



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Afghanistan: Seven Fundamental Questions

Mehar Omar Khan

I know we live in a world that is *real* and is *moved* by minds – thinking, manipulating, conniving, conspiring, calculating and masquerading minds. Our world therefore seldom has a place for ‘sentiments’ – pure, sincere, honest and spontaneous as sentiments are. But when it comes to war in Afghanistan, I am not deterred by the tyranny of the trend. I like, in fact I am forced, to think through my heart. What else can you do when you see images of your countrymen; innocent and unsuspecting men, women and children; ripped apart by other human beings exploding in their midst almost on a daily basis? How can I not worry about my daughter when I see a pale and empty face of a mother in Kabul or Peshawar, bent like a broken branch of an old, dried up tree; over the dead body of her child? How can I not cry when the soul of my nation is hit and hurt by violence that is so inextricably linked with bloodshed beyond the snaky Khyber Pass? For us in Pakistan, the ongoing struggle in Afghanistan and astride Durand Line is the most seminal endeavor of our history. If this war is won, the entire world stands to benefit. But if it is lost, one country that will be hurt the most is Pakistan – *my daughter’s home and her future*. War astride the Durand Line is therefore so personal to so many of us.

This war is also extremely personal for thousands of American mothers who await and pray for the safe return of their sons and daughters: bright young men and women who deserve to live and who must never be wasted just because someone considers it politically expedient to continue to muddle along and because setting the course right needs some statesmanship and may also involve some political cost.

To begin, let us make no mistake about several issues:

One, the coalition has won the war and has dealt an almost mortal blow to the enemy that originally was Al Qaeda.

Two, the coalition has NOT yet won the trust of a vast majority of the people of Afghanistan.

Three, the suspecting and war-weary people of Afghanistan have been flocking back to Pashtun leadership closest to them, a role hijacked by Taliban.

Four, having sacrificed hundreds of soldiers and thousands of innocent bystanders, the coalition cannot afford to fail.

And five, the coalition cannot afford to waste its time and resources in *fighting the few* instead of *fighting for the many*.

Most importantly, the coalition needs to remember that indiscretion and recklessness for the powerful is nothing but cowardice. *It's therefore time to behave like a real giant and refuse to fight the enemy on his terms.* Fight the enemies you must, but learn to fight them standing so you do not lose sight of the promise of peace atop that distant horizon.

So, just for a while, let's all take a pause and see where the ship is headed. Here are some questions that can help determine the right direction.

Who should the coalition try to impress: Afghans or rest of the world? While the pressure to present tangible results in terms that sound familiar to domestic and global audience is understandable, lives of young men should not be 'wasted' in pursuit of hollow ideals and empty slogans that mean woefully little to the people of Afghanistan. While there is *essentially* nothing bad about transparent ballot boxes, soap opera television, Afghan movies and a few dozen bold and beautiful women in the legislative assembly, the Afghan people look wearily at all these things. They are not impressed with these 'achievements', not just because they have an outdated mindset, but because it means so little to them in terms of alleviating some of their most basic concerns like hunger, malnutrition, disease, violence and fear. Coalition soldiers should not have to die for anything less noble than helping the people of Afghanistan forge a new future and a new destiny for themselves – *a destiny that they will themselves determine in ways that they feel comfortable with.*

Here are some ideas.

One, please understand the hearts and minds that you are trying to win. Most of these minds are illiterate, unschooled and locked in the last century. Most of these hearts are raw, romantic, sentimental and pure as a pearl. Help them *start where they actually are and not where you want them to be.* At their present level of socio-economic development, Afghans *do not truly need* a majestic parliament building, a palatial house for the president, five star hotels and nicely suited dummies as rulers in Kabul and Kandahar. They need small schools, clean drinking water, some pills for that headache which refuses to go away, some money to buy food for their kids and some assistance to kick-start their farming or that little shop in a mud-hut. People want their liberators to know that they need *'electricity before they are asked to destroy their kerosene lantern'* and that they need to at least be able to read names before they are asked to choose one out of a long list of people vying to be their President.

Two, coalition must refuse to lock itself in a fight that tramples the people. This will involve some sacrifice in the short term but huge dividends in the long term.

Three, people need soldiers that respect their values and their traditions because, however outdated they may be, these are *their* values and *their* traditions. This land belongs to a 'people'; it's not the property of 'a state'. In this context, is it not fair to ask how much of an effort, in terms of resources, has gone to 'Afghanistan the state' and how much to 'Afghanistan the people'? How much of the money and resources and security has stayed and stagnated in Kabul

guarding criminals and drug-lords; and how much of it has actually reached a far flung Helmand village caught in the center of the storm? How much of attention has gone to people most bitter about being ousted from power (Pashtuns) and how much of it has been lavished on communities that have generally always enjoyed a relative peace? Asking the right questions is the true test of honesty. Giving the right answers is a test of leadership. Questions carry their own correct answers as well as consequences for wrong answers.

