

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 42
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2012*


Article 7

Fall 9-1-2012

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Christopher Tuck

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Recommended Citation

Christopher Tuck, "Afghanistan: Strategy and War Termination," *Parameters* 42, no. 3 (2012), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3056.

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Afghanistan: Strategy and War Termination

CHRISTOPHER TUCK

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Why has ending the war in Afghanistan proved to be so problematic? In theory, the decision to end a war should be relatively straightforward. One or more of the belligerents determine whether or not it is worth continuing the conflict and, as long as at least one of them decides that continuing to fight is not worth the investment, peace is offered and the conflict terminates. Clausewitz encapsulates this rational, commonsense approach to the ending of war when he asserts: “Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.”¹ By this logic, and in the context of Afghanistan, the strategic dilemma associated with how and when to end the war could have been avoided by engaging in a rational cost-benefit analysis: how much has the war cost and what is the value of the objectives we were pursuing? Once the former exceeded the latter, then the Coalition should have struck a deal with the Taliban and left Afghanistan. Instinctively, of course, we know that the decisions involved in ending a war cannot be as simple as this rational cost-benefit analysis. But, why is that so?

One powerful argument blamed the ambiguous protraction of the Afghanistan war on the West’s failure to comprehend and apply the principles of classical strategic theory. Since in principle it should be no more difficult to end a war than it is to start one, theoretically one need only adhere to the precepts of an effective strategy to bring about the rational and purposeful end to an armed conflict. The “bad strategy” argument views the difficulty associated with ending the war in Afghanistan as a failure to understand, or apply, the principles of effective strategy—such as a clear and attainable end state, adequate means or unity of effort—as a consequence of an emerging “strategic illiteracy.” The argument presented is the West has been “out-strategized” by its opponents.² This article argues a different thesis: that, notwithstanding some of the evident difficulties associated with the strategy adopted in Afghanistan, the war there is a reflection of a much longer standing phenomenon— it is easier to start conflicts than it is to end them.³ The fact that Afghanistan is one of many such examples of problematic, protracted conflicts suggests that, in addition to a range of specific difficulties associated with the peculiarities of the nation,

Dr. Christopher Tuck is a lecturer with the Department of Defence Studies, King’s College, London, based at the United Kingdom’s Joint Services Command Staff College (JSCSC). Prior to this, he was a lecturer at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, where he worked in the Department of Defence and International Affairs. His research interests include strategy, war termination, and counterinsurgency operations.

there may be a range of broader structural challenges that contribute to making the purposeful termination of a conflict an inherently problematic activity. Put another way, wars can be difficult to end even when conscious, rigorous effort is made to try and realize the best strategic practices.

This article addresses two themes: the recurrent structural problems associated with ending a war, and how they have contributed to undermining Coalition attempts to terminate the conflict in Afghanistan. In doing so this author will investigate the significance to war termination of four questions and the challenges associated with answering them: who will win; is there an achievable peace; peace at what cost; and, can the war be terminated? Taken together, the complexities surrounding the answers to these four questions suggest, whatever the quality of one's strategy-making, there are recurrent structural factors present to a greater or lesser extent in all armed conflicts that constrain the strategies that can be conceived and executed. If strategy is the art of the possible, then many of the problems we have experienced in Afghanistan result not from strategic illiteracy or a lack of understanding of what needs to be done, but rather from inescapable dilemmas and contradictions inherent in almost any attempt to end a conflict. If these problems are, in fact, inherent to the activity of ending all wars, then whatever lessons we think we might learn from our experiences in Afghanistan for the formulation of strategy, our challenges there will be open to repetition in the future.

Who Will Win?

One of the fundamental requirements for ending a war is that the belligerents' views on the outcome begin to converge: this might be simultaneous pessimism that the conflict has degenerated into a "mutually hurting stalemate"; or it may be a tacit recognition that one or other of the sides cannot be stopped from winning.⁴ In either case, the fundamental point is that while any of the key belligerents believe that it is possible to improve their position in the future by continuing, achieving peace is problematic. Even if a belligerent believes that its position is likely to deteriorate, in the short to medium term, a belief that circumstances may improve in the long term will encourage either side to continue the conflict. Often this convergence can occur rather quickly, such as occurred in the Six Day War of 1967. In the majority of cases, however, this convergence occurs only after a prolonged period—witness the longevity of many recent counterinsurgency campaigns. The answer to the question "who will win" amounts to an assessment of how one is faring and how the future looks. In other words, it is an evaluation of whether war is accomplishing a belligerent's objectives. The difficulties with answering this question explain why so many conflicts are prolonged; in essence, performance in a particular conflict is not self-evident.

