



## Operational Check-Fire: An Assessment of Our Operational Concept of Operations in Support of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Interagency Policy and Goals

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The U.S. approach toward Afghanistan and Pakistan has seen marked changes since the transition from the George W. Bush administration to the Barack Obama administration during January of this year. With a new president came a new policy, fresh leadership, and a modified military/ diplomatic approach. Once new leadership was installed, an increase of 21,000 additional military personnel was announced, meaning that currently, 68,000 U.S. forces are present in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Forces have expanded offensive operations and are concentrating on two fronts. The first is the eastern border provinces with Pakistan, a traditional logistics route for Taliban and Haqqani Network forces, which also use the border area for safe havens, training, recruiting, and command & control. The second is southern Afghanistan where the Taliban loyalists of Kandahar and Helmand Province have had a menacing and somewhat dominant presence for years. Even now, some legislators and military commanders are calling for an even greater presence of U.S. forces, as Afghanistan has rapidly shifted from a delaying effort to the pivotal point of strategic policy. Meanwhile, some political pundits are already referring to Afghanistan as “Obama’s Vietnam”, even though some elements of the outlined civil-military objectives are only now being implemented.<sup>2</sup> While the political-military debate is likely to continue for some time, it is prudent to review the core goals for the region and evaluate if the ongoing U.S. operational approach is in fact supporting accomplishment of those goals. What is the strategic vision for Afghanistan and Pakistan? Which tasks and objectives support that strategic vision? Has operational success (or failure) had an impact on those strategic goals?

The “core goal” for Afghanistan and Pakistan is clearly articulated in the Obama administration’s *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*.<sup>3</sup> This White Paper, published during March 2009 following a 60-day interagency policy review, justifies further involvement in the region as a vital national security

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<sup>1</sup> See Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates Comments from June 10, 2009, discussing the new “Af-Pak” strategy, and the hope that momentum will shift away from the insurgents over the next year to 18 months. Of note, he does not address or refer to al Qaeda.

<sup>2</sup> See the February 9, 2009 Newsweek magazine cover story, *Obama’s Vietnam*, John Barry and Evan Thomas, also available online at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/182650>

<sup>3</sup> See White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group’s Report on Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/.../Afghanistan-Pakistan\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/.../Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf). The paper is not dated.

interest to the United States. The paper lays out the equivalent of a mission statement, operational objectives, and recommended actions. Unfortunately, it also serves as a stark reminder that there is still much to learn about the cultural, social, and political domain of Central Asia. The stated operational goals and objectives do not support U.S. core interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The high point of the white paper is the succinct articulation of a mission statement. It reads [the] “...core goal of the U.S...” is “...to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and eliminate its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent its return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.” An interagency policy paper generally does not contain a mission statement. Mission statements are normally associated with military operational objectives. The Department of State does not use any language that could be considered a mission statement in strategic or operational correspondence. This inclusion is noteworthy for its clarity and implied preeminence of a military operation. As such, this mission statement deserves further analysis, in order to assess the remainder of the paper regarding ongoing operations:

- a. This is predominately a military mission. While it is important to note that the paper is an Interagency Policy Group report, the goal of this mission is to “...disrupt, dismantle, and defeat.” Clearly, there is a role for all players of the interagency, but no entity can disrupt, dismantle, and defeat an adversary quite like the Department of Defense. Therefore, it is fair to imply that, from an interagency perspective, the Department of Defense has the lead, with other departments supporting that effort.
- b. The U.S. has regional concerns for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both countries are mentioned. Both countries are of strategic interest. Al Qaeda cannot be allowed to operate in either country.
- c. The target is al Qaeda, not the Taliban. Taliban is not mentioned in the mission statement. This one statement demonstrates a remarkable contrast between the current operational fight, clearly focused on the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the strategic mission. Success will not be realized until this strategic – operational disconnect is rectified.

Current operations do not support accomplishment of the strategic goals. The current campaign, directed by General Stanley McChrystal, does not contain the keys to strategic success. The operational campaign must be drastically modified. Shortfalls and inconsistencies between the strategic core goal and ongoing operations include:

- a. The U.S. is focused on the wrong enemy. Recently, General McChrystal noted that there are likely no major al Qaeda forces operating within Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Our military effort is predominately fixed on attacking Taliban, not al Qaeda forces. In fact, the additional forces currently deployed to the region are focused in Southern Afghanistan, particularly

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<sup>4</sup> General McChrystal stated on September 11, 2009, while meeting with reporters at the Dutch Defense Ministry, The Hague, Netherlands “I do not see indications of a large al-Qaida presence in Afghanistan now...”, as reported by Mike Corder, Associated Press.

