

AFGHANISTAN – THE SHIFT IN STRATEGY AFTER EIGHT YEARS

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

AFGHANISTAN – THE SHIFT IN STRATEGY AFTER EIGHT YEARS

by

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ABSTRACT

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Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched in October 2001 with the aim of destroying Al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime said to be harboring Al-Qaeda. The Taliban regime was successfully removed. However, after eight years, ISAF is not winning the war and the situation is seen as 'serious'. To make matters worse, the Taliban is said to be gaining strength and support from the Afghan people; the support towards the ISAF is instead declining. What went wrong? (1) Was the Campaign Design and Planning Process (CDPP), especially the strategic thinking process, thoroughly done?, (2) Was the correct strategy adopted? (3) Was the right approach used for the rebuilding phase? Hence, the aim of this study is to examine the CDPP and the strategy adopted that led to the situation in Afghanistan today.

This study will first look into the CDPP that led to the strategy adopted by the US led coalition, followed by examining the approach used for the rebuilding phase and to conclude with recommendations viewed as the way forward towards addressing the situation in Afghanistan today.

AFGHANISTAN – THE SHIFT IN STRATEGY AFTER EIGHT YEARS

War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.

—Sun Tzu¹

“Prior to September 11, 2001 when Afghanistan was in the dark days of its self-destruction, the international community had all ignored them”.² The September 11th attacks, however, shifted the focus of the international community towards Afghanistan when the attacks were revealed to have been planned from Afghanistan.³ This led to the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) followed by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under the United Nations (UN) on October 7, 2001 and in December 2001 respectively.⁴ The objective was to crush Al-Qaeda and its ally the Taliban.⁵

OEF started with the US led aerial bombing campaign towards the Taliban said to be supporting and harboring Al-Qaeda. By the end of 2001, the Taliban regime was removed and the Al-Qaeda network disrupted and dismantled.⁶ However, despite the removal of the Taliban and the establishment of an Afghan government as well as billions of dollars in numerous assistance and humanitarian aid, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda remain a threat to the Afghans and the international community as a whole. As support for the government declines, support for the Taliban grows. This evidently explains why after eight years the US and ISAF are not winning the war, and the situation is “serious”.⁷ The question is what happened, and what do we do?

This study will begin by first examining the CDPP with emphasis on the strategic thinking process that led to the strategy adopted by the US and ISAF, followed by

examining the approach used during the rebuilding phase. Subsequently, this study will conclude with recommendations viewed as the way forward in addressing the situation in Afghanistan today. The approach used will then be analyzed against the application of the instruments of national power; namely diplomatic, information, military and economic (DIME) and its impact towards the US and ISAF efforts in winning the war.

To begin with, the situation today is described by Michael Boyle as a classic example of a strategic trap; “you can’t win, you can’t lose, and you can’t get out”, and the only hope to escape this trap (Afghanistan) demands a commitment to the costs that are required to achieve them.⁸ Some argued that, had the operation been conducted differently (meaning more troops and with effective political and social efforts), the current situation could have been different (better security, better economy, a better political and social environment with a stable government). Others, however, defended the operations as executed, but agree things have not gone according to plan.

The Campaign Design and Planning Process (CDPP)

Campaign Design is a commander-based methodology for applying strategic thinking to continuously understand the operational environment, frame-ill-structured problems, and develop relevant solutions to achieve a campaign’s desired end state.⁹

Campaign Planning is the process whereby the commander translates national or theatre strategy into operational concepts through the development of an operation plan for a campaign.¹⁰

In this context, the whole process would have started with a CDPP especially the strategic thinking, a process that helps minimize blind spots and surprises when making decisions on strategic issues to enable long-term success.¹¹ Strategic thinking in this study is defined as; “the ability to integrate different perspectives about ambiguous,

complex issues with respect to the past, present and future and to evaluate information and outcomes through critical, creative, systems, and ethical lenses.”¹² This thinking process explicitly focused on self-awareness and how to think.¹³

In simple words, the CDPP is indeed an important stage in designing and planning a campaign for which if not conducted or done thoroughly to include the impact towards the population and a well considered follow through rebuilding phase would lead to severe consequences. Or as Liddell Hart stated; “if you concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by the peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing germs of another war”.¹⁴ In this regard, had the CDPP and strategic thought process been done thoroughly (with a follow through on the rebuilding phase), the situation today would have been different (with a more stable government and effective political and social development). One may argue that a rebuilding phase in Afghanistan has indeed been conducted over the past eight years. Nevertheless, this study observed that the process has not been successful in its entirety and has consequently led to declining support by the Afghans towards ISAF. Admiral Mullen’s statement that; “the gap between promised improvements and actual developments harms the credibility of the US message.”, provided the evidence of the situation today.¹⁵

