NATO’s Mission Impossible: Its Effects on the Afghan Partisan Movement and on US

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"The most extravagant idea that can be born in the head of a political thinker is to believe that it suffices for people to enter, weapons in hand, among a foreign people and expect to have its laws and constitution embraced.

No one loves armed missionaries; the first lesson of nature and prudence is to repulse them as enemies."

Thus spoke French Revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre in warning against foreign entanglements, though he soon succumbed to the pressure of his peers and the public: To ostensibly secure France's borders, he moved to belligerently impose the ideas of the Revolution in foreign lands, and shortly after lost his head on the guillotine to cheers of the crowd he had coddled.

"In counterinsurgency," noted Acting Director of U.S. National Intelligence David Gompert, "the population is not just the field of battle but the prize." The problem with our mission in Afghanistan is that each passing day not only makes that prize more unattainable abroad but brings new risks at home.

The NATO-led mission in Afghanistan is now near parity with the Red Army's top troop strength, and has already lasted as long as the doomed occupation during the 1980s that facilitated the collapse of the Soviet Empire. NATO's recent decision to fight for four more years in a war that cannot be won, on behalf of an untrustworthy and unpopular government, in order to solve a problem that no longer really exists, is a stunning waste of lives, treasure and the goodwill of the world's peoples on whom our own national security ultimately depends.

Still, the United States and its allies persist in pursuing what one soldier in the field described to me as "a crazy dream." As a result, NATO's already diminishing credibility and, more portentously, America's already declining influence in the world, likely will degrade faster and further despite newer, more positive plans for NATO's future program elsewhere.

"As we approach our 10th year of combat," intoned President Obama, "we must never lose sight of what's at stake: to deny al Qaeda a safe haven by "building democracy" with the good cop tactic of social "reconciliation and reintegration" (which no Taliban group has yet accepted) and the bad cop strategy of military "containment and counterinsurgency" in a country already tormented by three decades of constant war. Truth be told, although the Taliban and al Qaeda have had an unsteady alliance of convenience, there were never any Afghans in al Qaeda, and there is no significant al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan today. The one incontrovertible fact is
that over the last five years or so, the greater NATO's footprint in the country, the more widespread and lethal the Taliban insurgency has become.

The recent revelation in Britain's newspaper The Guardian, that some Afghan émigrés from the UK and other Western countries regularly return to fight with the Taliban against perceived Western occupation of their homeland, signals that the Afghan insurgency has become a partisan movement of the Global Age. "I work as a minicab driver," one London-based Taliban part-timer said, "I make good money. But these people are my friends and my family and it's my duty to come to fight jihad with them."

The name "partisan," which probably stems from the resistance of the Parthian people to Roman occupation 2,100 years ago, was first systematically applied to Jewish "zealots" and other "terrorists" just after the time of Jesus. Jewish partisans carried out suicide missions to incite Roman retaliation against the civilian population and so increase popular support for the rebels' cause. Beginning with the Spanish guerrilla war against Napoleon and on through WWII, "partisan" came to mean a member of any irregular force formed from a population to fight foreign control of their territory. The hallmark of any successful partisan movement is widespread local involvement, most tellingly from "part-timers" -- the "bakers and candlestick makers" who work for the occupiers by day and the insurgency by night. Partisan strength lies in the social network within which the insurgency is embedded: in the dense fabric of families and friends that now extends, courtesy of globalization's easy movement and communication, to fellow travelers among immigrant and internet communities.

Among the London cabbie's fighting circle in Afghanistan we find farmers, teenage madrasa students, local officials, European part-timers, and old timers fighting, they say, "because the foreigners are here"; 30 years before "they were called Russians, but they are the same, all kafirs (infidels)." A century ago, British Army missionary T.L. Pennell wrote in his classic, Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier, "The Afghans are never at peace except when they are at war! For when some enemy from without threatens their independence, then, for the time being, are their feuds and jealousies thrown aside, and they fight shoulder to shoulder... all desirous of joining some jihad."

Today, "Taliban" is an umbrella term for those who collectively hate the "foreign invader" enough to turn even traditional enemies into friends. Since 2005, when NATO began ratcheting up military involvement, Taliban ranks have swelled many fold and their influence has spread to nearly every part of the country. The Taliban coalition now extends to almost all segments of the population, including the Pashtun's traditional rivals: Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara and others.

