

AFGHANISTAN: TUNNEL OR CAVE

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From the times of antiquity to now, Afghanistan has been repeatedly invaded. It is worth noting how, out of all the great empires to make that decision, all but one have vanished from the map. Afghanistan is still there. With this essay I aim to assess the chances of success for this most recent adventure in Afghanistan, to answer the question of whether the Afghanistan project is a tunnel (with the implication that there is a light at the end) or a cave. To this end, I will first offer a summary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission in Afghanistan to date: what has been done and how it has been going. This will be followed by a strategic analysis, an assessment of NATO's stated goals with respect to whether or not they are possible. Once I have explained why much of what was intended cannot be done, I will proceed to argue that: going forward, the best course of action is to fully disengage.

How Did We Get Here?

As we all know by now, on the 11th of September, 2001, terrorists from al-Qaeda hijacked four passenger aircraft over the United States (US). Two planes were flown into the World Trade Center Towers. One plane was flown into the Pentagon. Passengers on the fourth plane brought it down before it could reach its target in Washington D.C. The attacks were planned and coordinated by al-Qaeda's leadership from their bases in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda occupied these bases at the invitation and with the blessings of the Taliban (a predominantly Pashtun coalition committed to governing Afghanistan according to a literal and originalist interpretation of Islam). Shortly after that fateful day, the United States launched an invasion of Afghanistan with the help of its NATO allies.

The invasion, called Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was officially launched on the 7th of October 2001.¹ To this day, this naming is somewhat ironic as it is unclear whether

1 Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S.

freedom in Afghanistan was meant to endure (endure's second definition) or whether the people of Afghanistan were going to have to endure freedom (endure's first definition).

In its early days the mission saw rapid success. Within the first two months of operations, the Taliban's control over Afghanistan was broken by the combined efforts of the US, NATO, and the Northern League (a *relatively* secular coalition of non-Pashtun tribes and warlords opposed to the Taliban).² The critically located city of Mazar-e-Sharif was liberated on the 9th of November 2001.³ Kabul, the nominal capitol of Afghanistan, was liberated three days later.⁴ A coalition of anti-Taliban Pashtun tribes then emerged to wrest the South and East of the country from the Taliban.⁵ This coalition included Hamid Karzai, the future president of Afghanistan.⁶ On the 5th of December, 2001, an interim government was established in Kabul; concurrently the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) endorsed NATO's mission in Afghanistan as an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) tasked to support and assist the interim government.⁷ Four days later, the Taliban fled Qandahar Province, giving over one of the last areas under their governance to decentralized tribal rule.⁸ Finally, in March of 2002, a major operation was fought to dislodge remaining elements of the Taliban and al-Qaeda from Paktia Province.⁹ All these early successes led the US to declare an end to “major combat” operations in May of 2003.¹⁰ That same year, in characteristically inaccurate fashion, then US Secretary of

Policy,” *Congressional Research Service* 7, no. 5700 (2017): 7.

2 Stanley Sloan, “NATO in Afghanistan,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 35.

3 Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service* 7, no. 5700 (2017): 7.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Stanley Sloan, “NATO in Afghanistan,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 35.

8 Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service* 7, no. 5700 (2017): 7.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared that the war had entered into a final “cleanup phase”.¹¹

The war did change gears in 2003, just not in the way Rumsfeld had predicted. At this point, the focus of the US was shifting from the war in Afghanistan to their extraneous exercises in Iraq. It was for this reason that in 2003 the US handed over command of ISAF to NATO.¹² This is not to say they gave full command of the war to NATO. ISAF and OEF maintained distinct chains of command until 2009.¹³ This is significant as, at this point, ISAF was only responsible for securing and assisting the interim government in Kabul while OEF was engaged in counter-terrorism operations across Afghanistan.¹⁴ Like the Soviets, NATO initially thought that if they focussed on securing the capitol they could leave the Afghan authorities to deal with the countryside.¹⁵ Like the Soviets, NATO discovered this assumption to be false. At the urging of the Kabul government, the UNSC expanded ISAF's mandate to include the entire country.¹⁶

With its mandate expanded, ISAF—one would hope unknowingly—decided to emulate another failed Soviet strategy. When they were in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union had tried to control the countryside by dividing it into sectors and then securing it piece by piece.¹⁷ ISAF initially tried a very similar approach. Their plan was to divide Afghanistan into sectors and—using large numbers and overwhelming force—evict the Taliban and secure the country sector by sector.¹⁸ The plan was to start in the North, where the Taliban's control had always been

11 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 71.

12 Stanley Sloan, “NATO in Afghanistan,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 36.

13 id. 39.

14 id. 36.

15 Ibid; A. Z. Hilali, “Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Strategy and Political Status,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 97.

16 Stanley Sloan, “NATO in Afghanistan,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 36.

17 A. Z. Hilali, “Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Strategy and Political Status,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 98.

