

Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan: Explaining the Absence of Victory

By Andrew M. Exum

Abstract: The counterinsurgency campaign seeks to create a space for the development of political solutions leading to peace. The means granted to Afghanistan have been weakened by the priority given to Iraq. Pakistani support for Afghan insurgents continues. The weakness of the Afghan government prevents it from distributing and fully exploiting international aid effectively. All these problems largely explain the failure of creating circumstances conducive to ending the war.

Introduction

I have been asked to explain why, after almost ten years of fighting, the United States and its allies have failed to win “hearts and minds” in Afghanistan. The question is a difficult one to answer, not least because the conflict is not yet over, but also because the question assumes winning “hearts and minds” is what the United States and its allies set out to do in the first place.

I suspect the question, though, is really a question of why the finest military in the world, together with its many allies, has failed to “win” in Afghanistan. In this case, I define victory as setting the conditions for a peaceful political process or reconciliation, thereby allowing the United States and its allies to leave Afghanistan with but a small training and advisory capacity left behind. That the United States and its allies have not yet done this, I argue, is due to any number of factors, four of which I will discuss in this article because I feel they are particularly important.

Although I was trained as an Arabist and am not a specialist in the peoples or politics of Afghanistan and Central Asia, I have made four trips to Afghanistan since 2001 – two as an officer in the US

Army leading combat units and two as a civilian advisor working for General Stanley McChrystal in 2009 and then General David Petraeus in 2010.¹ Since 2009, when it was very much apparent that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its Afghan allies were losing the war in Afghanistan, there has been reason for encouragement. The ranks of the Taliban and other insurgent groups have been decimated since 2009 thanks to a vicious campaign waged by NATO special operations and conventional units.² In addition, the Afghan National Security Forces, whose training the United States and its allies did not take too seriously until several years into the conflict, has steadily improved both in terms of quantity and quality. Afghanistan's gross domestic product, a crude developmental measure, to be sure, has more than quadrupled since 2001.³

Further, it is not at all clear that the United States and its NATO allies have indeed lost the hearts and minds of the Afghan people as the phrase "hearts and minds" is commonly understood. One bright spot for US and other NATO commanders is that despite the many failings of the international coalition since 2001, it is still more popular among the Afghan people than the widely detested Taliban, who ruled with an iron fist before falling from power in 2001 and have since waged a horrific campaign of fear and intimidation against Afghan civilians and their new government. The NATO coalition, in fact, still commands wide support among the Afghans. Even after a decade of US and allied military intervention and occupation, 62% of Afghans still support the presence and role of US forces in their country.⁴ By contrast, the Taliban is viewed unfavorably by nine in ten Afghans.⁵

As we will discuss, though, victory in a counterinsurgency campaign is not about which side is best liked by the population. Victory in counterinsurgency is about creating a space in which a

¹ I first deployed to Afghanistan following the attacks on September 11, 2001 and departed after fighting in *Operation Anaconda* in Paktia Province. (See A. Exum, *This Man's Army: A Soldier's Story from the Front Lines of the War on Terror*, New York: Gotham, 2004, as well as S. Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda*, New York: Berkley Caliber, 2005.) I subsequently redeployed to Afghanistan as part of a special operations task force and leading a platoon of US Army Rangers in 2004. After spending several years living and studying in the Arabic-speaking world, I then returned to Afghanistan for two months in the summer of 2009 to serve on the Initial Assessment Group of General S. McChrystal and then briefly returned, in December 2010, to conduct an interim assessment for General D. Petraeus.

² Author's notes from meetings with both conventional and special operations commanders at the tactical and operational levels in December 2010 in Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Sharana, and Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan.

³ The World Bank, World Development Indicators, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators?cid=GPD_WDI>.

⁴ See "Change Afghans Can Believe In" by pollster Craig Charney and retired US Ambassador James Dobbins, *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2011.

⁵ *Ibid.*

peaceful political process can take place. The reason the United States and its allies have not been able to do this and thus leave the country is because of the US war in Iraq from 2003 until 2009, the behavior of the military and security services in Pakistan, the weakness and actions of the government of Afghanistan, and doctrinal confusion among the US and allied militaries about what it means to win the “hearts and minds” of a people.

