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Commentary

The Best They Could Do? Assessing U.S. Military Effectiveness in the Afghanistan War

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Abstract

This article explores shortcomings in military effectiveness in the war in Afghanistan. It focuses on three sets of problems: the failure to resolve internal contradictions in the training effort, the failure to integrate political considerations with military activity, and poor strategic and operational/tactical integration.

Keywords

Afghanistan war, counterinsurgency (COIN), military effectiveness, strategic assessment, civil–military relations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

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At first consideration, the failure of the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies to prevail in the Afghanistan war might seem inevitable, the product of multiple factors mitigating against success. At the top of the list of those factors are the war's ambitious goals, which variously encompassed defeating or minimizing the Taliban insurgency, preventing transnational terrorists from operating on Afghan territory, and building a viable Afghan state capable of protecting its citizens' human rights and civil liberties. Further stacking the cards against success was the failure of politicians to clearly articulate a strategy to achieve these goals and the challenges of coordinating aims and means among NATO members. For the United States, the war in Iraq also contributed to strategic drift by absorbing resources and shifting political and bureaucratic focus away from Afghanistan.

Many of these problems have been noted by scholars and analysts (Jaffe, 2019), and also by the U.S. military (Seldin, 2021). Yet, one set of issues afflicting the U.S. role in Afghanistan has received relatively less attention: U.S. military effectiveness in prosecuting the war. To be sure, observers have detailed problems within the Afghan security forces themselves (Matisek, 2021) and noted the effectiveness of Taliban forces (Giustozzi, 2013). Yet, how are we to assess the effectiveness of the U.S. effort? How well did its military fight a war that was by many accounts always going to be challenging?

Those questions have yet to be fully engaged and answered by scholars and analysts. But what we do know about how well the United States performed in the war should give us pause; it suggests there were serious shortcomings in military effectiveness.

With the concept of military effectiveness, I refer broadly to a state's capacity to translate its material and human resources—equipment and personnel—into military power and ultimately to success in war.[1] In the U.S. case, the effort suffered from deficits in two key areas essential to military effectiveness. The first was the ability to integrate military activity along the political, strategic, operational, and tactical means-end chain to ensure that it is internally consistent and self-reinforcing. The second was in the responsiveness of military activity, which generally refers to the ability to tailor military activity to the respective strengths and weaknesses of a state's own, as well as its adversaries' and partners' capabilities. In both areas—ensuring that military activity was integrated and responsive to local conditions—the United States showed marked weaknesses. Below I highlight three examples of problems in the war with the aim of drawing attention to the need for greater analytical attention to these issues.

Unresolved Contradictions

The first set of problems relates to the failure to resolve, or sometimes even fully to recognize, internal tensions or contradictions in key domains of the war effort; these inconsistencies both reflected and promoted the disintegration and poor responsiveness of military activity.

These contradictions, for example, were clear in the conflicting purposes of the training of Afghan security forces, which was a key pillar of NATO's mission in Afghanistan throughout the war. One objective to emerge from the Bonn process convened at the start of the war was that NATO should invest in training security forces as part of building a viable Afghan state.[2] From the beginning, the United States oversaw training of the Afghan military, and later would also assume responsibility for training the Afghan police.

The training effort in practice had two conflicting objectives. Formally, the goal was to build the Afghan military so it could protect the Afghan state; training security forces was part of a broader goal of statebuilding, especially as initially conceived in the war's early years. In practice, however, the training effort often was subordinated to a more proximate goal of fighting the Taliban insurgency, and using Afghan units in support of that effort, or otherwise seconding the advisory mission to achieving mission objectives.

While these twin goals might appear to be complementary, they were in fact in tension. In the statebuilding case, the goal in principle would include the (formidable) tasks of institution building and creating structures and organizational incentives conducive to creating an independent and self-sustaining military. The second goal in contrast necessitated focusing more on how Afghan forces could be used as adjuncts or components in military campaigns or tactical missions; at times, fighting the war involved simply sidelining efforts to build capacity and to focus on U.S. or NATO partner led missions. As Jason Dempsey (2019) describes, even as the training effort was ostensibly central, U.S. commanders would often prioritize operations against insurgent leaders and subordinate their advising roles to warfighting objectives. Proximate tactical objectives would in these instances prevail over the larger training effort.

With a support or adjunct role in fighting the war, moreover, the Afghan military did not have to stand on its own. It could rely on external advisors, logistical support, weapons, and equipment. This approach then fostered dependencies and deficiencies in Afghan forces that worked against the creation of an independent military that could protect and serve the Afghan state. This tension may help explain why the Afghan military was built in an unsustainable way, relying on organizational structures and doctrinal concepts that were poorly suited to the human capital of Afghan society (Cordesman, 2021; Matisek & Reno, 2019, 2021).

