



The Case for a Fully-Resourced Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan

During the time that President Obama has been mulling the way forward in Afghanistan, a number of politicians, advisors, and analysts have put forth various arguments against a significant increase in troop strength and a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. The arguments, when closely considered, expose a default resistance to completing the mission, not a thoughtful dismantling of the pro “surge” case. Below you’ll find a list of the most popular critiques of General Stanley McChrystal’s COIN strategy and resource request, each followed by clear refutations from relevant experts.

Charge: The illegitimate election of Hamid Karzai means failure for any stepped up effort in Afghanistan.

Response: “[C]onsider the analogous case of Iraq over the last three years,” write Richard Fontaine and John Nagl in the Los Angeles Times. “At the time [of the surge of forces to Iraq], Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki’s Shiite-led government was widely viewed as weak and sectarian. An overwhelming number of Sunni Arabs -- who formed the center of gravity of the insurgency -- rejected its legitimacy and had boycotted the December 2005 elections that brought it to power. The Maliki government had done little to allay these feelings; on the contrary, elements of its security forces participated in sectarian violence against Sunnis through 2006.” Yet Gen. David H. Petraeus’ counterinsurgency strategy was able to protect populations, restore order, and make room for the political reconciliation that would not have otherwise been possible. “Prospects for such an outcome in Afghanistan actually look better now than they did in Iraq in early 2007,” write Fontaine and Nagl, “unlike Iraq -- where success hinged on persuading a critical mass of the Sunni Arab community to accept the bitter reality of a Shiite-led government -- no deep existential issue drives Afghans (primarily Pashtuns) into the arms of the insurgents.” In fact, all polls and other data indicate that “the national government in Afghanistan almost certainly retains greater legitimacy among the people than did the Iraqi government before things began to turn for the better there.” -- [Los Angeles Times](#)

Charge: Afghanistan is too “naturally” tribal and backward for a COIN strategy to work.

Response: In reality, Afghanistan “has been a state since the 18th century (longer than Germany and Italy) and has been governed by strong rulers such as Dost Mohammad, who ruled from 1826 to 1863,” writes Max Boot, in Commentary. “Afghanistan made considerable social, political, and economic progress during the equally long reign of Mohammad Zahir Shah from 1933 to 1973. The country was actually relatively peaceful and prosperous before a Marxist coup in 1978, followed by a Soviet invasion the next year, triggered turmoil that still has not subsided. . . . Afghanistan has not always been as unstable and violent as it is today. . . it is hard to know why Afghanistan would be

uniquely resistant to methods and tactics that have worked in countries as disparate as Malaya, El Salvador, and Iraq." -- [Commentary](#)

Charge: Al Qaeda is our real enemy. COIN focuses unnecessarily on defeating the Taliban and other related groups.

Response: "Al Qaeda does not exist in a vacuum like the -SPECTRE of James Bond movies. It has always operated in close coordination with allies," write Frederick and Kimberly Kagan in The Weekly Standard. "The anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s was the crucible in which al Qaeda leaders first bonded with the partners who would shelter them in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden met Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose network is now fighting U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan, as both were raising support in Saudi Arabia for the mujahedeen in the 1980s. They then fought the Soviets together. . . Bin Laden and al Qaeda could not have functioned as they did in the 1990s without the active support of Mullah Omar and Haqqani. The Taliban and Haqqani fighters protected bin Laden, fed him and his troops, facilitated the movement of al Qaeda leaders and fighters, and generated recruits. They also provided a socio-religious human network that strengthened the personal resilience and organizational reach of bin Laden and his team. Islamist revolution has always been an activity of groups nested within communities, not an undertaking of isolated individuals. . . There is no reason whatever to believe that Mullah Omar or the Haqqanis--whose religious and political views remain closely aligned with al Qaeda's--would fail to offer renewed hospitality to their friend and ally of 20 years, bin Laden. Al Qaeda's allies "provide them with shelter and food, with warning of impending attacks, with the means to move rapidly. Their allies provide communications services--runners and the use of their own more modern systems to help al Qaeda's senior leaders avoid creating electronic footprints that our forces could use to track and target them. Their allies provide means of moving money and other strategic resources around, as well as the means of imparting critical knowledge (like expertise in explosives) to cadres. Their allies provide media support, helping to get the al Qaeda message out and then serving as an echo chamber to magnify it via their own media resources." -- [Weekly Standard](#)

Charge: We can defeat our enemy in Afghanistan with a more limited counterterrorism strategy, using drones and increased intelligence gathering.

