



Planning a Military Campaign to Support Negotiations in Afghanistan

Bernard I. Finel

The policy debate in Washington over Afghanistan periodically lurches from irrational exuberance over the prospects of defeating the insurgency there to a sullen “throw the baby out with the bathwater” phase where everyone begins to talk about an “exit strategy” without much sense of what is left behind. In December 2009, the strategy was to defeat the insurgency, end corruption, and train up a viable Afghan national security apparatus. By later spring 2010, pessimism had set in and prominent analysts both inside and outside the government are now talking about much more modest goals focused on counter-terrorism and regional militias.¹ With the firing of General Stanley McChrystal and his replacement with counterinsurgency guru General David Petraeus, enthusiasm is again on the upswing.

Unfortunately, neither the overly optimistic assessments nor the overly pessimist are likely to be borne out. As a practical matter the United States is unlikely to be able to fully defeat the insurgency – not necessarily because any shortfalls in military capacity, but rather because of the fundamental implausibility of the non-military elements of modern counterinsurgency doctrine. Economic development is hard enough to promote under ideal circumstances²; it is virtually impossible under conditions of “opposed development”³ where an armed group is actively trying to prevent the initiative from being successful. Anti-corruption initiatives are rarely successful as well and anti-drug programs almost always fail. Clearing insurgent controlled areas is relatively easy. Holding those areas against insurgent activities is costly but not fundamentally impossible. But building responsive and resilient local governance is at this point purely in the realm of conjecture.

But if the counterinsurgency model is flawed in its overly optimistic assessment of the non-military tools available, the alternative approach focused on a rapid transition to a smaller footprint in Afghanistan is also flawed. A smaller footprint approach would have made sense

¹ Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, “Targeted Killing Is New U.S. Focus in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2010; Anthony H. Cordesman, “Realism in Afghanistan: Rethinking an Uncertain Case for the War,” CSIS, June 10, 2010. <http://csis.org/publication/realism-afghanistan-rethinking-uncertain-case-war> (accessed August 10, 2010); David Barno, “The Afghan tests facing Petraeus,” *Financial Times*, July 6 2010; Alissa J. Rubin, “Afghans to Form Local Forces to Fight Taliban,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2010.

² William Easterly, *White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

³ United States Institute for Peace Panel, “Opposed Development: Concept and Implications,” June 16, 2010. <http://www.usip.org/newsroom/multimedia/video-gallery/opposed-development-concept-and-implications>.

back in 2009, and it may be the best long-term approach. But for the next 12-24 months at least the United States is going to have in the neighborhood of 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. The key is to use this deployment to best effect.

The United States ought to use its temporary increase in combat power in a concerted effort to bludgeon, coerce, and cajole insurgent forces to the negotiating table. In the end, a small-footprint, counter-terrorism approach may be the most cost-effective hedge against disorder in Afghanistan. But in the short-run, transitioning to that approach should not be main task of U.S. forces. Instead, the primary objective for the United States ought to be to promote the development of an inclusive political settlement – one that presumes a legitimate governance role for many current insurgent groups.

Peace talks in Afghanistan got off to a rocky start with a series of Taliban suicide attacks launched against President Karzai's Peace Jirga.⁴ Nevertheless, the gathering of 1600 Afghan delegates to this conference was a significant development in the evolution of the conflict. While none of the major insurgent groups participated, the meeting clearly demonstrated that the preferred path for Karzai's government is now one of reconciliation rather than military victory.⁵ Karzai's formation of a 70-member "peace council" in September 2010 was another positive step⁶, as is the Taliban's recent willingness to negotiate.⁷

Ultimately, stability can only come as a result of Afghan political choices, and the message from President Karzai government is clear: the time to begin negotiations to end the Afghan war is now. In part this is a function of skepticism on Karzai's part about the ability of the NATO coalition to defeat the insurgency,⁸ but Karzai has been reaching out to the insurgents for several years now and clearly seems the possibility for some sort of compromise peace.⁹

The challenge for the United States, however, is that American interests and Afghan interests coincide only partially. Without any American input, a reconciliation process in Afghanistan could easily result in an agreement that maximizes the interests of various Afghan actors, while ignoring legitimate American security concerns. The essence of American strategy must now be to shape the negotiation process in such a way that it both increases the chances for a durable settlement, but also ensure that any such settlement take into account American security concerns.

⁴ Cavendish, Julius. "Taliban Rocket Attack Shakes Peace Congress in Afghanistan." *The Independent*, 3 June 2010. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/taliban-rocket-attack-shakes-peace-congress-in-afghanistan-1989944.html>. (Accessed June 15, 2010).

