



DOD (Adam Mancini)

Soldier signals to his team during patrol near Forward Operating Base Lane, Afghanistan

# Trapping Ourselves in Afghanistan and Losing Focus on the Essential Mission

By RALPH PETERS

**A** *fghanistan doesn't matter.* Afghanistan's just a worthless piece of dirt. Al Qaeda matters. To a lesser degree, the hardline elements within the Taliban matter. Pakistan matters, although there is nothing we can do to arrest its self-wrought decay. But our grand ambition to build an ideal Afghanistan dilutes our efforts to strike our mortal enemies, mires our forces in a vain *mission civilatrice*, and leaves our troops hostage to the whims of venomous regimes.

Afghanistan is the strategic booby prize. Even a perfect success in Kabul (which we shall not achieve) influences nothing beyond the country's largely imaginary borders. No other state looks to Afghanistan—a historical black hole—as an example. Political partisan-

ship blinded many Americans to the importance of Iraq in our effort to get at the roots of terror. Addressing topical symptoms rather than deep causes, we decided that Afghanistan was vital because our enemies, al Qaeda's lethal gypsies, had based themselves there when they wore out their welcome elsewhere. The more important issue was the "why?" behind al Qaeda. That *why* leads to the Arab Middle East, not Afghanistan, and the emotional heart of the Arab world lies in Baghdad. While Saddam Hussein's Iraq was not a safe haven for al Qaeda, its archetypal problems formed the foundation for Islamist terror: the comprehensive failure of Arab attempts at political modernity, resulting in the estrangement of frustrated individuals who turned to stern Islam as an alternative to secular

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strong-men and preyed-upon societies. Positive changes in Iraq, however imperfect, will resonate throughout the Middle East (if not as swiftly as the neoconservatives hoped). Progress in Afghanistan is a strategic dead end.

Even the assumption that, if we do not “fix” it to Western specifications, Afghanistan will become a terrorist base again misreads the past. Afghanistan became a terrorist haven because we refused to attack the terrorists we knew were there. Osama bin Laden could have been killed. Al Qaeda training camps could have been destroyed. The Taliban could have been punished. Instead, the Clinton administration simply hoped the threat would fade away. Our problem was

fecklessness, not the neomedieval lifestyle of villagers in remote valleys. We have embraced a challenge of marginal relevance, forgetting that al Qaeda was a parasite on the Afghan body and choosing to address an Arab-fathered crisis by teaching our values to illiterate tribesmen who do not speak Arabic.

Even if we could persuade Afghan villagers that our values and behaviors are superior, if we could reduce state corruption to a manageable level, if we built thousands of miles of roads, eliminated opium growing, and persuaded Afghans that women are fully human, it would have no effect on al Qaeda. The terrorists who attacked our homeland were not Afghans. Afghanistan was just a

cheap motel that was not particular about asking for identification. Even a return to power of the Taliban—certainly undesirable in human-rights terms—does not mean that September 11, Part Two, then becomes inevitable. The next terror attack on the West will not be launched from Afghanistan.

Pause to consider how lockstep what passes for analysis in Washington has become. The Taliban’s asymmetric strategy is not to defeat us militarily, but to make Afghanistan ungovernable. But what if our strategy, instead of seeking to transform the country into a model state, were simply to make it ungovernable for the Taliban? Our chances of success would soar while our costs would

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plummet. But such a commonsense approach is unthinkable. We think in terms of Westphalian states even where none exist.

We buy into so many unjustified-but-comfortable assumptions that it is bewildering. There is no law, neither our own nor among international statutes, that commands us to rescue every region whence attacks against us originate. Our impulse to lavish aid on former enemies was already a joke in the 1950s. By the 1960s, our “send money” impulse had grown so wanton that it began to destroy allies. In Vietnam, our largesse corrupted our local partners. For their part, the North Vietnamese enjoyed the strength of their poverty: As South Vietnamese officials and officers grabbed everything they could, North Vietnam concentrated on grabbing South Vietnam. Today, we are repeating that strategic decadence, deluging an ethically inept government with so much aid that we only anger the frustrated population while enriching those in power. And, of course, we hardly give a thought to what the Afghan people truly want or do not want.