Specifically, one criticism waged against the training effort was that it was plagued by mirror-imaging (Loicano & Felker, 2017), in which the United States simply tried to import its organizational structures to the Afghan context, without always assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the Afghan forces in a systematic way (i.e., a sign of poor responsiveness). Indeed, the training effort was based on establishing a

meritocratic, hierarchical, capital intensive military that required high levels of human and financial capital to support it (Howk, 2009). Even as evidence and anecdotes about persistent deficits in the basic capability of Afghan forces mounted, there was little effort to address the mismatch (Cordesman, 2021; Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2021).

Consequently, with the expansion in size over the course of the war, the Afghan army was transformed from a lightly armed force of relatively small units to one that increasingly reflected units organized and equipped like U.S. forces. Infantry battalions (*kandaks*), for example, grew in size and complexity, adding several hundred troops along the way, as support, medical, maintenance platoons were incorporated. “With these changes, the ANA infantry began to look very Western—large, motorized and heavily armed” (Grissom, 2013, 269). These tensions as to the purpose of the force and what that dictated for its appropriate character afflicted the Security Force Assistance (SFA) effort throughout the war, and were never resolved. In sum, the training effort was poorly integrated internally and with its ostensible political goals.

Neglecting the Politics of Military Activity

A second set of problems relates to the failure of military commanders to fully appreciate how military activity interacted with the political context in which the United States was operating in Afghanistan. While scholars and observers have noted that the United States and its allies failed to understand Afghan politics writ large (indeed, this is a common complaint among the war’s observers), how this dynamic influenced military activity and undermined effectiveness has not been thoroughly explored.

U.S. military culture has been influenced by existing conceptions of professionalism, which distinguish between the realm of politics and military activity, presuming that they operate in isolation from each other (Brooks, 2020). This “separation of spheres” concept has had negative effects at the strategic level, as analysts have noted. Yet, it also has negative implications at the tactical and operational levels of warfighting. Military commanders may neglect what Celestino Perez (2016) calls “ground level politics.” In the Afghanistan war, the U.S. military effort was afflicted by the failure to integrate politics effectively into assessment of the likely fit and consequences of its campaign and tactical plans and doctrine.

Perhaps a bit ironically given the intrinsic political character of the doctrine, these issues manifest in part in the embrace of population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine in Afghanistan. While COIN-related initiatives were present from 2003 with the advent of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (Barno & Bensahel, 2020), they became the dominant doctrine for U.S. and coalition military forces under International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander General Stanley McChrystal in 2009, with the support of CENTCOM commander David Petraeus, and Pentagon civilian and military leadership. Population-centric COIN assumes that the key formula to sustaining a viable state is altering individuals’ calculations and perceptions about the capacity and legitimacy of the state, by providing them security and public goods; people then voluntarily shift allegiances to the government. In Afghanistan though, the theory of politics implicit in this COIN approach often did not match the character of politics. There power was not primarily exercised as an extension of individual agency; politics were factionalized, by ethnicity and within that, by tribal affinities and regional bases. Sustaining political power in this context was then about building coalitions, which are consolidated through bilateral deals with powerbrokers, underpinned by patronage politics, in which coercive pressures often ensured compliance by individual actors. In other words, population-centric COIN at least in theory was not always well adapted to the political conditions on the ground and at the national level in Afghanistan.[3]

In part because of this disconnect, military commanders often faced a dilemma between implementing COIN and the reality of getting things done in Afghanistan. Indeed, arguably this tension between building on local structures versus importing and integrating a political system based on Liberal values was unresolved at many levels in how NATO politicians approached the war and reconstruction effort—it was

not the military's problem alone. Yet, the embrace of COIN complicated the military's capacity to deal with those tensions and arguably exacerbated them. Often, for example, military commanders did adapt their efforts to the more transactional and factional basis of Afghan politics, such as when they sought to rely on regional powerbrokers to achieve goals, aware that these individuals had the networks and capacity to implement them. Yet, they did so with some ambivalence, wary of the brutal practices employed by such actors, whatever their efficacy.[4] The fundamental notion of population-centric COIN, in which individuals offer their consent and voluntary allegiance to be governed by the state, clashed with the coercive and sometimes disturbing means through which these powerbrokers often accomplished their aims. The result was a degree of incoherence, which seems often to have been dealt with by managing contingencies and muddling through.