Iraq

The United States never really lingered long enough in Afghanistan to actually win outright when victory might have been most possible. In early 2002, I was leading a platoon of US light infantry from the US Army's 10th Mountain Division in what was imagined to be the last big set-piece battle against the Taliban and their Al-Qaeda allies. The feeling, among my men and I, was that we were once and for all ridding Afghanistan of the hated Taliban who had harbored the same transnational terror groups that struck the United States in the September 11th attacks and had similarly targeted US and Western interests elsewhere. In Washington, DC, however, and unbeknownst to us, US policy makers in the Bush administration had already begun to redirect their energies and the limited resources of the US government toward making the case and preparing for war on Iraq.

The next fall, this time leading a platoon of US Army Rangers, I found myself fighting in my second country in as many years, charged with tracking down and either arresting or killing high-value targets in an effort to stop the nascent insurgency undermining US attempts to rebuild Iraq.

The United States and its allies, of course, did not put nearly as much thought into the stabilization and reconstruction phase of the Iraq war as they did into the first few weeks of major combat operations. Partly as a result of the lack of US planning, Iraq descended into a maelstrom of ethno-sectarian violence from which it only emerged in 2007 after a number of factors – including new US counterinsurgency doctrine and operations – combined to reduce the violence and allow a peaceful political process to move forward.⁶

⁶ The various factors that contributed to a dramatic drop in ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq in 2007 are the matter of much scholarly debate. (For an incomplete review of the literature, see P. D. Feaver, “The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision,” *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 4, Spring 2011, p. 87-125.) Popular accounts of US military operations in Iraq in 2007 include T. Ricks's *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2009, as well as L. Robinson's *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008.

Between the initiation of hostilities in 2003 and the signing of a status of forces agreement in 2009, though, the war in Iraq diverted the lion's share of available military and intelligence resources away from Afghanistan. Commanders in Afghanistan were bluntly informed by the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs they were fighting an "economy of force" mission. "Operation Iraqi Freedom," journalist Peter Bergen notes, "consistently received around five times more US funding than 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan."⁷

The decision to divert so many resources away from Afghanistan to Iraq had a disastrous effect on the decisions subsequently made by other countries with interests in Afghanistan. "Tragically, I believe that this misunderstood message caused both friends and enemies to recalculate their options – with a view toward the US no longer being a lead actor in Afghanistan," stated US Army Lt. Gen. David Barno, who commanded US forces in Afghanistan from 2003 until 2005.⁸ "Many shifts in enemy activity and even the behavior of Afghanistan's neighbors, I believe, can be traced to this period."

Pakistan

No country's behavior was greater affected by the US decision to divert resources to Iraq than that of Pakistan. The United States had supported and engaged with the peoples of Central and South Asia sporadically through the twentieth century, and the US decision to divert so many military and intelligence resources away from Afghanistan and Pakistan toward Iraq confirmed for many Pakistanis the mercurial nature of US commitment to its interests in the region.

The United States and Pakistan, forced to work together since the attacks of September 11th, have enjoyed wildly different experiences as nations.

In the first half century of its existence, the United States of America roughly tripled its size through a series of wise business decisions – such as buying the Louisiana Territories from Napoleon's France – and wars of expansion fought at the expense of Mexico. US leaders, on the whole, made more wise strategic decisions than poor ones, and even fought a successful if bloody war of unification to settle constitutional issues that had caused political tension between the slave-holding southern states and the rest of the country since the nation's birth.

Pakistan, by contrast, has been poorly served by its leaders, who more often than not have made poor strategic decisions when

⁷ P. Bergen, *The Longest War*, New York: Free Press, 2011, p. 182.

⁸ *Op. cit.*

given the option. Whereas US presidents Thomas Jefferson and James K. Polk expanded US territory, Pakistan's leaders have lost roughly half of their nation's territory since its creation in 1947. Three disastrous wars fought against India as well as a failure to establish full sovereignty over its territory has condemned the Pakistani state to instability, dictatorships and political violence for most of its brief history.

Pakistan continues to make poor strategic decisions today. Recent decisions by Pakistan's leadership to arm and support rebels in Afghanistan have not only endangered the US and NATO efforts in Afghanistan but have also endangered the Pakistani state itself.

By one measure, the decision made by elements within Pakistan's military and security services to arm, support and reconstitute the Afghan Taliban and other insurgent groups after they were driven from Afghanistan by largely US forces is a logical hedging strategy: faced with the real possibility that the United States and its allies might depart Afghanistan, Pakistan needed to plan for a post-Western Afghanistan. The worst-case outcome for Pakistan in 2005 was that Afghanistan would one day emerge as a state allied with Iran to its west and, most dangerously, India. Unwilling to see its arch enemy hem it in from the north and west, Pakistan's military and security services, while happily accepting US aid and equipment on the one hand, armed and trained the enemies of the United States and the government of Afghanistan on the other.

