

By George Friedman
The Afghan War is the longest war in U.S. history. It began in 1980 and continues to rage. It began under Democrats but has been fought under both Republican and Democratic administrations, making it truly a bipartisan war. The conflict is an odd obsession of U.S. foreign policy, one that never goes away and never seems to end. As the resignation of Gen. Stanley McChrystal reminds us, the Afghan War is now in its fourth phase.

The Afghan War's First Three Phases
The first phase of the Afghan War began with the Soviet invasion in December 1979, when the United States, along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, organized and sustained Afghan resistance to the Soviets. This resistance was built around mujahideen, fighters motivated by Islam. Washington's purpose had little to do with Afghanistan and everything to do with U.S.-Soviet competition. The United States wanted to block the Soviets from using Afghanistan as a base for further expansion and wanted to bog the Soviets down in a debilitating guerrilla war. The United States did not so much fight the war as facilitate it. The strategy worked. The Soviets were blocked and bogged down. This phase lasted until 1989, when Soviet troops were withdrawn.

The second phase lasted from 1989 until 2001. The forces the United States and its allies had trained and armed now fought each other in complex coalitions for control of Afghanistan. Though the United States did not take part in this war directly, it did not lose all interest in Afghanistan. Rather, it was prepared to exert its influence through allies, particularly Pakistan. Most important, it was prepared to accept that the Islamic fighters it had organized against the Soviets would govern Afghanistan. There were many factions, but with Pakistani support, a coalition called the Taliban took power in 1996. The Taliban in turn provided sanctuary for a group of international jihadists called al Qaeda, and this led to increased tensions with the Taliban following jihadist attacks on U.S. facilities abroad by al Qaeda.

The third phase began on Sept. 11, 2001, when al Qaeda launched attacks on the mainland United States. Given al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan, the United States launched operations designed to destroy or disrupt al Qaeda and dislodge the Taliban. The United States commenced operations barely 30 days after Sept. 11, which was not enough time to mount an invasion using U.S. troops as the primary instrument. Rather, the United States made arrangements with factions that were opposed to the Taliban (and defeated in the Afghan civil war). This included organizations such as the Northern Alliance, which had remained close to the Russians; Shiite groups in the west that were close to the Iranians and India; and other groups or subgroups in other regions. These groups supported the United States out of hostility to the Taliban and/or due to substantial bribes paid by the United States.

The overwhelming majority of ground forces opposing the Taliban in 2001 were Afghan. The United States did, however, insert special operations forces teams to work with these groups and to identify targets for U.S. airpower, the primary American contribution to the war. The use of U.S. B-52s against Taliban forces massed around cities in the north caused the Taliban to abandon any thought of resisting the Northern Alliance and others, even though the Taliban had defeated them in the civil war.

Unable to hold fixed positions against airstrikes, the Taliban withdrew from the cities and dispersed. The Taliban were not defeated, however; they merely declined to fight on U.S. terms. Instead, they redefined the war, preserving their forces and regrouping. The Taliban understood that the cities were not the key to Afghanistan. Instead, the countryside would ultimately provide control of the cities. From the Taliban point of view, the battle would be waged in the countryside, while the cities increasingly would be isolated.

The United States simply did not have sufficient force to identify, engage and destroy the Taliban as a whole. The

United States did succeed in damaging and dislodging al Qaeda, with the jihadist group's command cell becoming isolated in northwestern Pakistan. But as with the Taliban, the United States did not defeat al Qaeda because the United States lacked significant forces on the ground. Even so, al Qaeda prime, the original command cell, was no longer in a position to mount 9/11-style attacks.

During the Bush administration, U.S. goals for Afghanistan were modest. First, the Americans intended to keep al Qaeda bottled up and to impose as much damage as possible on the group. Second, they intended to establish an Afghan government, regardless of how ineffective it might be, to serve as a symbolic core. Third, they planned very limited operations against the Taliban, which had regrouped and increasingly controlled the countryside. The Bush administration was basically in a holding operation in Afghanistan. It accepted that U.S. forces were neither going to be able to impose a political solution on Afghanistan nor create a coalition large enough to control the country. U.S. strategy was extremely modest under Bush: to harass al Qaeda from bases in Afghanistan, maintain control of cities and logistics routes, and accept the limits of U.S. interests and power.

The three phases of American involvement in Afghanistan had a common point: All three were heavily dependent on non-U.S. forces to do the heavy lifting. In the first phase, the mujahideen performed this task. In the second phase, the United States relied on Pakistan to manage Afghanistan's civil war. In the third phase, especially in the beginning, the United States depended on Afghan forces to fight the Taliban. Later, when greater numbers of American and allied forces arrived, the United States had limited objectives beyond preserving the Afghan government and engaging al Qaeda wherever it might be found (and in any event, by 2003, Iraq had taken priority over Afghanistan). In no case did the Americans use their main force to achieve their goals.

The Fourth Phase of the Afghan War

The fourth phase of the war began in 2009, when U.S. President Barack Obama decided to pursue a more aggressive strategy in Afghanistan. Though the Bush administration had toyed with this idea, it was Obama who implemented it fully. During the 2008 election campaign, Obama asserted that he would pay greater attention to Afghanistan. The Obama administration began with the premise that while the Iraq War was a mistake, the Afghan War had to be prosecuted. It reasoned that unlike Iraq, which had a tenuous connection to al Qaeda at best, Afghanistan was the group's original base. He argued that Afghanistan therefore should be the focus of U.S. military operations. In doing so, he shifted a strategy that had been in place for 30 years by making U.S. forces the main combatants in the war.

