



The Uncertain Status of the War

Anthony H. Cordesman

November 5, 2001

There are at least as many questions as answers as the U.S. enters another week of war. Secretary Rumsfeld, General Myers, and General Franks have all talked about progress and the war proceeding on schedule. The reality, however, seems more questionable.

This does not mean the U.S. is abandoning its basic reliance on the opposition, creating opposition controlled zones in the North and West, and encircling and taking Kabul and Qandahar. It also does not mean that the war has bogged down. However, for all the talk of executing its plan and being on schedule, the U.S. seems to shifting its strategy to put less and less emphasis on rapid victories by the opposition or a Taliban collapse, and more and more emphasis on a strategy of escalating the U.S. military commitment until it wins.

"There is Not Really A Government in Afghanistan Today"

Secretary Rumsfeld's comments about the lack of a smoothly functioning Taliban government, and its loss of communications and day to day control, are probably correct. The practical problem, however is just how much this matters and how much future U.S. restrikes on know Taliban and Al Qaida facilities can accomplish.

A Taliban government that digs-in, disperses, and conceals may not be efficient, but then it never was. The question is just how much this loss of capability really costs a Taliban that never approached the level of capability of a modern government.

Taliban Forces are Not "Making Major Moves"

Similarly, the fact that Taliban forces are not "making major moves" seems to be an intelligent strategy as much as a sign of weakness. Unless the Taliban needs to urgently reinforce a given front, it is best strategy is to sit there, make the opposition come to it, hide as much as possible in urban areas, disperse where it cannot, and wait for winter.

A New Ho Chi Minh Trail?

Afghanistan definitely is no Vietnam in the sense that it is supported by a massive aid effort from outside powers. At the same time, a new "Ho Chi Minh Trail" does seem to have opened up in the form of smuggling and reinforcement by volunteers across the border with Pakistan. The volume of both reinforcements and resupply seems limited, but then so are the needs of the forces involved.

Moreover, if history repeats itself, the Taliban should learn to adapt its supply and reinforcement system so that little formal communication is needed, the targets are small and highly disperse, stockpiles are concealed or hidden in populated areas, and give elements of supply and reinforcement move forward in concealed ways which are difficult to attack.

One key question is whether this flow can sustain outlying garrisons in hostile cities and areas like Heart and Mazaar e-Shariff, and goon during the winter. The answers are unclear, but the Taliban does seem to have successfully strengthen the garrisons around Mazaar e-Shariff to the point where it is questionable whether the Northern Alliance forces there can succeed on their own. Resupply and reinforcement of Kabul and Qandahar does see likely to succeed in spite of the U.S. bombing.

The Intensifying Air War that Isn't Intensifying But May

Press coverage of the war keeps referring to the war as intensifying. In practice, the U.S. has average a slightly lower number of total sorties over the last two weeks than before, averaging less than 90 sorties. Many of these sorties do involve bombers with high payload and extensive multiple strike capability, but they did earlier as well. The focus has changed to attack Taliban forces in the field, capability and extensive, but the intensity remains minimal by the standards of modern war and even by the standards of Kosovo -- considering the target base and objectives in the war.

Part of the problem is that the U.S. really does need secure forward bases near the area of the most intensive fighting. These could be in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and the U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps have expeditionary air base units that can be moved by C-17 and C-5 and rapidly prepare such bases to support F-16s and F-15s, while the U.S. Army has similar units to rapidly support AH-64 and ranger heliborne assault forces.

The present average of 80-90 sorties may be all that three carriers and Diego Garcia can support, and they are very demanding sorties needing 4-8 refuelings and limiting each aircraft to only one sortie per day. Furthermore, they rapidly wear down a force and vastly increase both the maintenance burden and the risk of accidents and having to carry out search and rescue missions. A relatively large air base could support 60-72 aircraft and average at least that many sorties a day, plus simultaneously house attack helicopters, air assault helicopters, lift helicopters, and resupply aircraft like the C-130. It can also provide secure recovery capability.

Forward bases in Afghanistan can be a mixed blessing. It does not take much artillery fire to limit base operations, and the Taliban can fire at ranges up to 20-30 kilometers. The North Vietnamese showed that man portable rocket launchers, antiarmor, and mortars can be a major problems and that small suicide teams can kill a lot of aircraft very quickly. Bases like Baghram and Mazaar e-Shariff can remain vulnerable for a long time. Heart and Shindand could be a different story.

There are two important exceptions. The U.S. Army showed during the Gulf War that it could rapidly create a major helicopter base in northern Kuwait with limited C-130 capability. Creating such a base in the Northern Alliance areas above Kabul could have a major impact. So could a base in almost any secure area occupied by the Uzbeks and Tajiks. The U.S. Army also routinely practices regimental sized efforts to create and secure such helicopter bases in semi-hostile territory. Some argue that such a base would be an "ulcer" for the Taliban, and attract many defectors while greatly strengthening isolated opposition elements.