Such a decision was logical if duplicitous. But it also had grave consequences for a Pakistani state that had problems enough with Islamist militancy. Today, the cities of Peshawar and Quetta have been devastated by the war in neighboring Afghanistan and in Pakistan's tribal regions. Political violence in Pakistan has increased, and today the threat to the Pakistani state posed by violent Islamist insurgents far outweighs the threat posed by nuclear-armed India in immediacy if not danger. Pakistani officials tell American visitors they yearn for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan and now regard a return of the Taliban to power as being a disastrous outcome.⁹ But it is difficult to determine whether or not the genie can be put back into the bottle.

For the NATO coalition in Afghanistan, meanwhile, Pakistani support for the insurgents has been disastrous. Counterinsurgency campaigns waged against an enemy with sanctuaries almost always end in tears. In Afghanistan, Gen. D. Petraeus told me in December 2010 that one of his two strategic "Achilles heels" was the insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan.¹⁰ While US and other coalition forces pummeled the Taliban and other insurgent groups in the fighting

⁹ As related by my colleague, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) David Barno, upon returning from a two-week trip to Pakistan sponsored by the government of Pakistan.

¹⁰ Author's notes, Interview with Gen. D. Petraeus, Kabul, Afghanistan, December 1, 2010.

seasons of 2009 and 2010, the insurgents slipped back across the Durand Line to recoup their losses in the winter.

The government of Afghanistan

The other of the two Achilles heels to which Gen. D. Petraeus referred in December was the weakness of and, in cases, predatory behavior of the Afghan government. Like the sanctuaries in Pakistan, the behavior of the Afghan government allows the insurgency to reconstitute its ranks each year by exploiting popular grievances. The failure of the NATO coalition – and most especially the United States – to form a coherent political strategy in Afghanistan is largely due to the inability of the US military to recognize the nature of the conflict it has been fighting since 2002.¹¹

Reading US counterinsurgency doctrine, one is struck by the intellectual debt the US Army and Marine Corps owe to earlier theorists of small wars and insurgencies, and especially those who studied and wrote about the French and British colonial experiences. In those experiences, though, both the French and British were themselves the governments waging counterinsurgency warfare.

The United States, in Afghanistan, is not so much waging counterinsurgency warfare but what Steve Metz describes as “counterinsurgency support operations.”¹² The United States, in other words, is waging counterinsurgency warfare as a third party on behalf of a host nation government. This is the way in which the United States has traditionally waged counterinsurgency campaigns, actually, from Vietnam to Iraq. But as Steve Biddle noted in 2008, the US military’s counterinsurgency field manual assumes the interests of the United States align with those of the host nation government and thus never instructs military officers or diplomats in what to do when interests do not align.¹³ It seems not to have occurred to the US government that the host nation government – in this case, the government of Afghanistan – might behave in ways that are not in the interests of the intervening third party.

¹¹ I noted this failure and prescribed a political campaign in Afghanistan in a 2010 paper for the Center for a New American Security. See A. M. Exum, “Leverage: Designing a Political Campaign for Afghanistan,” Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, May 2010, <http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_Leverage_Exum_1.pdf>.

¹² See S. Metz, (with R. Millen), “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Reconceptualizing Threat and Response,” US Army Strategic Studies Institute, November 2004, <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub586.pdf>>, and S. Metz, “Counterinsurgency: Strategy and the Phoenix of American Capability,” February 28, 1995, <<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/cntrinsr.pdf>>.

¹³ S. Biddle, “Counterinsurgency Manual Review Symposium”, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 6, no. 2, June 2008.

The counterinsurgency field manual also offers no guidance for what to do when serious disagreements erupt between the third party counterinsurgent force and the host nation on matters of strategy and operations. In Afghanistan, president Hamid Karzai has repeatedly expressed his belief that NATO operations should be focused on disrupting insurgents entering Afghanistan from Pakistan and should not focus on the people of southern Afghanistan, where Karzai maintains his base of support. This fundamental difference of opinion regarding the proper strategy for fighting Afghanistan's insurgents has led to numerous disputes between Afghan and NATO officials.

