

# THE ATLANTIC

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*Even though the situation on the ground is better than most people think, the war is on track to be the longest in U.S. history. Americans, says one Army general, need to show "strategic patience."*

*by Robert D. Kaplan*

## Saving Afghanistan

KANDAHAR—Afghanistan is about to spike in the news this summer, as 17,000 more marines and soldiers arrive from the United States and pour into the southern Kandahar region. They will advance down roads and river valleys where American troops have never ventured in eight years of war here, and deliberately stir up a hornet's nest of Taliban strongholds in Mullah Omar's backyard.

This incursion will lead to fighting and attendant casualties perhaps on a scale that Americans have not seen since the early days of the surge in Iraq. It will be part of an ambitious effort whose scope American commanders here dare not name or admit to, even to themselves: nation-building on a grand scale. To succeed, they must overcome the Afghan landscape itself: a sprawling expanse of high desert wrinkled with tortuous hills and wave upon wave of cathedral-like mountain ranges that segment the population into countless valleys and separate regions. Indeed, for the first time since the U.S. invaded here in late 2001, Americans are about to lead a great battle against culture and geography.

Whereas Iraq is highly urbanized with the capital of Baghdad exerting a powerful demographic and psychological influence on the rest of the country, in Afghanistan any military effort has a tendency to get lost in mileage. In Iraq, the setting up of small military outposts in individual neighborhoods—the heart of the surge strategy—created a webwork of hubs over a flat and densely populated landscape, with each outpost leveraging the success of the other. In Afghanistan, such outposts are often completely isolated from the other, with any success consequently self-contained.

And yet the military situation in Afghanistan is not nearly as dire as the one in Iraq on the eve of the surge in late 2006. Civilian casualties, despite rising 40 percent since 2007, are still 16 times lower than in pre-surge Iraq. Even today, with Iraq clearly on the mend and out of the news, it still accounts for twice as many civilian casualties as Afghanistan. Despite the disappointment with the American-led coalition, fewer than ten percent of the Afghan population support the Taliban, according to recent polling; neither do the Taliban and the other anti-government insurgents have a unifying or charismatic leader. There is no Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, or even a Muqtada al-Sadr. While resilient—that is, able to quickly replace leaders who are killed—the Taliban are not resurgent as news reports have claimed. The capital of Kabul has never been in danger of falling, notwithstanding periodic, spectacular attacks that energize the world media, such as those against the Indian Embassy and the Serena Hotel in Kabul, as well as the one on February 11 in which three ministries were targeted. In fact, that last attack was seen as a victory for the government because the ministries were quickly retaken by the Afghan army and police with little help from the NATO coalition. As American commanders repeatedly told me and three other reporters during a week of travel, a Taliban victory is not only not inevitable, "it is not even probable." Moreover, despite the boomlet of stories comparing Afghanistan to Vietnam, the home front

in America is not nearly in the same degree of turmoil over this war as it was over the one in Iraq three years ago. Finally, the Americans, in spite of all the reports of civilian casualties from air strikes, are still the most popular outsider in the eyes of Afghans, says Christopher Alexander of the United Nations office in Kabul.

On the other hand, the raw material for modern nationhood in Afghanistan is much weaker than what exists in Iraq. Literacy rates in the Pushtun belt of the south and east that has seen most of the serious fighting is under ten percent, with women's literacy hovering near zero in many places. Starting with the 1979 Soviet invasion, 30 years of warfare have decimated traditional structures of authority and the human capital here: there are little or no skill sets among the population for the most basic administrative tasks. Afghanistan exhibits the same stage of human development as the poorest sub-Saharan African countries. One regional governor told us that he has to micromanage everything because there are so few competent people around him.

Indeed, the government of President Hamid Karzai is weak, corrupt, and tribal to the core, with members of his family such as Ahmad Wali Karzai complicit in the drug trade. Karzai governs through his own Popolzai tribe of the Pushtun ethnic group, even as many positions in his government are manned by ethnic Tajiks from the north, who are former members of the Northern Alliance that helped the U. S. topple the Taliban regime in 2001. Karzai has also permitted former mujahidin commanders such as Ismael Khan, Rasul Sayyaf, and Mohammed Fahim to emerge as corrupt oligarchs. The result is that despite Karzai's own royal Pushtun lineage and his dependence on blood relations rather than institutions, he is increasingly disliked by his fellow Pushtuns. The Taliban, in this sense, are merely the latest incarnation of Pushtun nationalism on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. (That's why an American accommodation with elements of the Taliban will only lead ethnic Tajiks to rearm, possibly igniting a civil war.)