Response: "If the United States should adopt a small-footprint counterterrorism strategy, Afghanistan would descend again into civil war," Frederick Kagan testified before the House Armed Services Committee. "The Taliban group headed by Mullah Omar and operating in southern Afghanistan (including especially Helmand, Kandahar, and Oruzgan Provinces) is well positioned to take control of that area upon the withdrawal of American and allied combat forces. The remaining Afghan security forces would be unable to resist a Taliban offensive. They would be defeated and would disintegrate. The fear of renewed Taliban assaults would mobilize the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras in northern and central Afghanistan. The Taliban itself would certainly drive on Herat and Kabul, leading to war with northern militias. This conflict would collapse the Afghan state, mobilize the Afghan population, and cause many Afghans to flee into Pakistan and Iran. Within Pakistan, the U.S. reversion to a counterterrorism strategy (from the

counterinsurgency strategy for which Obama reaffirmed his support as recently as August) would disrupt the delicate balance that has made possible recent Pakistani progress against internal foes and al Qaeda." -- [House Armed Services Committee](#)

In Commentary, Max Boot notes, "it is hard to point to any place where pure [counterterrorism] has defeated a determined terrorist or guerrilla group. This is the strategy that Israel has used against Hamas and Hezbollah. The result is that Hamas controls Gaza, and Hezbollah controls southern Lebanon. It is the strategy that the U.S. has employed in Somalia since our forces pulled out in 1994. The result is that the country is utterly chaotic and lawless, and an Islamic fundamentalist group called the Shabab, which has close links to al-Qaeda, is gaining strength. Most pertinently, it is also the strategy the U.S. has used for years in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The result is that the Taliban control the tribal areas of Pakistan and are extending their influence across large swathes of Afghanistan." -- [Commentary](#)

Charge: Our army is already stretched too thin. A troops surge in Afghanistan is unsustainable.

Response: "This fear, heard often about Iraq in 2004-06, is no truer now than it was then," writes Tom Cotton in the Weekly Standard. "At the 2007 peak, the United States had 200,000 troops deployed to Iraq (170,000) and Afghanistan (30,000). Currently, there are 110,000 troops in Iraq and 68,000 in Afghanistan, well below that peak. And 60,000 troops are expected to leave Iraq by next August as more troops flow into Afghanistan. Thus, overall deployed troop levels in 2010 will remain the same or fall. The Army has also grown to accommodate repeated deployments. It expanded over the last two years from 512,000 to 547,000 soldiers and now plans to add another 22,000 troops by 2012. Further, it just exceeded its annual recruitment and retention goals, hardly the stuff of a broken Army." -- [Weekly Standard](#)

Charge: The American public believes we have no need to stay in Afghanistan after eight years of fighting.

Response: "Barack Obama has yet to talk about America or its ideals as being worth the fight. It's no wonder public support for our commitment in Afghanistan is lower today than at any point during the Bush administration," writes Foreign Policy Initiative Policy Advisor Abe Greenwald at the American Spectator. "The disconnect between rhetoric and mission is stark. Since taking office, President Obama has continuously spoken of the United States as a country that 'all too often...starts by dictating,' a place that 'has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive' toward allies, where 'our government made decisions based on fear rather than foresight, [and] all too often our government trimmed facts and evidence to fit ideological predispositions.' America, in Mr. Obama's words, 'is still working through some of our own darker periods in our history.' What kind of dupe would rally behind that place? To make matters worse, while the situation deteriorated in Afghanistan and loose speculation abounded the president went silent on matters of war. . . If the president wants to boost morale on Afghanistan, he is going to have to drink from the well of American exceptionalism." -- [American Spectator](#)

Charge: Dealing with the problems in Pakistan is more important than finishing the fight in Afghanistan.

Response: "The debate over whether to commit the resources necessary to succeed in Afghanistan must recognize the extreme danger that a withdrawal or failure in Afghanistan would pose to the stability of Pakistan," writes Frederick Kagan in the Wall Street Journal. The fight against the Taliban must be pursued on both sides of the border. Pakistan's successes have been assisted by the deployment of American conventional forces along the Afghanistan border opposite the areas in which Pakistani forces were operating, particularly in Konar and Khowst Provinces. Those forces have not so much interdicted the border crossings (almost impossible in such terrain) as they have created conditions unfavorable to the free movement of insurgents. They have conducted effective counterinsurgency operations in areas that might otherwise provide sanctuary to insurgents fleeing Pakistani operations (Nangarhar and Paktia provinces especially, in addition to Konar and Khowst). Without those operations, Pakistan's insurgents would likely have found new safe havens in those provinces, rendering the painful progress made by Pakistan's military irrelevant. Pakistan's stability cannot be secured solely within its borders any more than can Afghanistan's." -- [Wall Street Journal](#)

Charge: Afghans view coalition forces as "occupiers" and want us to leave.