When OEF was first launched, the operation started with the US led aerial bombing campaign towards the Taliban. Secretary Rumsfeld pointed-out (on the day OEF was launched) that; “There are not a lot of value targets. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda do not have armies, navies and air forces...”.¹⁶ While he categorized the war as being notably different from others, the US approach, a conventional approach meant to

be short and quick in tempo, low in casualties with strategic consequences, very much a Clausewitz's approach, was not different. As some individuals involved in the operation described; OEF revitalized the American way of war.¹⁷ However, by the third day of the air strikes, US planes returned back with their ordnance because they could not find obvious targets.¹⁸

The ground operation was initially conducted by the Afghan Northern Alliance (the indigenous anti-Taliban forces) and later taken-over by the US, the British and the Canadian infantry as well as the US Special Forces. The attacks were conventional in nature; aimed at removing the Taliban from power. The Taliban were seen as the center of gravity-COG (as described by Clausewitz),¹⁹ or Decisive Points-DPs (by Jomini).²⁰ By attacking the COG (or DPs),²¹ the US expected to eventually disrupt and dismantle Taliban support to Al-Qaeda.

Despite knowing that the Taliban do not have armies, OEF was launched with an overwhelming force very much superior to the Taliban. Although the operation was said to be a success, it did not last long nor did it capture or confirm the death of Osama bin Laden or the Taliban leader Muhammad Omar.²² A similar situation happened before during the French invasions of Spain and Russia. During that campaign, according to Jomini; "it was literally pointless to mass forces, because there were no decisive points to attack: the enemy was everywhere, usually concealed behind a screen of popular hostility that blinded the invaders".²³ The above approach indeed broke the back of the Taliban and scattered much of Al-Qaeda into the mountains.²⁴ The success was, however, not long lasting and OEF has instead been dragged out for eight years and the theory of war adopted proven wrong.

The problems in Afghanistan today can greatly be attributed to the lack or failure of the US Intelligence agency. As revealed by Dennis Blair (Director of National Intelligence) the US lacks deep understanding of the local power structure and the militants operating along the border with Pakistan.”²⁵ As a result, the US underestimated the capabilities of the Taliban and its network, the impact of the conventional approach towards the Afghan people and the effect of the geographical nature of the terrain in Afghanistan.²⁶

Early on, the US should have recognized that the Taliban are not fighting a conventional battle. They are fighting an insurgency war, as insurgents, aimed at overthrowing the established government.²⁷ The US, however, has continued to approach the problem using conventional military strategy and it is this continued Clausewitzian obsession of a “conventional” approach which has impeded strategic thinking. Militarily engaging the Taliban at every opportunity has backfired resulting in widespread casualties among the Afghan people and resulted in lost support from the Afghans.²⁸ US’s over reliance and dependence on technological superiority over human skill greatly contributed to the situation today, especially when all wars appear to be assumed alike.²⁹ This ultimately contributed to the removal of General David D. McKiernan (June 15, 2009) and replacement by McChrystal, a move considered rare for a field commander.³⁰ General Stanley A. McChrystal (Commander US Forces in Afghanistan – USFOR-A and ISAF), believes that “success is achievable”.³¹ The result is a shift in focus from going after the Taliban to protecting the population.³² Eventually, McChrystal’s call to stop bombing the Taliban and start protecting the civilians echoed by his view that; “the war will only come to an end with a political solution”, provided the

evidence to further substantiate the conventional approach of using overwhelming forces against the Taliban insurgents was wrong.³³

Sun Tzu once said; to disrupt the enemy, one needs to analyze their own interest as well as the enemy's.³⁴ He reiterated further that; "one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements".³⁵ In this regard, had the critical thinking process been thorough, the US would have considered the Taliban as insurgents, and according to many defense experts, insurgents would use the Vietnamese approach derived from Mao Zedong's teachings.³⁶ This amplifies the need for the US and ISAF to understand Sun Tzu being the source of Mao's teachings in fighting the Taliban.

