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A Case for Pragmatic, Minimalist Approaches to the Afghanistan War

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Introduction

This paper examines the conduct of the Afghanistan War under the Barack Obama administration and offers policy recommendations for the president.

Given the accelerated counterinsurgency warfare being waged by the weak Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) against the Taliban, a complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would be imprudent. [i] First, doing so could undermine U.S. credibility in the Middle East and South Asia because, as a great power, the United States cannot afford to lose wars. Second, a complete withdrawal is ill-advised in light of the fact that the strategic calculus in the Middle East still remains fraught with uncertainties. For these reasons, the United States should take a minimalist but effective approach in an effort to contain the spread of jihad in Afghanistan if it hopes to retain its influence in the Middle East.

Background: Obama's War in Afghanistan From 2011 to the Present

In 2009, President Barack Obama expanded the scope of the war in Afghanistan, thereby, increasing the troop presence by 30,000 ground troops. In addition, the president shifted his emphasis away from defeating to *degrading* the Taliban. [ii] When Obama initially acceded to General McChrystal's request for expanded efforts that require "a discrete 'jump' [in resources] to gain the initiative" in counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, after 2011, he shifted his emphasis away from a costly COIN campaign to the selective targeting of his adversaries using Special Operations Forces (SOFs) and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). [iii] Indeed, when the president approved General McChrystal's request for increased troop levels, he told the general that he had only one opportunity to get the strategy right. [iv] Thus, when President Obama withdrew all U.S. combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, both the opponents of COIN and its proponents failed to understand that Obama's initial emphasis on counterinsurgency did not necessarily mean that "Afghanistan now displaced all other issues atop the U.S. national security agenda" as Boston University historian Andrew Bacevich argued in his 2010 book, *Washington Rules*. [v]

There were several factors that accounted for the shift in Obama's strategy from 2011 and 2014. First, as General Bolger and the Boston University historian Andrew Bacevich both have argued, COIN turned out to be a costly endeavor that consumed time, U.S. resources, and U.S. lives. [vi] Second, the transition from counterinsurgency to selective targeting seemed to offer a range of available options to the president, including, and if necessary, complete departure from Afghanistan. [vii] Third, one immediate result of the Afghan surge had been the severe degradation, if not depletion, of both the Taliban and Al Qaida fighters. Fourth, as General Bolger suggests, one of the main reasons for the shift in Obama's approach was that the U.S. was unable to obtain a full cooperation from Pakistan to operate within its territory. [viii]

Although the United States withdrew its combat units from Afghanistan in December, 2014, both President Obama and the newly-elected Afghan president, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, signed a bilateral agreement “to keep in place our close security cooperation” in March this year .[ix] According to the bilateral agreement, the U.S. would continue to “train, advise and assist” the ANSF—including the police force—as well as continue to embark upon counterterrorism (CT) missions meant to target Taliban and ISIL/DAESH fighters.[x] As if to confirm the continued U.S. military presence, *the New York Times* reported that the remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan were engaged in “more aggressive range of military operations against the Taliban in recent months [than they had previously].”[xi] Furthermore, the increased attacks against the Afghan police by the Taliban in an effort to undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government in power have resulted in a tough fighting season this year as the U.S.-led coalition presence diminished from 80,000 troops to approximately about 9,800 U.S. and 13,000 to 14,000 NATO troops on the ground.[xii] Another reason for the mounting casualties this year, according to General John F. Campbell, the current commander of the Resolute Support Mission and the United States Forces, Afghanistan, was the diminished CAS (close air support) from the U.S.-led NATO forces.[xiii]

Policy Recommendations for the President: Adopt An Effective but Minimalist Approach to Contain Jihad in Afghanistan

In this section, I will attempt to offer policy recommendations that address the following questions. First, how do we define U.S. interests in Afghanistan? Secondly, in light of the current conflict with ISIL/DAESH, what are the options available for the United States to counter threats emanating from jihadists in the Af-Pak region? As the Afghanistan Study Group noted in their policy memo, one “vital” strategic objective in Afghanistan is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a “safe haven” for the jihadist movement including the Taliban and ISIL/DAESH.[xiv] As such, the best option available for dealing with the jihadist movement in Afghanistan is the minimalist approach that is grounded in flexibility and pragmatism. To that end, the Obama administration should consider the following six options.