Nor are we willing to recognize that the Taliban, or something like it, will always exist in those forbidding valleys. Unlike al Qaeda in Iraq, the Taliban is an indigenous movement (its rise accelerated by aid from Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence). The hold of religion—and the paralyzing social customs upon which

DOD (Brian Naranjo)



GEN McKiernan speaks to members of Afghan Public Protection Force, a new community-level force that guards schools, mosques, and roads to free police for other missions

faith insists—is powerful beyond our ken. We wish it away, pointing out the corruption among mullahs or the hypocrisy of believers willing to stone women to death for human foibles while enjoying the forbidden delights of pederasty themselves. But if hypocrisy negated the power of religion, there would be no religion anywhere. The human mind grows supple when self-interest and power come into play—even the mind chock full of religious doctrine. *Do as I say, not as I do* is an appropriate motto for faiths of all complexions—but that does not make religion any less potent. A “holy man” can rationalize personal monkey business in any number of ways but still believe implacably in the destiny of his faith. The Taliban’s rank and file are not draftees, after all. Yes, social pressures exist, and, for some, fighting is a job (and not an unwelcome one). But subtract religion from the equation and we have no Taliban (or al Qaeda).

A modern state as we wish to see it rise cannot coexist with Afghanistan’s traditional values. The distance between Afghanistan and Iraq is not 1,200 miles, but 1,200 years—give or take a few modern weapons.

This circles back to the prime thesis of this article: even if everything broke our way in Afghanistan, so what? Afghanistan is a sideshow to its eastern neighbor, Pakistan, and to its western neighbor, Iran. We are renovating, at great cost, the outhouse between two blazing strategic mansions.

When Washington dramatically increases aid to a troubled country—as we are doing with Pakistan—we might as well put the death notice on the international obituary page. Pakistan, which has well over five times Afghanistan’s population and a nuclear arsenal, cannot be rescued by American efforts. Why? Because Pakistan does not *want* to be rescued. A succession of demagogues (including the late Benazir Bhutto) turned the country into an anti-American bastion by blaming Washington for every jot of suffering in Sindh and each increase in poverty in the Punjab. Pakistan cannot serve up its favored elements within the Taliban (although the military is willing to take on other elements of that complex network of fundamentalist organizations). Ever obsessed with India, Pakistan views Afghanistan as providing strategic depth and sees “its” Taliban as a useful auxiliary force. Now, having underestimated the power and will of Islamists, Pakistan’s government and military watch helplessly as

terror groups gnaw into the country’s vitals. Pakistan is the new ground zero of terror.

And it is our lifeline.

### Criminal Irresponsibility

Even if Afghanistan were important to our security, we would still be foolish to deploy ever more troops in the nebulous hope that things will somehow break our way. We have reached—indeed, passed—a point where our military’s can-do attitude and our government’s nice-to-do impulses have put our troops in the worst position they have faced since the autumn of 1950 in Korea, if not since December 1941 in the Philippines.

While I recognize that, given the time and resources, our troops can defeat (although not destroy) the Taliban and keep a Kabul government in office indefinitely, the problem is not the quality or even the quantity of our Armed Forces, but the vagueness and relative pointlessness of the tasks assigned: our men and women in uniform will do what they are asked and do it well, but decisionmakers should ask them to do sensible, useful things.

As I write, we are sending 21,000 additional American troops to Afghanistan, with the prospect that more will follow. It is appalling—and a gross dereliction of duty—that no senior officers have spoken out against the violation of fundamental military principles involved in this troop increase.

In order to roll more Afghan rocks uphill, we are ignoring the *essential* requirement to secure supply lines adequate to the mission. Even if Afghanistan were worth an

Karachi northward through the Khyber Pass to various parts of Afghanistan. We have put ourselves at the mercy of a corrupt government of dubious stability with an agenda discordant with ours. Strategically, our troops are Pakistan’s hostages.

And Islamabad already has taken advantage of our foolishness. While milking us for all the military and economic aid it can extract, Pakistan’s security services recently demonstrated just how reliant we are on their good will. In the wake of the Mumbai bombings—sponsored by a terror organization tacitly supported by Pakistan’s government—attacks on our convoys transiting the Khyber Pass, as well as raids on supply yards in Peshawar, swelled in number and soared in their success rate. This could not have occurred had the Pakistanis not given the green light to the attacks. Pakistan was strong-arming us into getting an angry India under control. And we did.

Serious strategy requires balancing potential rewards with inherent risks. Above all, it demands a clear recognition of what is doable and what is not, as well as the ability to differentiate between what is merely nice to do and what is essential. A strategic goal may be desirable in itself but not worth the probable cost. To put 50,000 or more U.S. troops at risk demands a no-nonsense analysis of the dangers weighted against the potential strategic return. That analysis has not been done. We are arguing over tactics and thinking, at most, in terms of operations, while missing the critical strategic context.