But just as the central government is weak, so are the insurgents. The Taliban are just one of many anti-government syndicates that fight often at cross purposes with each other. In the south stretching from the Pakistani border town of Quetta to Kandahar are the Taliban-proper. In the southeast, stretching from Pakistani Waziristan into Khost, Gardez, and unto Kabul itself is the network run by former Afghan mujahidin leader Jalaluddin Haqqani. In the east is the HIG, or Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, run by another former mujahidin fighter against the Soviets, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. And these represent only a few of the groups operating here, not to mention the insurgent factions inside Pakistan, which are more ideological than the ones in Afghanistan, owing to the more ideological nature of Pakistani Islam.

The rugged, utterly porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border is recognized by neither side, but is instead an informal line demarcated by the British in 1893. Tens of thousands of Pushtuns cross the Khyber Pass border post each week in both directions without showing any identity cards, even as hundreds upon hundreds of jingle trucks pass through daily uninspected. The inability to regulate the frontier harks back to the tenuous nature of the Afghan state itself.

There is nothing ancient about Afghanistan. It came into existence only in the early 18th century as a buffer between the civilizations of Persia and the Indian Subcontinent. It soon became a buffer between the Czarist empire in Russia and the British Empire in India. The very situation in Afghanistan today, with different spheres of influence being carved out behind the screen of daily warfare, attests to this history. In the south and east, the radical Islamist insurgency is itself a reassertion of the concept of Pushtunistan on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In particular, Baluchistan in the south is becoming a Wild West area of arms bazaars and opium labs. (In fact, most armed insurgents in Afghanistan were trained not in Pakistan's tribal areas but in Pakistani Baluchistan, further proof that no

solution here is possible without military action inside Pakistan.) In Afghanistan's northeast, tribes in Kunar and Nuristan will fight any outsider, even those from the next valley. In the north, where it is more peaceful, trade is intensifying the links between ethnic-Tajiks and Uzbeks who straddle the border between Afghanistan and the former Soviet Central Asian republics. Western Afghanistan is coming under the political and economic domination of Iran, which supplies the city of Herat with electricity, even as the Iranian rial is the main currency in circulation. The Iranians are sending arms and military trainers into this part of Afghanistan. While the Shiite Iranians are against a takeover of Afghanistan by the Sunni extremist Taliban, they also want to keep Afghanistan weak, and to bleed the Americans as much as they can. (The Spanish contingent of several hundred NATO troops in western Badghis province—in the heart of Afghani Greater Iran—practically never leaves its base.)

And yet set against this whole legacy is another tendency, equally as compelling. Throughout the mid-part of the 20th century, Afghanistan had a credible central government under King Zahir Shah that boasted many accomplishments from eradicating malaria to overseeing the construction of a ring road uniting the major cities. Following the chaos of the early- and mid-1990s that came with the collapse of the Soviet puppet regime of Mohammed Najibullah, Afghans yearned so much for a central government that they initially welcomed the tyranny of the Taliban. And today, all polls indicate that Afghans want strong national leadership emanating from Kabul. Indeed, there is a hue and cry for roads, wells, culverts, dams, and other infrastructure that can help with farming. The problem is that decades of strife, in which central authority went from monarchy to communism, to anarchy, to theocracy, to enfeebled democracy, have left tribal affiliations as the only constant.

While the American-led NATO coalition is holed-up in a network of heavily fortified bases, surrounded by HESCO barriers and living off food supplied by Kellogg Brown and Root, the Taliban are masters of isolation, quick as they are to make deals with local tribes and to threaten villagers with hideous retribution through “night letters.” The population by all measures genuinely wants to be rid of the Taliban, even as Afghans are usually too afraid to cross them. The side that wins here will be the one that emerges in the eyes of the rural inhabitants as the strongest tribe—NATO or the Taliban and its affiliates.

Helping the Taliban are hundreds of millions of dollars in annual profits siphoned off from a \$4 billion opium trade, making the Taliban, in effect, narco-terrorists akin to those in Latin America. Poppy, particularly from southwestern Helmand province, has reemerged as the cash crop of Afghanistan. The government's counter-drug program is offering the carrot of free wheat seed and the stick of eradication. The Taliban respond with IEDs or improvised explosive devices, direct fire attacks, and mortars against anyone that tries to interfere with the lucrative trade.

American commanders insist they can win, that human agency can triumph over geography. The vast and mountain-fractured landscape may be intimidating, but some terrain still matters more than others, and in these places American efforts will be concentrated. For example, the most important stretch of road in this country is the Kabul-Kandahar highway, and the Americans vow to keep it open. Though a third bigger in size than Iraq and larger in population, many of Afghanistan's inhabitants are concentrated along river valleys and principal roads, where the poppy, too, is cultivated. Thus, the additional American forces that stream in here can achieve meaningful victories by concentrating themselves in a few strategic areas.