18 Stanley Sloan, “NATO in Afghanistan,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 36-37.

weakest and resistance against the Taliban always the strongest.¹⁹ This plan was executed in stages. From 2003-2004 ISAF 'secured' the North.²⁰ In 2005 ISAF 'secured' the West.²¹ Finally in 2006 the South and East quadrants of Afghanistan were 'secured' by ISAF.²² By October of 2006 the initial plan had been fully executed and all of Afghanistan was *officially* secured by ISAF.²³

Of course, the problem with concentrating your forces to clear and secure an area in a major operation before moving on to the next sector is that—as soon as you move on to the next sector—the enemy can come right back to the area that you have just cleared. This is exactly what ISAF discovered in 2006: the Taliban had been filing back into the areas cleared by ISAF as soon as their backs were turned.²⁴ The failure of sector by sector clearing was amply demonstrated by the fact that—in 2006, just when ISAF had assumed responsibility for the security of the entire country—the incidence and severity of Taliban attacks increased dramatically.²⁵ That ISAF could not, by 2006, secure all of Afghanistan was not exactly surprising however. At that time, the combined troop strength of ISAF and OEF was only 61,000, supported by (or supporting) an Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that supposedly numbered 89,500.²⁶ With this they were meant to secure more than 27,000,000 people spread across more than 650,000km².

Their first strategy having failed, ISAF switched from a strategy modeled around large contingents clearing an area and moving on to a strategy modeled around Provincial

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 id. 39.

25 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 81.

26 Stanley Sloan, "NATO in Afghanistan," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 37.

Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).²⁷ These were small to medium sized teams made up of both civilian and military personnel.²⁸ The idea was that the military component could provide security while the civilian component delivered reconstruction and development assistance.²⁹ It was thought that in this way ISAF could not only be more flexible in responding to threats but also more effectively win the support of the local peoples by showing them tangible evidence of a potential peace dividend.³⁰

Unfortunately this approach also found limited success. Even in areas without significant Taliban presence many non-Pashtun populations resisted the PRTs development efforts, fearing that they were a ploy by the (mostly Pashtun) central government to exert dominance over them.³¹ To be fair, creating a state wherein the central government could exert influence over the whole country was part of ISAF's plan. On the security front, the success of the PRT program was also extremely limited. In 2007 the rate of violence increased again as the Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to intensify their insurgency, operating out of secure bases in Pakistan.³² This expanded capability for insurgent forces was in large part because of Pakistan's concurrent *recognition* of the Taliban's *de facto* control over Waziristan.³³ By then end of 2007 then, the first two strategies NATO had employed in Afghanistan had proven unsuccessful and the insurgency was only gaining ground.

The situation continued to deteriorate through 2008, when NATO's member countries

27 id. 37-38.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 M. Konarovsky, "The NATO Operation in Afghanistan: Results and Possible Scenarios for Russia," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations* 59, no. 5 (2015): 39.

32 Stanley Sloan, "NATO in Afghanistan," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 39.

33 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 83-84.

were significantly distracted by the impending collapse of their economies, until 2009 when a number of developments occurred. Recognizing that the situation in Afghanistan was inextricably linked to Pakistan, the US stepped up its campaign of drone strikes within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).³⁴ Simultaneously, they secured a commitment from Pakistan's government that Pakistan would increase their efforts combatting insurgent groups taking refuge within Pakistan's territory.³⁵ While Pakistan did increase their efforts on that front, to some degree, they (unsurprisingly) did not elect to target the groups that were participating in the insurgency *on behalf of Pakistan*.³⁶ At the same time, with the hope of increasing the efficacy and efficiency of their efforts in Afghanistan, OEF and ISAF finally integrated their chains of command into a single structure.³⁷ As a whole, NATO also raised its commitment of troops in Afghanistan to a peak of 153,000 while continuing to train and recruit for the ANSF.³⁸ Within this were included 17,000 more troops from the US in particular.³⁹ It was hoped that a unified strategy encompassing both Afghanistan and Pakistan, alongside the higher troop commitments and greater availability of resources might effect a turning point in the war.

It was not to be. By 2010 it became clear that even the increased troop levels were insufficient to fully secure the country.⁴⁰ What is more, a persistent shortage of ISAF trainers—needed to train and direct the ANSF—prevented the ANSF (by this point having been supposedly increased to 243,000) from being effectively brought to bear against the

34 IISS, "United States Struggles to Craft Pakistan Policy," *Strategic Comments* 16, no. 1 (2010): 3.

35 Stanley Sloan, "NATO in Afghanistan," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 39-40.

36 Ibid; IISS, "United States Struggles to Craft Pakistan Policy," *Strategic Comments* 16, no. 1 (2010): 3.

37 Stanley Sloan, "NATO in Afghanistan," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 22 (2010): 39.

38 David E. Johnson, "What are You Prepared to Do? NATO and the Strategic Mismatch Between Ends, Ways, and Means in Afghanistan—and in the Future," *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 390.

39 M. Konarovsky, "The NATO Operation in Afghanistan: Results and Possible Scenarios for Russia," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations* 59, no. 5 (2015): 39.

