

Mistakes and Lessons from the Afghan War

Written by Julian Schofield

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JULIAN SCHOFIELD, MAR 15 2011

NATO's lack of success to date in Afghanistan can be attributed to four factors: the reluctance to make difficult choices in state-building, the failure to confront Islam, the failure to confront Kabul, and the influence of China. While NATO may still eventually win, it will have been at tremendous cost and time, and Afghanistan will have posed a great opportunity cost for other NATO objectives, such as nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea, or the current wave of unrest in the Middle East.

Afghanistan needs a clear vision imposed from without. A viable model in the case of Afghanistan is a decentralized state, with endogenous rather than expatriate Pashtun influence in Kabul. Any other deviation from the equilibrium will perpetuate intra-Afghan hostility and violence. But this regionalism should not imply deference to Afghan preferences. Afghanistan needs a solid anti-drug program to cut the funding to the Taliban and bandit segments of the society, but more importantly, cuts the source of corrupt funding to the mainstream elite. Afghanistan needs an anti-corruption program in which the US/NATO/UNO displace and punish violators. The Iron Emir built Afghanistan's system of laws and bureaucracy primarily through a police state. Afghanistan needs local village security, the imposition of a universal system of identification registration and movement control (along the lines of China's Houko system – linking documented residency with social benefits). If a village reverts to the drug trade, to banditry, to the support of the Taliban, then the superior firepower of NATO should be used to isolate the village, impound flocks, seize land, impose fines. NATO's rejection of collective punishment may need to be revised in light of the success of the relocation programs during the Malayan Emergency and the Strategic Hamlets program in Vietnam. Afghanistan needs a system of aggressive education. Iraq's Saddam Hussain rendered Iraq fully literate in the 1970s through the imposition of education programs backed by his police state, and he was recognized for his efforts by a special mention by the UN. The Japanese and Indian aid efforts also have it right – build infrastructure to facilitate intra-Afghan commerce. The high cost of transportation in Afghanistan makes it cheaper to import food than grow it indigenously, to import construction products and materials inputs for local industries such as carpet weaving. Productivity in Afghanistan is so low that it undercuts the advantage of cheap labour, rendering Afghanistan paradoxically less cost-effective a target of investment than any of its neighbours: Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, or Pakistan. The resistance to NATO power will manifest itself as Jihadist, but it will not endure because Islam would not in principal be opposed to anything proposed above.

Second: NATO has failed to learn the lessons of the Mughals and the British Indian Civil Service that to confront Islam requires it to be embraced. The Taliban is essentially a short-lived phenomenon, made up of children of displaced and landless refugees. Most Afghans reject the ascetism of the Taliban by worshipping saints, anathema to the Deobandi philosophy of the Talibs. The British mimicked the successful Mughal practice of becoming a financial patron to a variety of local religious movements and shrines. This would not extinguish the Taliban movement, which at its heart is a tribal-nationalist movement, but it would significantly weaken its appeal and legitimacy among the more religious. NATO's reluctance to engage religious groups is primarily the result of its secular outlook.

Third point: NATO's efforts are being undercut in Afghanistan because the availability of sanctuaries in Pakistan means that the Taliban can escape destruction and maintain their insurgency indefinitely. Pakistan will not move to close the sanctuaries without major security concessions from Kabul, specifically, recognition of the Durand Line as the de jure frontier, a commitment to not incite the Pashtun and Baloch to secede from Pakistan, and strategic

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detachment from India. Kabul will not make these concessions without NATO pressure, and cannot detach itself from India without security guarantees from NATO.

There are also important domestic reasons for Pakistan's reluctance to close the sanctuaries. Pakistan has little incentive to provoke the Pashtun, who, for all their violence and support for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, are not secessionists. In the 1930s, the Red Shirts under the Pashtun leader Abdul Gaffar Khan sided with Jawarhalal Nehru and the predominantly Hindu Congress Party, and were openly against the creation of Pakistan. They feared domination by the formerly British "mercenary" armies of ethnic Punjabis (from Northwest Punjab and Southeast Northwest Frontier Province). Having suppressed this secessionist Pashtun impulse, largely with the help of Jihadists and Islamists under Sardar Ibrahim in the lead-up to Partition in 1947, Pakistan is very unlikely to tolerate its re-emergence. Pakistan therefore tolerates the Islamists.

