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## America's Strategic Intent Applied in South Asia

**Robert R. Scott**

Secretary of Defense Gates, in his prepared statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 27 January 2009 stated, "There is little doubt that our greatest military challenge right now is Afghanistan". The Secretary of Defense went on to describe the linkage between Afghanistan and Pakistan and that any solution will have to take both nations, and the rest of the region, into account. More importantly, the Administration signaled that it will increase the level of U.S. combat forces deployed to Afghanistan and refine its support to Pakistan in order to achieve a more stable environment in that region. Acknowledging the linkage between Afghanistan and Pakistan in any strategic engagement is an improvement in our understanding of the region.

### The VUCA World

Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) define the world we live in.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan and Pakistan are an example of the strategic dilemma facing the international community in the VUCA world. The strategic dilemmas facing the U.S., and by extension the rest of the world, defined by their intractable nature and characteristics, have driven many to approach them as "problems" that can be solved. The U.S. will not succeed in lessening either the number or nature of strategic dilemmas, if it continues to attempt to solve them as it has in the past. We must change the manner in which we view the paradigm that is the VUCA world from one of solving problems to one of managing strategic dilemmas.

A stated goal in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to provide the population a sense of security at the tactical level for the international community to exploit it at the strategic level to forge an agreement of cooperation amongst the regional and local players. This change in the status quo in Afghanistan and Pakistan would strike at the Anti-Coalition Militias (ACM), in the same way that attacks by drones from unmanned aerial vehicles, strikes at their perceived feeling of security in areas they deem to be "sanctuary". The ACM would feel that they were operating from a position of weakness and could seek a negotiated political settlement that ensured their survival. This would serve as the strategic opening that the international community has been searching for, since 9/11, to shape a regional system that denies safe havens to groups such as Al Qaeda in South Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> *Get There Early*, Bob Johansen, Berrett-Koefler Publishers, INC. San Francisco, p *xiii*

The ACM is a term used in the generic sense to capture the large number of groups in the region comprised by the border area of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The ACM are “swarms or smart mobs as Howard Rheingold calls them, *and* are “loosely connected, technology-amplified aggregations of people organizing around fluid topics and incentives”.<sup>2</sup> It is critical to accept that there is not a simple track into negotiating with the ACM because there is not a sole leader of the group. This makes the requirement for a refined strategic intent that will counter the ACM in South Asia, all the more critical. Critical because “the outcome of the conflict in Afghanistan is also central to a sustainment strategy as it will impact important regional dynamics involving China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and key Central Asian states.”<sup>3</sup>

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a great deal of work was devoted to defining the elements of national power, defining the facets of a grand strategy, and describing how “little” strategies flowed from a grand strategy. This approach will not work because the VUCA world requires a mixture of bottom-up approaches and top-down solutions. “Modern dilemmas have evolved beyond the traditional definition of dilemma, which focused on an either/or choice between two bad options. Webster’s defines a dilemma as “State of uncertainty or perplexity especially requiring a choice between equally unfavorable options”. In today’s complex world, choices are many (we face not just dilemmas with two choices, but *trilemmas* and *multilemmas*) - even as the context within which the dilemmas are arising is becoming more intractable.”<sup>4</sup>

### Strategic Intent in the VUCA World

David Ignatius, in *The Washington Post*, has identified the methods of the U.S. Government’s engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. “The Obama team’s broad goal for AFPAK is a three-way strategic engagement to fight a common enemy. This means billions in economic aid for a collapsing Pakistani economy; it means a new focus on fighting corruption in Afghanistan; and it may mean distancing the United States from President Hamid Karzai in advance of Afghanistan’s presidential elections in August.”<sup>5</sup> However, before bringing to bear economic aid, a focus on fighting corruption, and combat forces there, planners across the U.S. Government will need to define the threats there and in what manner to commit those forces and economic aid in support of the President’s yet to be released strategic intent. The planners and advisors must know the purpose, what we want to accomplish, and the endstate, what are we after. The President’s “Strategic Intent *should be* a clear, compelling, and concise statement that includes the following:

- Purpose: What do you want to accomplish? How is this purpose related to the larger mission of enterprise?
- Method or task: What needs to be done?
- End state: What ends are we pursuing?

