

The Afghan endgame: lessons for U.S. strategy

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“History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.”¹

Abba Eban (Israeli diplomat and politician)

On Capitol Hill, General Patraeus, the new head of the Central Intelligence Agency, told the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee at his confirmation hearing on June 23, 2011, that President Obama had opted for more ‘aggressive’ force reduction in Afghanistan than advised by military commanders.² This ‘soft criticism’ from the top former U.S. military commander directly in charge of the war in Afghanistan came shortly after the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen publicly expressed similar reservations regarding the U.S. military pull-out, which was proceeding at a larger and faster scale than the military leadership had proposed.³

Meanwhile, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and Afghan President Hamid Karzai have now officially and publicly confirmed that the U.S. is engaged in negotiations with the Taliban over the endgame and future power structure in Afghanistan.⁴ In this context, the timing and form of the military leadership’s message to the U.S. Congress, and indeed to the world, betrays an eventual realization that like many post-World War II military campaigns in Asia and the Middle East, the grim realities of domestic politics have again overtaken the very best of U.S. military and strategic genius and technological prowess. While fighting terrorism remains a key national security objective, stabilizing Afghanistan is a goal that, according to President Obama’s calculations, ‘war-fatigued’ taxpayers, a skeptical Congress, vocal opposition and uncertain voters are not prepared to finance any longer. Hence, like President Nixon’s ‘Vietnamization Policy’,⁵ or President Reagan’s February 1984 Lebanon pull-out, any strategic objective or promise to partners is only as achievable as the American voters are willing to support and the political capital of an American leader can afford.

The home-front: political battles and overseas wars

In a Rand Corporation study titled *‘U.S. and Russian Policymaking*

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With Respect to the Use of Force published in 1996, John Kelly's words about the tumultuous conflict in Lebanon (1982-84) strike a familiar chord as they can be used also for the current imbroglio faced by the U.S. in the Afghan conflict given its political culture:⁶

George Shultz blamed Syria, Israel, and Caspar Weinberger for the debacle: Beginning with the first deployment of the MNF, the Pentagon restricted our Marines to a passive, tentative, and dangerously inward-looking role in Beirut. The Marines were there to bolster diplomacy, as an interposition force, a deterrent, a bargaining chip, to stabilize, to support the Government of Lebanon, even to keep the airport open. No one ever translated this into clear tasks or military missions. No one seems to have thought through what the implications were if the Marines were seen as the "handmaiden" of the Lebanese government.

McFarlane blamed President Amine Gemayel for not leading Lebanon to reform and peace. He also blamed Weinberger and Habib for not being better negotiators, the State Department's Near East Bureau for not anticipating the mess, Syria, and Israel. The Lebanese blamed the United States for walking away, Syria, and Israel. Weinberger blamed McFarlane and Shultz for not having a clear view or mission.

The blame-game afoot not only between key policy-makers including Secretary Clinton, Ambassador Holbrooke, Ambassador Eikenberry, General McChrystal and General Petraeus, but also on the state level between the U.S., Afghanistan and Pakistan, sounds familiar for yet another U.S.-led overseas war in Asia. This is a war that is becoming increasingly unpopular and has offered little to celebrate except Osama bin Laden's elimination. The credibility of its cause had made it a just intervention only four years ago and provided a popular slogan and rallying point during the last presidential election campaign, bringing the current administration to office. That has now been subordinated to domestic political processes and interests, which are of a more immediate nature to an economically troubled polity. In such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine a prolonged military campaign nine time-zones away from those who bring leaders to power and also send them home.

Moreover, the above-quoted analysis by a premier think tank reveals a cyclical pattern of domestic politics and institutional rivalries within the United States. This imposes severe constraints upon the political leadership's capacity to achieve or even pursue a long-term foreign policy goal since modern industrialized polities driven by a corporate culture lack both patience and the necessary finances.

In the present uni-polar international environment, the dominant challengers to U.S. power are non-state actors rather than states. Fighting long-drawn and economically expensive conflicts in culturally different societies thousands of miles away has proven to be a politically costly proposition for various U.S. presidents. It seems that President Obama wants to make amends before it is too late to save his own political career.