The Taliban has apparently been more successful in adopting Sun Tzu's approach by being 'everywhere and nowhere', a way of thinking that is alien to Western intellectual and cultural traditions. They appear to be; "so veiled and subtle, to the point of having no form; so mysterious and miraculous, to the point of making no sound, and they can be the arbiter of the enemy's fate".³⁷ Al-Qaeda remains a problem and after five years of conflict the Taliban have resurfaced, millions of dollars have been spent with little to show for it. Making matters worse, US intelligence remains in the dark over the command structure of the Taliban.

The Taliban appear to have adopted Sun Tzu's practices by attacking places the US and ISAF did not protect and holding places the US and ISAF is not expected to attack. They continue to modify their tactics in accordance to the changing US and ISAF situation.³⁸ They survive the air attacks and raids, and have proven to be more aggressive,³⁹ justifying the need to change the tactics and strategy toward stabilizing

the population in order to avoid further deterioration to the security situation in Afghanistan today.

The US and ISAF may have been winning the battles, but are they winning the war? The Taliban remain, as described by McChrystal, a very aggressive enemy.⁴⁰ The question is; could this be history again repeating itself as another Vietnam?⁴¹ At this point, it appears that the more the US and ISAF wishes to impose a peace entirely of their own choosing, 'by conquest', the stiffer the obstacle will be along the path.⁴² To avoid another Vietnam and to 'win' the war, McChrystal has recommended a more indirect approach, an approach that is typical in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment.

This move by McChrystal is a clear shift from the Clausewitzian (and Jomini) theory of conventional warfare. Using the indirect approach, winning the hearts and minds of the Afghans to win the war in Afghanistan follows a Sun Tzu approach.⁴³ This indirect approach of protecting the population as opposed to focusing on engaging the Taliban is meant to limit insurgent activities and separate the Afghan people from the Taliban.

In a COIN operation, the focus is not just about fighting the Taliban insurgents. Instead, the focus of effort is winning the support of the Afghans. They are the COG (as rightly pointed-out by McChrystal) not the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as assumed during the initial stages of OEF. The will of the Afghans is the key to the US and ISAF's success.⁴⁴

The problem is, insurgents such as the Taliban live and survive among the population, they survive and control from within the people, not from the sidelines.⁴⁵ Most ordinary Afghans do not submit to the Taliban (or Al-Qaeda) out of sheer support

of their ideology, but due to poverty and deprivation or fear for the safety of their families. They are even said to support the Taliban merely to feed their families.⁴⁶ Hence, the approach toward the war from the on-set should have been focused on protecting the Afghan people, winning their support, and segregating them from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

In essence, during the CDPP, the US and ISAF should have considered Sun Tzu (and Liddell Hart) as a complement to Clausewitz (and Jomini), especially when operating in an unconventional war against unseen enemies (the Taliban). In this regard, the indirect approach as advocated by McChrystal should have been thought of all along. As COIN theory states, the side who wins over the local population first will likely emerge victorious.⁴⁷ The least that should have been done is to understand Sun Tzu since the Taliban are evidently succeeding in using Sun Tzu to their advantage. The ability of the Taliban to modify tactics that suit the changing situation has made it difficult for the US and ISAF to defeat them. This explains why McChrystal said; “the current strategy cannot win”.⁴⁸

The Strategy

Strategy could be described as the relationship among ends, ways, and means. ‘Ends’ are the objectives, ‘Means’ are the resources available to pursue the objective, and ‘Ways’ would be the methods of how one organizes and applies resources.⁴⁹ In simple words, strategy is about the use (the way) of the capabilities (the means) available to achieve the objectives (the end). Strategy, in this study, is seen as a link between the military means and political ends,⁵⁰ with strategic communication as ‘the way’ to support the achievement of ‘the end’.⁵¹ Strategic communication is described as the proactive and continuous process that supports the national security strategy by

identifying and responding to strategic threats and opportunities with information related activities.⁵²

Strategic communication in this study is seen as significant in winning over the Afghans, either by means of verbal or visual messages, particularly so by means of actions. The issue is, as cited by Marc Lynch (an expert on public diplomacy at George Washington University); the military view's strategic communication as merely a means to dominate the information battlefield, shape the message, and defeat the enemy, as opposed to the State Department's view; "about relationships: building trust, creating networks and establishing credibility".⁵³ As for OEF, the US strategy was employing targeted and decisive force against the 'killers', to train the Afghans to defend their own nation and to help the Afghans build a just and democratic government.⁵⁴ This explains the military strategy of going after the Taliban adopted all along. The strategy, however, backfired as evident today.

