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## How to Win in Afghanistan

It is hard to recall when a war document as topical as General McChrystal's confidential report on the chances of stabilizing Afghanistan was last leaked - and so soon after being published.

Yes, we had the infamous Pentagon Papers[i] during the Vietnam War, and after 9/11, the Rumsfeld memo[ii] asking how we can measure success in the Global War on Terror, but this new lengthy official assessment by the NATO and US commander was leaked within just weeks of it being sent to the White House and at the time when the future of our involvement in Central Asia is the hottest issue in the news outside of "Obama Care."

The 66-page report obtained by the *Washington Post* and available in redacted form on-line[iii] really contains no substantive surprises. The message from the commander on the ground is that he is under-resourced and that corruption is rampant among his Afghan governmental partners. What is shocking, however, is the repeated call made by McChrystal for a strategy that will change the situation, a strategy that will address the drastic shortfalls in men and finances and how to 'cleanse' the host nation structures of undesirable elements.

Translated into English, this means that America today does not have a strategy. Eight years after the 9/11 attacks and eight months after the arrival of a new administration, we have deployed American men and women in harm's way without providing a clear strategy to explain why they should risk their lives for those back home. Lest you think this is an exaggeration, the *Washington Post* quoted President Obama last week as saying he will not commit any more troops to the operations in Afghanistan until he has "absolute clarity about what the strategy is going to be." (This begs the question: what were his advisers telling him during the campaign for the presidency and what have they been doing in the 240 plus days since the inauguration?)

It is difficult to explain away this lack of strategy. Yet if you talk to those brave men and women who have served, and continue to serve, in Afghanistan, it is obvious that no one has convincingly explained to them why America has deployed to a part of the world that has bested more than one empire in recent centuries.

Strategy is not a mysterious activity that can only be done behind the closed doors of the White House or the Pentagon. Every sentient human does it every day. Strategy is simply another word for how we connect what we wish to achieve with the ways in which we wish to achieve our goal and the tools and resources we have available to us. But first we must always answer the question: what is our ultimate goal? In Afghanistan the answers have ranged from making sure al Qaeda cannot attack us again to creating a representative and effective government serving the Afghan people. These are two very different aims each at the ends of a broad spectrum. It is for the President to decide which end of the scale will be used to justify putting more uniformed American lives in peril.

The White House now has General McChrystal's full report, and soon the new US National Security Strategy should be released. Therefore, we can reasonably expect the President to tell us which end of that spectrum most informs our actions in Afghanistan: whether we are fighting there to destroy al Qaeda or to create a radically new political, economic

and social reality for the country. Until then, we should remind ourselves of the basic facts and a recent, and very relevant, case-study.

The bare statistics are daunting. Afghanistan is 150% bigger than Iraq, physically as large as Texas but with terrain that is far more challenging than that of the Lone Star State. Although accurate census data is challenging to obtain, it apparently has a population comparable in size to California's but with more than 30 spoken languages. Of the almost 40 million Afghans, 10% - more than 3 million people - are involved in Afghanistan's world-beating drug trade. At the same time, the Afghan National Police force stands at 51,406 uniformed officers. For comparison, NYPD stands at almost 40,000.[\[iv\]](#)

These characteristics make Afghanistan one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, counterinsurgency scenarios a modern state has ever faced. Nevertheless we should remember that just over a generation ago another Superpower became embroiled in its own Afghan counterinsurgency: the Soviet Union.

Although the USSR was a totalitarian regime which often used unspeakable methods to suppress its own people, as well as the people of countries it invaded, the fact that it too recently attempted to stabilize Afghanistan and subdue a low-tech insurgency should not be ignored but studied. Therefore, the question might be asked: what should the Russians have done in order to win? Obviously numbers and brute force alone did not work. Washington is debating about whether or not to add to the 60,000 troops already deployed, when the USSR had up to 104,000 there. Boots on the ground, of course, are but one element of counterinsurgency success. How then could the Russians have defeated their own Afghan insurgency?

Having spent more than two months looking at seminal conflicts in history, starting with the Peloponnesian wars between Sparta and the Athenian alliance, to George Washington's irregular campaign against the British, it did not take too long for an interagency group of government representatives whom I had tasked academically to home in on three factors that led to Russia's defeat and which any outside actor will have to deal with should they wish to drastically change the Afghan reality in a lasting way.

To change Afghanistan an outside power must:

- Install a national leader who is a Pashtun but who is recognized by, and who is able to make lasting deals with, the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara ethnic groups
- Effectively co-opt the most significant tribal players
- Cut off sanctuary to any insurgent element exploiting the porous border with Pakistan.