Maintain Minimal Troop Presence in the Af-Pak Region

With the gradual spread of ISIL/DAESH into the Af-Pak region, a complete withdrawal of U.S. military presence is no longer feasible because doing so could undermine U.S. credibility in the Middle East and in Central Asia. Secondly, the proliferation of ISIL/DAESH has shown that we can never predict how strategic calculus may change or evolve in the Greater Middle East. As was confirmed by General Campbell during a Brookings panel discussion on Afghanistan earlier in August of this year, in light of the spread of ISIL/DAESH into Afghanistan, the sporadic combat engagements between the residual U.S. military personnel and the jihadists, along with the bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Afghanistan, may mean the U.S. will likely retain its presence in the Af-Pak region.[xv] Indeed, both feature articles from the *New York Times* and *PBS Frontline* agree that although the Obama administration remains optimistic over the election of President Ghani, Ghani’s grip on his own country still remains tenuous.[xvi] It is also worth remembering that even though the Obama administration still maintains troop presence in Afghanistan for training, advising and assisting ANSF, according to Michael O’Hanlon, the Co-Director at the Brookings Institution’s Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, it is now seeking to transition into smaller “embassy training-type” missions by 2016 “although these missions remain subject to reconsideration.”[xvii] Although it is too early to predict what the future holds, these trends, in some sense, seem to validate counterinsurgency theorists’ arguments that COIN waged by the Afghan government forces remains as relevant within the context of the Afghanistan War.

Thus, the Obama administration may have made the right choice to sign the March bilateral agreement with Ghani in an attempt to bolster the ANSF even as the U.S. military continues to embark upon counter-terrorism (CT) missions meant to go after and extirpate terrorist threats.

Work With President Ghani, But Only On Terms Favorable to the U.S. Interests

According to the *New York Times* article by Mark Mazetti and Eric Schmitt last November, the newly-elected President Ghani has developed a close rapport with General John Campbell, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, and has reached out to the international community to foster legitimacy for his own government.[xviii] Indeed,

Mazzetti and Schmitt quote General Campbell's email as saying that the difference between his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, and Ghani "is night and day."^[xix] Although one can construe these developments as encouraging signs, there are already concerns that Ghani is becoming increasingly dependent upon General Campbell's assistance and counsel, and that his grip on his nation remains tenuous at best.^[xx]

The last two indicators may not bode well for U.S. strategic interests in Afghanistan in that they may signal a perpetual Afghan dependence on U.S. aid and advice in order to retain legitimacy. Secondly, although high-ranking U.S. officials may insist that Ghani is not Karzai, we may never know how our working relationship with Ghani may unfold. Thus, even as we continue to provide security assistance to the Afghan government, we should provide Kabul with the means to become less dependent on foreign aid. Although former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley may be correct to argue that we need to continuously provide Afghanistan with diplomatic and economic stimulus packages "so that the Afghans don't sink," a more pragmatic approach would be to encourage the Ghani administration to engage its neighbors economically and diplomatically so that Afghanistan may become self-sufficient in the long-run.^[xxi]

Do Not Attempt to Change How Afghans Want to Live

Despite copious amounts of military materiel aid offered to the ANSF, and despite years spent attempting to implement a Western-style democracy and to impose rule of law upon Afghanistan's own citizens, such attempts amounted to hollow failures at best, and may have even exacerbated the degree of corruption within Afghanistan. As if to bear this out, in his 2009 book, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, Kilcullen quotes an Afghan tribal leader who asked him why Americans want to bring democracy to Afghanistan through national election when they "already have democracy...but at the level of the tribe."^[xxii]

Thus, given that any attempt to impose concepts foreign to the local Afghan citizens will breed resentment and hostility, we should let them figure out how they want to live. Although I do not agree with former Afghan Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalili's calls for establishing rule of law that is facilitated by the United States, he is correct to note that the "Afghan society needs to be mobilized in pursuit of what its population aspires to."^[xxiii] Indeed, retired Marine Major Peter J. Munson may have been right when he notes that that democracy "is just a form of government that, like all other forms, can be corrupted and lost."^[xxiv]