⁵ "Afghan Peace Jirga Backs Karzai Taliban Talks Proposal." *The BBC*, 4 June 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/south_asia/10234823.stm. (Accessed June 15, 2010).

⁶ Carlotta Gall, "Karzai Names Peace Panel for Taliban Negotiations," *New York Times*, 28 September 2010.

⁷ Karen DeYoung, Peter Finn and Craig Whitlock, "Taliban in Talks with Karzai," *Washington Post*, 6 October 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/05/AR2010100506636.html>

⁸ Filkins, Dexter. "Karzai is Said to Doubt West Can Defeat Taliban." *The New York Times*, 11 June 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/12/world/asia/12karzai.html?hp>. (Accessed June 15, 2010).

⁹ Koelbl, Susanne and Sohail Nasir. "A Road Map to Peace in Afghanistan: Karzai's Plan to Negotiate with the Taliban." *Spiegel Online International*, 17 May 2010.

Those American security concerns revolve primarily around the threat posed by transnational terrorist groups that once operated in Afghanistan and could conceivably return following a victory by radical Islamist forces.¹⁰ American interests require that such groups not be given a safe haven on Afghan soil, even if in practice such “safe havens” are less important to organizational capacity than most people realize. A secondary concern is the humanitarian plight of the Afghan people, in particular conditions for women and the possibility of reprisals against Afghans who have worked with the United States over the past decade.¹¹ The United States must work to ensure minimal standards of human rights.

Leverage and the Timing of Negotiations

The introduction of significant new American forces has shifted the momentum on the battlefield. The expulsion of insurgent forces from Marja, though not institutionalized through the establishment of effective governance is nonetheless militarily significant.¹² Similarly, the United States is now operating in force in Kandahar, a stronghold of the Taliban.¹³ For the next several months at least, the U.S-led coalition will maintain the initiatives and continue to expand its zone of control.

Some will argue that the United States ought to wait until its position is even stronger before talking.¹⁴ That is a mistake. Bargaining leverage right now is a function of the United States’ ability to introduce uncertainty into the minds of the insurgents. Because the insurgents don’t know how much worse their situation will get, they may be willing to settle for a compromise peace. If, on the other hand, the United States waits for a position of maximum strength, it is possible that the insurgents will see that situation as painful, but tolerable, and choose to wait out American willpower. Right now it is more risky for the insurgents to refuse to compromise. Once the escalation of forces has peaked, the balance of risk will shift and the United States and the Kabul government will need to make more concessions. Though it may seem paradoxical, the logic of the situation is to negotiate when our position is weak but strengthening rather than strong but stable or even weakening.

¹⁰ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,695135,00.html>. (Accessed June 15, 2010).

Bergen, Peter. “The Front: the Taliban- Al Qaeda Merger.” *The Front*, 19 October 2009.

<http://www.tnr.com/article/world/the-front>. (Accessed June 15, 2010). Bergen argument has been disputed, however, notably here: Farrall, Leah. “Al-Qa’ida Prefers U.S. to Stick Around.” *The Australian*, 12 November 2009.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/al-qaida-prefers-us-to-stick-around/story-e6frg6zo-1225796639320>. (Accessed June 15, 2010).

¹¹ “Attack on Afghan Female Politicians Highlights Growing Risk to Women.” *Amnesty International USA* 8 April 2010. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGNAU2010040816177&lang=e>. (Accessed June 15, 2010).; Gilbert, Ben. “Afghan Translators for US Military Targeted.” *Public Radio International*, 04 March 2010. <http://www.pri.org/world/middle-east/afghan-translators-for-us-military-targeted1899.html>. (Accessed 15 June 2010); Aryn Baker, “Afghan Women and the Return of the Taliban,” July 29, 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2007238,00.html> (accessed August 10, 2010).

¹² Chivers, C.J.. “What Marja Tells Us of the Battles Yet to Come.” *The New York Times*, 10 June 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/11/world/middleeast/11marja.html>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

¹³ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “In Kandahar, U.S. tries the lessons of Baghdad,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 2010.

¹⁴ Porter, Gareth. “Obama, Karzai Still Split on Peace Talks with Taliban.” *IPS*, 13 May 2010. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=51429>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

The challenge of tailoring military operations to support negotiations can be daunting. Indeed, any discussion of this issue requires listing things to avoid as much as options to pursue. Furthermore, the use of force in this context requires the ability to rapidly adjust and shift the focus of operations in response to developments at the negotiating table. Nonetheless, with sufficient planning, it is possible to wring maximum leverage from battlefield initiatives in order to create the best possible outcome. There are several key concepts to consider in crafting a “talk and fight” strategy.