The Taliban's priorities on the other hand are quite different (as highlighted earlier) from Al-Qaeda who are waging global terrorism.⁵⁵ Having separated the locals from the Taliban (as discussed earlier), the subsequent strategy should have been separating the Taliban from Al-Qaeda and to win them over using the indirect or 'soft approach' which would eventually disrupt and dismantle the Al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ After all, the Taliban as described by Kissinger is a local (not a global) threat, a negotiation with the group could eventually isolate Al-Qaeda.⁵⁷

With regard to Al-Qaeda, having isolated them from the Taliban, they should have been managed in a more holistic manner and the strategy executed in concert with the neighboring states such as Pakistan, where Al-Qaeda is currently said to be

operating from.⁵⁸ Even Yemen, being Osama's ancestral homeland and the focus of the jihadist networks' activities, should not be ruled out.⁵⁹ It is noted though that it is much more difficult now to track down Al-Qaeda and eliminate their operations. For this reason, diplomatic efforts, especially with the bordering states as well as other states with potential to be safe havens to Al-Qaeda, should have been pursued at the same time with OEF in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ This amplifies the need to use the diplomatic or political component of national power over the military as the thrust in resolving the situation in Afghanistan and the global threat of Al-Qaeda. This would, however, require effective strategic communication by the US and ISAF especially in reaching the Afghan people. As Bilal once said; "the key to a more effective US strategy is to cultivate credibility through the community".⁶¹

In this regard, the problems are not about communications at all, but about the execution of policy.⁶² Boone (Prof of Military History at US Army War College) once said; strategic communication is "80% actions and 20% words".⁶³ In this case, the US and ISAF actions do not appear to be aligned to their words.⁶⁴ What is being said does not coincide with what they (the Afghans) see on the ground, and this explains why efforts to send positive messages about US military actions, especially the development efforts, instead hurt the US's credibility.⁶⁵ As Wajahat Ali pointed out; "our messages lack credibility because we haven't invested enough in building trust and relationships, and we haven't always delivered on promises".⁶⁶

All along the initial strategy adopted, as described by McChrystal, was the equivalent of a lumbering bull attacking a matador's cape, only to tire and eventually be defeated by a much weaker opponent.⁶⁷ This explains why McChrystal had to shift his

focus toward the 'soft approach' in protecting the Afghans when he took command.⁶⁸

Using this approach, the focus shifted toward the Afghans as the COG (as opposed to the Taliban when OEF was first launched). Using this strategy, the main focus would be toward protecting the Afghan people, separating the Afghan people from the Taliban whilst at the same time expediting efforts in training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

A point to note however, is that it is significant that these efforts are seen to be led by Afghan leaders, rather than solely a US program. Subsequently, work towards improving the judicial system (to incorporate the tribal judicial system) along with the Afghan National Police (ANP), followed by the needed rebuilding programs to begin with at the village and district levels. In this situation, it is imperative that both the phases that are providing the stability and security (the military function) and the rebuilding phase (the nonmilitary function) of the Afghan people to move together. In other words, both the military and the civil agencies need to work together in a unified manner to win over the Afghans. As Mark Magnier once said; "whoever can bring security to Afghanistan will make a lot of people happy".⁶⁹ This reaffirms the need for the 'soft approach' and unified effort in winning the war in Afghanistan.

Rebuilding Phase

At this stage, the US and ISAF have been adopting the top-down approach in rebuilding Afghanistan. Efforts are being focused toward establishing a credible central government (in-line to the US strategy highlighted earlier) in order to eventually manage in running the nation. All funding and assistance is channeled through the central government. However, the promised improvements and actual developments

(as highlighted earlier) are not reaching the Afghan people at the village and district levels. What went wrong?

