



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Don't Try to Arrest the Sea: An Alternative Approach for Afghanistan

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Over the last three months that I've spent in the United States, I've heard with concern and trepidation the growing calls for a possible pull out from Afghanistan. No sane citizen of our world, let alone a Pakistani infantry officer who may soon end up being another name on an ever-growing list of the fallen soldiers in the war against terror, enjoys thinking about the painful possibility of our world's greatest military power and history's most inspiring nation retreating in the face of an onslaught by Kalashnikov-wielding bearded barbarians riding on the back of motorcycles, hungry horses and perspiring mules. What is *being realized* with increasing intensity is the pain of a seemingly endless and bloody war for almost a decade now; the pressure of a US public opinion that's almost irreversibly weary of war (at least for now); the misery of a mismatch between resources and mandate; the rising groans of despairing allies unwilling to persevere and, the scary scarcity of success stories. However what *needs to be realized* is the fact that abandoning Afghanistan will be an unmitigated tragedy.

For the United States, I believe, Afghanistan is not a case of 'success or failure'. The USA is too big and too powerful to fail against a collection of miserable fanatics holed up in the treacherous mountains of Southern Afghanistan. It's instead a case of *doing too much with too little care and attention*. It's a challenge (still quite surmountable) aggravated by *ditching smart choices and contracting wrong compulsions*.

The current US approach to fixing Afghanistan is impressive in *detail* but seriously flawed in *design*. Despite recent adjustments reflected most profoundly in Gen McChrystal's Counterinsurgency Directive, the ship is still headed for rough seas. The overall design continues to be based on 'mending and reforming' Afghanistan the country – *as a whole*. The brass-tacks continue to be muddled by unclear strategic intent. The 'reform route' continues to be pursued 'top-down'. Too many coalition personnel and too many international dollars still reside in Kabul or at best in the provincial headquarters. The majority of Afghans continues to stare angrily from the sidelines while a few thugs rule the streets and corridors of Kabul. Too many criminals continue to be respectable and powerful despite being in the neighborhood of so many well-meaning people. While too many US soldiers continue to die, radical *surgery* is still being pended in favor of *cosmetics*.

What is being tried is too much. What needs to be done is *economizing the force and maximizing the effect*. What needs to be done is to increasingly get smarter or leaner in *physics* and more effective and skillful in *chemistry*. What is being done is more and more of physics. What is

needed is more skill. What is being poured in is more troops. US public opinion is rightly angry about all of this. Why should young men continue to fall for a 'losing cause'?

But is it a case of a 'losing cause' or one of a '*badly managed success*'. I believe it's the latter. And it is with this belief that I want to suggest an alternative approach to what is being done. This approach is embedded in the belief that troops required to manage or govern Afghanistan will never be 'enough' and the right route is 'bottom up' and 'hub to spokes' and not the reverse. I also believe that promise and prosperity is the only magnet that can wean desperate people away from violence and that Afghanistan is too big to be made prosperous all-together. Hence the process of rebuilding and development will have to be 'selective' to start with.

The approach, suggested hereunder, is based on some 'can't do' and some 'can do' principles for Afghanistan. The identification of what can be done has to be based on a dispassionate recognition of what can't be done.

First, therefore, the 'can't do' part:

Can't 'govern' this country: It is historically incorrect to call Afghanistan a country or even a *place*. It has always been and is a *people*. Afghanistan represents a people who have always been divided and loosely managed; never properly 'governed' at any level even in the loosest sense of that word. Any effort to reverse that historical trend or reality will be a terribly misdirected investment of blood and money. Afghans, vastly ignorant as well as illiterate, have never been clever enough to submit to a central authority. 'Liberal democracy', 'united vision', a 'social contract', 'tolerant co-existence', 'civil society', 'civil debate', 'national discourse' – are all misnomers largely tossed around in a small section of expatriate community residing in the West. Hence, even the smartest bunch of people can't govern this place as a *whole*.

Can't 'protect' all Afghans: The emphasis in the ISAF Counterinsurgency Directive on 'protecting the civilians, instead of killing the Taliban' is unachievable in its entirety. Coalition troops can never reach the numbers necessary to extend adequate protection to the populace across Afghanistan. It will only give an additional propaganda tool to the Taliban, in addition to increasing the range of their target zone. Every suicide bombing will now be seen and portrayed as a sign of coalition's failure to deliver on its 'promise' of 'protecting' the people. And promises mean a lot in that medieval society. My proposed 'approach' addresses this dilemma.

Can't have 'total' peace: In Afghanistan, peace has always been relative – both in time as well as space. In that unfortunate part of the world, 'peace' has mostly meant 'less fighting' or 'fighting contained to a few a tribes in a few pockets' or 'bloodletting restricted to family feuds'. Afghans are fatally skillful in digging up reasons to fire and fight. No amount of money, time or effort can reverse this tragic historical reality in a space of few years. It will instead take sincere national leadership and international commitment spanning generations – something *very hard* to come by.