In theory, one might expect armed conflict to result in a fairly rapid process of strategic learning by both sides. The intense competition associated with war can be expected to permit belligerents to quickly assess their opponent's objectives, costs associated with the war, and relative strength of either

side. Indeed, conflict may be the only forum in which information can be credibly communicated between the protagonists.⁵ It is this type of information that will permit both sides to assess their progress. In theory, a conflict should end when both sides agree on who has won or lost or who has the greatest potential for winning or losing.⁶ In reality, these judgments are extremely difficult. Calculations regarding progress in a war will depend, among other things, on the metrics used to measure success. Thus, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was able to argue in March 2011 that the Coalition had made undeniable progress in Afghanistan by citing two criteria: the expansion of areas defined as secure, and the demoralization of the Taliban.⁷ One difficulty, though, is finding appropriate metrics with which to measure progress in a conflict and then deciding how best to measure them—should one measure success through military objectives such as casualty rates or territory gained, or should the focus be on political, economic, or social benchmarks? Military objectives are easier to calculate but success through the use of military power needs to be evaluated as a political concept: success is the attainment of the political objectives toward which the use of military power is directed.⁸ War, however, is nonlinear; there is no reliable relationship between the scale of military activity and the level of political success.⁹

The problem of assessing progress in war is complicated by the fact that such calculations are future-focused; one needs to know not only how they are doing now but also how to extrapolate this knowledge into future trends.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the accuracy of predictions about the future cannot be verified until the act occurs.¹¹ Given the wide range of metrics and methodologies for assessing them it is entirely possible for belligerents to “talk past one another” on issues of current and future prospects. It is possible that both sides will believe they are winning or at least think their circumstances will improve if they persevere.¹²

In any case, since war is the realm of chance, even reasonable calculations can be upset by game-changing factors that invalidate existing assumptions on the prospects for success. For example, history has numerous examples of opponents who lost a conventional war, but sustained the fight by transforming to unconventional warfare as a means for changing the nature of the game, invalidating the more conventional metrics utilized to measure success.¹³ Finally, because of a lack of uncontested and objective facts related to the question of whether war is working, there is a tendency for those analyzing the conflict to substitute beliefs for facts, rendering the basis of a belligerent’s war termination calculations subject to the power of particular narratives or rhetorical constructions: “peace with honor,” for example, or “no negotiation with terrorists.”¹⁴ These rationalizations challenge the capacity of states to plan and execute a particular strategy; at the foundation of any effective strategy is a mechanism for feedback and assessment—a belligerent needs to be able to reflect on the execution of its ends, ways, and means relationship if it is to know whether it is succeeding and whether some or all of these elements require adjustment.

The preceding discussion is central to the challenges associated with Coalition strategy development in Afghanistan. The introduction to this article noted the challenges in Afghanistan are not primarily the result of strategic illiteracy but derive from the difficulty in formulating an effective strategy. For the Coalition, one of the crucial difficulties has been the fact that there has been no consensus on whether the war is working. In complex nation-building contexts, traditional concepts of military victory need to be replaced by what Professor Robert Mandel refers to as “strategic success,” a concept that encompasses “inter-related informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic elements.”¹⁵ The metrics used to measure success need to reflect all of these dimensions if they are to adequately capture the breadth of activities required for true success. In consequence, the range of potential metrics with which to measure success is vast, given that Coalition strategy in Afghanistan encompasses such tasks as protecting the population; creating effective governance; encouraging socio-economic development; and enhancing the Afghan security forces.¹⁶

These challenges are compounded by the questions of whether one focuses on the local, regional, or national level of governance; whether the focus is on key trends, and, if so, over what time period; what geographic area one may favor; and how data should be categorized.¹⁷ Varying decisions on these issues can produce radically different conclusions related to conditions in Afghanistan. For example, in relation to national versus local economic conditions, nationally, Afghan gross national product (GNP) tripled to \$12 billion in the period between 2002 and 2006. Locally, however, such figures are meaningless in measuring the experience of ordinary Afghans. In 2009, less than half the Afghan population had income of more than \$100 a month. Various polls indicate a growing perception that economic opportunities are worsening.¹⁸ What would appear to be a simple and valid metric becomes a morass.