Helmand Province, where al Qaeda has likely not had a significant presence since early 2002.

- b. Somehow, the U.S. has become convinced that al Qaeda wants to return to Afghanistan, while no evidence supports that concern. The White Paper states "...this group [al Qaeda] wants to reestablish their old sanctuaries in Afghanistan."<sup>5</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. Al Qaeda has transformed itself as a global terrorist organization many times over since 9/11. There is absolutely no motivation for them to return to Afghanistan.
- c. The U.S. remains focused on development, civilian assistance, capacity building, and bolstering legitimacy of the Afghan government, when there is no compelling U.S. security need to do so.<sup>6, 7</sup> It is time to extinguish the well-meaning but grandiose delusions of development for Afghanistan and accept the reality that little has changed socially, culturally, or economically in this region since Genghis Khan was the prominent regional power in the early 1200s. Truly, not much has changed in the past eight hundred years. Afghanistan is really nothing more than a city-state (Kabul) surrounded by tribal and provincial power mongers, interspersed with a handful of warlords. This assorted body is accountable to no one, certainly not to the central government of Afghanistan, which cannot even maintain control or ensure safe passage even ten miles outside of Kabul.
- d. U.S. forces have freely restricted movement and operations along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, while the adversaries are not doing the same. In fact, the limits of advance are widely known, and they are being exploited daily by an enemy that has been granted safe haven in expansive parts of Pakistan. While the mission is to defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens, the U.S. has acquiesced on conducting significant offensive operations within Pakistan, citing the need for a strong partnership with the government. Contrary to stated policy goals, al Qaeda safe havens, recruiting operations, and command & control activities have been permitted to go on, with minimal risk to their operational success. By placing restraints on a physical environment where the enemy has none, U.S. forces continue to provide ample opportunity for al Qaeda to maintain and even increase the number and capabilities of safe havens that they have in the region.

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<sup>5</sup> See White Paper.

<sup>6</sup> See General Jones' comments from the PBS interview with Jim Lehrer. In the Lehrer interview, he notes "What we're really worried about is economic development and reconstruction and also governance and rule of law. We believe that it's clear that, over the years, that we've won all of our military battles, we've managed to restore order to large parts of the country, although we've slipped in the south in the last couple of years. But in the main, we do well militarily. It's the other two pieces that have been lacking in cohesion and coordination."

<sup>7</sup> The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) website contains a brief by Andrew Wilder, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, entitled "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Effectiveness of Aid as a Stabilization Tool in Afghanistan". See <http://www.usip.org>. In reviewing the USAID experience in Afghanistan from 1950-1979, Wilder concludes "Aid as a tool of diplomacy has its limitations when politically motivated commitments are at much higher levels – and promise more – than can reasonably be delivered in economic returns."

- e. Dedicating any U.S. resources toward the task of “Breaking the link between narcotics and the insurgency” is a distraction from the core strategic goal, and is even working against accomplishment of our mission. If the focus is truly al Qaeda, not Taliban forces, the U.S. should be looking at options to de-link the Taliban from becoming dependent, and thus supportive of al Qaeda goals. While drug trafficking is not to be condoned, it offers an alternative means of funding and support for the Taliban (from al Qaeda). Every soldier and Marine spending a day conducting counter-narcotics operations is a day not spent focusing on al Qaeda.<sup>8, 9</sup>
- f. There is a general false belief that the Pakistani government controls the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). In fact, the Pakistani government has largely ceded political control of both areas to Islamic fundamentalists who are directly supporting Taliban and al Qaeda operations. This is the same area where al Qaeda has established safe havens – the same area where al Qaeda command & control continues to be maintained even eight years after the 9/11 attack on the homeland. There are not just a few locations where al Qaeda is operating in these regions...there are several.<sup>10</sup>
- g. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the U.S. do not share the same goals or objectives. The Afghan government’s fundamental goal is simple...survival. While the U.S. continues to focus on U.S. casualties and percentages of attacks, some have missed a fundamental point - the principal target for Taliban and Haqqani Network forces is Kabul, the economic and political center of gravity...NOT U.S. forces. Security within Kabul, and in fact long-term survival of the Afghan government operating from this city-state is not assured. In Pakistan, the goal is also one of political survival, but that is only the start. Pakistan does not want to be considered a proxy for the United States. They consider themselves a regional nuclear power. As such, maintaining independence from the U.S.