Foster A "New" Coalition

Because waging a protracted counterinsurgency warfare through nation-building is a costly endeavor, and because the foreign policy options available at the U.S. disposal is still circumscribed by limits to its economic and military capabilities, another alternative that the U.S. should consider is to build a coalition involving Afghanistan's neighbors. After all, as the Afghanistan Study Group argues in its memo, "Despite their considerable differences, [Afghanistan's] neighboring states...share a common interest in preventing Afghanistan from either being dominated by any single power or remaining a failed state that exports instability."^[xxv] Thus, the United States must work with Iran and China since both have vested interests in containing the spread of jihadist struggles.

Furthermore, although Pakistan has proven difficult to work with, we should nevertheless continue to work with them by cajoling and flattering them. Although Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) advocates a sterner approach towards the intransigent Pakistani government, his recommendation is flawed because he does not seem to be cognizant of the fact that the stubborn approach by the U.S. may be the source of Islamabad's uncooperative attitude towards the United States.^[xxvi] Secondly, continued impatience towards Pakistan may backfire in that, in the event that the Pakistani government should succumb to the jihadists, the jihadists may acquire CBRNe (Chemical, Biological, Radioactive, Nuclear and high-yield explosives) capabilities that may threaten the United States and Afghanistan's neighbor.^[xxvii]

Be Prepared to Negotiate With the Taliban

Next, in order for the U.S. to enjoy a wider range of strategic options, the U.S. should be prepared to negotiate with the Taliban. Negotiation with the Taliban is crucial because it may lessen the impact of the jihadist movement in

Afghanistan, and also because it may eventually bolster the shaky legitimacy of the Afghan government in Kabul should it successfully coopt the Taliban. Viewed in this light, the updated edition of the Army/Marine Corps COIN Field Manual, FM 3-24, despite its intrinsic flaws, may be correct to note that “While it is unlikely counterinsurgents will change insurgents’ beliefs, it is possible to change their behavior...In other words, counterinsurgents must leave a way out for insurgents who have lost the desire to continue the struggle.”[xxviii]

Already, the prospects for meaningful negotiations look promising. Although the U.S. government failed to capitalize on this due to vociferous opposition from Karzai and the State Department, in 2013, the Taliban accepted the U.S. offers to resume negotiations in Doha.[xxix] Also, in light of the fact that President Obama has announced that the United States is prepared to communicate with terrorists to safeguard U.S. citizens, there is little reason not to negotiate with the Taliban.[xxx] Given the fact that the Taliban and ISIL/DAESH appear to be waging “mutual jihads” against each other, negotiating with the Taliban to contain jihad within the Af-Pak region may become all the more important.[xxxi]

Bolster Homeland Security

Last but not least, in order for the minimalist strategy meant to contain the jihadist threats to work, the United States must be prepared to defend the homeland against all possible threats including homegrown terrorists.[xxxii] The U.S. can monitor and prevent terrorist attacks from within by expanding the reserve components of the U.S. Armed Forces and with improved intelligence and surveillance capabilities. Although the U.S. should maintain a minimal military presence in Afghanistan to contain and selectively target jihadists, military presence abroad will not serve any meaningful purpose within the overarching paradigm of U.S. national security strategy if the United States cannot protect its own citizens at home.

Conclusion

The picture that emerged from my case study of the Obama administration’s prosecution of its Afghan War strategy was that, from the beginning, President Obama inherited the strategic constraints and assumptions from his predecessors. This meant that the president never had a preconceived strategy for solving the festering Taliban insurgency. Nonetheless, he deliberated on options offered to craft appropriate solutions as he saw fit. Thus, the president continued to make adjustments to his national security strategy as needs arose. The fact that his penchant for improvising led to questionable outcomes that continue to limit his geostrategic options notwithstanding, it also meant that he was capable of devising flexible and nuanced approaches to complex problems that do not offer easy solutions.