In Afghanistan, there has been a wide range of difficulties impacting measures of success. There are, for example, process challenges related to the fact there are multiple organizations gathering data, including the US government, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization/International Security Assistance Force (NATO/ISAF), the United Nations (UN), and nongovernment organizations. Each agency or organization often focuses on different metrics or analyzes them in different ways, interpreting the data in a more optimistic or pessimistic manner.¹⁹ Often institutional and bureaucratic factors shape preferences related to certain factors. The political scientist Anthony King notes that, despite the rejection of such measures by senior British officers in Afghanistan, there is a recurrent tendency for British units to measure the success of their 6-month tours in relation to body counts or the number of major operations undertaken.²⁰ There are key gaps in available data—more contested regions, for example, are more problematic when attempting to gather data. In particular, there are difficulties obtaining data related to the Pakistan border areas, resulting in a serious difficulty for what is recognized as an Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPAK) conflict.²¹ Even where there is sufficient data, it can be difficult to

interpret. The author and political scientist Anthony Cordesman notes: “It is far easier to quantify what is easily measured than to quantify what is relevant.”²² Relevant data relating to factors such as the quality of activity, its longevity, or its effect on perceptions can be difficult to objectively discern.

Other challenges are created by the relationship between metrics. Framing a set of relevant metrics is difficult enough—framing a set of metrics that weigh, deconflict, integrate, and relate military, political, economic, social, political, and informational activities and objectives is a completely separate issue. Because they are interrelated, a minimum level of success in each dimension may be required for achieving overall success. It may be difficult, however, to achieve success simultaneously across the entire spectrum of the conflict. Indeed, the case may well be that success in one dimension appears mutually exclusive of success in another. For example, military objectives may be achieved at the expense of political objectives and vice versa.²³ This problem has been a recurrent feature of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in the past. In Afghanistan, the trade-offs are even more complex because of the breadth and variation in objectives. For example, pushing forward on goals for social transformation such as greater gender equality creates political difficulties from Afghan traditionalists; drastically increasing the size of the Afghan security forces shows progress in building the capacity of the Afghan government, but it can come at a cost locally where security forces are often perceived as partial, corrupt sources of insecurity.²⁴ Paradoxically, success in one dimension may require accepting a measure of failure in another if the worst aspects of these incompatibilities are to be avoided. If, as some have argued, the key challenge in Afghanistan is defining a realistic notion of success “somewhere between ideal and intolerable,”²⁵ how much failure is acceptable? In 2010, 59 percent of Afghans listed corruption as their key concern (even more than security). At the same time, however, the authors Chaudri and Farrell note that corruption is also the “bedrock of the Afghan government”; without the capacity to use such inducements, many local administrators would be unable to govern effectively.²⁶ So, what level of corruption represents success in reconciling the competing needs of the perceptions of ordinary Afghans and the practical needs of the Afghan government?

Cumulatively, the lack of objective metrics with which to judge the progress in Afghanistan has a number of effects on assessing the performance of the Coalition’s strategy. One effect has been the tendency to fill gaps in our knowledge with beliefs—for example, to assume the Taliban are always unpopular.²⁷ Another effect has been to encourage the use of analogies in assessments of strategy as a replacement for metrics, especially the use of experiences in Iraq to inform judgments on the effectiveness of particular strategies in Afghanistan.²⁸ Another impact has been to avoid for as long as possible the creation of symbolic metrics of failure, such as the withdrawal of forces. As evident in recent years, once the debate on the drawdown was initiated, Coalition leverage in Afghanistan declined.²⁹ The difficulty in defining objective metrics for success has encouraged the use of rhetorical metrics—metrics

that sound plausible but are divorced from any obvious means of measurement. For example, Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal argued to senators before assuming command in Afghanistan that new goals were needed and that, in consequence, “the measure of effectiveness will not be the number of enemy killed. It will be the number of Afghans shielded from violence.”³⁰

One of the clear difficulties faced by the Coalition in Afghanistan are the challenges associated with assessing which elements of our strategy are succeeding, which are failing, why, and whether continuation of the conflict might improve the Coalition’s chances for success. This problem has afflicted the academic debate related to the strategy in Afghanistan. Even when elements of the strategy embody similar assumptions (for example, that Coalition success is problematic; that a scaling back of obligations might be required; that the Afghanistan and Pakistan issues are inextricably linked; or that the Afghan government is part of the problem), the prescriptions differ. Initiatives could include negotiating with elements of the Taliban; jettisoning democratization as a goal and focusing on a workable Afghan government; or, instead, prioritizing multilateral solutions that include Iran and decentralization of the Afghan state.³¹ Ambiguities surrounding metrics have a direct and profound impact on policymakers. The challenges associated with measuring progress bedeviled President Obama’s Afghanistan strategy review, mainly because it proved difficult to assess which aspects of the existing strategy were performing, which were not, and what milestones might be set to measure any alternative.³²

