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The danger of déjà vu

Why the Iraq surge is not a lesson for Afghanistan

BY COL. CHARLES D. ALLEN (RET.)

During the past year, we have seen our U.S. national security establishment ponder the question of what to do next in Afghanistan. With the January inauguration, a new president became commander in chief and sought to fulfill his promise to refocus on the “necessary war.” President Barack Obama initially adopted the bulk of the theater strategy that was put in place by the Bush administration and, in March, he provided guidance to the Defense Department and commander on the ground with the formal announcement of the strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In May, after a series of incidents with Afghan civilian casualties and the perceived lack of progress and results, the commander of all U.S. forces in Afghanistan, who was dual-hatted as NATO commander, International Security Assistance Forces (COMISAF), was asked to resign. Gen. David McKiernan was abruptly replaced by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, an officer who was well-steeped in the new counterinsurgency doctrine and the strategy for its implementation. The new commander was given 60, then 90 days to provide his assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and his recommendation for adjustments to the strategy.

In mid-September, the COMISAF initial assessment, also known as the McChrystal report, was leaked and published in the Washington Post by Bob Woodward. This premature and unauthorized disclosure pushed into the limelight the national policy and strategy debate. From both sides of the political aisle, there was a strident demand for decision and action. One camp called for immediate endorsement of the strategy of the commander on the ground. Another camp saw Afghanistan as a lost cause and sought an exit strategy. The actions of the president were seen by some as indecisive and dithering, while others attribute the delay to prudent discourse among the team of rivals that will lead to a better policy decision.

Curiously, in mid-November, two months after the

COMISAF assessment hit the press, we had a dissenting view by the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan (and former theater commander) that disagreed with the consolidated position of the secretaries of defense and state on deployment of troops.

On Dec. 1, with West Point as the backdrop, Obama presented his revised strategy for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, very little of the strategy from March had changed. The objectives essentially remained the same. The methods to achieve them were familiar — adjust the military strategy to include a whole-of-government approach; engage in partnership with allies and coalition partners to allow the Afghan people to build their national capabilities for security and governance; and recognize the importance of Afghanistan’s neighbor, Pakistan.

Even the resourcing of an additional 30,000 troops — the rough equivalent of five brigade combat teams — eerily mimicked the surge number for Iraq. And there was more déjà vu when our senior civilian and military leaders emphasized that a U.S. military solution was not viable and that the Afghan people would ultimately be responsible for achieving peace in their nation.

How did we get to this point? What should we make of it as military professionals?

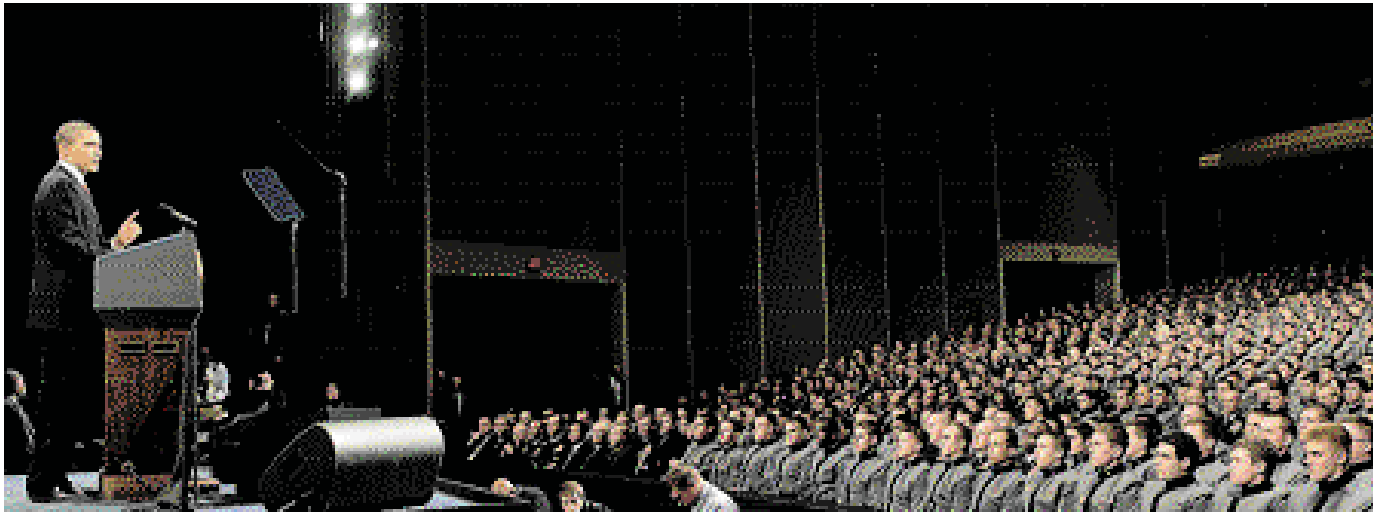
While my Army War College colleague, retired Col. Steve Gerras, contends (“Army Football and Full Spectrum Operations,” Strategic Studies Institute newsletter, November) that we — the Army — are trying to relive the past glories of World War II and operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, it is closer in time than that. Moreover, it is not limited to our Army.

