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A Précis on the Logic of the Afghan War

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Introduction

This Thanksgiving weekend marks when the duration of our current war in Afghanistan surpasses the duration of the Soviet-Afghan War. About nine years ago, on 13 November 2001, the U.S. backed and advised Northern Alliance forces marched into Kabul. Approximately three weeks later, on 7 December 2001, the Taliban quit Kandahar. However, chasing the Taliban and al Qaeda out of Afghanistan required considerably less strategic thinking, resolve, and leadership than it does to design a long-term solution which undermines and precludes al Qaeda sanctuary here and in Pakistan. Pundits, policymakers, and the public are losing patience, wondering, why nine years on, the U.S. and its partners have not been able to yet create durable stability in Afghanistan. The reasons why it took so long to give Afghanistan the strategy and emphasis it required are manifold, and some are explained in this précis. Afghanistan is governable but it requires a government suited to its complex character. It is not the graveyard of the U.S. and NATO. Nor do the Afghans perceive our current effort as an imperial conquest.

The Afghans would welcome peace and normalcy. They have suffered predation and conflict for well over three decades, dating back to the bloodless usurpation of Zahir Shah in 1973. More importantly, collusion between al Qaeda, the Haqqanis, the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, and others in the Pashtun areas, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, represents the gravest threat to the homelands of the U.S. and its partners. This précis addresses the efforts to help build durable stability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to eliminate sanctuary for al Qaeda and its nefarious hosts. This perspective derives from research which informed a brief the author delivered at the U.S. Army War College April 2010 Strategy Conference and an essay written for requirements at the U.S. Naval War College in May 2010. The first part, below, framed that presentation and amplified a list of near truisms about the region. Part one also briefly identifies imperatives for success in the theater. The second part lays out the context and the rationale for the comprehensive counterinsurgency argument and the counterterrorism-light counterargument, followed by a rebuttal and a conclusion.

Part One

Near Truisms on Talibanistan:

- 1) Talibanistan (tribal areas along the border) is the epicenter of global jihad.
- 2) The next massive bomb that explodes in the U.S. will be postmarked the FATA.

- 3) The graveyard of empires metaphor belongs in the graveyard of clichés.
- 4) Afghanistan is governable notwithstanding the epithet Yaghestan.
- 5) We are not the Soviets and Afghanistan is not Vietnam.
- 6) The Pashtuns and the Taliban are OK with death but not OK with injustice.
- 7) The Taliban have more time than us.
- 8) The Taliban (core senior leaders) won't quit.
- 9) The Taliban don't surf but one day Pashtuns may snowboard in the Hindu Kush.
- 10) Pakistan is Perfidistan and is exponentially more complex than Afghanistan.

Imperatives for Success:

- 1) Deny sanctuary and support to Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda.
- 2) Remove malign government and non-government catalysts for the insurgency.
- 3) Win the war of perceptions by protecting the populace in word and deed.
- 4) Address the grievances and meet the people's expectations within reason.
- 5) Undermine the Taliban and build security forces which can manage the threat.

Part Two - A Grave Threat, but not a Graveyard

The graveyard of empires metaphor belongs in the graveyard of clichés.

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas in the Pashtun Belt on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan constitute the epicenter for global jihad. If a huge bomb detonates in the U.S. tomorrow it will likely have a postmark tracing it back to the Pashtun Belt astride the FATA. Thus, the most remote place on earth has indeed become the most dangerous. The Taliban Administered Tribal Areas is a more accurate soubriquet to describe these tribal areas. As one interior minister in Pakistan once observed, most links run back to the FATA in the context of where and who coordinates regional and global jihad attacks. The reality is that Pakistan has supplanted Afghanistan as the essential place to inculcate al Qaeda recruits for operations abroad and for support to al Qaeda by those radicalized elsewhere.