Historical evidence shows that since Zahir Shah (President – period 1933-73), central governments in Afghanistan do not last long. This appears to be attributed to the skepticism by the people towards the central government whereby the central government is seen to serve the ruler, or the ruling tribal's interest. At one instance; the British provided annual subsidies and modern weapons to the Afghan ruler. The aid was used to establish state control and manipulate social divisions in order to weaken resistance to the regime. These type of actions have evidently fueled the skepticism among the Afghans toward a central government.⁷⁰

In Afghanistan today, the performance of Karzai's government does not appear to have changed much from what has happened previously. To make matters worse, the sudden withdrawal of US Special Forces (for redeployment to Iraq even before the major battle of Shahikot with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda March 2002)⁷¹ during the early stages of OEF resulted in vacuums at the village and district levels.⁷² This resulted in notorious Afghan commanders and warlords, who had been marginalized during the Taliban years, being co-opted to various leadership positions at the lower levels, especially at the districts level.⁷³

The line-up apparently failed to perform, which led to the conflict today being viewed just as a continuation of decades of war involving almost the same players. The same situation happens in the south and east region whereby the failure of the anti-Taliban leaders to demonstrate cohesiveness led to the Afghan commanders establishing their own authority. As a result, a culture of impunity was allowed to take

root in the name of 'stability' with abusers free to return to their old ways. The situation evidently proved that; "a wolf remains a wolf".⁷⁴

Today, despite having established a central government, Afghanistan is still far from stable for various reasons. To start with, prior to the August 20, 2009 presidential election, the Karzai government was alleged of making deals with some of the country's notorious warlords. As a result, they are said to be just old fashioned Afghans cutting deals, and this culture is said to run directly to the presidential palace. Worse still, the judicial system itself is said to be corrupted, forcing locals to turn to the Taliban to resolve disputes.⁷⁵ The Afghan police, in the meantime, continue to be demanding bribes from vendors to continue selling their goods.⁷⁶ As a result, ordinary Afghans weary of the prevailing lawlessness, chose to support the Taliban in stamping out such corruptions and restore the peace and allow trade to flourish again. The Taliban's refusal to deal with the warlords also earned them much respect.

The US military contractors on the other hand are said to be paying suspected insurgents to protect the US's supply route. With this latest evidence, the Taliban not only earned additional respect, but worse, the US appeared to fund the very forces the US and ISAF are fighting.⁷⁷ Efforts by the warlords who control approximately 75% of Afghanistan's countryside said to continuously undercut the authority of the central government exacerbated the situation.⁷⁸ This utterly discredited the central government and the warlords whom the US and ISAF brought back after the Taliban's removal in 2001. The result is increased UN concern about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and especially in the Karzai government's ability to stamp out corruption.⁷⁹

As it stands today, despite being the recipient of billions of dollars, they (the central government) frequently scored domestic political points by blasting the US and UK for ignoring their demands.⁸⁰ For this reason, the US and ISAF may need to seriously reconsider their partnership and close cooperation with the central government. The situation as described by Boyle; “We can no longer pretend we are partnering with a government when it does not govern, or see itself as a partner”.⁸¹ The better posture appears to be merely as a neutral mediator and peacekeeper. Using this approach, let the Afghans take the lead and own all efforts and programs, but obviously with strict supervision by the US and UN.

At this point, tremendous effort is needed by the central government to prove not just to the US and ISAF, but more importantly to the Afghan people that they are different and that the Afghan people are their concern. This entails the need to address the issue of corruption which is allegedly linked to the President himself. A bottom-up approach for the rebuilding phase deserves serious consideration to ensure rebuilding programs and benefits are getting to Afghans at the lower levels (the villages and districts). Using the bottom-up approach, some proportion of the humanitarian aid and financial assistance could be channeled directly down to the villages and districts through the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) under the UN supervision. Given the current situation, this appears to be the only means the lower level Afghans can benefit from the rebuilding phase.

With regard to training the Afghans as administrators, the concentration has been toward the central government in Kabul as opposed to creating institutions to train administrators at the village and district levels at the same time. As a result, without

effective and efficient lower level administrators, the central government does not have the 'grass-roots' to hold on to. To make matters worse, the programs to train Afghan bureaucrats for instance, do not seem tailored to the needs of Afghanistan. Individuals and small groups are sent to Western educational establishments said to be suitable for jobs in the West, but not for governing the Afghans.⁸² This further aggravates the situation and consequently contributes to why the Afghan people are turning their back on the efforts by the US and the UN.