In describing the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire, T.E. Lawrence wrote, "the idea of nationality was independence of clans and villages, and their ideal of national union was episodic combined resistance to the intruder... They were fighting to get rid of empire, not to win it." Although far inferior in treasure and arms, the insurgents would beat the enemy with "a highly mobile striking force of the smallest size" that would scurry to death the enemy's desire and ability to hold on to as much territory as possible: "his stupidity is our ally, for he would like to hold, or think he held as [many] provinces a possible." NATO's present "surge" strategy against a similar kind of enemy, initiated by the Obama administration's decision to send an additional
30,000 troops to assist in "pacifying" as many Afghan provinces as possible, also does not shine with intelligence or effectiveness. 2010 is the bloodiest year yet of fighting, with insurgent attacks up by two-thirds over last year.

In a report released in August 2009, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee warned that the Obama administration "has raised the stakes by transforming the Afghan war from a limited intervention into a more ambitious and potentially risky counterinsurgency." The incoming chief of the British Army, General Sir David Richards, cautioned that the proposed counterinsurgency and nation-building mission in Afghanistan (which now costs over a billion dollars per week) "could last up to 40 years."

A century before, Lord Curzon, the former Viceroy of India who had established the North West Frontier Province as a buffer zone to keep the Afghan tribes at arm's length, rose in Parliament as a member of the opposition to warn the new British government against prolonged military engagement: "we are dealing with an enemy habituated to every form and habit of guerrilla warfare, even if [military action] attended with maximum success, no permanent results can be obtained," and if Britain further attempted to occupy their homeland the whole region would be "ablaze from one end to the other [causing] an intolerable burden on finances." In Afghanistan, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Current "forward-looking" counterinsurgency strategy is to induce tribal and community elites who have respect and authority to wean away the "part-timer" local irregulars from the main Taliban force whose leaders are safe in Pakistan. But as Britain learned (and apparently now has forgotten) after nearly a century of unsuccessfully trying to subdue the Afghans, use of "divide and conquer" fails where social ties outweigh government influence. Perversely, the U.S. has unwittingly undermined its own version of the old Imperial British strategy of "conciliation and containment" by killing off many of the veteran mid-level commanders who were loyal to Taliban leaders in exile in Pakistan, thus leaving control of Taliban field operations to ever more young and local forces that refuse to acknowledge any outside authority, including the Quetta Shura and the older Taliban leadership. Their commitment against "the foreign invader" is, if anything, even more visceral and uncompromising. No significant group of Taliban has ever taken up offers of "reconciliation" and "re-integration" with the widely detested and corrupt US-backed Karzai government, and there is even less reason to consider such offers now: no Afghan government troop brigade can stand up to the Taliban without NATO support, and NATO actions on the whole (principally US and UK) have only increased the Taliban's popular support.

Danger to us lies in the fact that al Qaeda, which seeks to hijack and exploit globalization for a radically different world order, depends for its success on piggybacking essentially local and regional struggles that have hitherto wanted no part of globalization. Yet the more these parochial movements tie into the global network for their support, the more they become susceptible to Qaeda's siren song, where the whole world is a "House of War" until it accepts salvation.

Fortunately, most remaining core al Qaeda members are hiding out in caves or other hole-ups, and have a hard time implementing or even communicating strategy, much less actions. Unfortunately, Qaeda's core depends for continuing survival upon the Taliban, which are only
growing in strength. But unlike al Qaeda, the Taliban are primarily interested in their homeland, not ours (although some Pakistani Taliban leaders are now forging stronger alliances with al Qaeda and calling for hits against the US and UK, NATO's two largest contingents, because of the "rain of drones" that is killing them and the people around them).

In an interview with veteran correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave in June 2001, Taliban founder Mullah Omar argued that al Qaeda's fight against the West was the Taliban's. Omar said he had forbidden the Bin Laden from issuing fatwas for global jihad (Omar had previously confiscated the Qaeda leader's cellphone and put him under house arrest). When challenged with protestations of Western disgust at Taliban treatment of women (essentially no different from the way Afghan women were treated before the Soviets tried to improve their status), Omar retorted: "We don't interfere with what we consider your decadent lifestyle, so please refrain from interfering with ours. Do you tell your Saudi allies to change the status of women and adopt your lifestyle?"