The Soviet Union failed on all three counts and so, after a decade in the country, withdrew in 1989 after almost 20,000 of its soldiers had been killed and 500,000 had been wounded. Irrespective of the exact political and economic reality America desires to realize in Afghanistan, it too must first accomplish these three tasks.

How are we faring so far? Although Hamid Karzai is Pashtun it would seem from Washington that he is not the person who enjoys sufficient recognition and can sway enough of the other political actors to maintain an air of national unity. (The next few weeks will tell us how accurate this picture is.)

Has America co-opted the most important tribal leaders and warlords? In the beginning millions of dollars were distributed to people identified by the CIA and State Department as leaders who could stabilize the most dangerous regions in the South and East. The trouble was that often they were not the right people and in most cases they did not

"stay bought." Here, there is a cultural obstacle on our side of the issue: Americans do not generally like the idea of having to buy "the favor" of political actors, especially when we are at the same time attempting to establish representative government. Nevertheless, our military has gone from actively seeking out those to co-opt, to keep them on our side, to making sure that when we transport materiel inside Afghanistan our logisticians pack each convey by an extra 20-30% in order to pay the local warlords when the convoy is intercepted.<sup>[v]</sup> This is not us co-opting the locals but the locals co-opting us.

The last requirement, of course, is strongly connected to the latter. The lifeline of any insurgency, be it the drug-running FARC in Columbia or the Neo-Taleban in the Federally Administered Tribal Area along the Afghan border, is the lines of retreat and sanctuary. By definition all insurgencies start small and must choose their battles with the government until they have adequately built a counter-state and are in a position to challenge federal forces openly. This is the natural progression of "people's war" as designed by the master of irregular warfare, Mao Tse-tung. As long as entry and exit into and out of the Tribal Areas are not controlled by US forces, the Afghan National Army, or Pakistan, our soldiers and innocent people will continue to be killed in Afghanistan.

This is exactly the trap we fell into in Vietnam. Cambodia and Laos were never fully taken out of the equation as enemy sanctuaries, and as a result the insurgency could always recruit, regroup and resupply. In Southeast Asia, for political reasons, we enabled a war of attrition to be implemented against us. We are doing so again. In the words of Dr. Thomas A. Marks, the renowned authority on counterinsurgency and author of half a dozen award winning books<sup>[vi]</sup> on peoples' war: "Most Afghans may indeed not be members of the Taleban. But that is irrelevant if sanctuary remains available to the insurgents."<sup>[vii]</sup>

As we wait for the President and the White House to define the plan for Afghanistan, we should reflect on the last triad of strategy: our means and resources. Since the first units were sent there in the weeks after 9/11 to hunt down and destroy al Qaeda, this war has been shaped by the philosophy of the Special Forces of the United States. Always emphasizing quality over quantity, the world of Special Operations achieves what it does by working "by, with and through" the host-nation forces with whom it partners. As a result, any mission of the scale of Afghanistan - and even Iraq - will eventually stand or fall on the basis of how good our partner is at doing what needs to be done. Yet today in Afghanistan we are asking the local population to trust Afghan National Army and police units that we ourselves do not trust. Once more, Professor Marks: "We are again facing the same conundrum as in Vietnam: as long as your partner, the host-nation, does not stand up for itself, then the actions of US forces are largely irrelevant."<sup>[viii]</sup>

Unless we are prepared to have US soldiers provide security to the Afghan people in perpetuity, then we may have to reconsider the end-state of the mission. Did America deploy to Afghanistan to create a nation-state in a region that knows neither nation nor state? Or did we send Americans into the Hindu Kush to make sure another 9/11 never happens again? These strategic end-states are not the same and require different tools and methods. We hope the President will soon decide which goal we are fighting for and provide our forces with the resources to match.

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NOTES

- i) <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent1.html>
- ii) <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,100917,00.html>
- iii) [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140)
- iv) For a very fresh and detailed analysis of numbers see *Afghanistan Force Requirements* by Fred and Kimberly Kagan published Sept 19<sup>th</sup> by AEI and ISW available at [http://www.irantracker.org/sites/irantracker.org/files/pdf\\_upload/analysis/TTT\\_Afghanistan\\_-\\_Kagan.pdf](http://www.irantracker.org/sites/irantracker.org/files/pdf_upload/analysis/TTT_Afghanistan_-_Kagan.pdf)
- v) Information provided by an allied observer who has been tasked by NATO to report on the situation in Afghanistan.
- vi) See for example *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (White Lotus Books, 2007) and *Counterrevolution in China* (1998, Frank Cass)
- vii) Conversation with the author Sept 21<sup>st</sup>, Washington.
- viii) Ibid.