

U.S. Military Culture and the Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, MAR 6 2013

On 11 January 2013, President Obama said he would speed up troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, signaling his intention to soon end America's longest war. The announcement suggested that Obama would decide how quickly America will withdraw troops after he receives recommendations from General John Allen, the commander of American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan.[1]

However, all is not as it seems. Clearly, a difference of opinion could manifest itself between political and military considerations. Military culture and civil-military relations theories explain how the decisions will be taken. It is military culture and civil-military relations that will determine the nature of the withdrawal. The important common element to both is the professionalism of the military.

Military Culture

Military culture, to invoke Williamson Murray, 'might best be described as the sum of the intellectual, professional, and traditional values of an officer corps; it plays a central role in how that officer corps assesses the external environment and how it analyzes the possible response that it might make to the threat.'[2]

According to Murray's definition, military culture includes assessing the external environment and analyzing possible responses. The basis from which to make a military recommendation comes from Generals' schooling and extensive battle experience. This schooling has been both in professional military educational organizations, such as the U.S. Naval Academy and the U.S. Army War College, as well as tertiary civilian educational organizations, such as Georgetown University. Also, according to Murray's definition, General Allen and his successor Marine General Dunford would formulate their recommendation based on the sum of the intellectual, professional, and traditional values gained from this schooling and experience.[3] The most important value that permeates all US military doctrines and training is that of professionalism.

Civil-Military Relations

Understanding what it means to be a professional military officer, and what the military profession is, can be aided by the concept of civil-military relations. This concept can illuminate how the relations between General Dunford and President Obama would determine the decisions about withdrawal from Afghanistan. The seminal studies on civil-military relations received their intellectual refinement in political science and sociology. The clearest early statements of this relationship were those of Samuel Huntington, a political scientist,[4] and Morris Janowitz, a sociologist.[5]

The Huntington School

Huntington as a political scientist viewed the armed forces as being quite apart from society. He argued that this was as it should be, if the armed forces were to effectively address their mission and perform its major professional role: that is, defend the nation through the management and execution of large-scale violence when legitimately called

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upon to do so. He surmised that a military profession that regarded its role strictly in military terms and was conservative in its social values, beliefs and attitudes, would remain a politically neutral arm of government, and thus would be more amenable to political direction and civilian control.[6] Huntington's account is rooted in the idea of what might be termed a 'pure military space', focused on the technical means of war, occupied by a military profession using legitimate violence to achieve victory.

The Janowitz School

Janowitz on the other hand, as a sociologist, viewed the military institution as deeply embedded in society and dependent on it to effectively perform its responsibilities.[7] Despite this, the unique mission of the military rendered it somewhat different from other societal institutions and organizations. Janowitz called on the military to reflect the values and the sensibilities of liberal-democratic society, if it was to enjoy legitimacy and support from the citizenry. He viewed the armed forces in much broader terms than just a war-fighting machine and the profession as more than just a group of conservative "heroic warriors", insulated from the rest of society. While Janowitz did not see the military profession as usurping political roles, he believed that officers' competency and skill-sets should include those associated with developing an understanding and appreciation of their social and political contexts, both domestically and internationally.

Selecting the School

Clearly, these two positions lead to very different ways of viewing how General Dunford would formulate his recommendations, and how President Obama would make his decision. Following Huntington, General Dunford's judgment would be concerning the appropriate use of military capabilities to achieve the assigned mission, with the measured use of lethal force a critical aspect, obedient to government. In contrast, following Janowitz, General Dunford's judgment would be based on the military profession's values, beliefs and opinions, attentive to both government and society.

In practice, there may well be an overlap in the theories of Huntington, Janowitz and Murray on military culture and civil-military relations. Each has salient and relevant points. Taking all three theories simultaneously provides a substantive way to understand the known political and military facts, which show the tough decisions that have to be made.

Why is America in Afghanistan and why is it leaving?

The reason that America went to war in Afghanistan was to ensure that al Qaeda could never again use Afghanistan to launch attacks against America.[8] This was a political decision, based upon military recommendations from Pentagon Generals. At the time, many military officials believed that the best means of defense was the offense, hence the need to take the battle to the territory of the adversary.[9] Now, some 12 years after 9/11, there are political and military considerations for reconsidering this.

On the political front, there is the domestic political situation both in Afghanistan and America. A withdrawal timeline planned to start in the spring of 2013 would allow Afghan President Karzai to argue domestically that he had been able to more rapidly recover Afghanistan's sovereignty with Afghan forces taking the lead on security.[10] President Karzai has frequently called for American forces to no longer operate in Afghan villages. After his inauguration for a second term in office, President Obama can make the case that he is not only winding down the war, but that he is doing so even faster than he had promised.