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<sup>2</sup> *Get There Early*, Bob Johansen, Berrett-Koefler Publishers, INC. San Francisco, p 35

<sup>3</sup> “Making America Grand Again”, *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, by Shawn Brimley, Michelle Flournoy, Vikram J. Singh with contributions from Stefanie Garcia and Alice Hunt, June 2008, p 141

<sup>4</sup> *Get There Early*, Bob Johansen, Berrett-Koefler Publishers, INC. San Francisco, p 73

<sup>5</sup> “A Three-Pronged Bet on ‘AFPAK’” *The Washington Post*, By David Ignatius, Sunday, February 22, 2009

Strategic intent, with decentralized authority to execute and innovate within the boundaries of that intent, provides a practical way to engage with chaotic situations. A strategic intent should cascade across levels in the hierarchy (at least two levels down) and across organizational boundaries to provide a consistent direction and message. A strategic intent statement can be a bridge from the most senior officer to the on-the-ground leader who engages personally with those who must bring the intention to life in a practical way.”<sup>6</sup>

The President has not stated a refined strategic intent, grand strategy, or strategy for how the U.S. will deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the rest of the nations of the region. However, on February 9, 2009 the President gave his endstate when he said that his “bottom line is that we cannot allow al Qaeda to operate. We cannot have those safe havens in that region. And we're going to have to work both smartly and effectively, but with consistency, in order to make sure that those safe havens don't exist. I do not have yet a timetable for how long that's going to take. What I know is, I'm not going to make -- I'm not going to allow al Qaeda or bin Laden to operate with impunity, planning attacks on the U.S. homeland.”<sup>7</sup> The statement serves as an end state for South Asia because it clearly tells us what ends we are pursuing and it can be refined so that leaders at all stages of the spectrum know the reason behind their actions.

The civilian and military planners, who recommend the operational design to the Combatant Commander and the President, have not been provided a refined strategic intent that will enable them to recommend an operational design that allocates the elements of national power (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME)) effectively against the method that enables the accomplishment of the end state. The VUCA world is not dominated by two superpowers at different ends of the spectrum; therefore, the nation requires a strategic intent that allows for chaos, changing situations, and fluid interplay by state and non-state actors. “At its best, strategic intent facilitates agile response to unanticipated events through a consistent take-charge mentality within the framework of the intent.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Strategic Intent Applied in South Asia**

America and the international community require a refined strategic intent that enables the synchronization of our allies' contributions, the development of a narrative that explains to the world why we are engaged in South Asia, and facilitates cooperation across the international community. The fact remains that “in this world, nobody is really in control. For people who are experiencing more chaos than they can absorb, who are outside of their comfort zone, clarity looks like relief, and the need for relief feels urgent.”<sup>9</sup> Disengagement, in order to provide relief, is to allow the ACM freedom of action. The ACM will use that freedom of action to continue to attack the international system because that is how they rally individuals to the cause articulated in their strategic intent. “The principal stated aims of al-Qaeda are to drive Americans and American influence out of all Muslim nations, especially Saudi Arabia; destroy Israel; and topple pro-Western dictatorships around the Middle East. Bin Laden has also said that he wishes to

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<sup>6</sup> *Get There Early*, Bob Johansen, Berrett-Koefler Publishers, INC. San Francisco, p 54

<sup>7</sup> “Transcript: Obama Press Conference”, *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2009 From The White House, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/02/10/politics/100days/main4789627.shtml>.

<sup>8</sup> *Get There Early*, Bob Johansen, Berrett-Koefler Publishers, INC. San Francisco, p 54

<sup>9</sup> *Get There Early*, Bob Johansen, Berrett-Koefler Publishers, INC. San Francisco, p 54

unite all Muslims and establish, by force if necessary, an Islamic nation adhering to the rule of the first Caliphs."<sup>10</sup> Al Qaeda and the ACM have a clearly articulated strategic intent that guides their actions.

