

The Shadow Course of Action or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love NSC-68

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Debate about national interests with respect to the U.S. military's role in Afghanistan is moot in 2009. Neither tactical nor strategic retreat is now an option. There are, however, fundamental deficiencies to acknowledge which cripple any proposed strategy: the way we look at the world still through a Cold War construct, our lack of grand strategy, and a misunderstanding of the regional systemic environment. More importantly, we lack an understanding of the very nature of this war and who, or more correctly, what our enemy truly is. This carries greater repercussions to the stability and security of our country than any conglomeration of foreign insurgents. For the past 8 years, the U.S. has been pursuing a course of action (COA) generally leaning towards counter-terrorism (CT) with varying levels of intensity. The latest assessment from Afghanistan calls for a new COA based on a comprehensive counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. The deployment of 45,000 more U.S. troops could be necessary. These extra troops and this new campaign model will not "win" our Afghan adventure in nation-building. It is neither a military problem, a threat that addresses vital national interests, nor one we can afford in the long term. A third, unmentioned COA is more feasible and suitable to U.S. interests; by understanding the environment, the threat, and the interests of regional actors, we can successfully mitigate the threat to manageable levels, secure surrounding interests, and ultimately begin to address larger geopolitical concerns which are the true systemic threats to national security. Rather than "CT+" or "COIN+," U.S. policy and subsequent strategy for the 21st century should be "Containment+."

Afghanistan, as well as larger national defense strategy, must immediately decouple itself from a prevalent and growing idea: that long-term stability and security of a foreign state, and in turn our own national security, can be achieved through military-led nation-building. As such, the conventional U.S. *military* effort in Central Asia should immediately cease. Never should we attempt to define our grand strategy through a DoD-led campaign plan. This, however, is exactly what has happened. This is not an argument for complete withdrawal but rather a military withdrawal to be complemented with a new understanding of national security with the ways and means to yield it. This decoupling can revive a strategy known to work; a strategy that will get us out of the armed nation-building business, better husband our shrinking resources and political will, and leave us ultimately more secure. A graceful exit strategy must replace the wasting efforts of the DoD with that of the U.S. interagency partnered with a new

group of nations and international organizations who *do* have a vested interest in enabling some sort of normalcy or at least containment in Afghanistan.

Our military's war colleges and strategy programs teach the fundamentals: that in order to defend or secure national interests, the continuation of policy might call the nation to arms to compel the enemy to do our will, and that the policy and strategy of that war must match; that one must first understand the nature of a war before one embarks on it; that operational success does not define strategic success; and, most importantly, that our military's sole mission is to fight and win our nation's wars. Truisms aside, the end result is the same: somehow having forgot these lessons, the U.S., through a combination of mismatched national policy and strategies, a failure to reassess the strategic environment, and a failure to recognize and fund the proper state apparatuses in order to synchronize a responsible plan to secure our interests, has lost what makes us secure, what makes the world stable, and what our military can, or should, do about it.

While the deliberation over COIN tactics and enemy networks and leadership have been paramount to current policy discussions, a refocus on sound strategy is urgently important. Not a new window dressing or rearranging of deck chairs; a new understanding of the limitations of current plans and the strategic framework wherein they nest; a reassessment of what are vital national interests which demand different types of implementations of national power. The time for picking at the low-hanging fruit, both militarily and diplomatically, is over.

Fundamental Flaws in the Approach

The attacks of 9/11 demanded a response and our nation's military planned and delivered what became the limited CT campaign of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF). Much of that campaign was successful. Many of the top-tier personnel of both al-Qaeda and Taliban organizations responsible for planning and subsequently harboring the criminals have been eliminated; their networks are continually being degraded. Those not killed or captured remain topmost in our intelligence services' priority. This tactical level requirement satisfies the portion of the Commander-in-Chief's intent to bring those responsible to justice. The other portion of the intent, the strategic *enduring* intent, to "influence the behavior of our adversaries" is where current plans and strategies begin to be the problem and not the solution.