40 David E. Johnson, "What are You Prepared to Do? NATO and the Strategic Mismatch Between Ends, Ways, and Means in Afghanistan—and in the Future," *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 392.

insurgency.⁴¹ The result of these shortages was that by 2010 there existed increasingly large swaths of Afghanistan in which the Taliban were able to operate unopposed.⁴² This vulnerability was compounded by the fact that, in 2010, NATO announced that they would begin reducing their force levels the following year.⁴³ By 2014, their mission would supposedly be over and the ANSF would be fully responsible for the security of Afghanistan.⁴⁴ This revelation constituted a significant boost to the Taliban's morale, telling them that, *for them*, the end was in sight.

The forecast delivered in 2010 has proven to be largely accurate. By 2012 the ANSF had grown to number approximately 305,000, divided into an Afghan National Army (ANA) of 170,000 and an Afghan National Police (ANP) of 135,000.⁴⁵ By that same year ISAF's strength had been reduced to 120,000.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, in January of 2012 the Taliban opened an office in Qatar, to facilitate negotiations.⁴⁷ Three months later, realizing perhaps that a deal in 2012 would necessarily involve greater concessions than would be required if they simply waited until after 2014, the Taliban cancelled the negotiations.⁴⁸ Finally, standing by its 2009 commitment, Pakistan conducted a major counter-terrorism operation in 2014.⁴⁹ In this operation they targeted all the insurgent groups operating out of their territory, except their own.⁵⁰ Thus, by the beginning of 2014, the strategic situation in Afghanistan was not significantly better than it had been in 2010.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 M. Konarovsky, "The NATO Operation in Afghanistan: Results and Possible Scenarios for Russia," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations* 59, no. 5 (2015): 40.

44 Ibid.

45 id. 38-39.

46 Ibid.

47 Dominic Tierney, "Fighting While Negotiating in Afghanistan." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2013): 172.

48 Ibid.

49 Thomas F. Lynch III, "Post-2014 Afghanistan & the Looming Consequences of Strategic Misappreciation," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring (2015): 193.

50 Ibid.

As 2014 progressed the situation continued to deteriorate such that by the beginning of 2015, things were decidedly not good. The NATO forces of ISAF were withdrawn throughout 2014.⁵¹ Predictably, there was shown to be a strong correlation between ISAF leaving an area and the Taliban arriving, returning, or multiplying in that same area.⁵² Remember that at its peak, ISAF had over 150,000 troops. As of the 1st of January, 2015, a new agreement between NATO and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA) capped the size of ISAF at 12,500.⁵³ While this number is obviously grossly insufficient to ensure security or stability in Afghanistan, that was apparently thought to be irrelevant as the ANSF are now entirely responsible for the country.⁵⁴ What is more unfortunate is that current ISAF levels are insufficient even to maintain an effective counter-terrorism intelligence network in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ As for the ANSF, it has supposedly been expanded to now number 350,000.⁵⁶ This number is deceptive however as the ANSF is divided along tribal and ethnic lines and has an unfortunate tendency to decrease in size whenever equipment is issued or pay distributed.⁵⁷ Thus, even while NATO countries were withdrawing their forces, it was exceedingly questionable whether the newly established IRA would be able to sustain its own existence.

As it has turned out so far, the IRA has been moderately successful in continuing to exist. As of the summer of 2017, approximately a third of Afghanistan (both in terms of area and population) is either controlled or contested by the Taliban.⁵⁸ While this is certainly sub-optimal,

51 id. 192-193.

52 id. 192.

53 id. 182-183.

54 Ibid.

55 id. 194.

56 id. 183.

57 M. Konarovsky, "The NATO Operation in Afghanistan: Results and Possible Scenarios for Russia," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations* 59, no. 5 (2015): 38.

58 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States*

it could be more positively expressed by the statement that the Taliban do not control two thirds of Afghanistan. Such an optimistic spin is undercut though by a few unfortunate facts. First, the central government still lacks the authority to dismiss, or even accept the resignation of, provincial governors (this being the polite way to refer to regional warlords).⁵⁹ The IRA's fragility is further undermined by the fact that, because they could not decide who won the 2014 presidential election, they called it a tie and decided to have a president and a CEO (an extra-constitutional position that was made up on the spot).⁶⁰ There is also meant to be another election next year, i.e. another opportunity for chaos. Fearing this, and also in response to the Taliban continuing to gain ground (some estimates raise their area of influence to a full half of the country), the US decided to increase their presence last year by at least a further 3,000 troops.⁶¹ What we can say for certain therefore, is that: the situation continues to be unstable; the future is uncertain; and the mission is not over.

What is the Point Again?

So far, I have briefly summarized the past 17 years of NATO's war in Afghanistan. The strategic analysis and proposal for future action I promised have yet to be delivered. Before they can be attempted however, it is necessary to note what exactly NATO set out to achieve in Afghanistan. This is because the merits of any strategy are contingent on the outcome one is trying to achieve. The objectives of this mission are also worth iterating for the simple reason that, since the war has been going on so long, many have probably forgotten. It would be a terrible shame if, after billions of dollars spent and tens of thousands of people killed, nobody

Congress, Arlington Virginia: 2017.