The tribal areas of Pakistan have become a sanctuary where local insurgents, global terrorists, drug smugglers, and perfidious state actors converge. A host of foreign fighters also benefit from sanctuary afforded by the paucity of governance and security there. There is no location currently more favorable to al Qaeda's leaders than the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. The area hosted the formation of both al Qaeda and the Taliban. Osama bin Laden and his deputies have a unique thirty-year history of collaboration with the Pashtun Islamist tribal networks located in the Pashtun Belt. The region is al Qaeda's top sanctuary because the odds for success are better in Pakistan and Afghanistan than anywhere else. More disquieting still, since 2003 al Qaeda and the Taliban have colluded more closely. U.S. policy there must undertake an enduring and durable strategy to counter this political-military challenge.

The terrorists and their insurgent hosts in this sanctuary do pose the single gravest threat of attack on our homelands. Osama bin Laden recruited the leader of the 9/11 raid and all the muscle terrorists himself in Afghanistan. Since 9/11, al Qaeda or its associates have struck across the globe, from London to Madrid and from Algiers to Amman, since they displaced to

Pakistan's tribal areas. The cases of Najibullah Zazi, David Headley, and Faisal Shahzad underscore the gravity of the threats radiating from Pakistan. A Pashtun-American citizen, Zazi was apprehended by the FBI in September 2009 for conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction as he was allegedly plotting an attack in New York City. He had traveled to Pakistan's Pashtun tribal areas to receive training. Headley, an American citizen whose father was a Pakistani, has been implicated as an alleged conspirator in the Mumbai terrorist attack of November 2008. He grew up in Pakistan but anglicized his name and went undercover to spend several months in India where he carried out reconnaissance for the subsequent assault perpetrated by *Lashkar-e-Taiba*. U.S. authorities arrested Faisal Shahzad, an ethnic Pashtun, for the failed May 2010 car-bombing attempt in Times Square. Authorities also suspect Shahzad of colluding with militants in the tribal areas.

Analogies associated with the graveyard of empires, the Soviets in Afghanistan, and the Vietnam War, are speciously misplaced. The Americans are neither the Soviets nor the British. The Soviets defeated themselves by employing too few of the wrong forces fighting with methods suited for a big war. The British muddled through with an inconsistent approach to the Great Game. There are a host of reasons why Afghanistan is not Vietnam. The top three are: the Viet Cong did not fly suicide projectiles into America and kill over 3,000 people; the U.S. has now foregone conscription and has a seasoned volunteer and counterinsurgency-capable force; and there are no NVA (PAF) regiments poised to invade from Pakistan or fight with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Nor do the Afghans perceive the American-led NATO effort as a predatory colonial occupation. After the Taliban's bloodying flight from Afghanistan in 2001-2002, most Afghans held high expectations for improved security and prosperity because the U.S. and its allies were the wealthiest countries in the world. A failure of strategy, focus, resources, knowledge, planning, and insight led to a slow but massive mismanagement of those people's expectations. A misread of the lessons from the Soviet Afghan War also saw us opt for a small force which over relied on air power and warlord militias, while DOD encumbered the effort with ridiculously convoluted chains of command and control. After eight years of muddling through ourselves, since the middle of 2009, Afghanistan now has an unprecedented degree of superior leadership, forces, resources, and strategic insight. What it does not have is much time to show a reversal in momentum. 26 November 2010 does in fact mark the date when the duration of our war in Afghanistan surpasses the length of the Soviet war. Yet, al Qaeda still benefits from sanctuary on Pakistan's side of the Pashtun Belt and regenerating insurgencies still persist there because of the benefit of sanctuary as well.

Winning the War of Perceptions

The conflict will be won by persuading the population, not by destroying it.

This observation underscores the centrality of the population and the importance of perseverance in comprehensive counterinsurgency. The principal object of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan. The development of more self-reliant Afghan and Pakistani security forces to counter terrorists and insurgents is a corollary goal. During his

West Point speech, the President acknowledged that al Qaeda had established a safe haven in Pakistan's tribal areas and that "the Taliban has maintained common cause with al Qaeda." He also recognized "the fundamental connection" between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the fight against extremists.