Al-Qaeda forced a wholesale reevaluation of our strategic posture. Assuming that the "post-9/11" world required a new military strategy, a new focus on new and capable threats, and a new definition and response to "new" hybrid forms of warfare, we have actually put on strategic blinders. While we twitter away time and energy deciding what funding lines will allow us to generate a defense against "hybrid" war, we spread our forces and train them for a mission which cannot create true national security. In effect, while we dutifully respond to the strategy our enemy sets and empower his own strategic communications across the globe, we have failed to see the true nature of the obvious and open threat. The strategic threat is not

jihad, violent extremism, or ideology. We have continued to attack the wrong threat with the wrong tools, craft tactics and operations thinking they would suffice for grand strategy, and blindly follow a mindset which might have worked in a different time and for a different threat, but not now.

The efforts of the military and interagency's vast array of campaign planners, war fighters both in the general purpose and special operations forces, and their enablers have been singularly focused on tracking and eliminating violent extremist organizations and their supporters. Meanwhile, our nation continues to approach larger geopolitics as usual. This cannot continue. We can no longer be blind to the fact that our actions do not coincide with our words and we cannot assume that the populations of the world do not realize this. Oftentimes, these same policies and strategies (and national addiction to foreign oil) foment the very threats we must deal with in the future. More fallacious yet is the blood and treasure which has been expended while chasing the tail of a global bogeyman; our national-level response framework is more concerned about physical, often psychosomatic, symptoms than causes. We do not see that our responses are short-term, superficial band-aids at best; and band-aids that the country can no longer afford.

The fall of the Iron Curtain then the strategic shock of 9/11 both required new lenses through which to look at the world and it's driving, interrelated forces. We have, however, picked up the wrong set of glasses and continue to see challenges as discrete, linear threats. The "new normal" is not a new system of irregular threats, but rather that the environment which spawned al-Qaeda is not a forced bipolar construct anymore. There is no artificial lid on the pressure cooker of the disenfranchised populations whose corrupt and ineffective governments breed contempt. Threats which manifest themselves through terrorist acts are a result of this normal fabric of the human ecosystem. This ecosystem is one where nation-states as well as non-state actors are on equal footing to compete for the allegiance, support, and affirmations of legitimacy of the population itself.

This is not specific to the fight between the reformed Taliban and the Kabul government or even al-Qaeda and the disenfranchised (and non-existent) "Umma;" it is the rule rather than the exception everywhere one looks, from the Uyghurs in Hunan province to the Bolivarianists in South America; the "new normal" is one of populations feeling the perceived social and economic injustices of local poor governance and now being free to align themselves with groups to force change. In a world free of the encumbrances of the Cold War's bipolar weights, the "new" normal has risen to the surface and demands satisfaction. This is the irregular world we now face and non-state actors have risen to that challenge more efficiently than state governments ever could.

This, however, is not the threat OEF or its operating plans were designed to deal with. These plans, while largely effective in the response immediately after 9/11, provides for both a direct and indirect method of eliminating *adversaries*: to disrupt known violent extremist threats

and enable our partner nations to combat these threats themselves. It is a DoD-designed and led plan to eliminate threats *after they have already decided* to aim a Kalashnikov, bury an IED, or strap on a suicide vest, though they cannot systemically consider why that choice was made.

A new way to look at the world and its challenges is required to effectively address the true issues and vital interests at hand. This new approach cannot be singularly focused on counter-terrorism or the ideology of the attacker. It requires a true strategy of national influence, full-spectrum deterrence, security, development, and diplomacy that only the whole of government along with true international partners with similar interests can together provide. We have arrived at the culminating point of current plans and operations; their further use and the mindset that allows them to continue have already begun to diminish any beneficial returns.

What Happens When Limited War Is Allowed To Escalate to the Extremes, or, Is Afghanistan a Vital National Interest?