Additional factors that impair efforts in winning the hearts and minds and eventually the support of the Afghans are: first, while many Afghans support greater education and basic rights for women, an agenda which suggests full equality between the sexes is extremely unpopular. Second, there seems to be an oversight to the fact that many Muslim clerics across most areas constitute the only educated class in the village and derive much of their income and status from their role as Qathis, or Islamic judges. Hence, the institution of a purely Western style judicial system (ignoring the tribal system) is seen as a direct threat to this important class and contributes to the open support for the Taliban. Rather than force change and impose ideas on this tribal society, consult the locals for their advice, try and understand their points of view and culture and consider using traditional (Afghan) governing structures rather than reinventing them.⁸³ Scattering and defeating the Taliban may have been relatively easy, but dealing with and unifying the Afghans is a much more difficult problem to solve.⁸⁴

As Kai Eide (the UN envoy to Afghanistan) stated; "there is a need to strengthen Afghan institutions at a local level and build a sustainable economy".⁸⁵ To stabilize Afghanistan, the central government needs to focus on improving the judicial and the

security system to include the ANSF and toward restarting the economic engine of growth, especially in attracting foreign investments into Afghanistan. This is important to ensure that all rebuilding efforts reach the Afghan people whilst at the same time to enable the central government to fund future development programs as well as their own security once the US and ISAF leave Afghanistan (projected to be July 2011).⁸⁶

These efforts will require tremendous commitment by the central government. A first step in this effort is President Karzai's willingness to talk with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar.⁸⁷ All efforts in winning over the Afghans will require significant diplomatic/political and economic efforts and it is these efforts which will eventually decide the future of Afghanistan. The military component, will need to be used to assist in establishing a secure and stable environment. Effective strategic communication strategy should then follow to convey the good intention of the international community to the Afghan people.

The Instrument of National Power

According to Julian and Scott; "to succeed in the battle for the people's will, we must commit to attacking the problems within Afghanistan across all lines of operation, using the political, economic, social, informational, and military elements of our nations".⁸⁸ When viewed from the context in the employment of the instrument of national power (DIME),⁸⁹ the US and ISAF are evidently using the military component as the main thrust in a COIN operation, contrary to the Taliban who works toward winning the support of the population. In this respect, underestimating the Taliban not only led to the wrong theory of war and strategy being adopted, this also led to the wrong instrument of national power being used as the thrust in winning the war in Afghanistan. As a result, despite the technological superiority over the Taliban, the US

and ISAF evidently failed in their approach and strategy as discussed earlier. The strategy backfired and severely hurt and injured the Afghan people.

Today, the Taliban have proven to be more aggressive with attacks on UN workers.⁹⁰ This has hampered UN efforts to carry out aid and development projects as well as work to revive local economies and improve local administration, an integral part of the COIN strategy. The situation has indeed made it even more difficult to win over the Afghans.⁹¹ In fact, by mathematical logic, it is clear that the Taliban have the greater edge over US and ISAF because the ground advantage and the complex nature of the Afghan people works in their favor.⁹² This has led to the perception that the US and ISAF have indeed been on the disadvantage and losing the war.

Nonetheless, McChrystal has said that; “success is achievable”.⁹³ Hence, whilst the US and ISAF work towards stabilizing the security situation and training the ANSF, there remains questions regarding the impetus on diplomatic and political efforts. Domestically, greater emphasis should be given to talking to the Taliban and the tribal leaderships. President Karzai had previously offered to talk with the Taliban but was opposed by the US administration.⁹⁴ With the recent development as announced by President Obama on Afghanistan, this approach should be given greater momentum.

In the global context, Afghanistan has been the crossroad, the trail of trade (Silk Road) and the key to peace and stability through economic and growth developments in this region.⁹⁵ In this respect, diplomatic efforts need to improve to actively engage states such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and even Saudi Arabia, Turkey and China (all have significant vested interests in Afghanistan) in order to deny Afghanistan as safe haven for Al-Qaeda right from the early stage of OEF.

This has not happened and as a result, the Taliban (and Al-Qaeda) survived the initial thrust of OEF and continue to threaten the stability and security of Afghanistan from across her border in Pakistan. This fact should amplify the view that diplomatic or political, followed by information and eventually economic instruments of national power are needed in order to improve the thrust in winning the war in Afghanistan - as opposed to solely military power. In this context, the military component should complement all diplomatic and political efforts to provide a stable and more secure environment to enable the civil agencies under the UN to proceed with the rebuilding phase.

