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Is the War in Afghanistan in the Interests of the United States and its Allies?

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Is the war in Afghanistan in the interests of the United States and its allies? If so, at what point do the resources we are expending become too high a cost to bear? What are the strategic limitations of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and operations? And if the war is not in the interests of the United States and its allies, what are U.S. and allied interests in South and Central Asia – and how do you propose to secure them?

Beyond the hyperbole that Afghanistan is a graveyard of empires, current misconceptions and conventional ‘wisdom’ could certainly lead the United States to a similar fate as our Victorian British or Soviet predecessors. Aside from 1842 or 1979 allegories, neither US policy nor grand strategy in 2009 can justify long-term military (General Purpose Force) presence in Afghanistan. Plainly put, creating, defending, and institutionalizing top-to-bottom cultural, governance, or humanitarian reforms in Afghanistan are not vital national interests to the United States. With those *ends* outside the precepts of stated US policy, there is no justification for any of the *ways and means* of armed nation-building, security or stability operations, or anti-drug operations conducted by the US military in Afghanistan.

The only hypothesis that can begin to explain the continued military presence in Afghanistan is the theory that defense of the homeland begins at the Hindu Kush; we fight them there so we don’t have to fight them here. The immediate corollary being to prevent another ‘strategic shock’ like the events of 9/11, we must secure and stabilize the ungoverned, radical breeding ground from which they were hatched and could once again return to set up shop anew. There are multiple flaws in this argument which, taken at face value, yields a slippery slope of never-ending military engagements for anyplace we find an ‘ungoverned space’ or anywhere we find extremist elements which violently disagree with US policy or presence. Furthermore, this “strategy” to use the term loosely, will forever keep us on the strategic defensive, letting the ‘enemy’ call the shots while not enabling us to see beyond the tactical, threat-focused lens of the Cold War’s dead-and-buried paradigm.

The specified tasks, and therefore justification for, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM were limited: to destroy terrorist training camps and infrastructure within Afghanistan, capture al-Qaeda leaders, and, through military means, forcibly stop terrorist activities in Afghanistan. These tasks were (and still are) squarely within the realm of our vital national interests. Although

the war we are currently fighting addresses *national interests*, they are not *vital* national interests. This differentiation has largely escaped the debate on our necessity for presence, for *military* presence, in Afghanistan and therefore must be reengaged.

To be clear, a vital national interest is that which is directly tied to our national peace and security. If these interests are threatened the nation itself is at existential risk. Therefore, defense of those interests deemed as ‘vital’ *requires* a national commitment to expend blood and treasure. A *national interest*, however, requires a less kinetic, less direct approach to enable and promote. National interests (as opposed to *vital* national interests) are the hallmarks of what makes America great; these are the intangible but necessary factors (for us) that allow people of a union to create and maintain a great nation-state. These interests will allow personal, economic, and human freedoms and rights to flourish, and when and where possible, we will assist partner nations to grow towards and live up to them. For when national interests align between nations, mutual benefits are easier to realize and attain. Not securing *national* interests will not existentially threaten our nation.

OEF, through the lens of vital national interests, was largely won but for some inexplicable reason we have not realized it. What is worse, we allowed our strategy to change before the initial, imperative mission was fully accomplished. Having to a great extent captured, killed, and seriously disrupted the al-Qaeda leadership and training infrastructure in Afghanistan, the necessity, and therefore strategy for *this* war, has gotten away from us. This is true for one reason and one reason alone: we have transferred the consequence of the very real threat of al Qaeda to the Taliban, to fields of Afghan poppies, and to the political and economic shambles that was and is Afghanistan. These things are not existential threats to our nation. With public debate and approval, they might be worthy of continued political and economic transformation and support through other aspects of national power, but not wholesale military intervention.

