

The Evolving US Strategy in Afghanistan

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It is not clear that the United States has changed its initial strategy in Afghanistan. It seems doubtful that either Afghan experts or top level policy makers ever believed that the Taliban would suddenly collapse the moment the United States started bombing or that the opposition would suddenly win victories. It may have been a hope, but it is doubtful that it was ever a plan.

The basic strategy from the start seems to have been to use air power to weaken the Taliban militarily while using US, British, and other special forces to train the opposition, help it to selectively reequip, and develop the kind of forward air control that could both better target Taliban ground forces, and support them in their offensives.

US military planners certainly seem to have recognized the political difficulties they face from the start. They avoided massive bombing, focusing on a single faction in the opposition, and trying to rush things forward faster than the opposition could be made effective or the political problems caused by the divisions within and around Afghanistan could tolerate. One can argue the pace and the timing, and about the US failure to see the importance of the regional battle for hearts and minds, but it does not seem fair to argue that the US ever lacked a strategy or that the one it chose is any worse or more uncertain than the alternatives.

The US Strategy at This Point in the War

At this point in time, the pace and timing of how this strategy plays out seems to be uncertain, as is the level and type of US forces that it will have to bring to bear. In broad terms, however, it seems to be to:

Deny the Taliban any sanctuary in rear areas like Kandahar and Kabul while striking selectively at Taliban garrisons in key cities where the population is hostile to the Taliban such as Herat (Hazars) and Mazar e-Shariff (Uzbeks),

Buildup all of the factions of the opposition within the severe limits imposed by their strength and competence. Strengthen the largely Tajik forces in the Northern Alliance northeast of Kabul to the point where they can join their two fronts opposing the Taliban and move West to link up with the largely Uzbek faction around Mazar e-Shariff, and cut the Taliban off from easy access to its garrisons in the largely hostile Shiite west.

Strengthen the largely Hazara (Shiite) rebels around Herat so they can take the city and airfields in the West.

Get secure access to airfields around Herat and Mazar e-Shariff for air resupply and possibly US air/helicopter bases, and open up a land route across the Freedom Bridge (or river) from Uzbekistan to Mazar e-Shariff.

Use the Northern Alliance to put constant pressure on the Taliban forces in Kabul.

Use the accelerating defeats of the Taliban other areas of Afghanistan to create more and more Pashtun factions that split from it out of real hostility and opportunism, and avoid the image of hostile anti-Pashtun factions and the United States taking over the country.

Put growing pressure on Pakistan to reduce smuggling into Kandahar that now resupplies the Taliban and Al Qaeda and acts as route for volunteers.

Constantly search for windows of vulnerability to use air power or Special Forces to capture or kill bin Laden, Omar and other top opposition figures without ever openly announcing that this is a primary goal and making it a litmus test of US success.

Defuse the focus on the United States by working with British Special Forces, and by bringing in Australian and French Special Forces and Turkish (Islamic) Special Forces once their security can be reasonably guaranteed.

Take Kabul with something approaching a broad coalition of forces--not simply the Tajik-dominated forces.

Force the collapse of the Taliban "fortress" in Kandahar by encircling it and let the opposition take in on the ground if this is not possible.

Escalation and Intangibles

The advantages of this strategy are that it lays the ground work for an Afghan liberation of Afghanistan, avoids major US deployments of ground forces, and limits the "West vs. Islam" image of the fighting. It offers a great deal of inherent flexibility and it allows the United States to work around the winter and to adapt to shifts in the attitudes of given opposition factions and neighboring regimes. It makes it very hard for the Taliban to predict exactly what the United States will do at any given time, and it avoids simple benchmarks of success that can be used to embarrass the United States.

At the same time, there are several obvious problems and uncertainties--what are sometimes called "intangibles" in military planning--inherent in such an approach:

It can mean a long war, and one lasting into the summer of 2002.

It gives the Taliban time to disperse and convert to guerrilla fighting on some fronts while creating a stronger fortress in Kabul and Kandahar.