The separation of the roughly 40 million Pashtuns by the Durand Line is part of the problem. This de facto border extends more than 2,400 kilometers through some of the most difficult terrain on the planet. It is impossible to seal but we can make it irrelevant in the long-term. Al Qaeda has benefited from sanctuary from Taliban extremists on both sides of the line. The Taliban threaten both states. If the Afghan Taliban were again to wrest control of the Afghan state to reestablish their Islamist Emirate of Afghanistan, they would also probably afford al Qaeda sanctuary again. The Quetta Shura has consistently refused to renounce al Qaeda and a symbiosis born of necessity characterizes a degree of comity in their relations since they fled to Pakistan. The ideologies of al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban have also converged as a result of their losses in 2001-2002, their flight to the Pashtun areas in Pakistan, and their regeneration in sanctuaries together. The grim reality is that the threats engendered by the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban are linked. Success lies in building sustainable governance and security in the Pashtun areas on both sides to undermine the Taliban groups in both countries.

The best way to undermine the sanctuary the Taliban afford al Qaeda and its ilk is comprehensive counterinsurgency on both sides of the border to protect the populations, improve governance, meet the expectations of the people, and win over the perceptions of those populations. The U.S. and its partners have more leverage in Afghanistan, imperfect though it is. Pakistan is exponentially more difficult than Afghanistan because more of its people view America as the enemy, its army is wedded to the Indian threat, and civil control of the military tends to be tenuous and ephemeral. Also, it is not practical to place a significant number of western soldiers on the ground there. The crux of it is that success requires some degree of support from Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line. As daunting as counterinsurgency in Afghanistan seems, the quality of the Coalition and some of the Afghan leadership in Afghanistan provide reason for being sanguine about the prospects for success. The civilian and military leadership in Afghanistan during 2009-2010 has moved forward with an approach that matches ideas and deeds to win the war of perceptions. Those perceptions will stem from the presence of security, opportunity, and better governance. Pakistan has made less discernible progress in countering militants in the tribal areas over the last year. It has much to improve as a nominal ally. Stopping either passive toleration or active support of the Haqqani network and the Quetta Shura is a start.

Perpetuating a War of Attrition

The Pashtun is never at peace, except when he is at war.

A counterargument to the aforementioned rationale is that a better way in terms of a means and ends match is counterterrorism with a lighter presence. This counterargument urges us to narrow the scope of the effort to lethal counterterrorist strikes by special operators and armed drones to persistently disrupt terrorists-cum-insurgents in order to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a terrorist safe haven. The United States should thus limit its policy and strategy in

Afghanistan and Pakistan to counterterrorism, divesting itself from the counterinsurgency enterprise in Afghanistan. This logic postulates that counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is too costly in resources. Besides, the argument continues, it is not relevant to dismantling the al Qaeda leadership network, which mainly resides in Pakistan's tribal areas. Stabilizing Afghanistan will not matter in the end if Pakistan does not prosecute a similar pacification campaign because al Qaeda will still benefit from safe haven there.

Since pacifying the Pashtun areas on both sides of the borders is too costly and simply unachievable, this logic posits, a cheaper and more effective option is to rely on a leaner array of special operations forces and lethal drones to achieve the attrition of al Qaeda leaders, along with their Taliban hosts. This approach, the argument follows, will disrupt attacks on our homeland and our partners. These same counterterrorism-light proponents postulate that this approach will afford the U.S. the political flexibility to sustain a long-term effort to contain the radical Islamist threat emanating from the Pashtun areas. Thus, this argument follows, the U.S. should begin a significant drawdown now to reduce friendly casualties and lower costs in Afghanistan, and we should rely on the copious use of special-operations forces and drones.

A Contest of Commitment and Legitimacy

Pashtuns accept hardship, even death, but what they won't tolerate is injustice.