59 James Mackenzie and Matin Sahak, "Stand-off Over Powerful Afghan Governor Foreshadows Bitter Election Fight," *Reuters* online, last modified 7th January 2018.

60 Ibid.

61 "US Sends 3,000 More Troops to Afghanistan," *BBC News*, last modified 18th 2017.

knew why.^{62*}

What then, was this war meant to accomplish? I have identified three specific goals of NATO in Afghanistan. First, the mission was intended to create a central government in Afghanistan with the capacity to secure the country and, in the words of a US government memo, “take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future”.⁶⁴ What exactly this means is not entirely clear. For the purposes of assessing its feasibility, I will take the minimalist position and assume it means a central government that can exercise sovereignty over Afghanistan. Second, NATO hoped to defeat the Taliban, i.e. render the group incapable of seizing or holding power in Afghanistan.⁶⁵ Finally, and I will argue most importantly, the mission aimed to prevent Afghanistan being used by al-Qaeda or other terrorists as a base from which to launch further attacks against the US or other NATO members.⁶⁶ In the following sections I will argue that the first two of these goals are infeasible to the point of being effectively impossible but the third goal is achievable, just not in the way it has so far been attempted.

No Central Government

At no point in the foreseeable future will there be a central government in Afghanistan that can sustainably exercise sovereignty over the entire country. This conclusion can be reached through the consideration of two simple premises. There is no historical precedent for such an institution. There is no indigenous desire for such an institution, quite the opposite in fact. For

62 Conservative estimates place the number of dead within Afghanistan at 68,000 as of 2016 with a further 49,000 killed in spill-over violence in Pakistan; it is also interesting to note that over 60% of Afghans were either not born or were under the age of seven when the current war began.⁶²

63 Muhammad Ahsan, “Post-NATO Drawdown in Afghanistan and Regional Security: Post-Conflict Social Reconstruction Through Peace Education.” *Peace Research* 48, no. 1 (2016): 92-93; “AFGHANISTAN: People and Society,” *The World Factbook*, last modified 10th April 2018.

64 David E. Johnson, “What are You Prepared to Do? NATO and the Strategic Mismatch Between Ends, Ways, and Means in Afghanistan—and in the Future,” *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 385.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

these reasons, even though a central government can be forcibly created, no such institution will be able to long endure.

Throughout the millennia long history of human habitation of the region that is now known as Afghanistan, no single government has ever ruled over all of Afghanistan's peoples for any significant length of time.⁶⁷ Various invading empires have declared victory over the territory, mistakenly believing that, by defeating whomever held the 'capitol', they had conquered the country.⁶⁸ Within a generation though, they all learned that no matter which cities or valley floors they held, the mountains and the people in them were indomitable.⁶⁹

Also, when discussing historical precedent, it is worth noting that labelling Afghanistan as a single state or calling Afghans a nation makes very little sense. The vast majority of 'Afghans' do not think of themselves as such but rather identify themselves in terms of “peer group,” tribe, and then linguistic designated ethnicity.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the borders of Afghanistan are an artificial imposition of the British and other colonial powers. In the words of a former president of Afghanistan: “We do not know where the...border line is, but keep quiet about it.”⁷¹ Therefore, to attempt to create a strong central government in Afghanistan is to try and do something that—not only has never been done, but also—has proven undoable many times.

Not only has there never been a sustainably strong central government in Afghanistan, there is no evidence that the people whom foreigners call 'Afghans' want one. Historically and traditionally the highest authority, under God, that people in Afghanistan will give their loyalty

67 Lester W. Grau, “The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 130.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Lester W. Grau, “Securing the Borders Afghanistan During the Soviet-Afghan War,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 2 (2015): 423.

to has been a tribal chief or regional warlord.⁷² This has the advantage of allowing for people to be led by someone who speaks their language and is of the same ethnic or tribal background as they are, increasing the likelihood that they will at least be perceived as sharing their same interests. Such an arrangement is entirely incompatible with a central government that would, by necessity, have to be composed primarily of people from a different background than that of any given 'Afghan'. This is because there is no majority group in Afghanistan. Pashtuns make up a plurality of the population, but not a majority. For this reason, there simply is no way to arrange a government such that is not *unacceptable* to a *majority* of the population. Even if there were to be perfectly proportionate representation, about 60% of Afghan's would feel themselves marginalized in the minority.

The current government, set up by NATO around a Pashtun core, certainly alienates the majority of the population.⁷³ This fact is illustrated by the resistance of minority groups to the PRTs. In many areas, not having basic infrastructure like *wells* and *roads* was seen as preferable to accepting the authority of a central government!⁷⁴ From all this, we can clearly see that most 'Afghans' do not want a central government.

Since there is no precedent, no tradition, with which to legitimate centralized rule in Afghanistan and no desire on the part of the local population for such an institution, we can know that no such institution will emerge organically. For this reason, we can know that even if a central government is created, it will not survive long. Because centralized rule will not be established indigenously, such an institution could only ever be a foreign imposition. Thus, no

72 Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 130.

73 M. Konarovsky, "The NATO Operation in Afghanistan: Results and Possible Scenarios for Russia," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations* 59, no. 5 (2015): 38.