The items in the introduction of this paper were also present in Iraq as we looked for a new strategy and new leaders. Remember the “Victory in Iraq” strategy released by President George Bush during his speech at the Army War College in May 2005, and then the announcement of the “surge” to support the new “clear-hold-build” strategy in 2007?

Once we found the “winning combination” — the new counterinsurgency doctrine and the tight coupling of the Defense and State departments manifest in the Petraeus-Crocker team — we attempted to force the same template on Afghanistan. However, the context is different in that country’s conception of society, its history of governance, our identification of enemies, and the existence of safe havens

The thing we take hold of tends to be the most recent or most vivid memory that quickly comes to mind.

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AFP

President Barack Obama addresses the nation on his Afghanistan strategy at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

that do not mirror our experience in Iraq. We held up Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker as the paragons of interagency cooperation, but to get to them we had to experience Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez and Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, with the attendant failure of their relationship. That ideal Petraeus-Crocker pairing did not exist with McKiernan (no long experience in the region) and now-Ambassador Karl Eikenberry (not a career diplomat) and is apparently not in place with McChrystal and Eikenberry.

In his testimony before Congress on Dec. 2, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the strategy for Afghanistan was “essentially the same as in Iraq.” The nuance is a change from “clear-hold-build” to “clear-hold-build-transition.” (The Iraq surge also has a transfer of responsibility and of terrain to national security forces.)

What is different is the implicit change in scope and effort. Bush clearly stated in his 2007 strategy the need for success and “victory in Iraq.” It is possible that the U.S. concept of traditional victory is less definable and, therefore, and determined as unobtainable in Afghanistan. Hence, the “new” strategy accepts the limits of objectives to be pursued, the limits on methods to be employed (counterinsurgency and counterterrorism), and the limits on resources to be applied (forces and time to achieve the objectives.)

Once again, we are trying to fight the last war (following the assumed success of the surge in Iraq) through replication

of those conditions and circumstances. As Richard Neustadt and Ernest May authored in “Thinking in Time,” the context and the players are different, so how can we expect the same results? This is not strategic thinking. This phenomenon is simply reflective of human nature. Decades of research show that we are inclined to grasp the most recent thing that solved a problem and then try to apply that to the next similar situation. The thing we take hold of tends to be the most recent or most vivid memory that quickly comes to mind.

Ironically, this happened as we looked at our successes in the initial phase of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The U.S. recognized that it could not quickly insert traditional ground forces (for buildup and combat employment) into that land-locked country, so we turned to technology, special operations forces, and the co-opting of local warlords and militias for a nonconventional fight. The successes in Afghanistan led to the contention by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that operations in Iraq could be conducted with fewer troops and high-tech resources that became the “shock and awe” strategy.

Throughout 2009, we were reminded by many that Afghanistan was not Iraq. Hence, a fresh and comprehensive look was and is needed. How does Afghanistan fit into the larger National Security and National Military Strategies and

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that of the region? [Don't forget Iraq, Iran and Pakistan.] While we could not wait for the national strategies to be formally published, it is imperative that the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy be coherent with those higher strategies and developed concomitantly. With the wickedness of the problems in the contemporary environment, it is important to realize that at the strategic level, some problems cannot be solved and consequently must be managed. It is necessary that we have a clear understanding of our national interests and a concise statement of our goals — what we intend to achieve and why to guide our actions. As important is finding the commonality of goals with the Afghan people, their government, the goals of Pakistan and the goals of our potential coalition partners. To proceed otherwise is folly.

