

Boots on the Ground: The Realities in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria

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February 13, 2015

The Obama administration and its strongest opponents in Congress may not have all that much in common, but one thing they do share is the constant misuse of the word “strategy.” Strategy does not consist of stating a broad policy goal and empty rhetoric. It consist of stating an actual plan with clearly defined goals, specific means to achieve, milestones for action, estimates of the necessary resources and their availability, estimates of cost-benefits and risks, and metrics to measure success. A sound bite that fits in Twitter or a fortunate cookie is not a strategy.

Getting this wrong is particularly dangerous when one starts talking about the use of military force and mindlessly throwing around terms like “boots on the ground” with no actual definition of what is involved or what the term is intended to mean. Every American has to accept the fact that the coming presidential election means two years of vacuous partisan political posturing, but any form of war is serious and the stakes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria are all too real.

The Need for an Integrated Civil-Military Strategy, Based on Command and Embassy Expertise on the Scene

To begin with, these are areas where the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the key commanders on the scene, along with the ambassadors and State Department who have responsibility for the political and economic dimensions of a given operation, need to be asked for detailed advice.

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria do not have that much in common, but one thing is clear in all three cases. U.S. military action must be tied to a civil-military strategy that offers the best possible hope of producing a stable and friendly nation as its ultimate outcome. No amount of tactical victories in the field, and no amount of U.S. military force that merely defeats the immediate enemy threat, will create that stability. Military success is critical, but it is only a means to an end.

Defining “Boots on the Ground” Begins with an Effective Advisory Effort in the Field

Second, simply calling for more U.S. military forces in the abstract is as irresponsible and stupid as determining the type and size of forces without regard to the facts on the ground. “Boots on the ground” can mean sending in more advisers and trainers that cannot help host country forces learn how to become effective in combat, because they are not allowed to help the forces in the field. No advisory effort is likely to work that focuses on generating forces from the rear that have no real experience in combat, lack proven leadership, and cannot tie all of the elements of effective operations together.

Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the earlier war in Iraq have all shown that new forces tend to be no stronger than their weakest link, and simply providing formal training, equipment, facilities, and organization is no substitute for putting advisers in the field, working directly with host country forces, and providing enablers that can help new and inexperienced forces when they run into trouble.

The operational, mentor, and liaison teams (OMLTs) that the United States put into forward Afghan combat units at the Kandak level are examples of the kind of teams that are necessary. The specific teams required need to be determined on the basis of on-the-scene military expertise, but the United States has enough experience in different wars to know that they require some mix of the following skills:

- Real area expertise and language skills;
- Continuity enough to build up trust on the part of the force involved;
- Experience in actual combat leadership, with assignment on the basis of proven capability, not formal training.
- The ability to aid the host country forces with the kind of intelligence and battle management aid that only the United States can provide;
- The ability to provide some kind of support and enablers—air power, ground support, artillery, etc.—to help units that run into trouble;
- A system where the advisers in forward units can use higher levels of U.S. command up to the ambassador to deal with failures to provide critical supplies, lack of coordination in the field, host country leaders who need to be replaced, and problems like corruption in areas like pay, supply, support from other units, etc.;
- Expertise in air control and using air support, and taking or allocating artillery, as well as other forms of fire support and local reinforcements;
- Expertise in using local terrain and built-up area capabilities and establishing combat positions and placements;
- Forward assistance in urban warfare tactics and support from tools like airpower and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs);
- Advice in dealing with civil populations and feedback to warn if tactics or operations create tension, excessive civilian casualties, and collateral damage.

The mix involved will depend on the units involved and conditions in the field. Mature and proven host country or allied forces need far less support and help, and the goal is always to let them do it their way the moment this succeeds. It also depends on keeping the forward advisory teams small and their having the necessary expertise and skills. The United States failed critically to do this in Afghanistan before Transition. As late as early 2001, it was short at least 750 personnel in key Army and police training slots, and large numbers of the “advisers” in place had no practical experience in the role to which they were assigned.

Anyone calling for “boots on the ground” needs to realize that the most urgent challenge may not be providing more of our forces, but figuring out how to structure this kind of advisory mission, how to get skilled personnel, and how to deal with risks that will inevitably kill or wound some of the U.S. military involved. Any president who does not provide such capabilities needs to realize that he or she may have made the most critical decision in trying to make local forces effective and that such a decision can mean failure and defeat.