Black-turbaned atavists in Afghanistan are not enemies of the United States. As such, they do not warrant the shedding of a single drop of blood from a U.S. service member. The enemy we have, the one who has declared war on us, should be and always remain the focus of our efforts. It is only to our operational and strategic detriment that we continue to lump them together and furthermore assume they even share the same goals. By lumping them together, we confuse vital for other national interests.

When national interests supplant vital ones and the military is sent out to attain and promote them, the result is the current incarnation of OEF. This was allowed to happen for one reason alone: a tactical CT approach has become the cornerstone of not only the military's global response to 9/11, but the focus of the entire framework of U.S. strategy. This construct and the mindset which maintains it has become the primary obstacle to achieving the national objectives which our highest strategies (the National Security Strategy and the National Military Strategy) aim for; the goal and the methodology to reach it are becoming mutually exclusive.

However, the strategy when we find al-Qaeda's threat anywhere else across the globe, be it in Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan, or Newark, N.J., is addressed tactically, maybe through law enforcement, and distinct from larger geopolitical contexts. Why, then, does only Afghanistan warrant a new, total, military-led effort and a national strategy to redesign their culture, system of government, and market-base through a U.S. model? Because current CT operations and mindsets have ventured beyond their utility; because we have allowed them to define policy and strategy in order to promote non-vital national interests.

What *is* a vital national interest and what is *existential* to our way of life, is the credibility and influence we must maintain as a world power to pursue other policies of vital interest. We must achieve a positive result in Afghanistan and not be seen to run from adopted partners in Kabul in a fit of capriciousness. To do this, we must understand two lessons: 1) to learn the

critical differences regarding national interests so we again do not allow ourselves to think we can force non-vital socio-economic change in another country, and 2) realize that the largely unilateral efforts of the U.S. military are not the solution to a non-military problem.

Learning from Afghanistan does not require us to recall experiences in Vietnam as a crutch; we do not even need to look outside of Afghanistan itself. Just ask the British or the Soviets. Field Marshall Frederick Roberts, hero of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, eventually said: "The less they see of us, the less they'll dislike us." In the end, both he and the British parliament realized after three consecutive wars for the same strategic purpose, Afghanistan was not as important as they had supposed all along. Similarly, we have enabled the Taliban of the 21st century to take the place of al-Qaeda just as the 19th century Victorian British allowed Dost Mohammed Khan and his followers to take the place of the Imperial Russians as the present danger. This logic skewed the way both we and the British before us viewed and dealt with the territory and peoples of Afghanistan. In the face of a larger threat, both we and our British predecessors fought the wrong enemy; we focus on the Afghans when the true threat supposedly lies with al-Qaeda. The British fought the Afghans when their true threat supposedly lied far beyond the Oxus River in Russia. The Afghan populace is merely the unfortunate low-hanging target in a larger context of supposed threats. The argument that Afghan xenophobes provide an existential threat is indefensible yet *our* Afghan war and the British Afghan wars before it seem to be built on the same premise and are beginning to yield the same result. As Mark Twain said, history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

Something about Afghanistan must breed strategic overstretch. As British 'Forward Policy' of the 19th century delivered three unwinnable wars, the 20th century Soviet policy of defensive expansionism delivered their Afghan debacle, and 21st century U.S policy similarly seems to think defense of the homeland begins at the Hindu Kush. The British realized in their successive efforts that punitive strikes and raids when necessary into Afghanistan were far more effective in the long run than trying to maintain even a semi-permanent presence and installing British-friendly (malleable) governments. The Soviets never did make that reassessment and doomed their empire to failure. We have another chance.

To 'win' in Afghanistan, we must address what *are* our interests while allowing ourselves to divest from trying to pull an unwilling Afghanistan by the collar into the 21st century. This will have a far more positive effect on our global credibility and influence than if we were to continue our current strategy of endless CT or COIN campaigns and the haphazard manner in which we violate sovereignties to accomplish them.

