that they are fellow Muslims.

A liberating force becomes an occupying force within a short period of time. U.S. troops have been in Afghanistan for eight years. Afghans do not like the U.S., notwithstanding strong humanitarian and economic contributions made to their society. A cohesive Afghan state is possible, but it could take a decade to achieve, with or without U.S. support. The result might be an Islamist theocracy, rather than a Western-style democracy. For these diplomatic reasons, the U.S. has not made a clear statement to the Afghan people that the primary reason for the U.S. presence in the region is to protect the U.S. homeland, to protect Pakistan (a major U.S. ally with nuclear weapons), and to do what it can to help Afghanistan rebuild.

What do the Afghan People Really Want?

The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan should not be developed in a partial vacuum – a U.S. perception of its interests in Afghanistan without due regard to what the Afghan people really want. The

counterinsurgency tactic is built upon the premise that, to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, the U.S. must provide them with those things that they perceive are needed and wanted. The U.S. troops on the ground in Afghanistan know the Afghan people and their wants, but this empirical information becomes diluted as it moves towards Washington, and is in jeopardy of disappearing, or not being fully utilized in the strategy development process.

Most of the following "wish list" items are personal safety and security interests that must be provided at the village level. These are components of the long-range nation-building project that is envisioned for Afghanistan.

- Eliminate Corruption: The government-related insiders gain from U.S. payments, and this causes hostility within the Afghan outsiders to the U.S. and the Afghan central government.
- Establish Rule of Law: The Afghan legal system is dysfunctional, particularly at the village level. The Taliban fill this need by providing a successful, rapid, and accessible justice system.
- Build the Economy: Lack of economic opportunity and high unemployment levels enable the Taliban to successfully recruit by providing a source of income.
- Improve Education: High illiteracy is a major problem for economic development. Educational opportunities need to be provided to all Afghans. The coalition solution has so far been to build schools. While this is a productive endeavor, it misses an underlying problem, which is a lack of effective teachers.
- Minimize Collateral Damage: High collateral damage to villagers caused by U.S. action creates hostility and the condition for al Qaeda and Taliban recruitment.

How Should the Obama Administration Define its Strategy in Afghanistan?

The details of the "New Afghanistan" package are identified in the President's statement that "U.S. security and economic prosperity depend on the security and prosperity of other states." This provides insight into the unstated dichotomy of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In essence, the U.S. deems Afghanistan to be important because of U.S. security interests – denying al Qaeda operational space in Afghanistan, and preventing the Taliban from launching terrorist attacks against Pakistan from ungoverned tribal border areas. The American humanitarian impulse to assist the Afghan people (nation building) is subordinate to the U.S. counterinsurgency goal.

A clearer version of the components of a new Afghan strategy might be:

- Refocus objectives by acknowledging that the Taliban is a major threat to U.S. interests.
- Elevate Pakistan as a potentially greater threat than Afghanistan if the Taliban and al Qaeda could gain access to nuclear weapons.

- Reach an accord with the Pakistan government that authorizes the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and special forces troops to operate in the Af-Pak tribal border regions.
- Remember the lessons learned training Iraq's security forces and apply them to training Afghan security forces on an accelerated basis. Reallocate deployment of U.S. forces, if necessary, for this mission.
- Invest sufficient funds and provide enough civilian technical advisors to provide economic and agricultural assistance to villagers. The efforts should complement, rather than replace, Afghani opium crops for the immediate future.
- Provide funds for micro-investment to address and achieve economic prosperity at the local village level. Large critical infrastructure investment would follow.
- Recognize that government corruption is culturally endemic in Afghanistan. Ensure that grants-in-aid focus on villages and provinces, with robust U.S. oversight, rather than giving grants directly to the central Afghan government.
- Recognize that winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people involves protecting villages from Taliban retribution by partnering with tribal leaders. A supplemental goal is to train and equip village militias, in addition to Afghan security forces, so that the local populations can protect themselves once American troops withdraw.
- Maintain a long-term view of the counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, which may require a minimum of three years to succeed. U.S. Public opinion may create political pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan. This will be a factor in the mid-term Congressional elections in November 2010, and in the November 2012 presidential election.
- Conduct periodic assessments of conditions on the ground and report back to the American public. These reports will need to communicate progress against clearly defined training metrics. Affordability will be a key variable in the cost-benefit analysis of future operations in Afghanistan.