Similarly, anyone calling for “boots on the ground” needs to realize that even the best such effort will fail if it simply produces short-term tactical victories and not the ability to secure the population and hold territory, particularly populated areas and key parts of the economy. It will equally fail if the civil side cannot build the kind of governance and civil efforts that win broad support and bring lasting stability. “Win” is purposeless without “hold,” and “hold” is purposeless without “build.”

Supporting “Boots on the Ground” Requires Effective Combat Support and Enablers

At the same time, no such effort can work if the local or host country forces are too weak and the United States does not provide reinforcements or “enablers.” Every military force faces the threat of being attacked were it is weakest or there are combat units that are ineffective and incapable of protecting the flanks or positions of the combat units that can actually fight. These threats are far higher in newly formed and inexperienced forces.

Here, it is important to realize that unless major U.S. combat forces are deployed in significant enough numbers to actually do all or most of all the fighting, local or host country forces will fail if they cannot get emergency support and reinforcements. They also face a very different challenge in large countries, when they face a dispersed force of nonstate actors that is on the scene and knows their weaknesses in detail, and where the real war is less one of short tactical victories and more one of lasting attrition in fighting for control of the population.

And, these are wars that local forces must ultimately win. As was clear in Vietnam, and became all too clear in Afghanistan and Iraq, even the best U.S. combat units and a constant series of tactical victories can still fail if the United States and its other outside allies fully occupy an area or the country. Worse, doing it our way can deprive the local forces or host country of popular legitimacy, temporarily suppress sectarian and ethnic divisions, identify the United States as an occupier rather than an ally, and create a culture of military dependency where the local or host country forces never really learn to stand on their own.

This has very real meaning in terms of “boots” on the ground. The real need may be for high mobility strike forces that can support a local or host country force immediately and anywhere in the area of combat. In large, dispersed areas, this is more likely to mean forces like rotary wing and close support air units! AH-64s, armed helicopters, UCAVs, A-10s, air mobile land combat units than brigades of regular U.S. troops. The ability to rapidly insert small cadres of “stiffeners” like Special Forces, Rangers, and Marine combat teams may be more critical than to try to move large U.S. combat units—even if they are in country and have a credible line of support and supply one they move.

Morale-building enablers can also be critical. Having superior intelligence is a key tool, and so are medical services and evacuation, emergency airlift, avoiding over-commitment against the odds, etc. Knowing that air support is always available and operates in a climate of near total air superiority is another critical element of “ground power” even if it does not actually fly.

This kind of support also can be critical in dealing with the fact that “win” in the tactical sense is meaningless if it drives the population out of the area of combat, leaves civilians without homes or economic support, empowers given factions or warlords, or otherwise makes “hold” meaningless and “build” impossible. Hopefully, Afghanistan will not involve major battles for cities, although this seems unlikely. Iraq and Syria must mean such warfare, and creating the mix of intelligence, air, and advisory support to enable local and host country forces will be critical.

Both the administration and its opposition in the Congress need to consider this option in far more detail. Providing too little of this kind of support may be far more important than deploying major U.S. combat units. At the same time, it requires cost and risk assessments. One reason U.S. commanders have been careful to warn again and again that it may take several years to create effective Iraqi forces is that enablers—including substantial amounts of airpower—can only really work if the base of local or host country forces is ready to use them.

In addition, any major use of airpower or any other form of firepower has a critical political dimension, particularly in built-up areas. It needs to be used with great political care. One does not secure, hold, or build by turning a populated area into an angry desert—another reason to deploy forward advisers and constantly stress the civil-military character of any strategy.

The White House seems to be gradually accepting the need for the first two forms of “boots on the ground,” but it is far from clear in what numbers to perform what tasks for what duration and at what cost. These are all elements of any real world strategy; they are critical elements in judging the adequacy of the administration’s plans, their risks, and their cost-benefits.

They should be the immediate focus of any effort by the Obama administration to provide credible transparency, and it is a bit of a travesty that the administration has not done so. It is even more of a travesty for a Congress that both criticizes the administration—and endlessly talks about spending controls and fiscal responsibility on the one hand, and mouths off about strategy on the other—to not insist on such details.

“Boots on the Ground” in the Form of Major Combat Units

The final form of “boots on the ground” that applies to the Afghan, Iraq, and Syrian conflicts—and to the tactical objective of defeating Daesh or the Islamic State—is the option of deploying major U.S. ground combat units. In practice, advocates have never specifically suggested what this means, how many would be involved, what they would do, and whether they would begin to approach the previous levels in Afghanistan and Iraq. Opponents generally, at least tactically, assume the worst case in numbers, cost, and duration.