Although counterintuitive to our nature, we will be in a better position to apply the DIME once we accept that the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a strategic, long range, generational dilemma requiring our nation's involvement. Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason have described the "challenge for U.S. security interests in South Asia is thus, at its center, not a social problem, or a religious problem, or a generic "tribal" problem. It is a unique cultural problem, which is especially problematic for a country whose ethos and foreign policymaking paradigm is the national sublimation of culture in favor of assimilation through democracy."<sup>11</sup> They are correct in that the problem is a "unique cultural" one that is generational, however, America's Democracy does take into account the cultural background of its people. It is why the nation has survived the challenges of forming into a nation state, the Civil War, and its transition into the sole global power of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As the planners develop the operational design for the application of the DIME in Afghanistan and Pakistan, they will take into account the cultures of the population and focus on the ethnic diversity and varied geography there, and its impact on the tribal structures. With that in mind, the end state of the strategic intent for the GIRoA and international community over the next 12 months will be the successful conduct of the Presidential and Provincial Elections in August of 2009. In addition, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which operates under NATO in Afghanistan, in conjunction with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), must begin to set the conditions to challenge the resurgent ACM in 2010 and 2011.

The way ahead is to develop an operational design focused on engagement, based on America's strategic intent, which builds from the bottom up, rather than from the top down and does not overemphasize the primacy of tribes over ethnic groups. This means that the operational design focuses differently on ethnic groups, from the manner in which the "Sons of Iraq" were engaged, to take on the role of tribally based militias as part of the "Awakening" that took place in Al Anbar Province, Iraq. In Al Anbar, a key element of the US and Iraqi strategy was to engage the sheiks and leverage their networks in a top-down fashion. Another factor, which will have primacy in the planning process in helping to define the difference between the two nations, is that "Afghanistan has 55 ethnic groups who speak 45 languages."<sup>12</sup> There is not a single group of leaders for the ACM similar to the sheiks in Al Anbar and the complexity is exponential because of the large number of ethnic groups and languages or dialects spoken in that region.

Another key difference affecting the ethnic and tribal structure is the dichotomy of a predominantly rural agrarian society and one that is a more developed, petroleum-based industrial society. Because of these differences, the operational design in Afghanistan must shift from an over-reliance on as of yet non-existent strong central government and attempts to extend

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<sup>10</sup> "Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden's Network of Terror" by Laura Hayes, Borgna Brunner, and Beth Rowen <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/al-qaeda-terrorism.html>

<sup>11</sup> No Sign until the Burst of Fire, Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, *International Security*, Vol. 32, Mo. 4 (Spring 2008), p73

<sup>12</sup> Rethinking Governance in Afghanistan, Nigel J. R. Allan, *Journal of International Affairs*, Spring 2003, vol. 56, no.1, p 195

its reach to the provincial governments, to one that focuses on engagement at the district and village level. In addition, planners must take into account the requirement to plan for the role of geography in Afghanistan as described by Dr. Nigel Allan in his 2001 article where he states that “Simply put, space, or rather territory, must have representation in any future solution to this perennial problem of conflict.”<sup>13</sup> In this strategic dilemma, attention must be paid to the role of territory and space in the psyche of the ethnic groups. Moreover, how they view the GIRoA and ISAF in that space is critical. Defining that role and view will be an integral part of the operational design in support of the achievement of the President’s strategic intent.

The tribal structures in Afghanistan and Pakistan have proceeded through history in a state of flux, predominantly governed by survival. The requirement to survive has primacy for obvious reasons and drives the ACM to make or discard allegiances as they see fit in order to strengthen their perceived opportunities to survive. The GIRoA, ISAF and the international community must develop a method to promote economic growth, security, political systems, and the rule of law through the leveraging of ethnic and tribal customs and their methods for maintaining order. “The key to obtaining this objective is bringing about a balance between the creation of a strong and effective central government and the assurance of a degree of decentralization in an effort to secure some semblance of equal distribution and participation.”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The expansion of the President’s February 9, 2009 end state into his Strategic Intent for South Asia, using Bob Johansen’s model, will provide the necessary elements for the development of the regional strategies and operational campaign plans that facilitate the achievement of the ends we are pursuing. With that purpose, method, and end state the individuals who are trying to bring policy to reality will be able to act in the VUCA world to manage and shape the strategic dilemmas that we face and will continue to face into the future. We can no longer expect to defeat extremism in the short term, and need to adjust our paradigm to account for the long-term generational struggle that it will be.

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<sup>13</sup> *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, Nigel J. R. Allan, 2001, 42, No. 8, pp. 545-560.

<sup>14</sup> Afghanistan: Regaining Momentum, Ali A. Jalali, PARAMETERS, Winter 2007-2008, p9

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