President Obama's political U-turn

In an ironic reversal of fates, President Obama, who won the U.S. elections on the promise of taking the war from Iraq to Afghanistan, bluntly recognized in his recent June 22, 2011 national address that domestic economic strains have eroded national power. He conceded before his nation that, "*America, it is time to focus on nation-building here at home.*"⁷ But this realization of the limits of hard power is neither recent nor sudden. Eighteen months ago, on December 1, 2009, speaking before a new generation of military officers at West Point, President Obama had stated that he would not "*set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests.*"⁸ By announcing the pullout of troops on June 22, he has lived up to his promise that he would begin to bring home troops in eighteen months. However, the military cannot get Obama another term in the White House; and like in all good democracies, citizens do not forgive their leaders. That was a lesson that President Obama learnt in the last U.S. Senate elections.

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What do politicians do when they cannot fulfill promises made with their voters? From a *realpolitik* perspective, saving one's own government and winning another term in office seems like a more important objective than the relatively slight inconvenience of having to blame a distant ally like Pakistan, whose utility for the U.S. administration somehow keeps changing anyway.

Blaming allies: political and strategic compulsions

Pitted against a hostile Senate, a resurgent Republican camp, a critical media, an insecure Karzai government, and exhausted international allies,

the current U.S. administration faces the immediate concern of securing another term in office. The elections are coming at the worst possible time since it is finding it difficult to deliver on either domestic economic concerns or foreign policy goals. Blaming Pakistan, a frontline ally, and especially its military and intelligence service, helps to create a strategic diversion at the international and regional levels, and a political distraction at the domestic level. This not only allows the U.S. military to pull out of Afghanistan, albeit in a less than proud manner, but also helps to gain domestic political ratings by pacifying critics of the costly war at a time of economic downturn.

That also explains why, ever since President Obama's famous West Point speech in which he promised the pull-back, the American political and military leaderships, think tanks and media have had a united front on some aspects of the war. They have, for instance, tirelessly insisted that Pakistan 'do more' in fighting the Taliban, allow the U.S. intelligence a free hand in its territory, and expand the conflict by initiating large-scale operations in North Waziristan.⁹ This is coupled with a well-orchestrated campaign by the international and local media, not to mention diplomatic and domestic political fronts, to put Pakistan's military leadership under intense pressure to yield to these blunt but short-term demands.

In this fluid regional geo-strategic scenario of global significance, one wonders what incentive Pakistan has to escalate the fight at the cost of its own political stability, economic viability and domestic security. Allowing a larger U.S. human intelligence (HUMINT) footprint and significantly enhancing the threat to its population and modest infrastructure appears to be a questionable policy when the U.S. itself is entertaining the same 'bad guys' with lucrative political and strategic concessions in the future Afghan power set-up.¹⁰

Based on the turbulent history of Pak-U.S. relations, one is not surprised but disappointed at the recent sudden change of heart towards the Pakistani military for raising logical questions with their U.S. interlocutors. However, unlike in 1990, as we head towards the conclusion of yet another decade-long episode of Pak-U.S. mutual affection, Washington is dealing with a different and more multidimensional Pakistan. Today, the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff and the DG ISI are not the only Pakistanis that need convincing as increasingly, well-informed journalists, diplomats, politicians, scholars, students, and even common Pakistani people are also publicly raising similar questions. There are concerns regarding the growing demands and pressures from the U.S. and how they will serve Pakistan's long-term national, political, strategic, and

economic interests at a time when the European NATO allies of the U.S. are themselves exploring and publicly advocating for a political solution to the Afghan war.

Ditching allies and embracing enemies

As news of negotiations with the Taliban spread from various credible national and international sources, many informed Pakistanis are voicing serious grievances. Unsurprisingly, they see the U.S. as pressurizing Pakistan for its unilateral short-term and ambiguous strategic objectives without considering the regional security concerns of its vital allies or the over 35,000 Pakistanis and more than 3,000 military officers and soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in the country's costliest war. The Kerry-Luger Bill does not cover even a fraction of the economic damage that the Pakistani economy has suffered in the last decade, with over 60 billion dollars worth of opportunity costs, infrastructural damages and loss of investor confidence.¹¹ In a partnership of allies based on mutual trust and shared objectives, both wins and losses ought to be shared more equitably. For the U.S., in the long run, a carrot and stick approach may be more suitable for dealing with adversaries rather than frontline allies.

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War in Afghanistan: lessons for the U.S.