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increased effort, the lack of reliable, redundant lines of communication to support our forces would argue against piling on. In the wake of 9/11, it was vital to send special operations forces and limited conventional elements to Afghanistan to *punish* al Qaeda and its hosts despite the risks. Indeed, we might usefully have sent more Soldiers in those early months. But instead of striking hard, shattering our enemies, then withdrawing—the one military approach that historically worked in Afghanistan—we put down roots, allowing ourselves to become reliant upon a tortuous 1,500-mile lifeline from the Pakistani port of

Meanwhile, the belated awareness that our troops are de facto prisoners of war to Pakistan has led to the even greater folly of contemplating a 4,000-mile supply line from the Baltic Sea through Russia and various Central Asian states to provide nonlethal goods to our troops and those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Even though the evidence is irrefutable that Moscow bribed Kyrgyzstan to deny our continued access to Manas Air Base—a critical support node—elements within the U.S. administration actually argue that, in the interests of “resetting” our relationship with

Russia, it is essential to “expose” ourselves to risk to show the Russians that we trust them. These are serious arguments made by American officials. One suspects they do not have children serving in our military.

Few strategic calculations are more obvious than Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s ploy to addict us to a Russian-controlled supply line. With a domestic economic crisis on his hands (during which he still managed to promise Kyrgyzstan \$2.5 billion to close Manas to us), he senses that he will need to create foreign diversions and that the time is right to back an electoral *putsch* in Ukraine and to force regime change in Georgia. Putin calculates that we would accept these moves (protesting vigorously and briefly) in order to keep the supply line open. We are walking into *this* trap with our eyes willfully shut to the obvious peril.

Other voices have suggested bargaining for an ambitious supply route across China into the Afghan panhandle, crossing some of the roughest country on Earth. There are even whispers about opening a line of communication through Iran, an exemplary case of leaping out of the frying pan into the fire.

The logistics problem should have shaped our strategy in Afghanistan. After the late spring of 2002—when we had done what

*needed* doing in Afghanistan—our further goals and the means allocated to achieve them should have been determined by one ironclad criterion: What size force could be deployed, sustained, and, if need be, evacuated *in its entirety* by airlift? One vehicle beyond that calculation is one vehicle too many.

Even beyond the logistics debacle, we lack an integrated strategy, either specific to Afghanistan or regional. We have picked the wrong country to “save.” We are sending more troops, without clearly defining the endstate they are to achieve (echoes of Vietnam there). And the problem is where we *are not*—in Pakistan and, to an even greater extent, on the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, there are serious opportunity costs worldwide, including in our own hemisphere, that are bewilderingly absent from the national debate—to the extent Washington allows a serious debate.

Yes, we *can* make Afghanistan a better place, for us and for the Afghans, if we are willing to remain for a full generation while immobilizing a substantial slice of our

battle-worn Armed Forces (it is astonishing that, as Mexico degenerates under the impact of a savage narco-insurgency, our military officers are agonizing over the moods of toothless village elders on the other side of the world; the crisis is on our border here and now, and it is fueled by an array of other drugs, not opium).

Even if we hang on in Afghanistan, giving our all as we bribe cynical foreign powers to let us feed our troops, what ultimate benefit will make the mission worthwhile? Be *specific*: What do we get out of it?

Can we even define the mission in plain English?

### What Makes Sense

Historically, our military has taken risks with its logistics under three types of circumstances: when we had no choice, as in the desperate efforts in the North Atlantic or the Pacific in the first years of our involvement in World War II; when the gamble was carefully calculated to achieve a clearly

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Marines conduct resupply convoy on Highway 515, Afghanistan

U.S. Marine Corps (Philippe Chasse)

defined end *and* was of limited duration, as in Winfield Scott's march on Mexico City or the culminating maneuvers of Ulysses Grant's Vicksburg campaign; or when we grew overconfident and careless, which led to the Bataan Death March and the collapse of the thrust toward the Yalu in Korea. The fragile lines of communication supporting our forces and those of our allies in Afghanistan do not fit the first two models.

Any serious strategic analysis would recognize that Pakistan is the problem, not part of the solution. Our natural ally in the subcontinent is India, but developing a closer relationship with New Delhi will be strained by our need to warn India off from retaliating after Pakistani-sponsored or Islamabad-condoned provocations. Pakistan has no incentive to stop its rabble-rousing efforts to embarrass India over Kashmir or other matters, since Islamabad is convinced that we will keep an angry India in check. (Were we completely honest with ourselves, we would recognize that a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, however grim in human terms, would not only leave India the clear victor, but might solve quite a number of strategic problems.) Under the current conditions, Pakistan, a state that cannot control its own territory, is our regional boss.

And every troop increase in Afghanistan strengthens Pakistan's grip on us. Or, God help us, Russia's hold, if we really get it wrong.