Also, the understandings of politics that informed the implementation of COIN were at times too shallow and were not well considered in terms of the reactions they would elicit on the ground. Take once again McChrystal's effort to implement "fully resourced" COIN in 2010–2011, following a "surge" of 30,000 troops. Consistent with the doctrine's principles, the plan emphasized providing security to the local population by targeting insurgents, and "winning hearts and minds" by restoring government services and through a dramatically expanded development effort. As part of this effort, McChrystal made a concerted effort to execute, in coordination with Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, an integrated civil–military campaign plan aimed at improving the quality and transparency of governance, and reducing corruption and narcotics.

Yet, the approach could be overly technocratic, failing to fully think through how development and reform activities undertaken as part of the COIN effort might intersect local politics; that is, the full political dimensions of the development and public goods provisions of COIN were at times underappreciated. Consequently, despite a push to promote good governance, tribal politics interfered with efforts to restore government control (Jackson, 2017, p. 95). McChrystal's "government in a box" designed to enhance governance also proved a difficult import. Development projects, such as irrigation programs, provoked competition and stoked rivalries, given the political importance of water access (Jackson, 2017, p. 95). As Grissom captures it the counterproductive aspects of public goods provision:

> public works projects often triggered envy and competition between the beneficiaries and those who were excluded. Even when US development assistance fostered lasting goodwill, a basic question was whether this helped or undermined the Afghan state. If US units proved better at delivering goods and services, then this might tarnish the authority of the state and reinforce such "parallel structures" (p. 99).

In particular, the COIN initiatives neglected the way development efforts of this kind interacted with President Karzai's efforts to sustain his own power base. They intercepted the structure of patronage politics, in which his regime was ostensibly the chief beneficiary, potentially usurping the role of the Afghan state and diminishing its authority (Jackson, 2017, p. 87). As Karzai put it in November 2008:

> The problem here is, in a diverting play, the presence of the international community has created a parallel government to those such as of the Afghan government that are functioning. The PRTs in certain parts of the country have become a parallel structure to the governor of the province.[5]

Hence, if the goal was to enhance the authority of the Afghan state, and to sustain Karzai's cooperation with the U.S.-led counterinsurgency effort against the Taliban, development efforts were in some measure counterproductive.

Strategic Disintegration

A third set of problems relates the failure to integrate overall strategic goals with tactical military activity. The war effort was undermined by strategic disconnects, in which operational plans and tactical missions

did not always clearly support and advance strategic objectives. Analysts have offered this critique of the Afghan surge and associated COIN effort in 2010–2011 (see the discussion in Brooks, 2020). Yet, as Carter Malkasian (2021) suggests in his narrative account of the war, the problems were more extensive. One can see this strategic disintegration in the campaigns in the east of Afghanistan from 2006 to 2009.

In 2006, commanders initiated a counterinsurgency-influenced approach in the form of Operation Mountain Line, a campaign in the valleys of Afghanistan's mountainous Kunar and Nuristan provinces; the United States would eventually commit 20,000 to these battles in the east (Malkasian, 2021, p. 198). At the time, commander of the 10th Mountain Division, Major General Ben Freakley, and his deputy, Colonel John Nicholson, decided that they would pursue a "clear, hold, build" approach in the east, by establishing a series of outposts intended to root out Taliban insurgents and prevent them from maintaining a safe haven there.

The campaign would result in some of the fiercest fighting between insurgents and U.S. forces of the war, including the deadly Battle of Wanat in July 2008. In 2007, every soldier sent out on patrol into the mountainside was attacked by insurgents; such ambushes or attacks would result in the forces calling in air or artillery fire and consequently bombarding the valley with 1,000 or 2,000 pound explosive devices. One battalion during its tour expended 36,225 mortar or artillery rounds and 3,789 bombs and missiles (Malkasian, 2021, pp. 197, 188). Despite this, the insurgents were eventually able to steadily push the U.S. forces out of the outposts, with the United States losing these battles of attrition. Indeed, the presence of the U.S. forces served as much to incite opposition and mobilize Afghans against the United States, such as from the Korengalis and the Safi tribe, as to pave the way for winning hearts and minds (Malkasian, 2021, pp. 186, 189).

Nonetheless, both Freakley and Nicholson reportedly saw the campaign as innovative, citing the expansion of the number of outposts from 19 to 35 by the end of their tours in 2007.[6] Others, however, had their doubts about the strategic utility of the outposts. As Bing West wrote in the *New York Times*, "The generals were oblivious that the Korengal illustrated the war's strategic drift" (Malkasian, 2021, p. 192). At the time, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General Karl Eikenberry, also had his doubts about the strategy, given his own familiarity with Kunar and Nuristan, preferring to work with local authorities in populated centers to help government connect with people (Malkasian, 2021, p. 183). After Freakley and Nicholson's tours ended, their successors, Colonel Chip Preysler and Major General David Rodriguez, also questioned the plan. Preysler would later resign his commission after the Battle of Wanat, "stricken at the sacrifice for a strategy he did not believe in" (Malkasian, 2021, p. 198).