Afghanistan initially refused to recognise Pakistan, and subsequently sought to promote secession among the Pashtun tribes. Daoud Mohammed, holding the position of Afghan Defence Minister and later Prime Minister, instigated tribal and military attacks on Pakistan's tribal areas in an attempt to stoke secessionism from 1948 until 1963. These included the infiltration of several thousand Afghan soldiers, and the provision of arms and funds to recalcitrant tribes. Pakistan threatened to attack Kabul, but instead chose to blockade land-locked Afghanistan into submission in 1963. Daoud was removed by Afghan King Zahir Shah, and ten years of good relations followed.

However, in 1973, Daoud overthrew the Zahir Shah, and immediately resumed his support to secessionists in Balochistan and the Northwest Frontier Province. Pakistan Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, despite being an anti-clerical socialist, retaliated and enrolled the services of the nascent Islamist movement to overthrow the Kabul government in 1974, starting a war that was to last until the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban in 1996.

The war in Afghanistan was not started by the Soviet invasion of 1979, but by Pakistan in 1973. Until NATO recognizes the local origins of the conflict, and addresses directly the security concerns of both Kabul and Islamabad, perhaps by bringing them to the negotiating table, the war will continue.

Fourth: Pakistan feels little need to compromise with NATO because Saudi Arabia, Iran and China, give it little incentive to. Victory in Afghanistan requires NATO to address the interests of important geopolitical neighbours, something it has been reluctant to do because it contradicts other foreign policy interests. The EU states place a priority on the continued supply of oil from Saudi Arabia. The US wants to keep Iran isolated because of concerns over nuclear proliferation. China is vital for US concerns over North Korea. Afghanistan is not viewed as worth compromising any of the other geopolitical interests.

Iran is an important counterbalance to Pakistan in Afghanistan and the Taliban, is active against the narcotics trade, and offers logistics routes to Qandahar and Herat that bypass the insecure tribal areas of Pakistan. The Saudis do not endorse al Qaeda, but neither do they countenance the influence of the alternative Barelvi religious movements, Shiites (which constitute 20% of Pakistan's population), or movements relying on fiqs unlike that of the kingdom.

Similarly, China has a huge but unrecognized degree of influence in Islamabad. China wants Pakistan to counter-balance India, and requires it to suppress terror only to the extent that weakens the Uighur insurgents operating in China's Xinjiang province. China provides most of Pakistan's tanks, artillery, combat aircraft and patrol craft. China has helped Pakistan establish its nuclear weapons infrastructure, its missile program, its nascent satellite program, and the main centres of its military industry in the Punjab, primarily at the Wah Cantonment and Taxila. Since 2005, largely as a counterweight to the 2005 US-Indian Nuclear Framework Agreement, China has also committed itself to a large investment in Pakistan's civil nuclear program, including the construction of three new reactors. 120 Chinese firms and over 10,000 workers have been busy completing the Gwadar deep sea port, the coastal highway project, road networks in Gilgit-Baltistan, and the widening and likely paralleling of the Karakorum Highway with a rail link. This latter promises to give Pakistan access to Central Asia, bypassing Afghanistan and permitting it to remain chaotic.

The US cannot pressure Pakistan, China's closest and most durable ally since 1963, without China pushing on

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Japan through North Korea, or Taiwan, or US interests in the Persian Gulf. Any Sino-American friction could also have significant effects on the domestic US economy, given the debt and trade relationship between those two countries. The key underlying fact is that Pakistan is very important to China because it distracts India, whereas Afghanistan is not sufficiently valuable for the US to risk a confrontation in Northeast Asia.

Can NATO recover? Domestic populations may accept a tougher state-building program, and may even be willing to fund mainstream religious groups, but confronting Kabul's own refusal to negotiate over the Durand Line and China's shadow influence in Islamabad will require a major effort.

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