74 *id.* 39.

central government will ever receive popular support. Not only will a central government be unwanted, it will be actively opposed. Nothing unites the peoples of Afghanistan like opposing foreign impositions.⁷⁵ And no government can survive if the people it is meant to be governing are committed to opposing it. This reality is illustrated by the predicament of the current government of the IRA.

Currently, the government of Afghanistan is entirely dependent—its very existence is predicated on—the support of foreign investors and donors.⁷⁶ However the willingness of donors and investors to support the IRA government has been shrinking, continued support is contingent on the ANSF's ability to provide security and stability to the country.⁷⁷ This in turn is dependent, amongst other factors, on the Afghan government's ability to pay the members of the ANSF.⁷⁸ And the Afghan government's ability to pay the ANSF is dependent on the support of foreign investors and donors.⁷⁹ This is a classic case of catch-22. The government needs to secure the country to get the money that would allow it to secure the country, which is not happening. So the money will end. The government will collapse and we will be back to square one.

The territory we now call Afghanistan has never had a strong and sustainable central government for any significant length of time (meaning multiple generations), for good reason. Afghanistan is not a nation. The borders of the state, the IRA, are both unclear and arbitrary. The people do not want a central government of their own making and they are virulently opposed to the imposition of one. For all these reasons the current central government will likely fail, like past governments have, as will any future governments probably. The likelihood that NATO's

75 Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 130.

76 Thomas F. Lynch III, "Post-2014 Afghanistan & the Looming Consequences of Strategic Misappreciation," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring (2015): 185-186.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

first objective, establishing a central government to lead Afghanistan as a whole, will ever succeed is so vanishingly small we can call it impossible.

The Indefatigable Taliban

NATO's second objective in this campaign was and is the defeat of the Taliban. I have already established that this has yet to be accomplished. Now, I will assess the feasibility of this objective. I will conduct this assessment by first selecting key factors that have been identified in the literature as obstacles to the realization of this goal. I will then examine potential solutions to these problems, to see if they can be overcome. Finally, I will conclude that the Taliban can—or at least will—not be defeated.

As previously mentioned, since 2014 the ANSF has been solely responsible for the security of Afghanistan. Defeating the Taliban has been their job. And they have been failing. This is explicable for a number of reasons. Firstly, while the ANSF are decently equipped and trained, to a degree, the force continues to face a number of difficulties. There has long existed a highly entrenched warrior culture in Afghanistan.⁸⁰ While this does produce certain benefits in terms of incentivizing personal courage and ferocity on the part of individual fighters, it is—in many ways—incompatible with the strictures of a modern military.⁸¹ Discipline is lax, training under-appreciated, and desertion continues to be a problem.⁸² Thus, while the ANSF has been structured as a modern military, its efficacy continues to be limited by a lack of intangible cultural factors that support such an institution.

Far more critical though, is the distribution of the ANSF's capabilities. The experiences

80 Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 131.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid; M. Konarovskiy, "The NATO Operation in Afghanistan: Results and Possible Scenarios for Russia," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations* 59, no. 5 (2015): 38.

of the Soviet Union and NATO in Afghanistan have both emphasized how critical air power is in fighting this type of counter-insurgency (COIN).⁸³ In terms of air power, the ANSF is sorely lacking. Furthermore, this is not really a shortcoming that can be addressed. Afghanistan cannot afford to build or maintain a significant air force; the degree to which the ANSF exists now is already only because NATO, and the US in particular, has bankrolled it.⁸⁴ Neither are NATO members willing to give Afghanistan the resources for an air force. Many NATO countries already find their own air forces expensive. Even if cost was not an issue, increasing Afghanistan's air power directly increases the likelihood of these assets being used against NATO. As the US has (hopefully) learned: weapons systems that are given away in Afghanistan can be used in any number of unfortunate ways. Neither can the ANSF rely on NATO air-support supplementing their own capabilities. As the Soviet's learned, "air dominance is irrelevant unless precisely targeted" and NATO no longer has the intelligence infrastructure in place to facilitate such targeting.⁸⁵ Therefore, the ANSF lack the capability—especially when it comes to air power—to defeat the Taliban.

Another possible approach to defeating the Taliban could be through the use of NATO troops. The initial 2015 cap of 12,500 ISAF troops was certainly insufficient to defeat the Taliban. Some might say though, that this is just a question of numbers. Perhaps more troops might yield better results? This certainly seems to be the logic behind the US once again increasing their presence. It is highly questionable however whether the entire NATO alliance has the capacity or will to contribute a level of forces that would be sufficient to defeat the

83 Thomas F. Lynch III, "Post-2014 Afghanistan & the Looming Consequences of Strategic Misappreciation," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring (2015): 196-197.

84 id. 184.

85 Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 149; Thomas F. Lynch III, "Post-2014 Afghanistan & the Looming Consequences of Strategic Misappreciation," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring (2015): 194.

Taliban.