The end result is a military debate that borders on strategic infantilism. No one defines their terms, their objectives, the cost-benefits they expect, or any other aspect of a real strategy. The debate is essentially meaningless because no one states what they mean—or in most cases seems to bother to have asked themselves what they mean before they have taken a position.

In the case of Afghanistan, the debate may be moot. It is not clear that any side is now prepared to reintroduce even a brigade equivalent. That does not mean, however, that the need will not arise. It is at least worth examining in agreeing on any strategy for Afghanistan that is conditions based—rather than tied to the present rigid force levels and timing—whether this could be an option. The answer may be that the United States faces other strategic priorities, the cost may be too high, and the potential benefits too uncertain. But, this at least needs some examination.

The case in Iraq also needs that same level of careful examination and one that really tests different real world strategies, rather than trying to fill one intellectual vacuum with another. At the same time, the civil-military conditions are fundamentally different. The United States is not simply fighting Daesh or the Islamic State in Iraq.

The United States is dealing with at least three major Islamic extremist or jihadist movements in both Iraq and Syria: Daesh, the Al Nusra Front, and the Khorasan group. It is trying to help Iraq recover from the near civil war between Sunni and Shi’ite, and Arab and Kurd triggered by ex-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and it must deal with Iraqi government forces with strong links to Shi’ite militias and Iran—forces hostile to the United States.

The United States has no existing bases to build upon, no clear lines of supply, and will have no way to assess the potential of a shattered Iraqi Army until—and if—it can rebuild an effective force of at least 9 to 12 brigades. It cannot move into Western Iraq without considering the political impact on a Sunni population now generally hostile the Iraq civil government, and with strong elements that are hostile to the United States or feel that we failed to support them after they depended on us, as did the Sons of Iraq.

Once again, “win” is not enough without “hold” and “build.” U.S. forces cannot support the Iraqi government in retaking lost territory without becoming a hostile occupying force if the Iraqi government does not bring its Sunnis back into a political structure they can accept and probably give them some equivalent of both federalism and a largely Sunni National Guard. They cannot choose the central government over the Kurds, become a buffer between them, or deal with the resulting backlash of appearing to take sides—given the broader impact of the Kurdish issue and Arab perceptions of any failure to give Iraq’s Kurds equal rights.

And here, another aspect of the sheer fecklessness of the U.S. political debate over strategy becomes critical. The United States cannot have a strategy toward Iraq without having a strategy toward Syria. It is not fighting Daesh or the Islamic State. It is attempting to bring some form of unity and stability to Iraq. It is trying to use force in the form of small rebel forces, humanitarian aid, and diplomacy to resolve the Syrian civil war. And, it is trying to provide a lasting enough defeat of a range of Islamic extremist movements—of which Daesh is only one—to eliminate Islamic extremism as a major force in Iraq and Syria.

The United States cannot have an effective strategy in Syria that ignores the strategy for Iraq, separates Assad from Daesh, or ignores that fact that most of today’s Syrian rebels are not Islamic extremist factions with growth ties to other such movements outside Syria. It cannot talk about secure or buffer zones without asking how airpower alone could secure such areas, or what allies would protect them. It cannot rely on equally uncertain

alternatives like eventually training some 15,000 rebels without any defined mission or sending U.S. ground troops into Syria in search of enemies they are all too certain to find.

At the same time, the United States must adjust its broader strategy to deal with potential requirements in Yemen and massive uncertainties about whether it can achieve a new relationship with Iran or face an even more serious mix of threats in the Gulf if the nuclear negotiations fail. This would require strategic triage at the best of times, and a climate where sequestration is still a real possibility is not only not the best of times, but introduces a whole additional dimension of irrational behavior to the impact of partisan politics.

None of these factors creates the kind of barrier to the use of major combat units that should lead to the use of the word “never.” But, to go back to the original point made in this essay, strategy consists of stating an actual plan with clearly defined goals, specific means to achieve, milestones for action, estimates of the necessary resources and their availability, estimates of cost-benefits and risks, and metrics to measure success.

What the United States needs is to decide on a clear strategy to deal with both Iraq and Syria and not just Daesh or Islamic extremism. It needs to focus on the grand strategy needed to achieve a broad civil-military objective and not simply “win.” Talking about “boots on the ground” in Iraq and Syria out of this far broader strategic context is all mouth and no mind.

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