Now that the strategy has been formally announced, it is being held up to scrutiny from all quarters. While many may challenge the number of troops deployed and the stated timeline to begin withdrawal of those forces, strategic-minded leaders will focus on what is to be accomplished in conjunction with other elements of U.S. national power within the timeframe that they are deployed. For the U.S. military (which got nearly the number of troops it asked for), its professional responsibility is to implement and execute the strategy as vigorously as possible. Embedded in that is the leaders' responsibility to assess attendant risks continually, develop ways to mitigate those risks, and provide feedback and the best professional advice to our civilian leaders.

The words of Lt. Gen. Hal Moore are instructive when problems seem too familiar and solutions too apparent: Take the time and mental effort to determine what's happening, what's not happening, and what to do about it.

I suggest that we exercise strategic patience with the process. Making a decision can be relatively easy, if we are more concerned with expediency than with the long-term consequences. What we do know is that we will have to live with the decision for a long time to come. **AFJ**

While many defense industry sectors might be relatively unaffected by a particular notional change in strategic posture, the bad news is that it is often because a given sector's industrial capacity is already overstressed or non-existent, often due to previous strategic decisions. For one example (there are many): A lack of new rotary-wing requirements in the current program of record has led to significant reductions in the rotary-wing design and engineering industrial base, increasing the execution challenge that any new program would encounter and requiring greater lead time before industry could meet the requirements of a changed strategy.

The American aerospace industrial base is a perishable national asset. Like any military asset, it requires well-synchronized planning and management to remain healthy and vital. Without considering and understanding how industry will react to strategy decisions and what industrial capabilities could be lost as a consequence, decisions made during and after this year's QDR may significantly reduce the strategy options available to future decision makers unless plans to retain minimum capabilities are included.

How is this possible? The QDR currently underway considers force structure, capabilities and resources to establish a new balance point between the competing demands for wars of the present and challenges of the future. Industry reacts continually to changes in current market conditions, including the QDR results. Without considering how industry will react to this year's strategy decisions and what industrial capabilities could be lost as a consequence, DoD may inadvertently encourage industry to reduce or eliminate capacities today that may be required in the future. And strategic decisions are not a one-time event.

Even though DoD has recently decided to include industrial base references in the current QDR — a positive step forward — these references are not integrated into the ongoing strategic planning processes. Without including industry as a partner in the planning process, understanding the forces that drive industry decisions, and acting to

preserve America's competitive advantage, DoD is liable to find itself in a new world of declining industrial capabilities with nothing like today's dominance. It follows, therefore, that DoD and Congress should carefully consider the industrial base implications of QDR and other strategic decisions and implement corresponding industrial base policies and actions.

Given the rules under which industry operates today, if DoD makes significant strategic policy decisions without full awareness and appreciation of the likely effects on industry, America's strategic defense policy choices could unintentionally damage the defense industry's ability to service our broad national security objectives, whether they be in the short or long term. That would be a decidedly negative outcome for national defense.

Giving "leaner" companies time needed to plan and respond to alternative defense policies goes beyond the traditional notion of making industry a partner, as advocated by the Defense Science Board. The board recommends "establishment of DoD and private sector councils for finance, information technology, human resources, and logistics" — all meritorious ideas. The most important element, however, is missing — a common DoD/industry view of the future requirements for industrial capabilities. Only when industry understands what will be needed in the years ahead can it begin to assess what issues it will face. Conversely, only with an appreciation of industry's broad capabilities, limitations and needs can DoD ensure that its strategies will be supported by available and relevant industry capabilities in the event that threats with cutting-edge aerospace weapons emerge.

The current DoD leadership has shown welcome signs of acknowledging industrial-base concerns. However, the sooner partnership and coordination become standard and normalized, and included throughout the department's planning process, the more likely American aerospace capability will continue without dangerous gaps. The consequences for the nation of continued inaction are potentially severe. **AFJ**