This resulted in a view over the years (maybe the correct one) that it was possible to win in Afghanistan or, at least, not to lose badly if we remained there but adjusted elements of the strategy. The British author and politician Rory Stewart observes a recurring mantra, an “astonishing chanted liturgy,” regarding the views of consecutive ISAF commanders: “Each new general in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2011 suggested the situation he had inherited was dismal; implied that this was because his predecessor had the wrong resources or strategy; and asserted that he now had the resources, strategy, and leadership to deliver a decisive year.”³³ This recurring rhetorical construction is directly attributable to the lack of objective evidence related to whether the strategy was succeeding; it did provide, however, the basis for continuing the conflict.

Is There an Achievable Peace?

The fact that success and failure in war is often not self-evident is one dynamic that creates a propensity to continue the fighting; it was simply not clear if we were winning or losing, and this ambiguity left open the possibility for future success. There is a second critical issue that encapsulates another powerful set of factors that make war termination problematic. This question is whether there is any possibility to achieve peace? Even if belligerents conclude the conflict is not succeeding this does not necessarily mean it will result in a political compromise. The decision to terminate a conflict requires at least a chance that some viable solution does exist, even if no specific political solution is offered.³⁴ Viable political solutions require both sides have some objectives

that are compatible and realizable. Lacking these conditions, belligerents will continue to fight even when they believe doing so has ceased to provide an opportunity for victory.³⁵

The difficulty in visualizing an acceptable way out of war normally occurs in value-based conflicts. In conflict, the objectives pursued by belligerents can be divided into two types: interest based or value based. Interest-based conflicts tend to be disputes over tangibles (such as territory) and feature a basic level of common understanding between the belligerents about the nature of their dispute and the rules by which it can be resolved—the Cabinet Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would be an example. On the other hand, value-based conflicts are far more focused on intangible sources of dispute such as beliefs, or competing nationalisms. Value-based conflicts often involve goals that are highly ideological and intensely held; they are often needs-based or transcendental and driven by deeply held mental images of the opposition.³⁶ In value-based conflicts, the belligerent is more likely to place an importance on achieving objectives than on the costs incurred.³⁷ For this reason, value-based wars associated with identity or secession appear to be more difficult to resolve than issue-based conflicts that are often based on economic and political tangibles.³⁸

Afghanistan might appear to be an issue-based conflict; a war of choice: a nation-building intervention in another country focused on counterterrorism, establishing democracy, the rule of law, or a market economy; a conflict quite distinct from the zero-sum war of survival that normally drives value-based conflicts. There has, nevertheless, been a strong value-led dimension to the Coalition's commitment in Afghanistan, particularly from a US point of view. It is a conflict in which the costs of failure were portrayed as profoundly negative and the benefits of victory as extensive and enduring. The foundation for this was provided by the 9/11 attacks on the United States and served as a catalyst for the invasion of Afghanistan. It was the Global War on Terror that provided the broader context in which the cost-benefit calculations related to Afghanistan were then positioned. The Global War on Terror, and by extension the war in Afghanistan, was presented in essentialist terms by US policymakers: the enemies were relentless; the threat posed was a direct and dangerous one; the struggle against these forces was a vital one for the long-term security of the United States.³⁹ While President Bush's justification for the intervention in Afghanistan incorporated a number of objectives, such as democratization, building a free society, and establishing an ally in the war on terror, a core and recurring theme was the link between the war in Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror.⁴⁰