In 2015, NATO voluntarily capped their ISAF presence at 12,500.⁸⁶ That is how many troops these countries were willing to contribute. When the mission was at its peak, NATO was willing to contribute 153,000 troops.⁸⁷ Even this was insufficient to defeat the Taliban though. Furthermore, in a COIN context, it is not the absolute number of troops that is strictly relevant so much as the number of COIN forces available relative to the population to be secured. At the missions peak, NATO was willing to provide one COIN operator for every 183 people in Afghanistan (forces deployed/population at the time).⁸⁸ Again, this proved to be insufficient. The Soviet Union meanwhile, deployed 125,000 when the population of Afghanistan was around 17 million.⁸⁹ They failed to secure the country with one COIN operator for every 136 people.

According to the US's own strategic doctrine, a successful COIN requires 20-25 operators for every 1,000 individuals to be secured, or one COIN operator for every 40-50 people.⁹⁰ The current population of Afghanistan is around 34 million people.⁹¹ If we take US doctrine to be correct, and select for the more conservative ratio of one operator for every 40 people—because securing the same number of people in Afghanistan is harder than somewhere with less forbidding terrain—we can predict a necessary force level of at least 850,000 COIN operators. Even if we include all of the 350,000 members of the ANSF, NATO would need to deploy approximately 500,000 more troops specifically to be engaged in COIN operations. This does

86 Thomas F. Lynch III, "Post-2014 Afghanistan & the Looming Consequences of Strategic Misappreciation," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring (2015): 182-183.

87 David E. Johnson, "What are You Prepared to Do? NATO and the Strategic Mismatch Between Ends, Ways, and Means in Afghanistan—and in the Future," *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 390.

88 id. 390-391.

89 A. Z. Hilali, "Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Strategy and Political Status," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 98; Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 135.

90 David E. Johnson, "What are You Prepared to Do? NATO and the Strategic Mismatch Between Ends, Ways, and Means in Afghanistan—and in the Future," *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 389.

91 "AFGHANISTAN: People and Society," *The World Factbook*, last modified 10th April 2018.

not even include all the support that such a deployment would require.

Now, *in theory* it is *possible* that NATO *could* field such a deployment. However, if one were to go to Brussels and ask the member nations of NATO for 500,000+ more troops for Afghanistan, it is *highly unlikely* that they would agree. It is much more probable that the person making such a request would be asked to leave, how politely would depend on who was doing the asking. Therefore *if* defeating the Taliban is just a question of numbers, it is an infeasible objective as the likelihood that the force levels that the US's own doctrine suggest would be required are not going to be forthcoming.

Additionally, it is highly debatable whether defeating the Taliban is only a question of numbers. Their experience with the Soviet Union taught the insurgent forces within Afghanistan that: persistence, access to secure bases, and popular support all but guarantee their eventual success.⁹² Unfortunately for the NATO mission, none of these three factors are things which can be denied to the Taliban.

This assertion, that the Taliban cannot be denied what they need to avoid defeat, is most easily proven when it comes to persistence. Even on a theoretical level, how could anyone convince them not to fight? It is inconceivable that the Taliban might wake up one day and decide that actually they want to live in a liberal democracy, an ideology that is antithetical to their most deeply held convictions. Similarly, the idea that they might accept the foreign occupation of their homeland is ridiculous. Finally, while it is theoretically possible that there might be a negotiated solution to the conflict, there is no reason why the Taliban would accept anything less than their return to power while they are winning the war.⁹³ And on the other hand,

92 Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004): 141-142.

93 Dominic Tierney, "Fighting While Negotiating in Afghanistan." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter

NATO would lose all credibility if they offered those terms. Therefore we can assume that the Taliban are not going to quit.

The issue of the Taliban's access to secure bases is similarly insoluble. First off, there is no way to close the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border is 2,450km long.⁹⁴ It is unmarked and few, if any, even know where it is.⁹⁵ The Soviet Union tried desperately to close this border. They posted massive numbers of troops to guard it and even tried bombing the mountain passes to collapse them and mining those passes that they did not bomb.⁹⁶ Nothing worked. ISAF does not have the troops to try and guard the border and, for political and moral reasons, it is not going to lay millions of land-mines. Therefore, the border will remain open and largely uncontrolled.

Even with an open border, the Taliban *could* be denied access to secure bases *if* Pakistan was willing to vigorously deny them the use of their territory. That is not going to happen though. Pakistan has long been sheltering the Taliban and actively cultivating radical Islamist factions in Afghanistan, in order to give themselves strategic depth and prevent their being flanked by a Kabul government that is pro-India.⁹⁷ This is why, despite all the problems it has caused them, Pakistan is unwilling to fully disavow the Taliban: they fear India is trying to establish a proxy presence in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, India *is* trying increase their influence over Afghanistan, to prevent the country from serving as a base for Islamist terrorists to plan and

(2013): 178.

94 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 82.

95 Lester W. Grau, "Securing the Borders Afghanistan During the Soviet-Afghan War," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 2 (2015): 423, 428.

96 id. 419-420.

97 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 82-83.

