

Building a Potemkin Village

A Taliban Strategy to Reclaim the Homeland

By JEFF DONNITHORNE

The newly invigorated U.S. strategy to secure a stable Afghanistan faces hazards of its own creation. With a surge of troops and political capital, the United States hopes to achieve long-term stability with a short-term mandate for action. In light of Sun Tzu's admonition to attack an opponent's strategy, this article invokes the mindset of a hypothetical strategist in the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST). Its polemic opinions are apocryphal but represent a plausible line of action for the Taliban to attack U.S. strategy. By proposing this counterstrategy, the article attempts to discourage our belief in a potentially hollow success.

A Hypothetical Taliban Strategy

We are the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan, and we will prevail in planting our Islamic Emirate in its soil. Currently, the

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) is only a puppet on Kabul's international stage, and its legitimacy is diplomatic fiction. Ultimately, the government of Hamid Karzai will collapse under the weight of its own irrelevance, and we shall assume the leadership the people deserve.

The GIROA survives on the life-support of foreign aid, protected by American bodyguards cloaked as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Our goal, therefore, is to secure the withdrawal of ISAF in the next 3 to 5 years, while setting the conditions to overwhelm the remnant Karzai regime. To reach this goal, we must employ a two-part strategy. First, we must give the Americans every reason to do what they *want* to do: leave. Through effective information control, we will convince them that their newly revised counterinsurgency strategy has worked brilliantly. Second, we must undermine the

Taliban goal is to convince Americans that their work is done so they will begin to withdraw

GIROA, granting it the *appearance* of viability without any substance. When the world looks for progress in Afghanistan, it must be seduced by a Potemkin village—an attractive facade masking a hollow reality. After the departure of the Americans, we will use our preserved strength and influence to brush aside the GIROA and establish the Emirate. We must therefore embark on a strategic offensive masquerading as a tactical retreat.

U.S. Departure Is a Shared Interest

The Americans are making a final token stand for Afghanistan. They have added troops and reformed their strategy, but the U.S. President has already announced that some of his forces will return home in the summer of 2011. From their experience in Iraq, the Americans believe that short-term surges can alter the landscape of a centuries-old battle. Let us reinforce their illusion. We should therefore quiet our struggle in the outlying provinces, recalling our foreign fighters to our safe haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), while dispersing our indigenous forces among the population. ISAF will be monitoring metrics sensationalized by Western media: roadside bombs, suicide attacks, and our clashes with ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). We must phase out our use of these tactics to convince ISAF that its surge has worked and that the GIROA is ready to assume full command of the country.

This reduction in large-scale military action must occur slowly to convince ISAF that its success is a strategic victory and not a tactical ruse. We should continue to attack and harass in small numbers, particularly in ways that invite force against the population by ISAF and ANSF. Our forces should tempt reprisals such as those carried out by the Marines in Haditha, Iraq—capture or kill single members of isolated units, plant intelligence to implicate the innocent populace, and inspire violent responses. The Americans will take the bait because any American Soldier would rather shoot a gun than win hearts and minds. As long as these American deaths are isolated and not en masse, we can convince

the Americans of their strategic success while thwarting their true objective: the loyalty of the Afghan population.

As we deliberately grant tactical gains in the outlying provinces, the QST must solidify the security of its cross-border safe haven. The FATA sanctuary represents our competitive advantage in this struggle—the physical terrain is too imposing and the tribal terrain too complex for ISAF to penetrate. During this time, we must continue to organize, train, and equip a fighting force in our extensive FATA training camps. Furthermore, the QST must discontinue the recent pattern of terror and suicide attacks in Pakistan. These attacks invite an unwelcome military response by the Pakistani army against our stronghold in the border region. We must exercise greater discipline and patience, shoring up our safe haven and preparing for the opportunity that will surely come when ISAF departs.

Building the Potemkin Village

With its dependence on foreign aid, the GIROA will take desperate steps to assert sound governance across Afghanistan. As our forces diminish their attacks to encourage ISAF withdrawal, we must actively sabotage the legitimacy of the GIROA. ISAF will likely remain in Afghanistan if the GIROA bears *no* evidence of viability; therefore, we must allow some evidence of progress while ensuring that no national legitimacy is attained. Through infiltration and deception, we can discredit the central government, confine any administrative effectiveness to Kabul, and hamstring the protective role of the ANSF.

The Karzai regime seeks to consolidate power in a Western-style central government—a system foreign to the tribal landscape of Afghanistan. Therefore, the QST should encourage this centralization, reinforcing the government's isolation from the rural populace and its tribal architecture. We must entice GIROA leaders with vice and corruption, bribing them to spend on services and infrastructure in and around Kabul. To further this corruption, the QST should infiltrate the ranks of government by appearing to shift loyalties as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has

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done. We should become part of the problem, choking the flow of support to the countryside while polishing Kabul as the lone jewel in a crown of thorns. Meanwhile, our indigenous loyalists must sow discontent among the Afghan majority outside of Kabul's influence, bleating the government's failures and the inevitable departure of ISAF bodyguards. Through our propaganda, we can render the central government irrelevant to the countryside, severing any links to the tribal structure that the GIROA attempts to forge.

A functioning and robust ANSF is an essential requirement for ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan—we must foster the appearance of good health while implanting a cancer. As we diminish our attacks across the country, we should leak stories to the media hailing the effectiveness of the ANSF. A portion of QST fighters should enlist in the ANSF, infiltrate its ranks, and seek leadership positions across the force. Our embedded

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fighters should cooperate with ISAF trainers to create a token capability, while manipulating tribal connections to make the ANSF the slave of dueling masters. Once embedded, QST loyalists can erode ANSF effectiveness by fostering tribal loyalties instead of national ones, giving and accepting bribes, and encouraging factionalism. ISAF will not depart until the ANSF *appears* sufficiently robust—as with the rest of the GIROA, we must ensure that its perceived success is an actual failure.

Accepting Strategic Risk

The QST has an overwhelming shared interest with the Americans—we both want them to leave. Our strategy manipulates this shared interest, encourages their withdrawal, and keeps us in position to capitalize on the inevitable vacuum of power. Nevertheless, there is a risk: by encouraging the *appearance* of national stability, we could be ceding its reality. If ISAF can couple its local security gains to a comprehensive administrative effort from Kabul, the unwitting populace could believe that the Karzai regime is meeting its legitimate needs. If ISAF can clear large numbers of our QST fighters from the local villages, its strategy of “clear, hold, and build” could take root, and we could find it profoundly more difficult to reside in the Afghan countryside. Finally, we incur the risk that our efforts to undermine the GIROA will be *too* effective, and the Americans may not be convinced they can leave. In 3 to 5 years, Karzai's government may still be so inept that not even Kabul shows signs of progress; ISAF could feel compelled to stay even longer.

Ultimately, the weight of history accumulates in our favor and suggests that these risks are worth taking. Foreign occupiers have never succeeded in our land, and there is no evidence that the Americans have the patience or will to be the first. Their fondness for nationbuilding is limited, and their mandate for action will expire. We must flatter the Americans and encourage their surge narrative. Likewise, we must polish Kabul as the lone gem of evidence to suggest that the GIROA puppet can dance on its own. The weary Americans will believe the good news they create and begin to withdraw—and we will tear down the farcical Potemkin village and establish the rightful Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in its place. **JFQ**



Afghan President Karzai and Secretary of State Clinton address conference at State Department concerning Afghanistan

U.S. Navy (Chad J. McNeeley)