Throughout this paper, I advocated adopting a pragmatic minimalist approaches to contain the jihadist threats from the Af-Pak region. I suggested that the president should not completely withdraw military presence from Afghanistan, and that he should work with President Ghani so that he may become less dependent upon U.S. aid. I also recommended that the U.S. should allow Afghan people figure out for themselves how they want to live, and advocated that the U.S. should form a “New Coalition” comprised of Afghanistan’s neighboring states which include Iran, China, and Pakistan. However, in order for the minimalist strategy to truly work, the U.S. should also be prepared to negotiate with the Taliban, and bolster homeland defense here at home.

It is premature to declare with certainty how events will unfold. We cannot be certain whether the Taliban, or for that matter, ISIL/DAESH will wither away, or that they will succeed in toppling the current Ghani regime in power. Nor, as we saw in my case study, can we say that the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan will end in a similar manner to the Vietnam War, because the U.S. is still committed to containing the jihadist threat by training, advising and assisting ANSF through its military presence. Nonetheless, by adopting flexible approaches to the seemingly intractable and interminable conflict in Afghanistan, we may minimize undesirable outcomes that may further circumscribe or even harm U.S. interests.

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University, where I was fortunate enough to intern throughout this summer, for reading my manuscript repeatedly and offering me his invaluable insights. With that said, this paper does NOT represent the views of the Center for Complex Operations, but is a product of my own research.

End Notes

- [i] For the ongoing counterinsurgency warfare being waged by the ANSF, see Azam Ahmed's "The Hardest (And Most Important) Job in Afghanistan: A Week On the Frontlines With the Afghan National Police," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 4, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/magazine/the-hardest-job-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0 and Priyanka Boghani's "The War the U.S. Left Behind in Afghanistan," *PBS Frontline*, February 20, 2015 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/afghanistan-pakistan/the-war-the-u-s-left-behind-in-afghanistan/>
- [ii] James P. Pfiffner, "Decision Making in the Obama White House." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, [41;2], 2011, pp. pp. 255-256
- [iii] General McChrystal's memo that was leaked by the *Washington Post*. "COMISAF (Commander, International Security & Assistance Forces) Initial Assessment (Unclassified)," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2009 http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110_pf.html. See also Bolger, pp. 368.
- [iv] LTG Daniel Bolger (USA, Ret.) *Why We Lost: A General's Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* NYC: An Eamon Dolan Book Houghton Mifflin Court, 2014 pp. 323-324
- [v] Andrew Bacevich *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* NY: Metropolitan Books, 2010, pp. 218
- [vi] *Ibid.*, pp. 199-201 and Bolger's segment on Afghanistan from Chapter 13 to Chapter 18.
- [vii] Bolger, pp. 323-324
- [viii] *Ibid.*, pp. 368
- [ix] See Remarks by President Obama and President Ghani of Afghanistan in Joint Press Conference," Office of the Press Secretary Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 24, 2015 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/24/remarks-president-obama-and-president-ghani-afghanistan-joint-press-conf> and "U.S.-Afghanistan Joint Statement," Office of the Press Secretary Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 24, 2015 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/24/us-afghanistan-joint-statement>
- [x] *Ibid.* Also corroborated by GEN John Campbell during "The State of Afghanistan and prospects for the future: A discussion with General John Campbell" held at the Brookings Institution on August 4th, 2015, See the entire clip of the event at <http://www.c-span.org/video/?327479-1/discussion-conflict-afghanistan>.
- [xi] Mark Mazetti and Eric Schmitt "In a Shift, Obama Extends U.S. Role in Afghan Combat," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/22/us/politics/in-secret-obama-extends-us-role-in-afghan-combat.html>
- [xii] Azam Ahmed's "The Hardest (And Most Important) Job in Afghanistan: A Week On the Frontlines With the Afghan National Police," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 4, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/magazine/the-hardest-job-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0. See GEN Campbell's panel discussion at Brookings.
- [xiii] GEN Campbell's panel discussion at Brookings on August 4th, 2014.
- [xiv] See the Afghanistan Study Group's *A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy In Afghanistan* Washington, D.C.: Afghanistan Study Group, 2010, p. 2 http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/NewWayForward_report.pdf.