Such considerations led President Obama to make the withdrawal announcement after a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The two agreed that recent gains by American troops and progress in training Afghan security forces to take the combat lead meant that America could move up the schedules for pulling American forces out of Afghan villages and for ending most unilateral combat operations.[11] This does not mean the immediate end of American military presence in Afghanistan. President Obama said American forces left in Afghanistan after 2014 would have two goals: to advise, train and assist Afghan forces and to carry out counterterrorism missions aimed at

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al Qaeda and its affiliates.[12]

On the military front, the fighting season in Afghanistan has traditionally been its fiercest in the spring and summer, and reducing in the fall and winter. President Obama's political considerations and General Dunford's military considerations could therefore differ. Speeding the withdrawal process may not be the best war strategy, as Afghan troops still depend on international forces for artillery, air support, intelligence collection and casualty evacuation. The withdrawal time-frame which General Dunford prefers, in purely military terms, would be the fall of 2014.

Has America won in Afghanistan?

One question underpins the basic political and military considerations in Afghanistan. How many al Qaeda operatives remain in Afghanistan? If al Qaeda is still in Afghanistan, does this mean that America has not achieved all of its initial goals, as set out in 2001? To be sure, President Obama conceded that the longest war in U.S. history had fallen short of some hopes: "Have we achieved everything that some might have imagined us achieving in the best of scenarios? Probably not, this is a human enterprise and you fall short of the ideal." [13]

These may be important questions and responses, but they are not an issue, because the withdrawal is not absolute and the combat against al-Qaeda continues. In negotiations with Afghanistan, America demands immunity for any American troops which remain in the country. Afghanistan is willing to provide that immunity in exchange for a series of American assurances, including that hundreds of Afghan detainees now held by American troops would be turned over to the Afghan government, and the full ownership and control of the detention centers, including the facility at Parwan. Also under negotiation is an arms package including transport helicopters, unarmed drones, surveillance systems, military transport planes and light attack aircraft.

War against Al-Qaeda after withdrawal from Afghanistan

The Pentagon has presented White House staff with three options that would leave roughly 3,000, 6,000 or 9,000 American troops in Afghanistan after 2014.[14] Despite calling for American withdrawal for immediate domestic political gains, Karzai favors a larger American force, depending on them for training his own units. The battle to attain the initial goals following 9/11 will continue by other means that are more cost-effective to America, with less loss of life.

One of the additional options open to General Dunford is a maritime option. In the days immediately after 9/11, the administration had to project fire-power to a region where it had no bases. It used sea-based carrier warfare and network concentric concepts. Naval aircraft flew 75% of all sorties, dropping 33% of all bombs. It was Amphibious Ready Groups (ARGs) that provided principal ground forces in southern Afghanistan.[15] The attack on the Taliban commenced with Tomahawk launches, followed by carrier strike aircraft, USAF long-range bombers from Diego Garcia, and B-2s from the United States. The Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, was responsible for most of the theater. This strategy could be implemented again to contain the Taliban and al-Qaeda with greater effectiveness now that the Afghan armed forces are functioning on the ground.

How the decision will be made

In sum, General Dunford's intellectual, professional and traditional values as an officer will play a central role in how he assesses the external environment, and in shaping the recommendations he provides. These recommendations will be considered by President Obama following the Huntington model of civil-military relations, concerning the appropriate use of military capabilities to achieve the assigned mission. But the recommendations will also be considered by President Obama following the Janowitz model of civil-military relations, based on them containing values embedded in those of American society.

A withdrawal of land and air power from Afghanistan will have a reciprocal impact on the future size, shape, and organization of the armed forces and its equipment procurement. Hand-in-hand will go adjusted training programs and even promotion schedules. With the Iraq conflict over, and with an impending withdrawal from Afghanistan, the

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armed forces will be without a large-scale active deployment for the first time in 12 years.

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Pentagon will need to adjust to a different attitude from Congressional funding, where it is clear that budgetary realities will place fiscal constraints on the forces, while growing personnel costs will compete for operations, maintenance, and development resources.

The military has accepted this. It is not attempting to prolong the Afghan conflict as a means to ensure a larger and better funded military. This follows the Huntington model. The armed forces maintain being a military profession that would remain a politically neutral arm of government, not challenging the redefined budget. The military remain amenable to political direction and civilian control, focused on the technical means of war. Therefore, Huntington's theory predominates in the case of Afghanistan.

Ultimately, military culture and civil-military relations will determine the characteristics of the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. In turn, the withdrawal will determine American military culture and its organization into the 21st century.

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Dr. Glen Segell, FRGS, is Researcher at The Institute for National Security Studies Tel Aviv, Lecturer at Bar-Ilan University and Senior Researcher for the Ariel Research Center for Defense and Communication.

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About the author:

Dr Glen Segell is Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at the University of the Free State, South Africa and a Research Fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran & Gulf States Research, University of Haifa, Israel.