Pressuring the Insurgent Coalition

First, military pressure can be used to create different incentives on the insurgents, potentially exacerbating tensions in the insurgent coalition. There are many challenges in negotiating with a coalition. Because there is no single overall leader, there is also no one who can make binding concessions for the rest of the coalition. As a result, it is likely that we need to conceive of the process not as a single negotiation, but as a linked series of multiple parallel discussions. But the linkages between the processes are significant because the insurgents will get the best deal and terms the longer they are able to stand together. Removing any of the major parties – Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), or the Haqqani Network – from the fight will weaken the ability of the others to continue the struggle, both in terms of shifting perceptions inside Afghanistan and also in terms to providing much improved intelligence about the insurgency to NATO forces.¹⁵ And indeed, even within each group, differential pressure on factors and specific commanders could cause the organizations to splinter themselves. It is important not to overstate the potential of this approach. Even less than in a conventional conflict, a “bean counting” approach does not measure military capacity. Cleaving off insurgent groups won’t necessarily provide a one-to-one correlation to weakening the military capacity of the insurgency on the whole, but by the same token we should not underestimate the political and intelligence benefits of inducing high-level defections.

As a consequence, it is possible to use military pressure to exacerbate the inherent tensions in the insurgent coalition. Each member of the insurgency will be suspicious that others are close to making a separate peace, so military pressure that makes one groups bear a disproportionate brunt of the fighting will create tensions and resentment. Combined with a bargaining posture that also seems to demonstrate favoritism, it may be possible to provoke or exacerbate rifts in the insurgency. The essence of this approach, however, requires a careful coordination of diplomatic initiatives with military operations.

An assessment of the various insurgent actors is key to this argument. Unfortunately, we do not really know a great deal about the strategic calculus of the various insurgent factions. There is significant debate about the level of coordination of the different actors.¹⁶ And there is even significant debate about their basic strategic goals. Indeed, one major rationale for negotiations is precisely to begin to fill in these informational lacunae.

¹⁵ Golovnina, Maria. “FACTBOX: Insurgency in Afghanistan: Who Are They?” *Reuters*, 25 September 2009. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE58O2F620090925>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

¹⁶ McChrystal, Stanley A. “Commander’s Initial Assessment” A Special Report Prepared by the International Security Assistance Force, Kabul, Afghanistan, 30 August 2009. http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

Nevertheless, the insurgency in Afghanistan is composed not of upstarts with no track record, but rather by established power players, most of whom have been major actors in Afghan politics for a generation or more. Both the Haqqani Network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's HiG have roots in the anti-Soviet insurgency.¹⁷

Hekmatyar's situation is particularly intriguing. The notion that he is a committed ally to the Taliban seems fundamentally implausible. Indeed, it was Hekmatyar's government that the Taliban overthrew in 1996 leading to his extended exile in Iran. Going back further, in March 1990, Hekmatyar actually made common cause with "hard-line communist defense minister, Shahnawaz Tanai" to try to overthrow former Soviet puppet Najibullah in a coup.¹⁸ Hekmatyar is a political opportunist. He may have strong Islamist beliefs, but has shown himself over the years more than willing to compromise his beliefs when doing so would benefit his political position. It is precisely for that reason that Hamid Karzai has repeatedly reached out to Hekmatyar to offer to bring him into the government.¹⁹ In this case, it seems reasonable to assume that Karzai has a better read on the man than we do.

The situation with the Haqqani network is more ambiguous, and is further complicated by the fact that leadership is currently apparently divided between Maulavi Haqqani who has been a power player in Afghanistan since the 1980s and his son Sirajuddin who apparently manages military operations for the network. The Haqqanis have close ties with the Taliban and Pakistani intelligence²⁰, but their operations also have a heavy economic component with the Haqqanis extorting protection money, profiting from kidnappings, and generally exerting economic dominance over parts of Eastern Afghanistan.²¹ Precisely how the economic motives interact with the beliefs of the Haqqanis, which themselves may be divided between father and son, remains uncertain.