What and where is enemy Center of Gravity? A correct and truly honest answer to this question can make such a big difference. Notwithstanding my deep respect for the acumen of the men leading this war, current strategic direction and debate does not reflect a clear understanding of this fundamental aspect. Put simply, a center of gravity is the *most vital link of the chain; the link that holds the chain in one piece*. Where is the center of gravity of the ‘enemy’ in Afghanistan? No single person or his team qualifies as one. Taking out Taliban or Al Qaeda leadership is NOT likely to unravel these movements. In fact, dead bodies of both Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar will be more dangerous for the coalition and a boon for the insurgency. Is some Taliban battalion or any one of the countless Pashtun tribes and clans, the center of gravity? My answer is NO, because I believe that every *Pashtun* is a possible recruit, unless stopped and pulled away from the insurgency. Can control over some geographical areas guarantee success in this struggle? Not really. What then is the vital link in the systemic chain of the enemy in Afghanistan? I believe the center of gravity of the coalition’s enemy resides in *the narrative that drives and sustains the movement*.

To the chagrin of many ‘clash of civilization’ zealots, I believe that it is not God that pulls these ‘believers’ together in their struggle against the ‘infidels’ (read coalition forces) and the ‘helpers of the infidels’ (read Pakistan Army). They know that the God of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad belongs to all of us. The criminal misuse of God’s Glorious Name is only one part of a rather copious ideological handbook of Taliban and Al Qaeda. The real narrative is hinged on exploitation of *‘anti-occupation feelings amongst the valiant sons of the Pashtun soil’*. The hurting realization of being occupied is what drives Pashtun young men to the ‘hate hatcheries’ of Taliban and Al Qaeda. For the sake of the lives of its own soldiers and innocent Afghan people, the coalition leadership must think of ways to address this *feeling or perception*. In my last article, titled ‘Don’t try to arrest the sea’, I have recommended a way of doing precisely this.

Here is a brief list of some do’s. One, learn to behave like harmless investors and helpers who have come with their own security and are also ready to help the security of the brave people of Afghanistan. Two, make *development accompanied with security focused initially on selected districts*, the main effort. The *parallel effort* of striking selected Taliban targets may go on, but on the margins and at the time and place of coalition’s own choosing. Three, put *genuinely respected Afghan tribal elders in-charge* of the effort. Four, be humble enough to *lead the effort from behind* and maintain a low profile. Lesser the loud-talk and lecturing, the better. Insurgents and terrorists thrive on TV screens and air waves. Quietly get down to the real work and let the enemy be bored to death.

Aren’t we known by the company we keep? A friend of the coalition is somebody who stands shoulder to shoulder with the rest of us in our costly but necessary endeavor. The coalition’s friends must deliver. Think about just one example. Mullah Omar is a Kandahari. But so are the

coalition's number one men in Kabul and Kandahar. Is it not justified to ask why Mullah Omar, seriously hampered by coalition presence and operating perhaps from some remote cave in the dark mountains, is able to mobilize an insurgency, organize a reign of terror and establish a night-time government of his own; while the 'powerful saviors of Afghan people' in Kabul and Kandahar are unable to get out of their well-heated palaces and work with *their* people to launch a people's uprising (not necessarily violent) against the Taliban? Why do coalition soldiers have to continue to die for friends who are outright liabilities and who can't stand up and fight for the cause? Why always fall for Chalabis and Pehlvis and Diems and Thieus? Why not choose friends who have some credibility and courage? For success in Afghanistan, the coalition needs friends who are genuinely respected by their people for their honesty and integrity. Believe me, there is no dearth of stalwarts in that great land. Here are some ideas for those who care to listen. One, for the short and medium term at least, get out of the farce of elections and install through *jirgas* (age old tribal assemblies) the right people in places of power and prestige. Your respect and influence will be only as much as the influence of your friends. Two, let the most respected rule and decide in their traditional sphere of influence and leadership, that is, at the level of tribes and districts. While Afghan people have a right to dream of and work for a truly democratic future, today's Afghanistan is not socio-economically ready for a fully-baked, ready-to-serve, western style, country-wide, liberal democracy.

Is it not time for a new kind of war? The answer is a resounding YES. Having done most of the fighting, it's time for a different type of war. It's time for a new kind of COIN. Regardless of some of the tactical parallels that some analysts and experts may manage to dig up from Vietnam, Malaya and Iraq, *COIN in Afghanistan is the only one of its kind*. Our earth has no other country like Afghanistan and it has no other people who love their guns as much as the Afghans do. Our earth also has no other people who are as poor and still as proud as the Pashtuns. Our earth perhaps has no other terrain that is as treacherous as the mountains of Kunar and Khost and as inhospitable as the wilderness of Helmand. This list can be endless. My conclusion and plea is short: get down to genuine 'made-for-Afghanistan' COIN before it's too late. I have, in my last article, put across one way of fighting *the next stage of war* in that country. In that sea of chaos, start with offering people at least few islands of peace. To repeat, try to transform a few districts in the heart of the insurgency-ridden Southeast. Hold fast to these 'bases' and 'bastions' of peace and choose your counter-terror targets on the periphery, at your own time. In phase-II, consolidate and expand. A few years from now, you will *arrive* in Kabul. That's the way to go about it: from dirt to dazzle, if you will.