Most NATO forays are conducted with the Afghan National Army or ANA, which NATO wants to grow from a force of 80,000 to 270,000 by 2016. “We're building an army on an industrial scale,” British Brigadier Neil Baverstock told us. In fact, the ANA, a multiethnic organization that according to polls is the most respected institution in the country, forms

the heart of Afghan nation-building. The American military is leading an effort to establish the Afghan equivalents of West Point and the National Defense University, in addition to basic training and advanced combat schools, a noncommissioned officer academy, an officer candidate school, and a counterinsurgency academy. There are also plans to dramatically scale up the number of police and to increase the size of the Afghan National Army Air Corps from 35 to 128 planes by 2016. This budding military complex promises to suck away the country's very limited, literate elite, leaving comparatively fewer educated Afghans to be recruited for civilian jobs in business and government. And that raises the question of state capacity. An army of such a size will require a much more robust and institutionalized state than now exists. Otherwise, with the army the most efficient and dynamic institution, Afghanistan faces the risk of African and Latin American-style coups in the future. When this question was raised with American generals, they told us that the threat of a coup years hence is a risk worth taking if it means more stability in the short run. Yet, President Barack Obama's special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, is taking no chances and is therefore backing a veritable civilian surge, with the U.S. Embassy here about to double the size of its staff from 400 to 800, mainly with aid experts to be located outside of Kabul. This year alone \$2.6 billion is expected to be appropriated for rebuilding civil society here.

While the coalition builds an army from the top down, they hope to improve security in the countryside from the bottom up through the Afghan Public Protection Program or AP3. As described by American Brig. Gen. Mark Milley, the AP3 recruits, trains, and arms locals across tribal and ethnic lines, making them answerable to provincial governors who are, in turn, appointed by the democratically elected president. A pilot AP3 is being developed in Wardak province, which guards the southwestern gates of Kabul. Wardak's governor, Mohammed Fe'dai, speaks fluent English, is pro-American, and has a background in the professional world of non-governmental organizations or NGOs. He is one of a group of governors with whom the Americans are working, in effect, to circumvent total reliance on Karzai.

Certainly, the can-do spirit of the American, British, Canadian, and other soldiers here is infectious, even as the gargantuan size of the operation, with its attendant planes, helicopters, up-armored Humvees, and massively fortified bases is simply stunning. A senior American military official told us that counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism are inseparable, and the idea that one can withdraw from Afghanistan while still conducting selected strikes against al-Qaeda terrorists is "absolutely ridiculous." Without counterinsurgency, he says, the terrorists simply replace their killed leaders and have the freedom to plan attacks on the West.

Meanwhile, as committed as the U. S. is to the war and rebuilding effort, it is unclear how committed other western countries are. Despite all the talk, only two percent of NATO forces are in Afghanistan, and troops from Italy, Spain, and Germany come with so many caveats that they are barely part of the fight. Whereas American military doctrine has moved from conventional warmaking to the more subtle arts of counterinsurgency, NATO still has no official counterinsurgency doctrine, and is mired in peacekeeping and stability operations. And as 17,000 more American troops flow in here from Marine units and an Army Stryker Brigade, with 13,000 more to follow, even if some countries within NATO commit to more troops, we are on the verge of a further Americanization of the war.

The stakes are vast. An Afghanistan that can inch its way back to the modest and fragile stability of the mid-20th century will leverage Pakistan back toward normalcy, in addition to becoming a conduit for energy pipelines that promise to unite oil- and natural gas-rich Central Asia with the Indian Ocean—thus linking India and Pakistan in a peaceful system of commerce. But an Afghanistan that crumbles into granular ethnic and tribal elements will bring down Pakistan, too, in addition to enlarging Iran's new and unconventional terrorist

empire. And this is to say nothing of the moral victory that al-Qaeda and the Taliban will achieve if Afghanistan descends into chaos.

At the moment, American military officials tell journalists that the situation is much better than is being reported, even as they wear body armor and move in mini-convoys when they travel from one base in Kabul to another. As in Iraq, only when the body armor begins to come off will one be certain that the situation is demonstrably improving.

“This is not easy shit,” says one American Army colonel. “But what’s the alternative?” That’s why American Brig. Gen. John Nicholson, Jr. says that what is required is “strategic patience.” The U. S. military has already been in Afghanistan half as many years as it was in Vietnam, and with troops pulling out of Iraq and talk of a multi-year hard slog ahead here, Afghanistan is on track to becoming America’s longest war. To that end, significant numbers of American officers and civilian contractors will be embedded in Afghan government ministries for years to come, helping to run things. But does the home front have the stomach for it? Our reaction to the fighting about to unfold this summer will speak volumes.

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