Analysis

The lack of depth in the CDPP especially the strategic thought process was clearly evident. The US underestimated and miscalculated the Taliban, their ability, network and mode of operation. The US even underestimated the strength of the Afghan people along with its tribal complexity and sensitivity, as well as the challenges offered by the terrain in Afghanistan. As a result, the US consequently opted for the wrong theory of war and adopted the wrong strategy for the war. Despite the US and the ISAF's overwhelming superiority and technological advantage over the Taliban, the strategy has instead backfired with severe widespread civilian casualties. This clearly explains why the US and ISAF is not winning the war after eight years. The Taliban on the other hand, once thought defeated, are regaining strength, have regrouped, reorganized and have become more aggressive. This explains why the situation in Afghanistan is viewed as serious today.

The US strategy for OEF was indeed clear. However, the lack of depth in the CDPP especially the strategic thought process that led to total reliance on Clausewitz's

(and Jomini) approach towards the Taliban in a COIN operation. This strategy goes against what Kenneth Coon and Glenn Harned once said, that; when our adversaries are unconventional, so should be our approach to defeat them.⁹⁶ As result, the US approach has so far been unsuccessful.

The Taliban, on the other hand, evidently adopted Sun Tzu, and they have shown more success. Taking a more indirect approach, as suggested by McChrystal, and focusing on the Afghans is a step in the right direction. The impact of the military strategy in adopting the 'hard approach' toward the Afghan people has been severe.⁹⁷ For that reason, the US and ISAF need to refocus efforts on strategic communication in order to redevelop US and ISAF credibility. Communication alone, however, is not sufficient, actions must support those communications.

In the meantime, Kenneth and Glenn also said that; fighting against extremism and insurgency cannot be won by using military alone. There is indeed a need to blend the diplomatic or political, informational, and economic components of national power.⁹⁸ In this instance, while the military elements are being focused to stabilize and improve the security environment as well as training the ANSF, greater impetus should be given towards the diplomatic or political and economic efforts as the main thrust in winning the situation in Afghanistan today. This will allow efforts to then focus on the rebuilding phase.

However, since history has proven that central governments never last, the central government should focus on managing the macro development such as improving the judicial system, providing the nation's basic infrastructure such as roads, communication systems, water and energy supply as well as generating the nation's

economic engine of growth. Similar programs would need to be undertaken concurrently by the UN and NGOs at the village or district levels and eventually move upwards and link-up with the efforts by the central government. Using this approach, financial assistance for the lower levels may need to be channeled through the NGOs with supervision by the UN. This approach would not only benefit the Afghans at the lower levels, but provide a greater impact. The effort needs to be shared and owned by all levels of Afghans and not dominated by the few in the central government.

To protect the Afghans across Afghanistan requires additional troops, which is only achievable in its entirety provided the US and ISAF are able to reach the actual numbers required. However, with the additional 30,000 troops announced recently, the US and ISAF should focus to provide stability and a secure environment, in order to protect the people and to train the ANSF at all levels especially at the village and district levels. The UN should then assist and push the central government in moving their economic engine of growth to enable them to generate their own revenue to fund for their future rebuilding programs and funding their own security. At this stage, the Afghans must be seen to take the lead in all efforts. These efforts, especially in providing Afghanistan a viable economy, will however, require decades, not years.⁹⁹

To defeat the Taliban which would eventually deny Al-Qaeda a safe haven, would require the support of a strong and stable Afghan government. To have a strong central government, the regime needs to be one the Afghan people are comfortable with. Despite billions of dollars, which have poured into Afghanistan since 2001, the condition of the Afghan people is still bad, and so is the plight of women - since the overthrow of the Taliban.¹⁰⁰ As highlighted earlier, cases of rule of law are being

managed by the Taliban instead of the central government, which is attributing to the weak and unstable Afghan government.¹⁰¹

These problems may require the US to reconsider its partnership with the Afghan central government. The US may need to change its role from partner to neutral mediator in order to be effective in assisting the Afghans. As partners, the Afghans expect and rely on the US to take the lead and bear joint responsibility in developing Afghanistan. At this juncture, the Afghans must be made to take the lead in all programs, inclusive of providing the local security at the lower levels as well as training the ANSF. With this approach, any delays or failures will be on them – the central government. The central government has now been given until July 2011 to prove their commitment. Should they fail, the US could disengage from the situation in Afghanistan. Gorbachov took a similar approach back in 1985. He gave one year to the Afghan leaders to make decisive progress. When they failed, in November 1986, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan.¹⁰² An identical situation happened before in Somalia back in 1995. With increasing loss of lives and costs to sustain the operation, when both factions (Ali Mahadi and Farah Aidid) failed to reconcile, the US, and eventually the UN, finally disengaged and withdrew from Somalia.¹⁰³ The ball is now with the Afghans.