The challenge, however, is negotiation can only be successful if conducted by participants who are able to carry through on their commitments. While it may be tempting to break the insurgency into smaller and smaller groups, each with less capacity to resist, the reality is that even small splinter groups, remaining outside the process, can serve as a magnet for the most irreconcilable elements in Afghan society. A large and coherent insurgency compromised of many who might be willing to negotiate is more likely to lead to a durable settlement than one comprised of smaller, more radical fighters. In short, negotiations require a tight balancing act that puts sufficient pressure on insurgent leaders to bring them to the table without so severely weakening them that they can no longer implement any accords.

¹⁷ Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press 2004), 194-224.

¹⁸ Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press 2004), 212.

¹⁹ Carlstrom, Gregg. "Karzai is Talking to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Again)." *The Majlis*, 22 March 2010. <http://www.themajlis.org/2010/03/22/karzai-is-talking-to-gulbuddin-hekmatyar-again>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

²⁰ Mazzetti, Mark and Eric Schmitt. "Afghan Airstrikes by Taliban get Pakistan Help, U.S. Aides Say." *The New York Times*, 25 March 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/world/asia/26tribal.html>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

²¹ Toosi, Nahal. "Haqqani Network Challenges US-Pakistan Relations." *ABC News*, 29 December 2009. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=9442987>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

One significant way to balance these cross-cutting incentives is to eschew strikes on senior leadership targets. Ultimately, a settlement based on bringing major power brokers to the table is more likely to be successful than one that seeks to lure away a larger number of replaceable mid-level commanders. Furthermore, while we should resist calls for a general ceasefire, we also have to acknowledge that targeting senior leaders makes negotiations impossible, as seen with the fallout from the Pakistani capture of Mullah Baradar.²²

Second, military operations should be conceived to line up with negotiation phases. The culmination of negotiations will likely involve some sort of freezing of the *then-current* status quo. The key to a durable outcome is that the situation at that point be viable over the medium to long-term. For instance, a negotiated cessation of hostilities that leaves all the combatant parties intertwined militarily is likely to lead to tensions, challenges of authority, and a rapid unraveling. Patchwork quilt-style plans are always unstable, whereas the creation of viable and homogeneous entities promotes durable agreements. The Balkan wars and the failures of the Carrington-Cutileiro and Vance-Owen Bosnian peace plans in 1992 and 1993 demonstrate the challenges of fragmented political authority.²³

Similarly, negotiations that result in disconnects between political authority and effective military control are liable to result in crises in short order. As a consequence, military operations need to be phased in order to create the foundations for a durable political order. This ought to be an important consideration particularly in regards to operations around Kandahar, which is likely to end up being a zone where the Quetta Shura Taliban receives at least some concessions about local control. Holding Kandahar “hostage” – in terms of repeatedly clearing Taliban forces -- to QST concessions is perhaps a productive approach, but trying to institutionalize control of the area is likely to result in tensions in an eventual peace accord.

Third, special attention ought to be paid to the position of economic spoilers.²⁴ A major challenge with insurgencies is that they tend to draw in opportunists looking to profit from the fighting. These actors, with little interest in the political outcome, profit --politically and financially – from on-going conflict. They cannot easily be brought into a political process because they prefer fighting to peace, regardless of the substance of any accord. As mentioned earlier, there is at least some evidence that the Haqqani network is this sort of group. But regardless, an important contribution of military operations will be to defeat and disarm these kinds of conflict parasites if possible. If it is not possible to eliminate militarily, these economic spoiler might be “bought off” with material concessions, though this sort of arrangement is inherently unstable and prone to exploitation.

²² Shah, Saeed. “Arrest of No. 2 May Throw Taliban Peace Talks into Disarray.” *McClatchy Newspapers*, 16 April 2010. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/02/16/v-print/85466/arrest-of-no-2-may-throw-taliban.html>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

²³ Wikipedia “Peace Plans Offered Before and During the Bosnian War.” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_plans_offered_before_and_during_the_Bosnian_War. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

²⁴ Donais, Timothy. “The Political Economy of Stalemate: Organised Crime, Corruption and Economic Deformation in post-Dayton Bosnia. Conflict, Security & Development.” *Informaworld*, 3(3):359-382 (December 2003). <http://www.informaworld.com/10.1080/1467880032000151635>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

Pitfalls to Avoid

There are also several approaches that we should avoid in order to bring about a successful outcome to negotiations.

First, we need to avoid over-thinking the military campaign in the hopes of sending calibrated messages to the insurgents. Much of the limited war literature of the 1950s and 1960s argued for extensive signaling through military campaigns.²⁵ At various times this has led to proposals in past conflicts to constrain the use of certain military capabilities and weapons systems, and also planning military operations around arbitrary geographical limitation.²⁶ These are rarely effective. While, for instance, a predator drone strike halt might seem a significant signal of "good will" from our perspective, the insurgents are unlikely to perceive it as such if they are still being targeted by other means. Similarly, there will be proposals to respect certain administrative boundaries, such as city or provincial limits, but again while the message may seem clear to us, it be essentially invisible to the adversary which may not organize along similar lines.