[xv] BBC reported that ISIL/*DAESH* were in Afghanistan in May to train and offer materiel assistance to the Taliban. See “Islamic State ‘training and supporting the Taliban’ in Afghanistan,” BBC News, May 7, 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32620403>. See also Gen Campbell’s assessment at Brookings.

[xvi] According to Ambassador Dan Felman, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), diplomacy has placed Afghanistan on a firmer footing for national unity, as well as bringing together common interests between Afghanistan and Pakistan for peace, and advancing women’s rights in Afghanistan. He also stressed that diplomacy has provided for Afghanistan a security guarantee. See his keynote speech at the United States Institute for Peace during its “Beyond Afghanistan’s Dangerous Summer,” on August 5th, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5kdAMnhUHo>.

[xvii] Michael O’Hanlon during “The State of Afghanistan and prospects for the future: A discussion with General John Campbell” held at the Brookings Institution on August 4th, 2015

[xviii] Mazzetti and Schmitt, 2014

[xix] *Ibid.*

[xx] Boghani. Also see Ahmed, Azam and Joseph Goldstein “Taliban Gains Pull U.S. Units Back Into Fight in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/asia/more-aggressive-role-by-us-military-is-seen-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0

[xxi] See Stephen Hadley’s panel discussion with Andrew Wilder at the United States Institute of Peace’s “Beyond Afghanistan’s Dangerous summer,” on August 5th, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5kdAMnhUHo>.

[xxii] Kilcullen *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars In the Midst Of A Big One* NY: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 78

[xxiii] Ali Ahmad Jalili “Winning in Afghanistan,” *Parameters*, [39;1], 2009, p. 9-10

[xxiv] Peter J. Munson *War, Welfare & Democracy: Rethinking America’s Quest for the End of History* Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013, p. 185

[xxv] See the Afghanistan Study Group’s *A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy In Afghanistan* Washington, D.C.: Afghanistan Study Group, 2010, p. 8 http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/NewWayForward_report.pdf.

[xxvi] Max Boot “What It Will Take to Secure Afghanistan,” *A Council on Foreign Relations Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 23*, June 25, 2012 <http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/take-secure-afghanistan/p28587>

[xxvii] See the Afghanistan Study Group, pp. 2

[xxviii] FM3-24/MCWP (Marine Corps Warfighting Publication) 3-33.5, C1 (Change #1) Washington, DC: Headquarters, the U.S. Army and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, June 2, 2014, 10-41

[xxix] Karen J. DeYoung “In Qatar, U.S.-Taliban talks remain on the line,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2013 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-qatar-us-taliban-talks-remain-on-the-line/2013/06/22/f45e381e-db7d-11e2-b418-9dfa095e125d_story.html

[xxx] Julie Hirschfeld Davis “In Hostage-Terrorist Policy Shift, Obama Admits Failures,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/world/middleeast/obama-softens-policy-on-hostage-negotiations-with-terrorist-groups.html>

[xxxi] Joseph Goldstein “In ISIS, the Taliban Face An Insurgent Threat Of Their Own,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/05/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-face-insurgent-threat-from-isis.html?_r=0

[xxxii] See my blog article entitled “A Case for A Sustainable U.S. Grand Strategy: Retirement without

Disengagement for a Superpower,” *The Strategy Bridge via Medium.com*, February 16, 2015
<https://medium.com/the-bridge/a-case-for-a-sustainable-u-s-grand-strategy-69734cc05a4c>

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- {9} http://www.afghanistandystudygroup.org/NewWayForward_report.pdf
- {10} <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32620403>
- {11} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5kdAMnhUHo>
- {12} http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/asia/more-aggressive-role-by-us-military-is-seen-in-afghanistan.html?_r=0
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- {14} https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-qatar-us-taliban-talks-remain-on-the-line/2013/06/22/f45e381e-db7d-11e2-b418-9dfa095e125d_story.html
- {15} <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/world/middleeast/obama-softens-policy-on-hostage-negotiations-with-terrorist-groups.html>
- {16} http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/05/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-face-insurgent-threat-from-isis.html?_r=0
- {17} <https://medium.com/the-bridge/a-case-for-a-sustainable-u-s-grand-strategy-69734cc05a4c>
- {18} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/comment/reply/28032#comment-form>

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