Still, the campaign in the east persisted even after more doubts about its utility and cost were raised by a new brigade commander for Kunar and Nuristan in the fall of 2008. Then Brigadier General John Richardson, who had returned to Afghanistan, fiercely opposed abandoning the Korengal valley on grounds that too much had been invested to leave and that it was imperative to prevent the Taliban from using it is a sanctuary. It was only when newly appointed ISAF commander, General Stanley McChrystal, backed the end of the campaign, due to his preference to focus on the war in the south, that the men and equipment were evacuated (Malkasian, 2021, pp. 213–214). As Malkasian characterized these events, the campaign had been "an unneeded diversion of U.S. resources. It neither eliminated terrorists nor protected the populous lower valleys" (Malkasian, 2021, p. 215). In other words, the campaign was disconnected from larger strategic imperatives.

Does It Matter?

These examples provide just a brief snapshot into U.S. military effectiveness in the Afghanistan war. They suggest, however, that there were serious deficits that hindered the responsiveness to local conditions and

the integration of military activity at different levels and domains. Critics might counter than such problems were unavoidable, pointing to the issues outlined at the start of this essay: Afghanistan was a hard problem, made harder by the larger failings of political leaders to duly define goals and strategy along the way. Yet, while there is plenty of blame to go around, in many cases, the errors were of the military's own making; its approach worsened problems, rather than mitigating or solving them. For example, to the extent they helped mobilize rather than neutralize opposition to the U.S. forces fighting the war, the campaigns in Kunar and Nuristan provinces were at least partly counterproductive to the goal of curtailing the Taliban insurgency. While it may have been an insurmountable task to create an Afghan military comprising personnel that were institutionally and normatively capable of protecting the Afghan state, that goal was never really the overriding organizing principle of SFA, at least in practice. The dependencies fostered in the training effort then made it more difficult for the Afghan military to exist as a capable standalone entity to fight the Taliban in the absence of external support and resources, which in turn likely had downstream effects on the incentives for its personnel to remain committed to their jobs following the withdrawal of coalition forces in August 2021 (Schroden, 2021). Despite the centrality of development and public goods provision, the technocratic approach employed at times seemed to work at cross purposes with the goal of building constituencies of local Afghans supportive of an Afghan state—instead encouraging competition over resources, or upending social structures, while doing little to bolster the legitimacy of the Afghan government among its citizens.

Finally, while the particulars are distinctive to the Afghan case, that such glaring deficits in the integration and responsiveness of military activity could persist unresolved speaks to larger organizational problems in the U.S. military. These faults in military effectiveness cannot simply be blamed on the larger challenges of the war or on the failings of politicians. Understanding the dynamics that allowed problems to persist and often not even to have been fully recognized is paramount—these same organizational barriers could afflict future missions or wars if left unaddressed (and not just security force assistance or counterinsurgencies). This imperative is just one of the many reasons scholars and analysts must commit to further study of the Afghanistan war.

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1. For this definition and framework, see Brooks and Stanley (2007).
2. In November 2001, pursuant to United Nations (UN) resolution 1378, UN representative Lakhdar Brahimi initiated a process to delegate roles in overseeing political transition and reconstruction in Afghanistan, which culminated with the Bonn agreement. In addition to other measures, it provided a multinational force initially to provide security in Kabul, which was extended to the rest of the country in the fall of 2003 and which subsequently was known as International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) control in 2003. As part of the agreement, the United States took on the role of building an Afghan army, while the international partners assumed responsibility for other reconstruction and security tasks.
3. When Afghan tribes did mobilize to fight the Taliban, the reasons often seemed disconnected from the logic of COIN

and had to do with particular factors related to local politics. See the discussion of the uprising in Ghazni and the Andar Awakening (Malkasian, 2021).

4. For an illustration see the discussion of Abdul Razziq, who was the police chief of Kandahar Province (Malkasian, 2021, esp. p. 422).
5. “U.S. running ‘parallel’ government says Karzai,” November 27, 2008. https://www.dawn.com/news/430600
6. They contended that the outposts “were bringing insurgents to battle, preventing them from threatening other areas and disrupting infiltration lines from Pakistan” (Malkasian, 2021, p. 191).

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