The most important lesson for the U.S. ought to be that the country's stamina for war, political support base, public sentiment, economic health, voter confidence and international support, are not sufficient to sustain long-term conflicts. This consequently neutralizes the effectiveness of its military might, except in short-term campaigns and limited wars. Even the strategic, technological and economic strengths of this century's sole superpower have not been able to subdue a few thousand non-state actors of a poor and tribal society; eventually, just like in Iraq, the conflict in Afghanistan is also likely to end through a political compromise.

Historians and analysts will no doubt question the wisdom behind spending hundreds of billions of dollars, shedding the blood of thousands of Afghan and U.S. soldiers and civilians, squandering an entire decade of history, and tarnishing the credibility of the leader of the ‘free, liberal and democratic world’ eternally. If the U.S. values life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for its own citizens, its allies, though coming from diverse cultures and faiths, and experiencing bad governance and resource deficiencies, expect nothing less for their own nations. As soon as the American political leadership realizes this universal need for all nations, will we have a more peaceful world and the image of the U.S. among countries like Pakistan will also improve immensely. Moreover, the threat that the U.S. faces from extremist forces will also recede considerably.

Role of Allies

“Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies. Those whom God has so joined together, let no man put asunder.”¹²

John F. Kennedy

In a February 2008 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, along with his top military commander in Afghanistan, was clearly concerned with how this partnership was proceeding. He stated that not only the strategic objectives of the Afghan war, but the future of NATO was also being undermined due to the reluctance of military allies to engage in risky combat operations in Afghanistan as they tried to avoid casualties.¹³

The U.S. went to Iraq with only a few allies joining the military campaign; but in Afghanistan, it had initially up to 68 coalition partners.¹⁴ However, political compulsions, domestic sensitivities, regional security concerns and global economic realities made it increasingly difficult for many allies to sustain the military campaign for the duration that the U.S. expected. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan indicate that the ‘war stamina’ of coalition partners is more susceptible to domestic political and economic pressures, and therefore leads to ‘war fatigue’ earlier than what might have been in American plans. Moreover, the non-state challengers to this sole superpower are also diverse and embedded within various social fabrics that span the globe. Therefore, the U.S. faces a paradox between grand strategic choices of ‘unilateral intervention’ or the pursuit of an ‘alliance strategy’ in this global war that has already outlived the terms of various governments that chose to be partners in the conflict.

Unilateral intervention relies more on hard power and military might but is seen as less legitimate in an increasingly interdependent and globalized world. On the other hand, an alliance strategy, despite being more broad-based, legitimate and diplomatically feasible, is deficient in terms of both ‘military capabilities’ and ‘political will’ of key allies that may not share identical global security agendas, resources and political capital. This further makes the prospect of a sustainable alliance against terrorism unlikely, except for medium-term regional alliances like the one with Pakistan.

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The economic and political costs of such an expensive alliance with the U.S. in a seemingly endless war far outweigh the potential short term benefits that an alliance with the sole superpower might otherwise accrue for developing countries. It is very difficult for the smaller regional partners to justify additional funding and troop casualties, and tolerate sustained political and economic instability and slow growth rates - all for a campaign where there is no direct interest. Hence, the war fatigue of allies due to their domestic compulsions indirectly imposes severe constraints on both the legitimacy and ‘war stamina’ of a broad-based and long-term U.S. military campaign in the war on terror.

Long war is a flawed strategy: lessons from eastern strategic wisdom

The campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have proven that modern military might is unable to compete with the depth and complexity of a 5000-year old Asian civilization, particularly in fourth generation warfare. Perhaps the U.S. military leadership of the 21st century should reflect on the words of an Asian scholar that remain relevant today even though they were written 25 centuries ago. Sun Tzu, the wise Chinese strategist wrote in his famous book ‘The Art of War’ that, “*There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.*”¹⁵

Henry Kissinger, in his recent book ‘*On China*’, almost warns the American leaders about the valuable lessons he has accumulated over the past four decades of long engagement with China. He notes that policy, diplomacy and strategy must not be pursued as a zero-sum game like chess: “*The Chinese turbulent history has told them the wisdom that not*

every problem has a solution and that too great an emphasis on total mastery over specific events could upset the harmony of the universe.”¹⁶