Finally, US doctrine assumes insurgencies take root in a society due to the weakness of a government and not its behavior. So US operations are intended to strengthen the host nation government. But what if it is not the *capacity* of the host nation government but rather the *behavior* of the host nation government that is causing the insurgency? In this case, what the US doctrine prescribes the United States and its allies do would effectively exacerbate the problem rather than alleviate it.

The ineffectiveness and behavior of the Afghan government also skews the normal theory of how control and violence interact in insurgencies. In the normal model, violence occurs as control is contested between two sides in a binary conflict. As one side gains control, though, violence drops. This assumes, of course, that the sole driver of conflict is the presence of an insurgent. If, for example, other drivers of conflict are present, violence will not fall off and allow for a peaceful political process to move forward.

In Afghanistan, the behavior of the Afghan government in some cases is driving the conflict, meaning despite the best efforts of the NATO and Afghan security forces to remove the Taliban, unrest continues due to disputes over land, irrigation rights, corruption and abusive public officials. So even when the US and allied militaries are able, together with Afghan forces, to wrest control of an area away from the Taliban, violence continues as Afghans frustrated by the absence of accountable government and rule of law rebel against the civilian authorities.

In the summer of 2009, I helped draft a new military campaign design for the NATO forces in Afghanistan that subsequently informed a campaign plan.¹⁴ Had the United States and its allies sought to engage the political actors of Afghanistan as aggressively as they planned to engage the Taliban and other insurgent actors, they would have been wise to have drafted a political campaign plan concurrently, looking for ways in which the United States and its allies could use both consensual and coercive means to bend the behavior

¹⁴ A popular account of this effort can be found in Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

of Afghanistan's political actors in directions amenable to US and allied strategic goals.

“Hearts and minds”

The phrase “hearts and minds” only appears once in the US counterinsurgency field manual, and it is to explain what the phrase “hearts and minds” does not mean. In an appendix to the field manual – and not in the main body of text, which does not use the phrase – Australian scholar David Kilcullen contributed the following corrective:

“Hearts” means persuading people that their best interests are served by COIN [counterinsurgency] success. “Minds” means convincing them that the force can protect them and that resisting it is pointless. Note that neither concerns whether people like soldiers and Marines. Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts.¹⁵

In Afghanistan, as in Iraq before it, some US units have mistakenly interpreted “hearts and minds” to be something akin to what D. Kilcullen and the other authors of the field manual make explicit it is *not*. US and other NATO commanders have waged counterinsurgency in Afghanistan based on something that looks like “gratitude theory” – the idea that if the United States and its allies build enough schools, pave enough roads, and give out enough money, the Afghan people will be so thankful that they will lay down their arms and embrace the government of Afghanistan rather than the Taliban. This theory is not supported by any evidence suggesting it has ever been true.

Successful counterinsurgency, as D. Kilcullen notes, is more about cold-blooded economics than turning US and allied units into what author Bing West has derisively referred to as “a gigantic Peace Corps.”¹⁶

When it comes to aid and development, in fact, most of what the United States did in Iraq was demonstrated to have had no effect on reducing the level of violence affecting Iraqi society. Only the use of the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP funds) correlated with concurrent drops in violence and can thus be claimed

¹⁵ FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Department of the Army, 2006.

¹⁶ B. West has been among the most vehement critics of the US military's humanitarian activities in Afghanistan, going so far as to claim the US military has lost its “warrior ethos” due to counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. See B. West, *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan*, New York: Random House, 2011. See also A. M. Exum, “In Afghanistan With Our Warrior Elite,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2011.

to have had a stabilizing effect.¹⁷ In Afghanistan, meanwhile, aid and development funds have, if anything, exacerbated drivers of conflict.¹⁸ The enormous amount of money that has flooded into Afghanistan since 2001 has distorted incentives in the society, creating a dynamic in which neither side in the conflict had an interest in seeing the conflict end.¹⁹

In addition, it has taken a long time for US and allied military commanders to realize that no aid and development money is neutral in a conflict environment like Afghanistan. Every dollar or euro spent in a village in Afghanistan enriches one group of Afghans at the real or perceived expense of others.

Finally, just as the US counterinsurgency field manual was being published in 2006, a scholar at Yale University named Stathis Kalyvas published *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, an exhaustive study of civil wars in which the author concluded, among other things that the causal relationship between control and collaboration in civil wars is often misunderstood: contrary to the arguments of many, a faction rarely exerts control over a population through collaboration.²⁰ More often than not, collaboration is achieved through control: “The imposition of control allows the effective use of violence, thus deterring defection; opponents are identified and flee, are neutralized, or switch sides.”²¹

If one measures “loyalty” in a civil war, S. Kalyvas argues, based on one’s pre-war political preferences, one gets a poor picture of what is actually happening in the population in the midst of the conflict. A better way to measure loyalty within the population is to study the *behavior* of the population *during* the conflict.