In the long-view, the competition is for legitimacy and not lethality. A rebuttal to the counterterrorism argument is twofold. First, a strategy of disruptive strikes among a population of about 40 million Pashtuns equates to an endless commitment to attrition; and second, finding whom we attrite becomes exceedingly difficult without a persistent security presence among the population, and without coupling with indigenous security forces, to gain the intelligence to know where this leadership infrastructure hides. Persistent strikes without usable and accurate intelligence would likely result in too many killings of non-combatant Pashtuns. This approach will likely alienate many more Pashtuns because of the deep-seated values of justice and revenge intrinsic to their tribal code. As implied by the quote above, unjust killing in the Pashtun Belt is a catalyst for creating more terrorists and insurgents. This approach creates a never-ending cycle of radicalization and killing in the tribal areas.

When would this perpetual-attrition approach to the Pashtun Belt ever end? Convenience and expediency are not the solution for Pakistan or Afghanistan. We have tried this before and it had a bad ending with the Soviets, and it helped produce the deteriorating situation the U.S. and its partners confront today. The strategic solution does not blend well with America's historical proclivity toward a strategic attention deficit disorder (S.A.D.D.) but it does resonate with the second quote above because it necessarily matches action with influence to gain the perception of legitimacy among the people in the region. The Pashtuns have expectations which are not so dissimilar from the expectations of most people: security, education, and services from relatively uncorrupt government officials. The U.S. and its partners confront this deteriorating situation now because of strategic shortsightedness stemming from support of the former Pakistani dictator Zia's anti-Soviet jihad and from the economy and neglect of this theater during the first eight years. The U.S. embarked on its Afghan endeavor with a miscomprehension of the Soviet experience there. As a result, too few troops, for too many years, focused almost

exclusively on a counterterrorism approach, which by necessity over relied on civilian-casualty inducing air power and population-alienating warlord militias.

A prudent long-term approach sees a determined comprehensive effort in counterinsurgency to win the support of the Pashtuns in both countries, with a more precise counterterrorism effort, informed by better intelligence to eliminate the core and irreconcilable jihadist members of the Taliban and al Qaeda. This option holds the best prospects for reversing the momentum and changing the perceptions of the Pakistani and Afghan elites, and producing the impetus to politically reconcile with those who are willing to do so among the enemy. Once this is achieved, a gradual drawdown to formidable but leaner U.S. Military Advisory and Assistance Groups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan will be required for long-term engagement with both the Afghan and Pakistani senior civilian and military leadership. Long-term stability in South Asia requires no less a commitment if the U.S. and its partners intend to genuinely preclude the emergence of radicalized Islamist emirates which offer succor to the likes of al Qaeda in either Pakistan or Afghanistan.

To be sure, there are some caveats, political and strategic imperatives, which if not fulfilled, will preclude ultimate success for our collective efforts in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. First, we must persuade or compel our host-nation partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan to redouble their commitments and to ensure that we all seek and pursue common goals in a genuinely concerted effort - the reduction and elimination of terrorist and insurgent movements, with their leadership, on both sides of the Durand Line. Second, both host-nation governments must demonstrate sufficient moral rectitude and governance capacity to address the expectations of their populations, and not to serve as catalysts for grievances which fuel the Taliban narrative, and the recruitment of more insurgents. The U.S. and the Coalition now face finite resources, finite time, and finite political will, which are already waning. The Taliban do have more time. The core leaders will not quit until we take away both their capacity and their will, to convince them of their defeat. 11 September 2001 resulted from nihilistic terrorists imagining the unimaginable in the most diabolical and destructive way. The Taliban don't surf now and never have. But, if we try to imagine the currently unimaginable in an optimistic and constructive way, in 50 years, with a prudent commitment to stability, the Pashtuns might snowboard in the Hindu Kush.

Colonel Robert M. Cassidy, U.S. Army, is serving in Afghanistan. These views stem from service there and a study on Afghanistan and Pakistan completed at the U.S. Naval War College in 2009-2010. After peer review and editing, this became an article which appeared in the August-September 2010 issue of the RUSI Journal with the title, "The Afghanistan Choice: Peace or Punishment in the Pashtun Belt." The post-peer review printed article can be found at this link: <http://www.rusi.org/publications/journal/ref:A4C6E4F8DACBE9/>. The Army War College brief can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA3vC-B4w94>.

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