Eliminating al Qaeda and Taliban personnel may be the easiest task to achieve. The other goal, nation building, is much more difficult. However, failure of one goal will decrease the success of the others, since these strategic goals are interdependent. All of these goals must be met to contribute to victory.

Potential Consequences of the Decision

Achieving these strategic objectives requires careful attention to complex tactical issues. Complications could arise from any number of areas, such as:

- The domestic U.S. political consequences of wartime decisions.
- The consequences of early withdrawal.
- The impact on U.S. relationships in the Middle East, including India, Iraq, Iran, and Israel.

Domestic Political Considerations

Conducting a war abroad is an extension of domestic politics. In the event that competing strategic options are in reasonable parity, it is possible that the President's difficult choice would be based on the preferences of his political constituency. Public support of war at its inception is usually high, based upon "rally-round the flag." However, as years drag on and casualties mount, the public becomes war-weary. Public antipathy motivates Congress, and, if anti-war demonstrations occur and reach a critical mass, they will be magnified by the media, resulting in increasing public pressure to end the war. Consequently, domestic politics will seriously affect any strategic plan.

Counterinsurgency tactics are risky from a domestic political perspective. A realistic time frame for a successful counterinsurgency campaign is an estimated 3-7 years, with no guarantee of victory. However, this could stretch much further, far beyond public patience.

Will the American public be patient? Affordability is a new concept that must be considered in light of domestic political agendas. The estimated expenses to be incurred in Afghanistan range from \$40 billion to \$60 billion per year at the current 68,000-troop level. An increase of 40,000 troops coupled with raising some 400,000+ Afghan military and police security forces could cost \$80 billion to \$100 billion. The consequence may be a comparison between unmet domestic social service needs and continuing the war.

The war in Afghanistan is in its ninth year. The American public is not yet "war weary" because, to date, there has been only limited public involvement. It is possible that the public may become more involved as time progresses when the financial costs of war in Afghanistan become known, and troop casualties mount. This could degrade support for the U.S. continuing presence in Afghanistan, including a vigorous anti-war protest movement. During times of economic prosperity, the public was not interested in the cost of war in Afghanistan. That has changed within the last year because of the economic downturn, a high unemployment rate, and enormous budget deficits. However, in the event of a large-scale al Qaeda attack in the U.S. homeland, support for the counterinsurgency campaign would increase.

Early Withdrawal

War must have an exit strategy. In Afghanistan, the U.S. must carefully consider the point at which withdrawal from the region would result in greater benefit than cost. On the positive side, withdrawal would limit more American, NATO, and allied casualties. In addition, the financial costs would be reduced greatly.

On the negative side, four consequences could occur. First, the Taliban could continue to gain in strength and ultimately dominate the outer provinces and possibly Kabul. The weakening of Afghanistan's government suggests that this is a serious possibility. Second, the Taliban could become an extraterritorial concern and spread further into Pakistan. Third, if the Taliban presence in Pakistan grows substantially, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal could be in jeopardy. Fourth,

although al Qaeda is an international operation, U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan could be perceived as a major Islamist victory.

Regardless of whether there is a troop increase, a stable troop level, or early withdrawal, there should be a rationale based on a clear objective, strategy, and tactical implementation. The objective needs to be reexamined. The strategy should then be formed. The tactical implementation should be deferred until these two conditions are met.

This discussion is based on speculation and intellectual abstractions – political, economic, and academic. What is missing are the anecdotal facts on the ground which are best supplied by U.S. troops in Afghanistan. They can provide evidence of the positive disposition of the Afghan people resulting from the individual acts of bravery and kindness of U.S. troops. The U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan are the best source of information and their evaluation of objectives, strategy, and tactics should be the point of departure for policy setting. The military ethic, which is at times at odds with the political imperative, is a commitment to victory. Anything less suggests that the investment of blood and treasure will have been wasted.