US and allied militaries do this in Afghanistan. One metric employed by US and allied forces is the number of improvised explosive devices turned into NATO and Afghan forces by local Afghans. The more devices are turned in by local Afghans, the more confident those same Afghans feel in the ability of the NATO and Afghan forces to provide enduring security. It is no surprise to students of civil wars that in the areas in which the NATO and Afghan

¹⁷ E. Berman, J. N. Shapiro, and J. Felter, Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counterinsurgency in Iraq, “NBER Working Paper Series”, vol. 14606, December 2008.

¹⁸ See, among other papers, A. Wilder and S. Gordon, “Money Can’t Buy America Love,” *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2009.

¹⁹ This was a common complaint of Afghan and international aid workers and researchers in Afghanistan when I last visited in December. I then argued the United States should sharply reduce the amount of money it donated each year to Afghanistan. See A. M. Exum, “Five Ways to Win the War in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2010, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/12/15/5_ways_to_win_the_war_in_afghanistan>.

²⁰ S. N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

forces have established security and control, more devices are turned in. In areas still contested, fewer devices are turned in.

Populations in civil wars are simply struggling to survive – through hedging, passivity, or swinging back and forth between competing factions. The goal of the insurgent and counterinsurgent both is to get the population to commit to collaboration. Where each side has been successful in Afghanistan has not been where the United States and its allies have built the most or least schools but where each side has established control and convinced the population that collaboration is in its own best interests.

The goal of the United States or any other country waging counterinsurgency as a third party is not to win the conflict outright but merely to create space which host nation actors can then exploit to carry out a peaceful political process. In the words of Sir Rupert Smith:

We intervene in [...] a conflict in order to establish a condition in which the political objective can be achieved by other means and in other ways. We seek to create a conceptual space for diplomacy, economic incentives, political pressure and other measures to create a desired political outcome of stability, and if possible democracy.²²

What R. Smith recognizes is that the intervening force is at the mercy of the host nation government for its success. Although I disagree with the assessment of my colleague Tom Ricks that the “surge” in Iraq was a “tactical success but strategic failure,” T. Ricks is very much correct that the success of US counterinsurgency operations in Iraq in 2007 was dependent on the actions of the Iraqi government – which T. Ricks feels failed to end the conflict in that country.²³ I disagree. Although political violence continues to plague Iraq, the dramatic drop in ethno-sectarian violence in 2007 has held, and a peaceful political process proceeds along.

As in Iraq, political violence will likely continue to be a defining feature of Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. But that does not mean Afghanistan is doomed to a high-intensity civil war that prevents US and allied units from transitioning out of Afghanistan between July of this year and 2014. And it does not mean that Afghanistan is condemned to a relapse into the horror that was the 1990s. As Craig Charney and James Dobbins note:

In 2001 there were 1 million Afghan children in school — almost all boys. This year more than 8 million children will

²² R. Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, New York: Knopf, 2007, p. 272.

²³ See T. E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*, New York: Penguin Press, 2009, as well as T. Ricks's blog on *Foreign Policy*: <<http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/>>.

attend school — a third of them girls. Afghanistan's dismal literacy rate will triple over the next decade as these children complete their education.

Now, 80 percent of Afghans have access to basic health-care facilities, almost twice as many as in 2005. Infant mortality has dropped by a third, and adult longevity is rising.

Perhaps most remarkable, half of Afghan families now have telephones, thanks to the cellphone explosion since 2001. Almost no one had a phone a decade ago.²⁴

The US and allied counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan has come at a cost of almost 2 400 coalition lives at the time I write this, and tens of thousands of Afghan lives.²⁵ But it is too soon to tell whether or not the war will end up a success or failure on balance in terms of US and allied policy objectives. It is not too soon, though, to diagnose some of the ways in which the United States and its allies have made the war more difficult than it could have been.

²⁴ See "Change Afghans Can Believe In" by pollster Craig Charney and retired US Ambassador James Dobbins, *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2011.

²⁵ See data from iCasualties, <<http://icasualties.org/OEF/ByYear.aspx>>.