Response: "In fact repeated polls have shown that majority of Afghans want the U.S. and NATO there," writes Brian Glyn Williams in Foreign Policy. "As they watch Indian soap operas on televisions the Taliban once smashed, send their girls to school, and drive on newly paved roads, millions of Afghans are experiencing the direct benefits of the U.S. presence in their country. This is the work we could have been doing in 1991 and, for all its obvious flaws, it is a tentative sign of progress in the long journey to rebuild civil society in this long suffering land. In other words, compassionate, global-minded Democrats who supported President Bill Clinton's humanitarian interventions in places like Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia owe it to the Afghan people to be patient and do the same for Afghanistan." -- [Foreign Policy](#)

Charge: Afghanistan is the "graveyard of empires."

Response: "This refrain belongs, as they say now in the military, in the graveyard of analogies," writes Tom Cotton in the Weekly Standard. "The Soviets, in particular, teach us how not to win in Afghanistan. A heavily mechanized force, the Red Army was ill-suited for Afghanistan's treacherous terrain, and it was dependent on long, vulnerable supply lines. It also discouraged innovative junior leadership, which is critical against an insurgency. To compensate, the Soviets employed vicious, massively destructive tactics that inflamed the Afghan people and still scar the country with depopulated valleys and adult amputees maimed as children by toy-shaped mines. Our present way of war couldn't be more different. We deploy light and wheeled infantry to Afghanistan, making our tactics more flexible, our supply lines shorter, and our soldiers more engaged with the locals. We also radically decentralize decision-making authority to our junior soldiers and leaders, who increasingly can draw on years of combat

experience. In short, America has a counter-insurgency strategy, whereas the Soviet Union had a genocide strategy. Afghans I spoke with always recognized the difference, reviled the Russians, and respected our troops." -- [Weekly Standard](#)

Max Boot makes a similar point in Commentary, "The two most commonly cited examples in support of this proposition are the British in the 19th century and the Russians in the 1980s. This selective history conveniently omits the military success enjoyed by earlier conquerors, from Alexander the Great in the 4th century b.c.e. to Babur (founder of the Mughal Empire) in the 16th century. In any case, neither the British nor the Russians ever employed proper counterinsurgency tactics. The British briefly occupied Kabul on two occasions (1839 and 1879) and then pulled out, turning Afghanistan into a buffer zone between the Russian Empire and their own. In the 1980s, the Russians employed scorched-earth tactics, killing large numbers of civilians and turning much of the country against them. Neither empire had popular support on its side, as foreign forces do today." -- [Commentary](#)

Charge: We can manage Afghanistan by focusing on the training of Afghans.

Response: "The Afghan Army is reasonably effective. It is too small, with roughly 90,000 total soldiers," writes Michael O'Hanlon in the Wall Street Journal. "But by most accounts, the Afghan Army is fighting well, and cooperating well with NATO forces. Gen. McChrystal's new approach to training Afghan troops will greatly strengthen and deepen this cooperation." Here is the key point as it relates to a troop build-up. "Not only will NATO finally field enough personnel to embed with each Afghan unit in mentoring teams, but its combat units will partner with Afghans at every level on every major operation – living, planning, operating, and fighting with each other in one-to-one formal partnerships." In order for that partnering to be fully implemented, a large troop surge is required. -- [Wall Street Journal](#)

Charge: There is no rush to get all of the requested resources to Afghanistan.

Response: "We face both a short and long-term fight," wrote Gen. Stanley McChrystal in his comprehensive assessment of the war. The long-term fight will require patience and commitment, but I believe the short-term fight will be decisive. Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near term (next 12 months) – while Afghan security capacity matures – risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible."

Many Americans are understandably resistant to the amplification of war after eight years of combat in Afghanistan and other taxing military deployments. But distaste for combat cannot supersede obligations of national security. Those who seek to sidestep those obligations must be challenged head-on, so that the illogical bases for their claims can be exposed and America can get about the business of winning a war and bringing our soldiers home in victory.

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