It exacerbates the "West vs. Islam" aspects of the war until the opposition forces dominate the fighting.

It requires patience by the media, Congress, and Administration hawks.

It means the political tensions and instability in the nations in the region may play out over at least six more months when all ideally want rapid closure.

It means month after month of civilian casualties in some form.

It presents the risk of a humanitarian crisis for which we are likely to be blamed, even though the Taliban spent some three years creating the mess inside the country and the UN estimated that 3 to 7 million Afghans would be at hazard this winter more than a month before the war even began.

It depends heavily on being able to retrain and reequip the opposition into effective fighting forces.

It depends on continued opposition cooperation with the United States and with other opposition factions.

It depends on the opposition factions cooperating at least on the surface in trying to create a common Afghan government, although many experts believe it will work just as well if each major faction is given relative autonomy in its own ethnic area.

It really needs air bases in neighboring countries and/or inside Afghanistan for fixed wing and rotary wing operations the moment opposition or United States land operations intensify.

It leaves the level and type of US forces committed open-ended, although there is a logical progression from limited Special Forces elements to attack helicopters and limited ranger raids to light units to heavy divisions.

There is no way to set a clear calendar, say which US ground forces should really move at any given time, or measure progress in any linear form since set backs are almost inevitable.

A Reasonable Chance of Success

There are some Vietnam-like elements here. The opposition is weak and often anything but "good guys." We cannot predict the success of our approach to the "Afghanisation" of the various military factions and how success our training and supply efforts will be. There is no solid friendly "government," or government in exile, to provide political cohesion and

leadership. Today's allies may not stay the course. We may rely too much on air power and tactical victories on the ground, and too little on winning a solid political base.

That said, no country around Afghanistan likes, or will deliberately resupply, the Taliban. Russia and China are more or less on our side. The Taliban also is so hated in most areas that its position in much of the country is much more like the Soviet position than ours. Garrisons occupy a hostile countryside with few they can trust in cities like Herat and Mazar e-Sharif. Many experts feel that the Taliban and Al Qaeda cannot act as guerillas even in Pashtun areas. Rather than Mao's "fish in the sea," they will be moving targets the moment Afghans find them to be weak and dispersed.

We also need to remember that the Taliban is remarkably weak as an organized military force, even taking account of some 5,000-7,000 Pakistanis and 3,000-5,000 Arab volunteers. In many ways, the Taliban is also remarkably fragile ruling elite. It cannot number more than 200,000 real activities in a nation of 24-26 million, and probably has a maximum of about 45,000 real troops. Roughly 60 percent of the country is ethnically and/or religiously hostile to the Taliban's practices, and many Pashtuns have as much reason to hate the Taliban as other factions.

At this time, the pace and timing of how this strategy plays out does remain uncertain, as is the level and type of US forces that it will have to bring to bear. This depends on the relatively weak reed of opposition ground forces.

For example, the largely Tajik forces in the Northern Alliance northeast of Kabul have some 5,000-7,000 fighters divided into two major fronts with Soviet equipment that only includes about 100 tanks, 100 other armored vehicles, and 100-150 major artillery pieces. Fuel and ammunition supplies are very low and far below those normally needed for an offensive by such troops--about 20 to 30 percent. Capability to use armor and artillery is low, and the ability to maintain and sustain it in combat is lower. Such a force would normally take about 4-6 weeks of intensive effort to bring up to limited readiness for a sustain offensive, but then its opposition is so weak that there are no precedents by which to judge.

In summary, there is a good prospect of success if the United States is willing to escalate its air and ground presence to make up for any emerging problems in the rest of this strategy. Victory, however, will not be weak unless the Taliban and Al Qaeda collapse for internal political reasons, or a sudden US capture/kill of Bin Laden and/Omar have this effect. At this moment in time, our problems in logistics, basing, and the problem of aiding and transforming opposition forces make it likely that the best the United States could hope for was some major victories by the onset of winter in the North and victory by late next spring.

Afghan War Topics

11/05/01	The Uncertain Status of the War
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