The difficulty in developing a successful strategy for Afghanistan has been the fact that, as long as the strategic objectives are posed in essentialist terms and victory has been portrayed as absolutely necessary, a range of alternative strategies examining any possible compromise has been excluded. Words alone do not make a conflict value-laden. But President Bush's characterization of the Afghan war in value-based terms resonated with the American public,

and, indeed, elsewhere, resulting in high levels of support for the conflict in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and other nations. In contrast to the war in Iraq, Western public opinion tended to view the initial intervention in Afghanistan favourably.⁴¹ In the United States, at least, there continued to be the belief that the original decision to invade Afghanistan was correct even if there was growing criticism as to how the campaign was conducted.⁴² Indeed, while President Obama attempted to reshape US foreign policy rhetoric, the net effect of his efforts was greater attention on Afghanistan rather than less. In trying to distance himself from President Bush's focus on Iraq, he argued that it was Afghanistan that was the real frontline in the struggle against terrorism.⁴³ While the Obama administration has dropped the term Global War on Terror, the administration continues to stress the threat to US vital interests posed by international terrorism and the centrality of Afghanistan (and its relationship with Pakistan) as an integral part of that threat.⁴⁴

Given the value-based dimension of the war in Afghanistan, it is not difficult to discern why there was always a tendency to persevere, even if the military results were ambiguous and the range of acceptable strategies constrained. The value-based aspect of a conflict cannot simply be turned off by the government. The objectives imputed to the struggle in Afghanistan are high; the sacrifices of citizens and soldiers are sanctified by the importance of those objectives; and the escalating costs are justified in terms of vital interests. Given the existential nature of the struggle, as it was initially presented, dissent could be delegitimized as unpatriotic, pro-al Qaeda, or antimilitary.

Movement in relation to relieving a portion of the value-based elements of the strategy has clearly been discernable. In March 2009, President Obama articulated more defined goals that focused on the defeat of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, although the associated objectives continued to span a complex array of nation-building activities in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ At the same time, debate emerged surrounding the value of adopting more limited objectives, such as a de facto partition of Afghanistan⁴⁶ or at least developing a narrower measure of success focused on "security and stability in local terms and not the conversion to Western values and an idealized concept of democracy."⁴⁷ A willingness to accept more limited objectives resulted in a serious debate over the validity of limited approaches, such as Vice President Joe Biden's "light footprint" idea, embodying special operation forces and remote attack.⁴⁸ In particular, the preconditions directed at negotiations with the Taliban, including the requirement they accept the Afghan constitution and dissolve all ties with al Qaeda, were dropped.⁴⁹ The Obama administration moved to a "fight, talk, and build" strategy in which negotiation is a crucial plank.⁵⁰ The notion that some of the Taliban constitute actors legitimate enough to negotiate with represents an important symbolic shift from value-based thinking.

Peace at What Cost?

Even assuming that a belligerent comes to believe that his position in a war is likely to deteriorate over the long term and an acceptable political

compromise is conceivable, there are obstacles that may encourage the continuation of the conflict. These obstacles are reflected in the third vital war termination question: peace at what cost? The costs referred to by this question refer to the giving up of wider objectives that are indirectly linked to the conflict in question. Put another way, winning the war may become only one (and sometimes not even the most critical) of the reasons to continue fighting. The truth is that war often supports policy goals associated with the political survival of governments or the prestige and credibility of a state. Often in these circumstances, fighting may become an end in itself.

Domestically, a number of political actors derive side benefits from a conflict, whether they be economic, political, or psychological—terminating a war may incur substantial costs.⁵¹ For political leaders survival in office is a basic objective.⁵² A leader's personal stake in the progress of a conflict may be quite high given the fact that success or failure in the conflict may have a direct impact on their prestige and survival.⁵³ Elites who might otherwise negotiate or accept a settlement will fear internal opposition from rivals or constituents who would view any negotiations as a sellout, act of treason, or an indication of incompetence and mismanagement of the conflict.⁵⁴ It is not unreasonable to expect the leadership might lose power as a result of opposition by those constituencies who expect current policies to be defended to the bitter end.⁵⁵ Such a settlement can be a powerful blow to the self-esteem for a particular leader, especially when the leader has based his image on the success of the state.⁵⁶ This is especially true of leaders closely associated with the decision to go to war. They are likely to fear any settlement that cannot be portrayed as victory. Leaders may be unwilling to countenance peace until all options have been tried and failed.⁵⁷ Even then, they may insist on continuing to fight through fear of punishment. Certain domestic contexts can be problematic in this respect; for example, when leaders are charismatic populists who rely on heroic achievement, a call for peace without victory can be career (and possibly life) threatening.⁵⁸ Cumulatively, the compromises required for peace can make selling a victory a difficult proposition. This explains why leadership tends to change when the time comes to formalize the peace.⁵⁹