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<sup>8</sup> See Counter-Narcotics in Afghanistan: The Failure of Success?, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Briefing Paper Series by David Mansfield and Adam Pain, December, 2008. The paper outlines the challenges of associating short-term poppy cultivation rates with security and economic issues. AREU is an independent research organization located in Kabul, Afghanistan. See <http://www.areu.org.af> for this report and other AREU publications.

<sup>9</sup> See Reconstructing Afghanistan: Government Response to the Committee’s Fourth Report of Session 2007-08, a report from the United Kingdom House of Commons, International Development Committee, Third Special Report of Session 2007-08. Available online at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk>. Page 16 and 17 address *Narcotic and counter-narcotics*, the paragraph 134 notes “Wide-scale eradication has not contributed to a sustainable reduction in poppy cultivation in many provinces. We believe that while eradication has a legitimate role, for example in targeting large landowners, an excessive focus on it and on reducing acreage under poppy cultivation has been at the expense of the creation of qualitative changes in rural livelihood opportunities.” “Poppy cultivation can be an attractive choice in a high risk environment, especially for poor farmers. We believe that expectations that poppy cultivation will be reduced over a short period are misplaced. Given the heavy reliance on poppy cultivation for household income, any enforced dramatic reduction would have significant negative social, political and economic consequences.” [Page 17, Paragraphs, 134, 139].

<sup>10</sup> For further information on the political-military challenges for the NWFP and FATA, see President Obama’ Policy Options in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Hassan Abbas, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 26 January 2009. The report is available online at <http://www.belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu>.

for policy formulation and operational execution is very important. Additionally, al Qaeda and Taliban operations within FATA and NWFP are generally not perceived as a threat to the security of the country. In fact, India, the Kashmir region, and continued development as a regional nuclear power all trump any discussion of terrorist threats on most days of the week. Finally, U.S. goals are not clear to players in the region, and likely not even to the U.S. public. Is the objective the defense of Afghanistan? Is it defeat of the Taliban? Or is it defeating al Qaeda? After conducting offensive operations in the region for almost eight years, success has not been achieved in any of those areas, so it is only fair to expect some confusion regarding the current operational approach, which looks very much like more of the same.

The U.S. must radically shift the operational approach in order to achieve strategic success. Tactically, soldiers and Marines continue to perform admirably. But where is the linkage between their tactical proficiency and accomplishment of strategic goals? The answer lies in the ability to wage an operational campaign that is achievable, relevant to strategic goals, and acceptable in regard to risk (political, economic, and national resources). The operational campaign should:

- a. De-link Taliban forces from al Qaeda. Surprisingly little has been done to effectively drive a wedge between the Taliban and al Qaeda forces. Rather, the bonds have been strengthened by a lack of political and cultural understanding for the region. In fact, Taliban and al Qaeda forces do not share the same goals. Instead of collectively addressing the Taliban and al Qaeda as the threat, U.S. military commanders should be encouraged to hold direct talks with Taliban provincial and local leaders, explaining that the intent is to destroy al Qaeda forces - that as long as Taliban forces play no part in supporting al Qaeda, they would be allowed to operate freely within the province. If, on the other hand, the Taliban forces fail to sever ties with al Qaeda, they will be destroyed. The results of this change, of course, supported by an aggressive information operations campaign and strong offensive action if needed, would be a game-changer. Further, it ensures that the main effort for military operations shifts to an achievable, definable, relevant target...al Qaeda.
- b. Cease and desist all counter-narcotics initiatives. Ensure that Taliban forces understand that, while drug trafficking is not condoned; their operations will not be interfered with as long as they maintain no contact or supporting relationship with al Qaeda.
- c. Answer non-compliance by the Taliban (i.e. ongoing support for al Qaeda) with overwhelming military force, focused on offensive operations directly into 'areas of default'. Maintain offensive operations until the Taliban is destroyed at the local level or their support for al Qaeda ceases...and make those conditions clearly understood on the ground.
- d. Cease and desist immediately all thought of a clear, hold, and build strategy, as was conducted in Iraq. Forces are not available to hold broad areas of Afghanistan (Afghanistan is larger than Iraq both in area and population), and there is no

infrastructure on which to build. Afghanistan is not Iraq, Pakistan is not Iraq, and there is no 'cookie cutter' solution to the complex problems of the region.