Who is the enemy? Do Taliban ranks mostly come from Pashtuns? Yes. Do most Pashtuns hate America? NO. Are we not smart enough to separate Pashtuns from Taliban? I sincerely believe that transnational terror outfits, generally eager to cover themselves under the mantle of Al Qaeda, pose a grave threat to all of us. However, we will surely lose if the enemy manages to drive us mad. In the interest of the entire world, the coalition must start to separate the *friend, or potential friend*, from the *sworn enemy*. It is time to separate the enemy (Al Qaeda and its hardcore supporters, abettors and cohorts among all nations) from a vast number of people who have been cleverly co-opted or coerced into enemy ranks or who have the misfortune of living in lands controlled by the enemy. It is time therefore to extend support and succor to the populace in the heart of Taliban-controlled areas while dealing a deadly blow to the enemy with no less than surgical precision. This is COIN Afghanistan style. *The only way to disengage the people*

from our enemies is to engage with the people. To start with, it will be a costly undertaking, but it will get us there in the medium term. It is a moral and professional responsibility of the coalition leadership to confront their men with an enemy that is *carefully selected and militarily manageable.*

Is it terrorism or an insurgency using terror as a tactics? I believe what we are facing in Afghanistan is an insurgency that employs terrorism as a weapon. The root is the insurrection. Counter-terrorism will only temporarily put out fires while simultaneously fueling insurgency through collateral damage unavoidable in such operations. I recommend that while we continue to confront and contain terror, we must get to the root of this poisonous growth. I believe, 'counterinsurgency' must be the main effort of coalition's campaign in Afghanistan and counter-terror strikes or operations should be used only to ward off the enemy while the rug is being pulled from under their feet. This is not just a wishful thought of a man sick of seeing the daily scenes of mayhem and massacre in his country. It is instead a strategic imperative. Complex though it is, counterinsurgency is winnable through a focused, concerted and determined effort. However, a counter-terror centric approach will only clip the branches while letting the roots, fed on the uncontrollable ill-will generated by counter-terror operations, grow stronger by the day.

How many soldiers will be enough? Are numbers relevant in this struggle? Yes they are. Can big numbers achieve big tactical victories? Yes they can. Can mighty divisions and bombers alone win this *war*? NO. Even in a conventional war, no number is big enough in mountains or in deserts. In counter-terror, no number can stop suicide bombers exploding in busy markets and public buildings. Hence, if the numbers are aimed at holding people in a *protective embrace*, a surge will probably mean success in the short term. But if the surge is meant to pursue Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists in the mountains and over the desert tracts, it will end in a disaster. *As exemplified by the success of 'Sunni Awakening' in Iraq, a surge can succeed only if people rise with it.*

Disdain never delivers. How can a student of history ignore the image of a tired and broken Dr Brydon, the sole survivor of first Anglo-Afghan War, reaching the gates of Jalalabad Garrison in January 1948? History's verdict is clear. Humility in estimating the challenge is *key* to success in such struggles. Disdain can lead only to disaster. The cost of disdain in 19th century was loss of a few thousand colonial soldiers. The cost of unbridled hubris combined with an incurable inability to listen to allies and 'giving the devil (enemy) its due' in the 21st century means loss of a whole world. It is time for the coalition to start being as humble as humans ought to be and revisit the route taken early in the war. The enemy is ugly, his tactics heinous and his motives mean; but that's how most insurgents have been throughout history. Give me an example of a weaker enemy who fought like a noble knight. What the coalition needs to aim at is victory of the Afghan people – instead of aiming at the defeat of a few thousand fanatics. A victory for the people will in itself doom the enemy.

Post Script: Just like my daughter, millions of little Afghan girls will be eligible to go to school this year and the year that comes after this. These children living in the dirt-yards of refugee camps and in those lost mud-houses of Helmand await our victory – their victory.

Views expressed in this article are author's own and do not represent his parent organization, Pakistan Army, or his current establishment, Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth. The author is thankful for an overwhelmingly positive response to his earlier article published in Small Wars Journal.

Major Mehar Omar Khan, Pakistan Army, is currently a student at the US Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. He has served as a peacekeeper in Sierra Leone, a Brigade GSO-III, an instructor at the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul, and as Chief of Staff (Brigade Major) of an infantry brigade. He has also completed the Command and Staff Course at Pakistan's Command and Staff College in Quetta.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2009, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here](#).