For the reasons outlined, any attempt at compromise risked serious damage to the political fortunes of those associated with the Bush administration. President Bush's hawkish foreign policy was a political asset for much of his tenure. As the architect of the war, and having been involved for such an extended time in arguing for its necessity and the viability of long-term success, a major shift in his administration's policy was unlikely. The Bush administration returned again and again to the idea that, despite the rising costs, progress was being made and victory remained a possibility. In speeches, President Bush asserted that "we are winning the war on terror"⁶⁰; "we have seen the turning of the tide"⁶¹; "we are making progress"⁶²; and "We will not waiver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail."⁶³ It not surprising, then, that dramatic changes to the United States' war termination strategy only evolved once the Bush administration had been replaced.⁶⁴

Externally, states continue to fight because, even if they are not winning, ending a conflict might weaken political commitments given to various allies or undermine the deterrence directed at adversaries. War may, therefore, be useful in the context of a broader struggle; in other words, the leadership may feel the costs associated with the current conflict need to be weighed against its overall value. Perhaps the conflict serves as a source of information or in sending messages related to the belligerents' resolve. Governments in conflict are inclined to shape the perceptions of multiple audiences on issues related to resolve, willingness to compromise, or a willingness to sustain the costs of the conflict.⁶⁵ These issues can become especially pernicious because they have a circular logic—the longer a war continues, the more political capital is invested, and the more politically damaging any failure can be, so the greater the incentive to persevere in the hope that something positive might materialize—perseverance that often increases the costs associated with failure. Paradoxically, the prospect of negotiations may itself extend conflict; a good example is when belligerents continue to fight beyond the initial objectives or pre-established limits in the hope of creating a more secure postwar environment. Such a situation may develop when one side is trying to create bargaining chips for future negotiations.⁶⁶ In such cases, these new or expanded interests often decrease the sensitivity of the belligerent to the associated costs of continuing the fight.

These imperatives help explain the nature of the war in Afghanistan. Defeat avoidance, because of the belief that this would have damaging repercussions for US policy, has become one of the themes in arguing for perseverance. In July 2010, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Chairman of the Homeland Security committee, argued that defeat in Afghanistan would energize extremism “all around the world And it’ll be a tremendous cutdown in America’s prestige and credibility in the world.”⁶⁷ Such arguments related to credibility and prestige are powerful because they have an intuitive logic and are difficult to objectively disprove. The prestige argument is particularly powerful because, as author Stephen Biddle notes, a rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan would carry with it a set of risks that would be hard to predict or control. There is the possibility that a rapid withdrawal might be accompanied by “nightmarish imagery” deriving from the collapse of the existing Afghan government.⁶⁸

Can the War be Terminated?

Even assuming that the costs of peace were judged as acceptable, there is a final obstacle that must still be overcome if a conflict is to end. This obstacle is embodied in the question “can the war be terminated?” Even when the leaders of a nation or faction have decided that the conflict should be terminated and they are willing to accept the costs of peace, the question remains as to whether the peace can be accepted by political constituencies whose cooperation is required to effect the termination of the conflict. This issue is essentially a question of political autonomy—to what extent is the leadership of a belligerent beholden to other constituencies?

Sometimes the decision of a single leader is the same as that of the state as a whole. In 1991 Iraq capitulated because Saddam Hussein made that decision. In general, though, most leaders rely to a greater or lesser extent on a variety of political actors in order to exercise power. This may be the electorate, media, oligarchs, military, allies, or other political factions. Autonomy has internal and external dimensions. Internally, peace has to be sold to those groups that keep the leadership in power; for example, the governing party or political allies.⁶⁹ Domestic politics can be decisive in war termination calculations.⁷⁰ In fact, war termination often constitutes one of the most divisive and problematic policy changes for decisionmakers mainly due to the intense emotional, psychological, and political issues associated with conflict termination. It can result in an extreme polarization of views within a society, especially if the outcome of war is less favorable than what was expected, or some deeply held national values are challenged.⁷¹ Externally, when a war has been internationalized, peace has to be sold to other “war-oriented actors,” allies or sponsors for either side, or third parties whose agreement or acquiescence is required to produce an acceptable settlement.⁷² Power is relevant to this problem; a belligerent’s strategic leverage over war-oriented actors may be crucial if the objectives one wishes to achieve are at odds with those of other actors. Where one party lacks strategic leverage over its allies or other war-oriented actors it may face a challenge from an “intractable ally,” a situation where an ally obstructs any feasible settlement.⁷³