- e. Focus on Pakistan, not Afghanistan. The U.S. has placed an artificial demarcation line along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, which has given al Qaeda the ability to operate from safe havens within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North West Frontier Province. Imagine if tomorrow, the U.S. homeland were hit again with a devastating attack on the scale of a 9/11 event...only this time, the planning, command & control was found to have been conducted from within Pakistan instead of Afghanistan. Would there be any hesitation before striking offensively at the targets within Pakistan? No, there would be no hesitation. And yet, today, the U.S. has effectively given al Qaeda an area to operate with relative impunity, while thousands of U.S. forces are arrayed to the west, against another military force that does not share the culture, language, or strategic ambitions of al Qaeda. One can only wonder what they must think of the actions during the past eight years.
- f. Al Qaeda, al Qaeda, al Qaeda. Focus all intelligence and military operations on defeating al Qaeda.... If military operations are focused on al Qaeda, there is no longer a requirement to conduct operations across entire Afghani provinces, such as Helmand; there is no need to maintain strong points of defense along the Korengal Valley. Instead, military forces will operate from several forward operating bases (FOBs) already established, responding only to direct intelligence about al Qaeda. With our new posture and focus on al Qaeda, our relations with the local populace will change over time. New sources of intelligence will be built. New relationships with local leaders will develop. And, the force protection posture will actually improve, as U.S. forces are no longer seen as a threat by the local Afghani and Pakistani populace.
- g. Stop all development and capacity building activities. There is no measureable relationship between these activities and strategic or operational success in the region. These capacity-building actions are largely based on a western perspective of what some think the Afghani or Pakistani populations need, likely reinforced by local government leaders who may be well-meaning or see an opportunity for increased graft and corruption with every new project. After spending billions of dollars in the region, the security and stability situation is more tenuous today than even five years ago. There is simply no value-added or return on investment; these activities serve as a distraction from accomplishing other relevant operational goals.
- h. No refuge, no quarter...destroy al Qaeda. When General McChrystal returns to Washington, DC in coming weeks for testimony in front of the House Armed Services Committee and Senate Armed Services Committee, one can only imagine a member of congress asking "General, do we know where there are any al Qaeda safe havens, but have decided not to attack them due to political sensitivity or concern over what our allies would say?" Imagine if the answer were in the affirmative. U.S. forces must be prepared to strike targets without notifying the sovereign state. Al Qaeda is operating from within villages, mosques, and other areas that they consider safe due to concern for collateral damage. These concerns go BEYOND the legal constraints of the Law of Land Warfare.

U.S. forces can no longer offer quarter and refuge to al Qaeda...in any country...at any time. Actions may include strikes using precision guided munitions, special forces, or even traditional raid forces at the operational commander's disposal...but no quarter can be given to al Qaeda. Remember the stated goal "...disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan..."

If a mission is related to U.S. national interests, ensure that U.S. forces are responsible for success...period. In other words, proxy armies cannot be relied upon. As noted, different players have different interests. Reliance on Afghan security forces, the Pakistani Army, or even NATO forces is a mistake when it relates to the core goal of defeating al Qaeda. Therefore, the training and equipping of Afghan and Pakistani forces should be left to other players (NATO) who also have an interest in the region. U.S. assets, however, should remain focused on the destruction of al Qaeda.

The current operational campaign in Afghanistan is not supporting strategic success. In some areas, actions on the ground are actually working against those objectives. Status quo is neither politically acceptable nor operationally tenable, so a course change is imperative. Efforts must be re-focused on al Qaeda instead of Taliban forces, and other distracters, such as counter-narcotics operations, must be dropped from the equation. Al Qaeda, not the Taliban, is intent on striking western targets again, including in the U.S. homeland, and all of the interagency effort must be shifted to ensuring their destruction. The Taliban, on the other hand, is a regional player with no global ambition or design. They are vulnerable to 'de-linkage' from al Qaeda, because they have different motivations and goals...though U.S. actions to date have made those linkages stronger, not weaker. This campaign does not need to be critiqued as another Vietnam, in that there is an opportunity now to shift the focus, re-engage the principal threat (al Qaeda), and achieve that rare combination of tactical, operational, and strategic success.

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