It is not a threat to the United States if the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan decides to live as if it were in the 15th century and create laws to mandate it. It is not a threat to the U.S. if they decide to ban women from attending school or stone them for adultery or not wearing a headscarf correctly. Nor is it a threat if poppies are their main cash crop. These are all variously horrible, unfortunate, and things we would like to see change, but do not constitute a direct, existential threat to the United States requiring a military response. Therefore, if the direct threats are not the Taliban (who was in power minding their own business since 1996), Sharia law (which has been used in various countries at various levels of fundamentalism for over 1400 years without being a threat to us), drugs, or necessarily even the failed or ungoverned state itself (of which examples have always been present on the global stage, also without being a threat to us), what are they? The direct threat was and is the loosely tied organization of al Qaeda and its affiliates. They are best destroyed just as we successfully prosecuted the early stages of OEF- through a combination of limited relationship building with local populations, deployments of Special Operations Forces, thorough intelligence, and targeted airstrikes. When we need to, our nation can call upon these assets to attack and defeat these threats. Then those assets can come home. Any continued presence should only be conducted by the occasional SOF, Foreign Service Officers, and/or USAID representatives (in permissive environments) to maintain networks of relationships when and where necessary and promote US interests. If al Qaeda were to again coalesce in Afghanistan, we would find, fix, and kill/capture them. This is the same strategy we

follow when we find them anywhere else, be it Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan, or Newark, NJ. Why, then, does only Afghanistan warrant a total military-led effort to redesign their culture, system of government, and market-base based on US biases?

As Sun Tzu said, "Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." What is facing us now is a series of tactics and operations with no overlying match of policy and strategy. Even if there is a higher strategy that is in line with national policy, this policy does not pass the "Family Factor" test that Kent Johnson defines in his article "Political-Military Engagement Policy: Casualty Avoidance and the American Public." (Aerospace Power Journal, Spring 2001) Our limited war in early OEF quickly and silently evolved into something different with the intent of removing the Taliban in their entirety and 'enabling' a centralized democracy to exist where none has before. After the war for our vital national interests, we allowed our nation's military to be the tool used to secure interests of a far less critical nature; to forcibly promote our beliefs of human rights, economic freedoms, and individual liberties. In our best Wilsonian imitation, we are determined to bestow the Peace of Westphalia upon Afghanistan, create a sovereign state in the best Western sense of the word, and allow them to move through the "majestic portal" to bring them into the family of evolved nations. Somehow, this will be better for America than whatever locally legitimate ruling authority rises to power in Kabul or the rest of Afghanistan's provinces. In a utopian world, this might be fine, but in reality, where the native Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek people get a vote, it yields the quagmire we face today. Not only is this outside of our initial (and again, largely complete) mission in Afghanistan, it is outside of both the pragmatism and necessity of realpolitik and realism on one side and any cost-benefit analysis of political idealism on the other. To think that to secure the US homeland from attack we must install an amenable democratic government in Kabul awakens definite parallels in Afghani history.

Field Marshall Frederick Roberts who, during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, led a successful attack against Kabul and the later 300-miles-in-3-weeks march from Kandahar to Kabul (to rescue an embattled British force) eventually said: "The less they see of us, the less they'll dislike us." In the end, he, and the British parliament, realized that after three consecutive wars in the same region for the same strategic purpose, Afghanistan wasn't as strategically important to the British as they had supposed all along. In their effort to maintain varying levels of control or influence in Afghan affairs to counter supposed Russian aims on British India, the British fought three politically debilitating wars with the Afghans resulting in *less* regional influence, *less* control, and *more* loss of life each time. They would eventually conclude that if the Russians wanted to attack British India through Afghanistan, they, the British, should let them. The impossible task and effort of maintaining influence over the Afghans was inordinate compared to the cost of defending India at the gates of India, not at the Hindu Kush. Invading Afghanistan was easy; the follow-on governing was impossible. It would be far easier to let Russia try and stretch their LOCs and expend their blood and treasure through unconquerable Afghan territory to get to India, not the reverse.

Something about Afghanistan must breed strategic overstretch. As British 'Forward Policy' of the 19th century delivered three strategically unwinnable wars, we similarly seem to think defense of the homeland begins at the Hindu Kush; that we must fight them there so we don't have to fight them here. The British realized in their successive efforts that punitive strikes and raids when necessary into Afghanistan were far more effective in the long run than trying to

maintain even a semi-permanent presence and installing British-friendly (malleable) governments.