Taken in this context, the challenge for the Coalition is the structure of the conflict in Afghanistan, which has linkages between intra- and extra-Afghanistan conflict dynamics—Afghanistan constitutes only part of a larger regional conflict.⁷⁴ Peace in Afghanistan is conditional on the cooperation of its neighbors.⁷⁵ The recognition of this arrangement is reflected in the articulation of the AfPAK concept—a concept embodying inextricable linkages between the politics associated with the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and at the same time recognizing that resolving the former requires the resolution of issues in the latter and vice versa.⁷⁶ The autonomy problem is one the United States has only a limited capacity to influence when it comes to other “war-oriented actors.” This is most readily seen in America’s relationship with Pakistan, an ally but one with deep reservations regarding US policy in the region.⁷⁷ At the same time, the United States has become increasingly willing to criticize Pakistan’s ties to elements of the Taliban.⁷⁸ Pakistan’s relationship with the Taliban is ambiguous. While Taliban and Pakistan forces have been involved periodically in heavy fighting, Pakistan has been inclined to sustain links with the Taliban. This relationship is based on Pakistan’s view that Afghanistan is a major player in their conflict with India. From Pakistan’s perspective, the Karzai government is pro-Indian; from the Indian point of view the Taliban are seen as a potential Pakistan-sponsored catalyst for their conflict in Kashmir.⁷⁹ But the autonomy problem extends to other actors. There are a wide range of regional actors whose cooperation or at least acquiescence is required to construct a comprehensive strategy for a stable peace; these include Russia,

China, Turkey, India, and Iran. While many of these actors are not friends of the Taliban, they are suspicious of US intentions in the region. They are also suspicious of each other; Iran and Pakistan have a long history of conflict with regard to Afghanistan. All of these challenges have made it much more difficult for the United States to develop a comprehensive strategy.⁸⁰ Nor have allies proved as malleable as the United States might have hoped. For example, it has been clear since at least 2009 that the United States' NATO allies were focused on withdrawing their forces from Afghanistan, irrespective of whether the Americans approved or not.⁸¹

Internally, the key autonomy issue is linked to public opinion, although its effect on the entire scope of government policy has proven paradoxical. It might be assumed that, in small wars, public opinion plays a key role in bringing an end to the conflict once the costs begin to mount. In Afghanistan, however, the war was generally popular for a long period of time, creating incentives to continue the fight—the government had a high degree of autonomy to continue the conflict aided by public support of nearly 90 percent. Additionally, events in Afghanistan were largely removed from public scrutiny by the controversies surrounding the Iraq war and its aftermath.⁸² The administration wished to continue the fight, and there was little internal opposition to prevent them from doing so. Despite a shift in public opinion related to the war, President Obama's autonomy within the domestic parameters associated with Afghanistan questions was more limited than one might suppose. Part of the rationale for the intransigence in US policy related to Afghanistan was caused by the manner in which the administration was able to draw on the rhetoric associated with the war on terror. The administration was able to draw on preexisting ideas and policies articulated as far back as the Reagan presidency.⁸³ President Obama was successful in shifting the nature of the debate to the larger issues of the Afghan war and away from issues such as troop strength. This focus on the broader political questions associated with bringing an end to the war was possible because the president was able to reduce the Pentagon's role in the decisionmaking process and successfully replace some key personnel.⁸⁴

Domestic political conditions remained problematic, however, even after 2008. As late as September 2009, polling reflected mixed views on the Afghanistan conflict. A poll in September 2009 had 43 percent in favor of withdrawing forces from Afghanistan as soon as possible, but 50 percent thought US troops should remain until "the situation had stabilized." One of the more interesting facts was that 76 percent of those surveyed still saw the possibility of the Taliban regaining control of Afghanistan and they viewed that possibility as a major threat to the well-being of the United States.⁸⁵ Thus, even the Obama election victory did not represent a ringing mandate for withdrawal from Afghanistan. Another difficulty was the structure of the opposition to the war. There was a high degree of consensus among the elite liberal establishment related to the belief that Afghanistan was a just and potentially winnable war. This was especially true among academics and political commentators.⁸⁶ While 37 percent of Democrats wanted US forces to remain in Afghanistan,

support for staying the course was almost twice as strong (71 percent) among Republicans.⁸⁷ Given this situation, the prospect of terminating the Afghan war by means of significant concessions risked reinforcing the traditional perception of the weakness of the Democratic Party on the issue of defense, giving the Republicans a platform from which to attack the president. In addition, any precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan would generate friction from a substantial minority within the Democratic Party that supported the war, making cooperation on other major issues even more problematic for the president.⁸⁸ Indeed, as a response to the possibility of appearing weak, President Obama and the Democrats used Afghanistan as the means with which to balance their criticism of the Iraq war. This position permitted the president to enhance his attack on the Bush administration's Iraq policy with promises to "get tough" in Afghanistan.⁸⁹