98 Thomas F. Lynch III, "Post-2014 Afghanistan & the Looming Consequences of Strategic Misappreciation," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Spring (2015): 187.

launch attacks against India.⁹⁹ Therefore, we can expect that the Taliban will be denied sanctuary in Pakistan just as soon as a spirit of neighborly love and cooperation develops between Pakistan and India.

Having established that the Afghanistan-Pakistan border cannot be closed or controlled *and* that Pakistan will not roust the Taliban from its territory, one further option remains to deny the Taliban access to safe bases. This precedent for this option comes from the COIN campaign conducted by the now non-existent country of Rhodesia. The Rhodesian government was faced with a somewhat similar situation in that, the insurgents that they were fighting would infiltrate the country across uncontrollable borders, strike, and then retreat to bases in neighboring territories.¹⁰⁰ Their solution was to use highly mobile light infantry and airborne forces to track the insurgents back, across international lines, to their bases and kill them there.¹⁰¹ This worked moderately well.¹⁰² Unfortunately, this approach is entirely inapplicable to the situation in Afghanistan.

As I have already established, the government of Pakistan does not want the Taliban removed from its territory. Therefore any action taken against the Taliban, inside Pakistan by NATO, would be a unilateral violation of the country's sovereignty. Already, as of 2009, an estimated 64% of Pakistanis viewed the US as an enemy because of the US's drone campaign.¹⁰³ This campaign has had a relatively small footprint and has been limited to the semi-autonomous FATA.¹⁰⁴ If ISAF were to enact a strategy that included so-called 'hot-pursuit' operations that crossed over in Pakistan's territory, this would be a much greater violation of Pakistan's

99 Ibid.

100 Charles D. Melson, "Top Secret War: Rhodesian Special Operations." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 16, no. 1 (2005): 61-65.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 IISS, "United States Struggles to Craft Pakistan Policy," *Strategic Comments* 16, no. 1 (2010): 1.

104 id. 1-2.

sovereignty. Thus, the people of Pakistan would likely be outraged and the government of Pakistan would face a dilemma. The government of Pakistan would be forced to either counter NATO's incursions onto their territory or risk losing legitimacy amongst their own citizens. Conflict between NATO and Pakistan would be bad. The collapse of a de-legitimized government in Pakistan, Pakistan as a failed state: that approaches worst case scenario. Pakistan is thought to have the world's fifth largest nuclear arsenal. Therefore there can be no systematic policy of cross-border raids by ISAF.

The Taliban are likely to keep their bases and their determination. It is also highly probable that they will continue to enjoy *at least* the passive support of the people. We can know this by considering the different ways a population can be swayed to a certain course of action. Generally speaking, these options take two forms: carrots and sticks. In this case, neither approach is applicable.

When the Soviet Union realized they were facing an insurgency in Afghanistan, they were aware of Mao's metaphor that guerrillas are fish and civilian populations are seas.¹⁰⁵ From this premise, they devised a strategy based on massive reprisals: attempting to subdue the population through force.¹⁰⁶ Basically they thought that if the people were more afraid of the Soviet Union than the mujahideen, the people would support the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁷ They did their very best to make this strategy work. Through the vigorous application of strategic bombing, Soviet forces rendered massive swaths of the countryside uninhabitable, forcibly relocating the population to the cities.¹⁰⁸ They destroyed crops to avoid the mere possibility that they might

105 A. Z. Hilali, "Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Strategy and Political Status," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 101.

106 *id.* 101-102.

107 *Ibid.*

108 *Ibid.*

feed the mujahideen.¹⁰⁹ When Soviet forces were ambushed, whichever village was nearest the ambush site got bombed in retaliation.¹¹⁰ Yet, the people were not cowed; they were angered. The number of insurgents increased continually and the Soviet mission to Afghanistan failed.

So sticks do not work, how about carrots? That was basically the thinking behind the PRT program that ISAF ran. As I have already established, it did not work out and it is easy to see why. Firstly there is the fact that many areas reject the presence of foreigners and the authority of a central government, however much development is promised. Secondly, everyone has always known that ISAF/NATO would leave eventually. The Taliban have been able to exploit this knowledge most effectively. Apparently, Taliban representatives have a saying: “The Americans have the wristwatches, but we have the time.”¹¹¹ The implication being, for those without a grasp of subtext, that after NATO leaves the Taliban is going to come back and kill anyone who collaborated with the occupation, and their entire family.¹¹² Unfortunately for NATO, this is an accurate assessment of the reality of the situation. Therefore, rational people who do not desire the extermination of their family do not collaborate.

To sum up then, the Taliban are not going to quit. They are going to continue to prosecute a guerrilla war from secure bases in Pakistan. The forces opposed to them are insufficient and improperly equipped to defeat them. There is no way to prevent, coerce, or convince the peoples of Afghanistan to not support them. Currently, the Taliban is winning the war and it is extremely likely that they are going to continue to do so.

109 Ibid.

110 id. 106.

111 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 87.

112 Ibid.

So What Now?