Americans CAN Do Grand Strategy

There will always be tactical, direct actions necessary against imminent threats. This is what the DoD excels in. The DoD, however, cannot alone rebuild the influence and credibility which the U.S. was previously able to maintain and wield. This strategy cannot be formulated in

the Pentagon or defense-funded think-tanks; it must come from a pragmatic geopolitical approach in the White House and supported through relevant action in Foggy Bottom. There has been an inextricable dissolution of national credibility and influence primarily due to the manner and framework by which we assumed would defend our overall security. Credibility in the eyes of the populations and influence in the eyes of their governments can only be attained if U.S. foreign policies can point out the moral high ground and adhere to it.

As a nation, we are well versed in promoting U.S. values and principles, but when our words are judged against actions, the populations of the world find them failing. To fix this, two points are in order. First, we cannot coddle and support authoritarian or unjust regimes which create the very future threats that would do us harm simply to get what we need from their soil (which *is* a vital national interest). But the causal factor is not the U.S. Government; it is the poor governance which the host nations generate. That we allow it to occur and oftentimes subsidize it only serves to make us the first target the insurgent must attack (in his mind, to break the support relationship) before he can focus on his real enemy – the host-nation government. Second, the foreign policy doctrine of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” is as caustic to the current and future operating environment as “the ends justify the means.” Citizens from Saudi Arabia, to Nigeria, to China recognize this. We should certainly understand this after applying it against the Soviets and inadvertently creating the very monster of al-Qaeda we fight today.

If we as a nation are to honestly promote a theory of true national security, it will be to rebuild our credible influence lost through the unilateral years when the ends were perceived to justify the means. We can do this by serving the sitting governments with ‘warning orders’ that we will no longer stand as a buffer between them on their thrones and in their secured compounds from their disenfranchised populaces. It is these disenfranchised populaces who are continually on the losing end of foreign direct investment, globalization, economic alliances, foreign internal defense, and see their host government’s relationship with the U.S. as the primary cause of their strife. To a large extent, they are correct. These disenfranchised populations are what al-Qaeda needs to pursue their own political agenda. The Taliban, Hezbollah, ETA, the MILF, all, at some level, satisfy a valid need of the population the host nation government cannot or decides not to provide. As this relationship matures, so it becomes a threat to us.

One of this country’s fundamental strengths is our legitimacy through self determination. The unintended consequences of our recent actions inhibit this; we prevent national “natural selection” from running its evolutionary course in countries we supply economic, military, and government-support aid to. This is not a call for Isolationism but rather an approach taking into account our vital interests and successfully differentiating them from other national interests. If we realize that the best use of the military is not armed nation-building, not a global promoter and enforcer of Jeffersonian democracy, and not the primary enabler of non-vital interests, we can make that distinction. Furthermore, one of today’s most critical arguments then becomes moot: the QDR and the bifurcation to a COIN force and a conventional force. If there is a return

to understanding vital vs. other national interests, more sobriety might be found in how to build and deploy U.S. forces.

But first we must realize current strategy and the framework through which it was developed continually lowers our international prestige, perceived commitment, and useable influence. We fall prey to delusions of grandeur when saying that current plans are revised to conduct 'by-with-through' operations pointing to an indirect, 'softer' manner at addressing threats. In reality, 'by-with-through' operations in concert with malleable partner governments are still only designed to kill or capture hostile targets, not address the underlying environment from where they are continually produced. Small wars, long wars, or any amount of Provincial Reconstruction Teams or advisory brigades cannot accomplish this.