At the root of President Obama's problems lay the fact that the rhetoric of President Bush resonated with the American people. The development of a strategy for Afghanistan, its motives, costs, and benefits established under the Bush administration was a powerful influence, not because it was based on incontestable fact but because it was socially acceptable. As the political scientist and author Richard Jackson notes, the war on terror had become "culturally and materially embedded within US politics and society."⁹⁰ In the short term, the scope for rhetorical innovation, of radical changes in the narrative, was limited.⁹¹ Afghanistan was viewed at its inception as a just war and any unpopularity stemmed not from a collapse in the perceived validity of the broader war on terror argument, but from a public perception that the war on the ground was being lost.⁹² Even if the war in Afghanistan had become unpopular, the conflict was still inextricably entwined with a broader threat narrative that continued to be effective. By the time President Obama took office, the war on terror debate, its language, logic, analogies, and metaphors had become normalized; he was trapped by the core assumptions prevalent among the American public.⁹³ For this reason, the president continued to assert that he would do whatever it takes to defeat the Taliban,⁹⁴ an approach accompanied by parallel moves—troop surges, the extension of drone operations, and an expansion of activities in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The challenges associated with operations in Afghanistan have not been primarily due to any strategic illiteracy; they are problems directly related to war termination. The problems experienced by the Coalition have been witnessed in any number of other wars, both recent and past. Examining the situation from an historical perspective, Afghanistan is far from unique. The war theorist and author John Vasquez notes that there is a tendency for wars to become sticky or stabilized; in other words, belligerents often continue to pursue war beyond the point at which, with hindsight, it might have ended.⁹⁵ Indeed, policy stability may be self-reinforcing; cumulatively, mutually reinforcing problems associated with the four questions analyzed in this article may lead to what

the authors Stanley and Sawyer term “negative duration dependence,” i.e., the longer wars continue, the harder they are to terminate.⁹⁶

Professor Chaim Kaufmann notes that in such circumstances only major shocks can alter policy, “Change only occurs when a particular experience is too salient to be ignored, too unambiguous to be discounted, and so squarely in conflict with the prior belief that it becomes cognitively cheaper to abandon the belief than to try to resolve or to tolerate the inconsistency.”⁹⁷ In Afghanistan, however, there has been no single shock of such a magnitude that it has revolutionized the war termination debate. Change has come incrementally. In a sense, the death of Osama bin Laden had a catalytic effect, allowing the United States to distinguish between its struggle against al Qaeda and its fight with the Taliban.⁹⁸ In this particular case, President Obama has been able to refocus metrics for success by redefining the metrics according to what has already been achieved. In this respect, following bin Laden’s death, the Obama administration has made a concerted effort to focus the public on its successes in disrupting al Qaeda.⁹⁹ But even in this context, bin Laden’s death merely reinforced an existing trend in the gradual narrative bifurcation of the Taliban and al Qaeda.

The primary difficulty in Afghanistan is the problem of answering the question “how are we doing?” The complexity of the policy goals has made it difficult to discern whether the Coalition has been succeeding or not, and which of our ends, ways, and means has been successful. On its own, this problem might have resulted in an early end to the war; or, at least, a reassessment of ends, as well as relooking the ways and means. The answers to the remaining key war termination questions (is there an achievable peace, peace at what cost, and can the war be terminated) have resulted in a strategy of protraction in the hope that something positive will turn up. The value-based aspects of the war in Afghanistan made it difficult to consider any legitimate outcome other than total victory. The political costs of compromise have grown for those who initiated the war in terms of the domestic political credibility of Coalition decisionmakers and the international prestige of the states involved. Even when willingness to compromise on specific goals has emerged, the United States government has demonstrated a lack of internal and external autonomy capable of constructing a viable alternative. Beating ourselves anew with the birch branches of Clausewitz will not produce miraculous solutions to these challenges. Indeed, these issues reinforce Colin Gray’s point that “strategic thinking is difficult; indeed, strategy is so difficult to do well that it is remarkable that it is ever practiced successfully.”¹⁰⁰

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