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Is Our Afghanistan Counterinsurgency Approach Irrelevant?

Lawrence Sellin

"You know you never defeated us on the battlefield", said the American colonel.

His adversary pondered this remark a moment. "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant."

That conversation occurred on 25 April 1975 in Hanoi between Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., then Chief, Negotiations Division, U.S. Delegation, Four Party Joint Military Team and Colonel Tu, Chief of the North Vietnamese Delegation.

Colonel Summers is now best known as the author of a powerful critique of the Vietnam War titled, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. It analyzed the reasons behind the US tactical victory, but strategic defeat in that conflict.

In his book, he quoted the classic work of military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, noting America's strategic mistake in Vietnam, which may now also be appropriate for Afghanistan.

"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."

It is not generally accepted that the current conflict in Afghanistan is just the latest iteration of a civil war aggravated by competition among global and regional players to influence the future of Afghanistan according to their own national interests.

It is yet another example of how US policy in Afghanistan misunderstands the true nature of the conflict and relies too heavily on tactical military results at the expense of achieving critical strategic objectives.

The counterinsurgency approach currently being executed in Afghanistan will not by itself achieve the goals of defeating al-Qaeda and denying the Taliban an ability to overthrow the Afghan government, even within the recently announced expanded time-frame to 2014.

It may be most useful maintaining a stalemate, that is, preventing the Taliban from winning in Afghanistan and, thereby, providing a platform from which a political solution may be launched.

In fact, the center of gravity of the war is not Afghanistan, but Pakistan.

According to [Stephen P. Cohen](#), in the aftermath of the 1971 India-Pakistan War and to counter India's military and industrial might, Pakistan took measures to increase the Islamic influence within its society. They did this through proliferation of madrassa Islamic schools and greater support for militant groups to be used as proxies to challenge India in Kashmir and secure its western flank in Afghanistan. In essence, radical Islam could be considered one component of Pakistan's foreign policy.

Pakistan's current strategy regarding the Taliban isn't without historical precedent. It has been the natural evolution of its direct involvement in Afghanistan supporting Sunni Muslim mujahedin groups in their jihad against the Soviet Union.

Current operations in Afghanistan will be hindered as long as Pakistan continues to provide sanctuary for and support to the insurgents.

There is nothing surprising about Pakistan's pursuit of its national security interests. That is, to secure its western flank against India and both to control and leverage the Pashtuns, whose tribal areas span the Afghan-Pakistan border.

That policy translates into a weakened Afghan central government and maintaining the Taliban as a proxy military force to influence Afghan domestic and foreign policy. An outright coalition victory and a more independent Afghanistan would threaten those interests. Stalemate in Afghanistan and peace terms according to Pakistan's wishes are likely the ultimate aims driving that behavior.

Ironically, victory by the Taliban in Afghanistan could potentially backfire on their Pakistani patrons. Pakistan's policy, in no small measure, helped spawn the Tehrik-e-Taleban-e-Pakistan, which has begun to launch terror attacks within Pakistan.

The Taliban on both sides of the border follow the ultraconservative ideology of the Pakistani Deobandi school of Islam. Deobandi is pan-Islamic, which considers loyalty to the country as secondary to a loyalty to Islam. Similar to al-Qaeda global jihadist ambitions, Deobandis hold that it has a sacred right and obligation to wage jihad to protect Muslims in any country.

No Afghan strategy will succeed without a broader southwest Asian initiative. Like Barack Obama, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev inherited a seemingly intractable military conflict in Afghanistan.

Afghan expert Steve Coll [wrote in his Think Tank blog](#) at *The New Yorker*:

"Gorbachev advocated U.N.-brokered regional negotiations aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan and isolating Islamist extremists. It failed, however, in part because the

United States, until the end of 1991, continued to fund and support a 'military solution' for the mujahedin favored by Pakistan's army and intelligence service."

The US and NATO must recognize Pakistan as a key partner in any Afghan solution. Concurrently, a regional diplomatic approach should be initiated to end the war and help Pakistan address its insecurities. Both those steps will help mitigate the use of radical Islam and terrorism as a component of national policy in south Asia.

Without sanctuary and support, the insurgency in Afghanistan will wither. With them, our efforts in Afghanistan could become irrelevant.

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