Can't have 'rivers of milk and honey' flowing in a few years: After centuries of war, Afghanistan is now way 'beyond a quick or economical repair'. Too much is required to be set right and built anew. Roads, hospitals, schools and colleges - nothing is there. Attitudes, dreams,

aspirations, ideals, sense of unity, and a ‘unifying’ sense of patriotism – again, nothing is there. It’s all broken; shattered by wounds and trauma inflicted by unkind times and endless misery. Brigades of straight-thinking US soldiers with scant support or commitment from Afghan ‘national’ leadership or international community (if there ever were two things by those names) can’t do it in decades, let alone years.

Can’t do it without Pashtuns: Like it or not, Afghanistan has always been a Pashtun country. Many as they are though, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras have always been the ‘outsiders’. Regardless of who holds the banner (the Taliban or anyone else) Pashtuns will never cease fighting unless given their leadership role in Kabul. They have always shed blood for the defense of their ‘right’ on the throne of Kabul. One can’t mess with that ‘right’ without incurring serious consequences. What we are facing in Afghanistan is ‘*Pashtun Intifada*’. It is only ‘*led*’ by bearded mullahs calling themselves ‘Taliban’. Take out Taliban and the insurgency will *continue*.

Now what ‘*can be*’ done:

The list is very short. Don’t try to arrest the sea. Create islands. Having gone well past the phase of breaking the back of Al-Qaeda and dispersing the Taliban, concentrate on ‘*creating and building*’ examples. Set the beacon and you’ll see that all the lost ships and boats will come ashore. Here’s how to do it.

First and foremost, *believe* that it’s not God that drives these people crazy; it’s poverty. Believe that Pashtuns don’t submit to the Taliban out of sheer love for the one-eyed Mullah Omar; it’s deprivation and fear that drives this herd to the first man holding the flag of power and promise. Raise your flag higher than the Mullah’s and the half-blind lunatic will be devoured by Pashtuns. What is being done is unfortunately not the right way of raising the banner. It defies the logic of ‘can’t do’s’ given above. The Pashtun face of the country is not sufficiently visible.

Kabul or the Provincial Reconstruction Teams will NOT work. Provinces are too big a governance laboratory for Afghanistan. Instead, pick a few districts (nothing more than that) in the heart of areas worst-afflicted by the Taliban-led insurgency. Invest heavily in these districts.

Do it in two phases; first craft the message, then two, let the message spread itself.

Here’s is how to create the message. In selected (preferably non-contiguous) districts, give them an honest and polished leadership from ‘amongst themselves’, a transparent and efficient court, a model Pashtun police heavily armed with both weapons and motivation, schools (separate for girls and boys), a few hospitals, electricity, money for farming and setting up small businesses through a few efficiently functioning banks, paved roads, a model transport system and, not the least, build a beautiful grand mosque and an FM station that recites Quran with Pashtu translation 24/7. If possible, build a few plants and job-creating projects around mineral mines and informal fire-arms industry. Let these people serve as an example for rest of the Pashtun country. Having created these models, international community can then work ‘upwards’ and ‘outwards’ to include more and more areas and tribes.

Simultaneously the governance, right from district up to Kabul must be painted with an unmistakable Pashtun color. As of now, Pashtuns are being seen and treated like Sunnis of Iraq. In reality they are a majority and deserve to be empowered like Shias in Iraq.

A few examples of model districts would unmistakably mean this: that the USA means good and only good; that Islam is not the sole monopoly of Mullah Omar; that Islam and Quran can co-exist with banks and schools and hospitals and businesses; that life without bloodshed is a good life and that what Americans do is better than what Taliban do or plan to do. The approach will give Pashtuns an irresistibly attractive reason to ditch the message and manipulation of the Taliban in addition to stripping Mullah Omar and his Al Qaeda cohorts off their narrative and their manifesto.

Militarily, the coalition must hold fast to these model districts as bases and let the Taliban fester and sulk in the outlying, ungoverned margins. Their lack of ability to give in their areas of influence what coalition gives in its area of control will delegitimize them in due course of time. This may sound like giving away vast swathes of land to Taliban. In reality, it means a considerable improvement on the current situation. The Taliban structure of governance stands on a foundation of both fear and promise. The existing effort to pursue them everywhere leaves them surviving everywhere. They thrive on the coalition *chasing* their shadows. This new approach of excluding them from selected pockets will progressively deprive them of targets for violence and an audience for propaganda. Their brutalities in areas without coalition presence will discredit them while doing no harm to coalition's image. Relative peace in coalition-governed districts will fuel discontent in Taliban-controlled districts. It will also give coalition and Afghan Forces the strategic advantage of operating from the '*interior lines*' instead of having to hopelessly *roll up* the Taliban from the margins to the center.

Such 'model district projects' should not be the responsibility of the USA alone. Other members of the international community must also partake by taking up a district each.

These islands of peace and prosperity, though small, will be seen by all the lost mariners in the sea (of chaos and cruelty). It is my sincere belief that these model districts will serve as the 'clarion call'. Pashtuns, hungry for food and promise, will come running and rally to the cause that gives hope of a better future, of peace and of return to the 'throne of Kabul'.

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