Second, military pressure is one the major sources of pressure we can place on the insurgents. As a consequence, we ought to consent to a ceasefire only very later in the process, when major framing issues have been resolved and the discussions are focused on implementation. Military operations are the backbone of diplomatic leverage²⁷, not any of the other, softer metrics of population-centric counterinsurgency such as measures of goods and services provided.

Third, time is a crucial element to consider, and as a practical matter it is not clear that time is on our side. As a result, we ought to begin negotiations with a willingness to make concessions, but gradually harden our positions and begin to impose costs if the insurgents seek to draw out the process.

Ultimately, if the insurgents believe they can win in the long-run, negotiations will collapse anyway. We ought to find out sooner rather than later if the time is ripe for a settlement by being initially generous and increasingly firm. The insurgents must know, in no uncertain terms, that negotiations are a window of opportunity, not an invitation to delay.

Fourth, we have to assume that any settlement will be subject to numerous violations. As a consequence, we need to think carefully about redlines. Some violations can be met with quid pro quo responses. Others will require wholesale reconsiderations. But the goal is not a perfect peace, but rather a peace better for U.S. national security interests than the current war. That said, we need to plan for the collapse of accords, not because we lack faith in our ability to enforce them, but rather simply as a prudent form of risk management. Some possible measures include pre-staged catchment areas for refugees, regional agreements for power projection

²⁵ The clearest example of this was Henry Kissinger's 1957. *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. Kissinger, Henry. *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. (New York, NY: Harper Row, Inc. for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1957)

²⁶ McMaster, H.R. *Derelection of Duty*. (New York, NY: HarpersCollins Publishers 1997), 226.

²⁷ Pape, Robert. *Bombing to Win*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1996).

capabilities, and plans for the reintroduction of combat forces developed and to the extent possible negotiated to ensure Congressional approval.

Conclusions

The goal of a negotiated outcome is not the abandonment of Afghanistan. The goal instead is to place U.S.-Afghan cooperation on a long-term stable basis. Obviously, the United States is not going to keep 100,000 troops in Afghanistan forever. As a consequence, our goal must be to wring the maximum benefit possible from this high-water mark of our military power in the country. The biggest risk to continued American involvement to safeguard our interests is not a gradual withdrawal but rather an over commitment that leads to a dramatic collapse of national will down the road. Our current approach represents a reckless gamble, an all-or-nothing bid at total victory against a resilient and adaptive foe. Not only must we try to convince the insurgents to accept half a loaf, we must be willing to do so as well.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to negotiations is political. President Obama has done little to prepare the country for such a process, and news that the coalition is negotiating with insurgents will result in a howl of protest about negotiating with “terrorists.” Indeed, President Obama made his own job more difficult when he made his case for escalation in Afghanistan and seemed to conflate al Qaeda and the Taliban.²⁸ In order to sell negotiations at home, Obama will need to educate the public about the complexities of Afghan politics. But the reality is that this will be difficult, and as a consequence, it is likely that the United States will need to negotiate through proxies, likely through Afghan President Hamid Karzai. President Obama will need to convince the American public to support Karzai in this process, and to accept that Afghan solutions to Afghan problems may require us to accept to inclusion of some unsavory characters into the Afghan political order. Regardless, whether negotiations involve the United States directly, or at arm’s length, a domestic political strategy for gaining support for talks is already overdue.

Our military success is opening up a window of opportunity to establish a decent outcome in Afghanistan. But we can only achieve that if we aggressively push for negotiations now. Otherwise, we will fritter away the benefits of the Afghan “surge” and find ourselves in 2013 facing the same challenges we faced in 2009.

Dr. Bernard I. Finel is currently an Associate Professor of National Security Strategy at the National War College. Previously, he was a senior fellow at the American Security Project, a non-partisan think tank located in Washington, D.C. and Executive Director of the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University. He holds a BA in international relations from Tufts University and an MA and Ph.D. in international relations from Georgetown. His views are my own and do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the National War College, National Defense University, or the Department of Defense.

²⁸ Lubold, Gordon. “Obama’s Afghanistan Speech: Five Key Points.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 December 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2009/1202/p02s01-usmi.html>. (Accessed 15 June 2010).

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