In NSC-68, Paul Nitze, through the writings of George Kennan in 'The Long Telegram,' used themes and constructs which transcend the context of the Cold War for which it was written. They are as applicable today and in line with this strategy as they were in 1950. To paraphrase Shoeless Joe in the movie *Field of Dreams*, Nitze described a "Build it and they will come" strategy; America maintains its most credible influence and intrinsic power through the "strength and appeal of its idea, and feels no compulsion sooner or later to bring all societies into conformity with it." What we are doing in Afghanistan is directly contrary to that advice. Furthermore, it says that only through leading the "moral and material strength of the free world" and "building a successfully functioning political and economic system" can we defeat the nature of the threat. In other words, by ensuring our own house is in order and living up to the ideals which first made us a great nation, can we "truly frustrate" al-Qaeda's designs. *Only then* can we convince authoritarian regimes and the disenfranchised groups who become insurgents of the "falsity of [their] assumptions." Finally, one of the severest threats our nation faces is the "lessening of U.S. prestige and influence through...lack of skill and imagination in the conduct of its foreign policy..." What we are suffering now is exactly that lessening of prestige and influence leading to failed foreign policies. While we chase the tail of Soviet ghosts in the form of al-Qaeda, we fail to see true threats. As we attribute national security to filling in 'white spaces' of ungoverned areas, as we enable al-Qaeda to wield power over us as if they are the monolithic Soviets of our time, and as we cling to a tactical counter-terror based plan as the crux of our national military strategy, we fail to bring new thinking and imagination to our foreign policy. As we continue to support the failed, corrupt, and illegitimate regimes around the world, we will continue to birth the threats of our future.

Comparing NSC-68 to what passes for "strategy" today is enlightening. Our national strategy itself, the way in which we look at *threats*, their underlying causes and enabling factors, and our own complicity in their creation and fomentation, is the true nature of the problem. That we misjudge vital for other national interests certainly does not help. A "disrupt and respond" framework, while appropriate to a specific threat in a short-termed focus, cannot truly address the challenges posed by the modern environment. Understanding the systemic nature of the regional environment, focusing on the true threats as they apply to vital or national interests,

and leveraging the incipient partnerships already in place in the region and who already share common interests will provide us a way ahead.

Recommendations and Conclusion

A new strategy and a new notion of national security are both critical yet missing from ongoing DoD overseas contingency operations. The current series of plans under the CT “strategy,” although having served a necessary and effective role in the timeframe immediately after 9/11, has outlived its useful lifespan. The forthcoming National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy must not be centered on CT or COIN and the tactical, non-existential threats we face from terrorists. If they again are, we only empower al-Qaeda’s own strategic communications and let them dictate our larger strategies. By justifying a \$515 billion defense budget to fight global jihad, we play right into their hands. Our future strategy must be centered on regaining credible influence and restoring legitimacy.

Desired strategic outcomes cannot be achieved through DoD-led, direct *or* indirect CT activities. The terrorists are not the problem and the DoD can plan kill/capture operations of al-Qaeda cell leaders ad infinitum without achieving any strategic goals. If we cannot evolve from the current mindset of seeing the world as various pockets of threats created from an espousment of violent ideologies, the unending game of global ‘whack-a-mole’ will continue. Ideology is not the problem and it does not need to be fought as were the Communists during the Cold War. We can target hostile groups or focus on their ideology but these are more symptomatic of the true threats themselves. This approach requires a whole-of-government vehicle focusing on other aspects of national power; national power to be applied with the consent of Congress and the American taxpayer, not an expansive and undefined “Authorization for Use of Military Force” still provided for under Senate Joint Resolution.

The National Security Council is that vehicle. It must be empowered and enabled to holistically synchronize *and direct* whole-of-government efforts to deal with the “new normal” in accordance with vital interests. Current CT or COIN plans must be relegated from the cornerstone of U.S. strategy to merely a supporting, limited sideshow. We must see we are not a nation at war but one at peace; we make this peace more difficult than it needs to be because we only focus and fund against the physical enemies who would do us harm, not the systemic challenges which create them. The credibility and influence we have lost in pursuit of a global bogeyman must be restored. This can only be accomplished if one sees the need for a strategic reevaluation based on a new understanding of the systemic environment. The larger question then remains: seeing that current strategy and the failure to differentiate between vital and other national interests are the crux of the problem, what is to be done?

