

Afghan Focus Blurs Big Picture

U.S. Must Battle the Idea of al-Qaida Worldwide

The death toll for American forces in Afghanistan reached its highest monthly total of the nearly 9-year war in July for the second month in a row. Western publics are growing increasingly pensive about the prospects for military success as they realize that despite the 70,000 additional troops the U.S.



By **Daniel Davis**, left, a U.S. Army cavalry officer who fought in Desert Storm in 1991 and has served in Afghanistan and Iraq, and **Matthew Hoh**, who served two deployments with the U.S. Marine Corps and Defense Department in Iraq, and in 2009 resigned his State Department post in Afghanistan to protest U.S. policy. These views represent only those of the authors.

has deployed to Afghanistan in the past 24 months, Taliban strength and capability continue to rise while the security situation continues to deteriorate.

In an attempt to quell this anxiety,

many of today's best-known pundits have sought to reassure domestic audiences by telling them we must, for the sake of our vital national interests, persevere in Afghanistan. Failure, they contend, would result in some ominous but ill-defined disaster.

Based on a considerable body of evidence and some common-sense logic, however, we disagree with this characterization.

Commentators unambiguously state that if we "lose" in Afghanistan, the Taliban will march on and recapture Kabul and afterward will welcome al-Qaida back to "plan future 9/11s" against the U.S.

This is a powerful emotional argument. Unfortunately, it also ignores whole categories of evidence, reveals a lack of understanding of how al-Qaida operates today and requires that we believe transnational terrorists will act in ways that are antithetical to their interests.

First, consider that we are reportedly spending more than \$7 billion a month on the war in Afghanistan and are on a pace this year to suffer 600 to 700 American deaths. CIA Director Leon Paneta recently acknowledged there are as few as 50 al-Qaida members in Afghanistan.

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No matter how you parse the numbers, that means in order to prevent al-Qaida from re-establishing a safe haven in Afghanistan, the U.S. is spending about \$1.7 billion a year on each al-Qaida member, while sustaining the deployment of more than 100,000 conventional combat troops who battle not the transnational threat of al-Qaida, but the regional insurgent group that is the Taliban. The Taliban has no designs on attacking the U.S. outside of Afghanistan.

And yet, by all estimates, there are fewer al-Qaida operatives in Afghanistan than virtually any other country where they operate, which raises the question: If we are expending so many assets, lives and money on protecting

that one single piece of inhospitable terrain against so few transnational operatives, what do we have left to defend our interests against the decentralized global network of thousands of al-Qaida members throughout the rest of the world who really are planning "future 9/11s"?

Geography Is Not the Answer

Second, to contend that we can protect our homeland against a future terrorist attack by physically securing the geography of Afghanistan, one would have to believe that al-Qaida requires the physical ownership of specific terrain in order to plan and train for future attacks. It is now clear beyond question that al-Qaida is more an idea than a physical organization and, as such, lives wherever the minds of people are open to its ideology, irrespective of where on the map they reside.

Never forget that while a portion of the planning for 9/11 took place in Afghanistan, the bulk of the preparations took place in Germany, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and in the U.S. itself.

Third, we believe it is remarkably unlikely the Taliban would spend more than a decade fighting to regain control of Afghanistan only to welcome al-

Qaida back to re-establish training bases, knowing such action would cross the U.S.'s most inviolable red line.

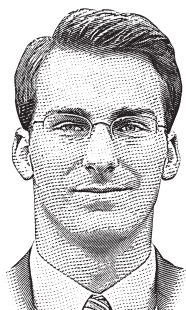
Just as we were able to decimate the Taliban in 2001 with precision attacks and indigenous ground support, we would, at any time of our choosing, be able to reprise that effort and destroy all they had worked so hard to achieve.

As a result, we respectfully suggest that in order to give America the best chance to achieve the president's stated objective of denying al-Qaida a safe haven, the U.S. needs a new synchronized global counterterrorist effort focused not on a comparatively tiny geographical location, but rather on battling the idea of al-Qaida, on killing or capturing cells or individuals who plan attacks against the U.S., and reallocating our personnel to tasks that damage the networked nature of today's transnational terror threats.

Relying on 20th century geographic-centric strategies that bludgeon tiny pieces of the Earth's terrain with large numbers of conventional combat forces to battle 21st century enemies who operate in geographically dispersed networks may lead to a future 9/11 that otherwise might have been prevented. □

Keep Exercising the Muscles of Sustainability

On Aug. 9, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates unveiled the Defense Department's detailed plan to trim unnecessary administrative expenses so the savings can be reinvested in important war-fighting capabilities such as unmanned aerial vehicles, multimission Navy ships and helicopters.



By **Travis Sharp**, a researcher at the Center for a New American Security, a nonpartisan national security think tank in Washington.

and U.S. troops are fighting and dying in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet Gates' crusade against bloat is about much more than dollars and cents or the current wars. It

is about exercising the muscles of sustainability so vital to military power and the future security of the U.S.

Sustainability has long been a hallmark of military strategy. As renowned Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote, "A prince or a general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources, doing neither too much nor too little."

Recent scholarly research has concluded that nations that develop more impartial, more responsive and more sustainable systems for buying weapons and equipment are able to maximize their military power.

History bears out the truth of these insights. During World War II, the Axis powers were plagued by organizational waste that compounded their military challenges. Italy was hindered by corruption and administrative incompetence, and Japan and Germany both suffered from

bitter rivalries between civilian and military leaders that slowed their output. If these internal weaknesses had not existed, the Axis by 1942 might have been unstoppable.

Cumbersome Soviet Structure

Similarly, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was overburdened by its wasteful but enormous military economy, which was driven by industrial supply instead of strategic demand. Soviet leaders were unable to reorganize in order to keep up with the U.S. militarily, and the USSR's bloated defense sector sapped its overall strength and contributed to its eventual demise.

Though the U.S. was ultimately able to defeat these enemies, past success does not guarantee future security, particularly given the dangers of the 21st century. Technological advancement and globalization are making it easier for hostile states and terrorist groups to acquire deadly capabilities that threaten U.S. security.

With no more than a laptop and an Internet connection, cyber terrorists can launch synchronized, untraceable attacks against American military and civilian networks.

The U.S. government faces an inherent disadvantage in defending against such attacks because its unwieldy bureaucracy cannot move as nimbly as smaller, more decentralized adversaries. To overcome this reality, the U.S. must hedge against uncertainty by cultivating processes that rapidly identify emerging threats, consistently generate high-quality solutions and quickly reorient toward agreed-upon priorities.

This is the exact strategy that Gates is seeking to pursue through his sustainability initiative. But one year is not enough. The Defense Department should make this year's effort, in which the military services are forced to identify and trim a specified amount of unnecessary administrative spending, an annual part

of the defense budget process.

Give It to the Experts

If the services perform poorly or resist the plan, a panel of impartial governmental and non-governmental experts could be convened to offer recommendations to Pentagon leaders. In this way, the Defense Department would make the trimming and reinvestment of resource-devouring fiscal underbrush an ingrained part of its preparation for future contingencies.

Rather than treating cost-cutting as political Kabuki theater, policymakers would do well to remember how sustainability has affected victory and defeat in war throughout history. The Pentagon's current initiative is not just about bean counting. It is about fostering processes that most effectively transform America's vast resources into usable political and military power that can help protect the U.S. against the uncertain challenges ahead. □