Beyond the supposed and indefensible argument that the Taliban provides us with an existential threat, we have allowed something far more insidious to occur; we have enabled al Qaeda of the 21st century to replace Russia of the 19th century in the way we, and the Victorian British before us, looked at and dealt with the territory and peoples of Afghanistan. Academically, the parallel is illuminating; in reality, it is tragic. Al Qaeda, far from requiring a massive, conventional military deployment (nor a global war on terrorism), should in actuality warrant only local police actions. If that is not possible or within the capacity of local forces, a “low-intensity,” small footprint, or otherwise limited US response to negate that threat where present would suffice. This should be the modus operandi in Afghanistan, Yemen, central or northern Africa, Indonesia, or anywhere else. Large-scale deployments or nation building are not the answer. If for no other reason than to point out the fact that we do not see the need to try and “fix” every other un- or under-governed space across the world or forcibly promote our national interests everywhere else they might differ from our own. “Fixing” Afghanistan is not a vital national interest.

Even assuming that the “threat” of the Taliban and a failed state of Afghanistan is existential to the United States, there still remains a core problem that remains unresolved in our attempt to secure and stabilize Afghanistan to prevent a repeat of 9/11: we still cannot define who the enemy is and why they are fighting us. The following quote will explain why:

"Is it according to the usages of war to treat as felons men who resist invasion?" -- The Bombay Review newspaper commenting on the nature of Gen Roberts' invasion into Kabul during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (October 1879)

This quote from 130 years ago highlights the current debate between wars with the Taliban with a big "T" versus one with a small "t." There are those “militants” who can be negotiated with and those that cannot, primarily because of the reasons why they are fighting. To paint the disparate groups, tribes, and their various reasons for fighting (or fighting back at) US forces all as Taliban 'terrorists' cut from the same cloth is a self-defeating prospect. If we can agree on two 'separate' Talibans (as both Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal agree), what does that say about our COIN tactics that we call in Predator strikes against anyone who shoots at us? What, and who's war are we fighting? Let us not fall prey to Clausewitz' admonition that we enter into a war that 1) we are not prepared to fight, or 2) mistake for something different. Beyond that, the question must be asked if targeting Pakistani “Taliban” is beneficial to the fight in Afghanistan. The death of Baitullah Mehsud will certainly find proponents in the Government of Pakistan, but fitting his personal target folder into the larger strategy in Afghanistan is troublesome at best. This dilemma defines the issue (even presupposing that the Taliban must be destroyed): given current strategy, it is impossible to differentiate between local clan wars for power, insurgencies with other aims, and what they have to do with vital interests. Localized populations perceiving the government in Kabul as illegitimate is not our fight. Fighting the South Waziristan Taliban for the Pakistani's is certainly not our fight. Pakistan's nuclear weapons are not at risk to the Taliban nor is Islamabad in danger of falling; if those are the only reasons for direct US action across the Durand Line, it is a very weak casus belli at best.

Today, tactics and operations are underway in Afghanistan with no solid answer to what strategy they follow. We do not know what our end-game in Afghanistan is. We do not know what that will look like to define when we can expect to leave. And there are certainly other national priorities to pay for. As the British eventually found out after a failed strategy in the 19th century, it will be cheaper and leave us safer in the long run to simply use our military in a punitive manner if and when non-state groups, or the government of Afghanistan itself, again display a threat to US vital interests. The current war in Afghanistan is not justifiable by the definition of a vital national interest. Furthermore, nowhere else do we have vital national interests in Central Asia. National interest abound in the region (human rights, oil to European markets through the Caucasus, free markets, etc.) but they are best served by the pillars of government and the instruments of national power best associated with national interests: diplomacy and economics to promote our desires. If a threat to our vital national interests arise, and diplomacy fails to settle the issue through coercion or deterrence, the nation's military will be used through an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will.

Major Jeremy Kotkin entered the US Air Force as a communicator in 1995, through the ROTC program at Rutgers University, NJ. He spent 12 years in the USAF and deployed with NATO/SFOR during Operation JOINT FORGE and deployed overseas to Germany, Korea, Japan, Italy, and Bosnia. In 2008, he performed an inter-service transfer to the US Army and entered as a Functional Area-59, Strategist, and was assigned to the J5 shop at US Special Operations Command. He attended the Strategic Arts Program at Carlisle Barracks, PA earlier this year and is currently working on developing the command strategy for US Special Operations Command.

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