After 9/11, Taliban leaders called a meeting to try to figure out how they might disinvite their troublesome "guest" (a sacred status afforded even enemies in order to be able to recalibrate alliances and prevent devolution of society into a Hobbesian state of "All against All" where no central government reigns). But the US administration ridiculed their deliberation and bombed the Taliban and al Qaeda into real togetherness (no Afghans had previously joined Qaeda because they couldn't stand Arab outsiders telling them how to fight and pray).

There are strong parallels between developments in Somali and Yemen and what is happening in Afghanistan, but also important differences. The US-backed ouster of Somalia's Islamic Courts Union by Ethiopian forces in 2006 has led to a growing insurgency by the Mujahedin Youth Movement, Al-Shabaab, a radical offshoot of the Islamic Courts that is much more sympathetic to Qaeda's aims. As with the Taliban and (to a lesser degree) al Qaeda in Yemen, the Shabaab insurgency gathers strength by weaving popular opposition to a corroded and ineffective Western-backed government into an ever more tightly knit social fabric of family, friends, patronage and discipleship.

But neither the Shabaab nor al Qaeda are as deeply or widely rooted as the Taliban in the traditional customs (pashtunwali) and overlapping social ties (andiwal) that have long maintained the independence of the tribes as well as the country as a whole against strong outside invaders. Where the Taliban can ensure themselves popular support and political success primarily by tapping into these roots, the Shabaab and (to an even greater extent) al Qaeda in Yemen seek to advance their local cause by tying it more to Qaeda's global cause. Those from the West who enlist in such common cause are more likely to strike "the head and the heart of the snake" than its hand, be they disaffected immigrants from Britain's urban Muslim ghettos or (the far fewer) lonely middle class or misplaced Muslim youth, such as some from the Somali community in the area of the twin cities in Minnesota, who can't quite melt it into America's immigrant mainstream.

Yet, except for a single successful Qaeda-directed attack against the US (9/11) and a single case of partial Qaeda direction in an attack against Britain (7/7 Underground bombings in 2005), there has been no successful Qaeda attack against the West (the March 2004 Madrid train bombings
were entirely locally organized and self-directed). In the US, all other jihadi-inspired plots have been badly bungled affairs by socially-alienated terrorist wannabes. Several received hurried and haphazard training or direction from some Qaeda associate. This was the case for last year’s failed Christmas Day crotch bomber from Nigeria, and for the Pakistan-born Times Square firecracker fumbler from Connecticut.

More commonly, would-be jihadi bombers are caught through entrapment by the FBI or other law enforcement agencies, which often instigate the plot or provide the plotters with their target or means (usually dud bombs). Recent entrapments include Mohamed Osman Mohamud, the 19-year-old Somali-American who planned to blow up a car bomb in the middle of a crowded Christmas tree-lighting celebration in Portland last Friday, and Farooque Ahmed, the Pakistani-born computer-science graduate from Virginia who was arrested last month for allegedly participating in a plan to bomb the Washington, D.C. Metro to help the Taliban’s cause. (It is highly questionable, however, that entrapped jihadi wannabes would have ever become terrorists on their own because actual participation in homegrown plots is largely a contingent matter of chance and happenstance, so that any person who begins along the path towards extremist violence is likely to deviate from it if friends they link up with in their social network go another way).

The Afghan Taliban -- the most tactically competent, socially-embedded, and tenacious foe we face -- realize that any closer association with al Qaeda than is convenient would likely only strengthen Western resolve to stay. They don’t allow al Qaeda to operate from their territory and, indeed, could well sever their relationship should Qaeda become a bigger headache to them than we are. But the longer we stay, the more we play into Qaeda’s hands, and the more likely that the part-time Taliban will become full-time global partisans who are not bunglers and hit hard where we live.

In 1958, France’s World War II hero, General Charles De Gaulle, came to power in the midst of a bitter debate over the future of Algeria that divided the French people. He promised to ensure Algeria’s continued occupation and integration with France. But his sensitivity to the movements and stakes of world history, and to the facts on ground, soon shifted in favor of Algerian independence. Even if that meant the end to French control in North Africa, a hostile regime at France’s doorstep, and great risk to his own political (and physical) survival. A great leader knows when it is in the interests of the people to reverse course, even if the people are initially unconvinced. President Obama has the intelligence to be such a leader, but does he have the political audacity and fortitude?