I have established that NATO's dream of setting up a stable and enduring central government in Afghanistan is not going to be realized. I have also explained why, barring unforeseen changes, the Taliban is not going to be defeated. What remains to be addressed is the original objective and the objective that—I argue—has always been the most important for NATO. Namely, we would like to avoid Afghanistan being used as a base to plan and launch terrorist attacks against NATO members and their allies. I contend that this is the most important objective for strictly realist reasons. Most people in NATO, and what is more broadly referred to as 'the West', would likely agree that if 'universal human rights' could be realized all over the world it would be nice. Most would also agree though that there are many problems in the world that cannot be immediately addressed. When it comes to security, almost all humans agree to prioritize themselves and their peers first, followed by everyone else later. Therefore, it is fair to say that what NATO *really* cares about is the security of the members of the alliance.

Luckily, ensuring our security does not depend on defeating the Taliban or establishing a unitary state in Afghanistan. This is true for three reasons. Almost all the parties to the conflict in Afghanistan do not hold launching terrorist attacks against Western countries to be a priority. Second, the causal link between terrorists having bases in Afghanistan and an increasing likelihood of attacks succeeding within NATO countries is relatively weak. Finally, continuing to associate with the central government in Afghanistan and continuing to fight the Taliban actually makes it so that more people are enemies of NATO, not less.

First then, it is true that both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State terrorist group have a presence in Afghanistan, want more of a presence in Afghanistan, and wish to do harm to Western nations. The good news though, is that the war in Afghanistan is not a contest only

between NATO and the terrorists. In recent years, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United States have all retained proxy forces within Afghanistan.¹¹³ Each of these countries as a vested interest in preventing al-Qaeda or similar groups from establishing a presence in Afghanistan. Why? Because all of these countries are considered potential targets by al-Qaeda and their ilk. Even Pakistan, who does support the Taliban, violently opposes al-Qaeda. As for the Islamic State, everyone (even al-Qaeda) hates the Islamic State. Even many of the 'Afghan' factions that have been actively resisting NATO's mission can be relied on to oppose terrorist groups that try to occupy their territory, especially if given money.¹¹⁴ This is because, while the vast majority of Afghanistan's population is Muslim, most are not foaming-at-the-mouth fundamentalists and most find such ideologies strange and distasteful.¹¹⁵ Therefore, even without NATO's involvement, it is far from clear that terrorists would be able to establish themselves in Afghanistan. Furthermore, even if the Taliban defeat the current central government, all the same factors that prevent the IRA from becoming a cohesive whole would also apply to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

It is also worth noting that having territorial bases is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor for terrorists to launch attacks against Western nations in 2018. As we have learned in recent years, all terrorists need are disaffected minds with access to the internet and a truck or a knife. In fact, some would argue that the experiences of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria might even suggest that having a territorial base is a liability for terrorists, not an advantage. And in any case, the current literature on counter-terrorism strongly indicates

113 Dominic Tierney, "Fighting While Negotiating in Afghanistan." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2013): 183.

114 Lester W. Grau, "Securing the Borders Afghanistan During the Soviet-Afghan War," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 2 (2015): 422.

115 Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Winter (2007): 74.

that this is a problem best addressed by law-enforcement and intelligence forces, for reasons that fall outside the scope of this essay. The point though is this: winning the war in Afghanistan would not necessarily make us safer.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the longer NATO's involvement in Afghanistan continues, the more it increases the risk to it. In their pet factions of the Taliban, Pakistan has a proxy by which they can exert influence over their border regions and promote the stability of their state. As I have previously mentioned, the whole world has a vested interest in the stability of Pakistan. Thus, for NATO, combatting the Taliban—in that this interferes with Pakistan's security—may well be an irrational act. Furthermore, the central government of Afghanistan is bitterly opposed by much of the country's population and unlikely to survive long. By supporting it, NATO earns the ire of millions and the affection of a losing team. Finally, as the Soviets learned to their detriment, killing insurgents in Afghanistan increased the number of one's enemies. Every time NATO kills an 'Afghan' they impose the duty of revenge on all the male relatives of the deceased.¹¹⁶

There are innumerable different factions fighting in Afghanistan and most are opposed to fundamentalist terrorists. Terrorists having a place to stay in Afghanistan does not significantly affect the likelihood of terrorist attacks within NATO countries. Staying involved in Afghanistan increases the instability of the region and the number of enemies NATO has. For all these reasons therefore: NATO would best assure its security by leaving Afghanistan, reinvesting the resources that would be spent in domestic security, and hopefully never looking back.

It is a Trap!

This project was begun to answer the question of whether or not there is a way forward

116 id. 87-88.

for NATO in Afghanistan. Is there light at the end of the tunnel? To answer this question I first looked to the history of NATO's war. What was tried, how did it go, how do things stand now? I found that much was tried. Most of it failed. Currently, things are going quite poorly. Then I analyzed the feasibility of NATO's objectives. Could they build a sustainable central government? Can the Taliban be defeated? The answers were 'no'. Finally, I turned to what is—or at least should be—NATO's primary concern: its own security. On this point I found that continued involvement in Afghanistan does not improve the security of NATO's members. It makes it worse. For all these reasons then, I have argued that the evidence shows that there is no tunnel metaphor for Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a cave and it is time to turn around and leave.

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