Summary

To summarize, after the Taliban government was removed, many Afghans hoped that the situation would guarantee their security and improve their economic and living conditions. The situation in Afghanistan today remains uncertain. OEF has not been successful, greatly attributed to the failure right from the CDPP, especially the strategic thought process, followed by the wrong theories of war and strategy adopted and

eventually the sole use of focusing primarily on the military as the thrust in winning the war in Afghanistan.

The lack of commitment, as evident from the shifting focus by the US to Iraq beginning in 2002, poor governance and endemic corruption are the key issues that led to the Afghan people to turn to the Taliban, has contributed to the continued skepticism towards the central government, the US and ISAF. This explains why after eight years the US and ISAF is not winning the war, and the Taliban instead is gaining the upper hand with increased activities.¹⁰⁴ .

Today, the stakes are numerous. The most important player is the ordinary Afghans who's daily life has been affected by almost thirty years of conflict, and who's security situation continues to be under constant threat. This insecurity prevents development from happening, which in turn reinforces insecurity and increasingly pushes Afghanistan in a downward and dangerous spiral. At the very least, the US and ISAF owe the Afghan people assurance that Afghanistan survives without collapsing into civil war or becoming a safe haven for terrorists. This will require concerted efforts domestically and internationally, especially along the bordering states of Afghanistan. The US strategy today (as announced by McChrystal) is clear and that is "protecting the population".¹⁰⁵ With the eighteen months provided (until July 2011), while the US and ISAF work toward stabilizing the security situation and training the ANSF, the UN needs to be more aggressive in pushing and assisting the central government in improving the judicial system (without ignoring the tribal system) and the nations rebuilding programs. At the same time, the UN need to push them (the central government) towards moving the economic engine of growth which would eventually generate self-funding to fund

future projects and most important to pay for their own security. In this aspect, such rebuilding efforts remain substantially civilian.¹⁰⁶

What do we do?

To win over the Afghans and succeed in Afghanistan, the initial effort needs to focus on providing continuous protection to the people and in separating them from the Taliban. The Afghans need honest and trustworthy leadership from amongst them with a transparent and efficient armed police and judicial system. In addition, efforts need to be made to offer the low and middle level Taliban insurgents amnesty and an opportunity to rejoin society.

As for the rebuilding phase, there is a need to be selective and begin from the village level and work upwards. Pick a few districts dominated by the Taliban, invest heavily, provide them with the basic needs such as schools, clinics/hospitals, clean supply of water and electricity, and effective communication systems. Provide them with funding for farming and setting up of small business. Providing job prospects would be of tremendous impact on the Afghans. Let them serve to be the model for other villages and districts. Relative peace and prosperity should inevitably convey the message of good intent by the US and ISAF and the international community with proof that life without bloodshed is good.

The Afghan people have had hollow promises before. Hence, all promises must be honored with sincerity and transparency. At this point, all actions will speak for themselves.

With the new strategy and time frame provided, greater impetus is required, especially in moving their economic engine of growth to fund future development projects and security.

To continuously disrupt the Al-Qaeda network internationally, diplomatic efforts with states of great potential as safe havens (especially the bordering states), must be given greater emphasis. Liddell Hart once said; "Peace through a stalemate, based on a coincident recognition by each side of the opponent's strength, is at least preferable to peace through common exhaustion-and has often provided a better foundation for lasting peace".¹⁰⁷ In other words, "we can pull a horse to the water, but it is up to the horse to drink or not..." In the end it will fall to the Afghans to make the decision on whether these efforts will be successful or not.

Endnotes

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¹² The phrase *integrate different perspective* is used because at strategic level, plans need to take the multidirectional nature in searching for resolution of tensions. *Complex* is referred to the inter-related nature that are often imperfectly unknown, and *ambiguity* refers to the uncertainty and ability to be understood in two or more possible ways. The *past, present and future* captures a way to envision how history best informs our ability to properly frame the present issue while considering future trends or challenges. The lenses of *creative, critical, and systems* were chosen due to the inter-related nature of the explicit thinking process. *Ethical* was chosen to explicitly encourage leaders to consider if and what are possible ethical aspects of issues to ensure there are no blind spots and gain greater acceptance of decisions. Ibid, 13.

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