Another obstacle to a more rational approach to Afghanistan is the difficulty that U.S. officers, once given responsibility for a problem, have in admitting that there may be no solution. Our military is not good at cutting its losses. So now we have flag officers who, protesting all the while that Afghanistan is not Iraq, appear intent on applying the techniques that worked in Iraq to Afghanistan: troop surges, security for the population, train up the local security forces, and so forth. While the situational differences are so great that it would require another article of this length to enumerate them, the basic proposition is that Iraq is a semimodern society that wants to get better, while Afghanistan is a feudal society content with its ways and impatient with our presence (in large part thanks to the cynical populism of President Hamid Karzai). In Iraq, religious extremism was imported. In Afghanistan, it sprouts from the soil with the ease of poppies.

And, decisively, Iraq matters.

To determine which strategy makes sense going forward, we need to have the mental discipline to distinguish between what we need to do for our own security and what merely appears desirable to idealists. We *do* need to continue to hunt al Qaeda and to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for global-reach Islamist terrorists again. We do *not* need to pursue the disproportionately expensive and probably futile mission of creating a modern state in the Hindu Kush. Indeed, a fundamental problem we face is that Afghanistan was never an integrated state in which a central government's writ ran to each remote valley. Afghanistan has always meant the city-state of Kabul, with tributary cities along caravan routes and tribal regions that coexisted under various terms of compromise with the government and their neighbors. Iraq at least has a nascent, if not yet robust, sense of national identity. Beyond a few Western-educated figures, Afghanistan does not and will not.

If we accept the need to continue the pursuit of our sworn enemies, but abandon the self-imposed requirement to build a modern state where none existed, the dimensions of the problem shrink and our requirements become sustainable. A sound strategy with realistic goals would look different from our present approach, though. Roughly outlined, the strategic goals and means from which we might choose are these:

**Enemy-focused Approach #1.** Concentrate on the continued attrition of al Qaeda and the prevention of an outright Taliban takeover. Cease development efforts. Turn domestic security requirements over to "our" Afghans, reversing our hapless attempt at being an honest broker in favor of supporting those figures and groups willing to fight against the radical Islamists. Reduce our footprint to a force that can, if necessary, be sustained entirely by air (15,000 troops or less). Establish a mothership base at Bagram, with a few subsidiary bases distributed around the country. Design our residual force around special operations capabilities reinforced by drones, conventional attack, and rotary wing aircraft, and sufficient conventional forces for local defense and punitive raids. Ask all NATO forces that do not contribute directly to the core mission of destroying our mutual enemies to leave the country. Ignore the opium issue. Instead of attempting to foster governance, concentrate on rendering

provinces ungovernable for the most extreme Taliban elements, striking fiercely whenever they come out in the open to exercise control of the population.

**Enemy-focused Approach #2.** While less desirable than the first approach, a complete withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan—while continuing to strike our enemies with over-the-horizon weapons and supporting anti-Taliban Afghan factions to keep the Pashtun provinces ungovernable by our enemies—would still be preferable to an increase in our present forces. Allow Afghanistan to further disintegrate if that is its fate. Let an unfettered India deal with Pakistan.

The past and persistent tragedy of our involvement in Afghanistan began with our unwillingness to accept that punishing our enemies is a legitimate military mission and need not be followed by reconstruction largesse. We never sense when it is time to leave the party, so we wind up drunk on mission creep. At home, a polarized electorate defined our simultaneous commitments solely in domestic political terms: For the left, Iraq was Bush's war and, therefore, bad. But those on the political left felt the need to demonstrate that they, too, could be strong on national security, so Afghanistan became the good war by default. It has been impossible to have an objective discussion of the relative merits, genuine errors, appropriate lessons, and potential returns of each of these endeavors.

In this long struggle with Islamist terrorists, our focus should not be on holding territory, but on the destruction of our enemies. That is a lesson we should have taken from al Qaeda's disastrous engagement in Iraq. Thanks to its own grave miscalculations, al Qaeda suffered a colossal strategic defeat as millions of Sunni Muslims turned against it. Its error was to believe that a terrorist organization could and should hold ground. Al Qaeda immobilized itself by seeking prematurely to administer cities and districts, forsaking its flexibility and losing the war of popular perceptions. In Afghanistan, we are in danger of making a parallel mistake as we assume that physical terrain still matters.

Throw away the traditional maps. Chart the enemy. Our focus should be exclusively on his destruction.

As the Obama administration attempts to come to grips with the Afghan morass, it must begin with the strategist's fundamental question: "What's in it for *us*?" **JFQ**