In short, the U.S. needs to review and reshape its entire strategic culture of starting a military campaign based on anger and arrogance. Its economic, industrial and technological advantages prevent the possibility of any nation-state challenging the might of its war machinery head-on within the contemporary uni-polar international system. However, World War II, the last major war between the industrialized nations, was won primarily on the basis of the sheer industrial capacity of the U.S. - an advantage that is no longer relevant in modern wars against non-state actors. Today, fourth generation wars are not fought against nation-states but within and against societies, whose structures are different, robust and complex; hence, ‘political will’ matters more than ‘military capability’. Unlike third generation wars during the 20th century, in current warfare, what non-state actors lack in military capability, they make up through benefiting from the deficiencies and vulnerabilities of political will of the states.

A policy of ‘unilateral interventionism’ based on hard power would exude more threat than security for American interests. The U.S. must learn from the Chinese, to pursue relative security rather than attempting to overwhelm the adversary; this is increasingly pertinent now as it needs to peacefully co-exist with the giant that Beijing is destined to become on the world stage. In the classic tradition of ‘*Wei Qi*’ (also known as the ‘*Game of Go*’ by the Japanese), Chinese grand strategy is aimed at preserving the system rather than securing total victory, undergoing protracted campaigns based on strategic encirclement rather than direct confrontations, and strategic flexibility rather than single-mindedness.¹⁷

The United States needs to realize that an overwhelming reliance on hard power as a tool to achieve short-term national interests destroys what soft power could otherwise yield in terms of influence, trust, multilateralism, and global goodwill. A national security grand strategy rooted in the principles of collective security is more suited to an increasingly interdependent and globalized world. Such a paradigm shift will help sustain permanent national interests of a state with the unprecedented influence and power that the U.S. enjoys today.

Due to the nature of the present international security architecture, new and old allies view Washington as a major partner more out of fear than trust and it is this lack of trust that translates into anti-Americanism in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to a U.S. Congressional Research Service report titled *“The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11”* issued on March 29, 2011, over the past decade, the U.S. has spent 806 billion dollars in Iraq and 444 billion dollars in Afghanistan; at approximately 100 billion dollars a year, the cost of the Afghan War is seven times the total Gross National Product of Afghanistan.¹⁸ One wonders how much of that over 1.25 trillion dollars, paid by

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American taxpayers, was spent on the welfare of the Iraqi and Afghan people. If applied effectively, such a large amount could have helped to prevent political space and ideological justification sought by extremist forces that take advantage of socio-economic grievances of the people.

Growing anti-Americanism is not a cause, but a consequence of the unilateral hard power of the U.S. towards the developing world, which itself is redefining its social contracts between state structures and societies. What the U.S. can and must do is be seen as a partner of the nations rather than the governments of allied states; the anti-U.S. sentiments among various societies, including those that are allies in the war against terrorism, indicate that it needs to reshape its ‘state-centric alliances’ to ‘people-centric alliances’. When children and soldiers die and fathers lose their jobs, it is not just state structures that need to be compensated, but the very societies on whose support this alliance rests, need adequate support. Otherwise, there is little incentive for them to aid a foreign power whose alliance has cost them lives, limbs and loved ones.

Lesson from history: revival of the original American dream

Fourth generation warfare is waged not between nation-states but among and within societies. The ‘corporate interest-based’ will of an industrial, urbanized and individualistic society like the U.S. is

qualitatively insufficient to compete with the ‘identity-based’ will of a tribal and clan-based society like Afghanistan. Western technological capability cannot compensate for this ‘asymmetry of wills’ among western and tribal societies; what the tribal society lacks in technological capability, it compensates through the robustness of its rugged people. Western powers will continue to face this dilemma in military campaigns against developing countries till these societies, through the effects of globalization, become industrialized enough and their value systems are transformed enough so that monetary advantages are valued more than honour, and utility replaces pride.

The United States remains the sole superpower of a uni-polar international system and aspires to be viewed as the leader of the free world. However, at a time when it is confronted with complex and unique global challenges, elimination of enmity merits more attention than the elimination of the enemy. In this respect, U.S. policymakers ought to pay heed to one of their greatest visionaries, Abraham Lincoln, whose famous words are more relevant today than ever before, in terms of offering the most suitable recipe for contemporary and modern strategic dilemmas: “*Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?*”¹⁹

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