Uncertain Lethality in Attacking Taliban Ground Forces

Since we have no battle damage data of any kind, it is difficult to know what U.S. air planners think they have accomplished to date, but several issues are clear:

- The "strategic bombing" effort against rear areas may have affected the Taliban or Al Qaida but has not demoralized, shattered, or paralyzed them. Given past history, the U.S. Air Force probably expected to have far more effect that it has actually had. It also has probably underestimated the skill with which enemy forces learn to disperse, hide, and shelter with time.
- Impressive as heavy bomber strikes using area bombs are when seen from afar, they have a poor history of killing and even of producing lasting psychological and morale effects. The USAF has made many claims about the impact of such bombing over the years, but every independent review from the Strategic Bombing Survey in World War II to the Gulf War Air Power Study by Elliot Cohen have reached different results. The enemy learned to dig-in, disperse, and ride out the bombing relatively quickly.
- The Afghans have been under air attack before. Equally important, they have suffered from years of artillery fire in every battle. They dig in and fortify routinely, and antipersonnel weapons tend to be effective only against exposed personnel. The body count to date may be surprisingly low.
- The real wild card that may hurt or cripple the Taliban and Al Qaida is the U.S. ability to kill major weapons nearly 24 hours a day, even when they are relatively well concealed or revetted, and to detect and kill significant concentrations of vehicles and personnel in garrisons and buildings.
- The Taliban does rely on artillery, armor, and reinforcement by truck. U.S. sensors and reconnaissance can detect and target such activity to an amazing degree, although it cannot separate exposed military from civilians wherever they are intermingled. The Taliban is dependent on superior firepower to halt Northern Alliance offensives and to defend its garrisons in exposed areas. The key question is how much killing of such targets is enough, how efficiently can the U.S. kill, and how well can the Taliban resupply.
- The U.S. escalation to the use of JSTARS and Global Hawk, and steadily greater concentrations of other sensors and intelligence assets, should help. So should putting more special forces spotters on the ground. The doubling

of the deployment of U.S. Special Forces to sport targets, however, may or may not represent the success of such strikes.

- Special Forces have a mixed history of getting the right targets in such missions, the deployment of more special forces may reflect the failure of the opposition to perform the mission as much as the success of U.S. spotters, and it takes a lot of spotters and troops to protect them to cover wide areas from the ground.
- In theory, killing cumulative levels of 400-500 major weapons north of Kabul could have a major impact. So could taking out the more limited numbers of major weapons around Herat and Mazaar e-Shariff could do the same. Stopping truck convoys with reinforcements could also be critical, such as the Taliban has relied on truck mounted reinforcements for its victories even more than weapons. The problem is that the slow Taliban infiltration of new weapons can at least partially compensate, and many key Taliban weapons like mountain howitzers, small multiple rocket launchers, and heavy mortars are hard to spot and kill - historically an average of about three precision weapons per target - and easy to shelter and re-vent.
- One key lesson of Vietnam is that ground troops cannot wait for air power to do their job. The ARVN perpetually waited for the U.S. air strikes to do more than they could. It did not press forward and make the enemy expose itself and retreat. It avoided casualties in closing on the enemy. This ARVN approach to war fighting worked defensively in some battles, but never offensively.
- The problem for both the Afghan opposition, and the U.S. advisory and military efforts, is that getting poorly trained opposition forces to move at the right time and in ways where air power can provide close support is a difficult task at the best of times. The best time windows after extensive air support only have half hour duration at most and the separation of friendly and enemy forces often has to be limited to a few hundred meters.
- Under these conditions, U.S. attack helicopters may prove vital to provide on-call firepower at the right place and time in ways that compensate for the Taliban's weaknesses.

We Will Win: The Question is When and At What Level of U.S. Commitment

We do have a strategy and we are making progress. At the same time, U.S. defense officials are putting too much spin on this progress, understating both Taliban options and capabilities and overstating our air effort. There is still no way for the U.S. to know how much it will have to escalate, and the fighting could well drag on into the spring unless we can somehow decapitate the Taliban and/or Al Qaeda or they collapse more for internal political reasons than purely military reasons.

Afghan War Topics

| | |
|----------|--|
| 11/02/01 | Defining "Carpet Bombing" in the Afghan War |
| 11/01/01 | The Problems in Major U.S. Ground Options in Afghanistan: It May Not Be Over When It's Over |
| 10/31/01 | The Taliban and its Afghan Opposition: Why the "Bad Guys" May be Less Fragile than The "Good Guys" and Why a US Ground-Air Option May Be Necessary |
| 10/30/01 | The Growing British Role in the War Against the Taliban and Al Qaeda: Force Contributions and Chronology |
| 10/29/01 | A Long War? Weather as a "Four-Edged Sword" |
| 10/25/01 | The Lack of Battle Damage Assessment Data |
| 10/24/01 | Background to the War |