To fully and effectively rebuild national credibility and influence, the U.S. Government must address longer-term challenges and not simply tactical threats. We must also be honest; honest with ourselves, our expectations, and our abilities. As Clausewitz definitively states, the

“aim of war should be what its very concept implies – to defeat the enemy.” But just as he continues to expound on the significance of the definition of ‘defeat,’ so must we. At the heart of the matter, the rebranded ‘Global War on Terror’ is not a military problem in want of a military solution. Our nation’s strategy treats terrorism as a unified global issue; find them and either unilaterally or through the assistance of local governments, kill or capture them. How can we then ‘defeat’ it?

If the U.S. government can widen the aperture of the definition of ‘threats,’ the utility of Clausewitz can still be applied. Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Lashkar e Taiba, MEND, or even Qutbist Wahhabis in Egypt or Saudi Arabia are not the focal threats. As mentioned earlier, the focus in this ‘war’ is not an enemy “army,” an ideology, nor terrorist network; the focus should be the population and factors of the environment and local governance which forever keep them grasping upwards from the lower rungs of Maslow’s hierarchy. In environments that are not permissive to U.S., international, or non-governmental aid and assistance within their borders (i.e. Afghanistan, Somalia, the North West Frontier Province, etc), a more pragmatic approach should be taken. These quasi-states/failed-states can be successfully contained through the defined mechanisms of international policing, security, sanctioning, and other diplomatic “sticks.” The carrots come into play through the writings of NSC-68 to eventually draw those populations out of their failure as they are ready. But we cannot or should not attempt to do that for them. Our security will be maintained by continuing to pursue vital or high-value targets with our military instruments designed for such limited, decisive, and short-duration missions. Beyond that, Afghanistan *can* solve Afghanistan’s problems....if it so chooses. If and when it does, the international community can be there to assist.

The strategy to secure our interests and rebuild our credible influence outlined here accounts for several critical and true points: First, we did not create the failed state of Afghanistan and, in turn, it is not ours to fix. Second, al-Qaeda (and certainly not the Taliban) is not the modern Soviets of our time to wage a worldwide counter-revolution against; we will not directly win a ‘battle of ideologies’ with Islamic fundamentalists and by attempting to do so, we have enabled them to become the strategic threats we face today. Third, nation-building does not equate to U.S. national security; unless we speak of the duration, cost, and political will it took to rebuild the socio-economic systems of Germany and Japan after World War II, we should not “penny-packet” our way towards an *Auchinleckesque* failure in Afghanistan. As opposed to 1945, our nation does not have that will, endless supply of resources, or need to “fix” Afghanistan. Finally, a strategy of containment along with an effective whole of government “3D construct” of Diplomacy-Development-Defense will allow the U.S. to maintain both physical and economic security and the promotion of our core national values. This is a new lens through which to look at the world. The current series of plans cannot fully adapt to meet this challenge; they remain fully centered on counter-terror operations that only begin to scratch the surface of the real problem and unintentionally make matters worse by conducting the very operations we perceive to make us safer.

These changes need not be executed from within Afghanistan and from the bottom up by rebuilding their society. Through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the United Nations, Interpol, and direct partnering with both India *and Iran*, this strategy will work from the top down using the correct instruments of national power. Furthermore, we should not have to drag NATO to fight our war in Afghanistan simply to find an easy excuse to maintain their relevance. Working with relevant alliances, countries, and organizations towards shared interests will require difficult thinking outside the box and put our diplomats and strategists outside their present comfort zones, but it is necessary.

We can learn from our mistakes in Afghanistan yet recover gracefully. To recover, we must see the “war” for what it is and what it is not. We must adhere to our own *raison d'état* and not blindly follow a credibility and influence-destroying campaign plan. Only then can we successfully use the international structures already in place to order the system in and around Afghanistan and show the world we have done our job. This is the only acceptable strategy: a re-awakening of a containment policy partnered with rebuilding our national credibility to (diplomatically and economically) influence world affairs and synchronizing a true whole-of-government approach to international issues. Only this can once again draw the world to the “shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere” and make future generations of Americans safe.

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