Though Obama's goals were not altogether clear, they might be stated as follows:

- Deny al Qaeda a base in Afghanistan.
- Create an exit strategy from Afghanistan similar to the one in Iraq by creating the conditions for negotiating with the Taliban; make denying al Qaeda a base a condition for the resulting ruling coalition.
- Begin withdrawal by 2011.

To do this, there would be three steps:

- Increase the number and aggressiveness of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.
- Create Afghan security forces under the current government to take over from the Americans.
- Increase pressure on the Taliban by driving a wedge between them and the population and creating intra-insurgent rifts via effective counterinsurgency tactics.

In analyzing this strategy, there is an obvious issue: While al Qaeda was based in Afghanistan in 2001, Afghanistan is no longer its primary base of operations. The group has shifted to Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other countries. As al Qaeda is thus not dependent on any one country for its operational base, denying it bases in Afghanistan does not address the reality of its dispersion. Securing Afghanistan, in other words, is no longer the solution to al Qaeda.

Obviously, Obama's planners fully understood this. Therefore, sanctuary denial for al

Qaeda had to be, at best, a secondary strategic goal. The primary strategic goal was to create an exit strategy for the United States based on a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and a resulting coalition government. The al Qaeda issue depended on this settlement, but could never be guaranteed. In fact, neither the long-term survival of a coalition government nor the Taliban policing al Qaeda could be guaranteed.

The exit of U.S. forces represents a bid to reinstate the American strategy of the past 30 years, namely, having Afghan forces reassume the primary burden of fighting. The creation of an Afghan military is not the key to this strategy. Afghans fight for their clans and ethnic groups. The United States is trying to invent a national army where no nation exists, a task that assumes the primary loyalty of Afghans will shift from their clans to a national government, an unlikely proposition.

The Real U.S. Strategy

Rather than trying to strengthen the Karzai government, the real strategy is to return to the historical principles of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan: alliance with indigenous forces. These indigenous forces would pursue strategies in the American interest for their own reasons, or because they are paid, and would be strong enough to stand up to the Taliban in a coalition. As CIA Director Leon Panetta put it this weekend, however, this is proving harder to do than expected.

The American strategy is, therefore, to maintain a sufficient force to shape the political evolution on the ground, and to use that force to motivate and intimidate while also using economic incentives to draw together a coalition in the countryside. Operations like those in Helmand province where even Washington acknowledges that progress has been elusive and slower than anticipated clearly are designed to try to draw regional forces into regional coalitions that eventually can enter a coalition with the Taliban without immediately being overwhelmed. If this strategy proceeds, the Taliban in theory will be spurred to negotiate out of concern that this process eventually could leave it marginalized.

There is an anomaly in this strategy, however. Where the United States previously had devolved operational responsibility to allied groups, or simply hunkered down, this strategy tries to return to devolved responsibilities by first surging U.S. operations. The fourth phase actually increases U.S. operational responsibility in order to reduce it.

From the grand strategic point of view, the United States needs to withdraw from Afghanistan, a landlocked country where U.S. forces are dependent on tortuous supply lines. Whatever Afghanistan's vast mineral riches, mining them in the midst of war is not going to happen. More important, the United States is overcommitted in the region and lacks a strategic reserve of ground forces. Afghanistan ultimately is not strategically essential, and this is why the United States has not historically used its own forces there.

Obama's attempt to return to that track after first increasing U.S. forces to set the stage for the political settlement that will allow a U.S. withdrawal is hampered by the need to begin terminating the operation by 2011 (although there is no fixed termination date). It will be difficult to draw coalition partners into local structures when the foundation U.S. protection is withdrawing. Strengthening local forces by 2011 will be difficult. Moreover, the Taliban's motivation to enter into talks is limited by the early withdrawal. At the same time, with no ground combat strategic reserve, the United States is vulnerable elsewhere in the world, and the longer the Afghan drawdown takes, the more vulnerable it becomes (hence the 2011 deadline in Obama's war plan).

In sum, this is the quandary inherent in the strategy: It is necessary to withdraw as early as possible, but early withdrawal undermines both coalition building and negotiations. The recruitment and use of indigenous Afghan forces must move extremely rapidly to hit the deadline (though officially on track quantitatively, there are serious questions about qualitative measures) hence, the aggressive operations that have

been mounted over recent months. But the correlation of forces is such that the United States probably will not be able to impose an acceptable political reality in the time frame available. Thus, Afghan President Hamid Karzai is said to be opening channels directly to the Taliban, while the Pakistanis are increasing their presence. Where a vacuum is created, regardless of how much activity there is, someone will fill it.

Therefore, the problem is to define how important Afghanistan is to American global strategy, bearing in mind that the forces absorbed in Iraq and Afghanistan have left the United States vulnerable elsewhere in the world. The current strategy defines the Islamic world as the focus of all U.S. military attention. But the world has rarely been so considerate as to wait until the United States is finished with one war before starting another. Though unknowns remain unknowable, a principle of warfare is to never commit all of your reserves in a battle ♦ one should always maintain a reserve for the unexpected. Strategically, it is imperative that the United States begin to free up forces and re-establish its ground reserves.

Given the time frame the Obama administration's grand strategy imposes, and given the capabilities of the Taliban, it is difficult to see how it will all work out. But the ultimate question is about the American obsession with Afghanistan. For 30 years, the United States has been involved in a country that is virtually inaccessible for the United States. Washington has allied itself with radical Islamists, fought against radical Islamists or tried to negotiate with radical Islamists. What the United States has never tried to do is impose a political solution through the direct application of American force. This is a new and radically different phase of America's Afghan obsession. The questions are whether it will work and whether it is even worth it.

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