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Current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan: analytical framework

This short article is aimed at highlighting the crucial points of the ongoing political and military campaign of the USA in Afghanistan. Political strategy is viewed as the correlation between the main goal and accessible resources for its achievement. This text is not intended to determine the motivation of the first Bush Administration (2000-2004) to invade Afghanistan. Instead it rests upon one “hard fact” – the war was started. Our concern is how it was conducted – in military and political spheres – and what the outcome was.

Decision-making

The US Congress hearings on the war in Afghanistan took only a few hours. The whole procedure was crumpled leaving no space for a thorough discussion and analysis. But it is clear that broad consensus was achieved at least in two cases. First, there was broad agreement on the necessity of strengthening the American presence in this unstable part of the world. Too many powerful nuclear states were posing strategic threats to the oil and gas resources in Central Asia. Second, indeed it was a war “on terror”, supplying an emotional motivation for the invasion. We can assume that policymakers either decided that October 2001 was a convenient moment for establishing American presence in Central Asia or that this action was just and necessary. Both parties and the congressmen of different foreign policy attitudes (patriots and internationalists) decided to provide President Bush with their support and gave him an excellent mandate for war. For the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon there was not enough time to assess the resources and develop a proactive political strategy for actions in the country. The Administration and the Congress took advantage of this perfect opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism and solve important strategic problems.

Assessment of resources

How did the Bush Administration assess the amount of resources needed for conducting a military campaign in Afghanistan? The analysis of the Taliban and the Northern Alliance forces provided incomplete data on Afghani civilian attitudes toward radical Islamists. Consequently that led to overestimating of coalition efforts for nation-building and preserving security in the country. In the beginning the US military resource was seen as overwhelming, based on the experience in Yugoslavia in the late 1990s. The Pentagon proposed a quick invasion of Afghanistan relying upon US Armed Forces only. The NATO’s campaign in the Balkans provided them with hard experience of operational coordination, which, as they thought, would again pose problems for decision-making.

First stage: prompt victory

In late 2001 the Pentagon conducted a successful “prompt victory” campaign in Afghanistan. During the first stage of American presence in Afghanistan the enemy was compact and located on the other side of the front line – that was classic warfare aimed at ousting the Taliban to the
border with Pakistan. The Northern Alliance was provided with money and air support, which helped them to conduct a successful offensive against the Taliban. In November 2001 the US Armed Forces in coalition with the Northern Alliance took control of Kabul.

After the initial success in northern parts of the country Tajik military leaders decided to concentrate their efforts on controlling the occupied territories thus urging the American Command to launch military campaign in other parts of the country populated by the Pashtuns. A prompt military campaign was assisted by the agreements between the US and several Pashtun tribal leaders. An important role in those negotiations was played by ex-king of Afghanistan Mohammad Zakhir Shah. One of the Pashtun tribal leaders and famous immigrant – Khamid Karzai – was proposed by the USA for the Prime-minister of the interim government while the ex-king gave his consent to refrain from claims for power. After Karzai’s election he did not fulfill his promise on delivering governmental posts to different parties including Tajiks, but instead gave posts to his relatives and immigrants causing Tajik discontent.

At the end of 2001 the United States concentrated its efforts on border control with Afghanistan having rare secured by friendly tribes. But the desire for a quick and cheap war followed by a quick and cheap peace was unfounded.

**Second stage: pragmatic strategy correction**

This stage was marked by a growing understanding in the White House of the insufficiency of efforts and resources provided for the Afghan campaign. After one and a half years of their presence in the country the US military found themselves in a situation of opposing enemy on two front lines. The first one was at the border with Pakistan and the other was dispersed throughout the country in the form of local resistance. In March 2003 the war in Iraq began thus making the Afghanistan campaign difficult to handle by the US forces only. “Prompt victory” warfare then transformed into positional warfare, marked by broadening of coalition participation in the operation “Enduring Freedom” and preserving independent leadership of NATO and the US military in the country.

The summer of 2003 was marked by the transmission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command to the NATO. The US and NATO military contingents in Afghanistan at that time were roughly equal – 20,000 and 23,000 of servicemen respectively. On October 5, 2006 NATO officially took over the control of the US Armed Forces in Afghanistan. The ISAF leader – Great Britain – developed the so-called “New Operative Plan” for providing security in the country and increased its contingent to 5,600 people. Since 2003 many NATO participants showed growing resistance to calls from Washington to increase their presence in Afghanistan.

Currently NATO forces are dispersed throughout the country providing “rare assistance” for the US forces still located in the South and South-East in the so-called “tribal region” at the border with Pakistan. Analyzing the number of human casualties of the coalition we can assume that this region is still the most dangerous part of the country. In 2001-2006 the United States lost 335 servicemen, Great Britain – 40, Canada – 32, Spain – 19, Germany – 18, France – 9, Italy – 6.

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Stage three: warfare “leak” behind the front line

Five years of the military campaign in Afghanistan cost the US budget $88 billion. Another $26 billion was spent on security measures of the US international representations\(^4\). The third stage of the campaign is marked by dithering of the front line and transformation of the whole country into a guerilla battlefield. A telling confession was made in May 2007 by Chairman of the German Bundeswehr Union Bernhard Hertz: “We were wrong in assessing the effect of our efforts. The ISAF mission in Afghanistan is nearly failed”\(^5\).

Recent updates show that the Taliban has conducted several operations supported by the Tajik Northern Alliance. Similarly to the situation of the USSR invasion of Afghanistan the situation is beginning to deteriorate after 4-5 years of foreign military presence and the absence of any significant improvement of the Afghan economy. Probably this fact will convince the United States of the necessity to start negotiations with the Taliban – the idea that is now gaining support from the NATO partners in Europe\(^6\). It should be mentioned that the worst case scenario – the Armed Forces evacuation – is complicated by the dispersed location of the allied forces and the absence of sea ports.

Conclusions

It is clear now that the US betrayal of the ex-king Zakhir Shakh claims for power and the betting on immigrant Khamid Karzai was superficial and led to deterioration of relationships between the Kabul Government and powerful tribes. A political strategy of prompt conciliation would probably work if the USA relied upon some of the Afghan non-immigrant tribal leaders.

Currently NATO and the USA control only 3-5% of the Afghan territory (that is the territory near military bases) and only during the daytime\(^7\). In fact, the US strategy has failed: it did not succeed in suppressing local resistance and stimulated trans-border warfare which is threatening to grow in scale and destabilize the situation in Pakistan and Central Asia.

\(^5\) “Mitteldeutche zaitung”. Interview with the Chairman of the German Bundeswehr Union Bernhard Hertz. May 25, 2007.