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# U.S. Response to Terrorism: A Strategic Analysis of the Afghanistan Campaign

By Valentina Taddeo

*"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not to fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."*

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 1963

## Introduction

When the United States declared war against terror on October 7, 2001, they labelled as "terrorism" a universal enemy against whom all the civilized nations would have fought. The principal objective of the U.S. intervention was al-Qaida, and its bases in Afghanistan, protected by the Taliban regime, were the target of U.S. air strikes. Since then, the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan has adopted different strategies, from a counter-terrorist approach focused on the enemy to a counterinsurgency approach focused on the population.<sup>1</sup> However, after eight years of confrontation and seven years after the collapse of the Taliban regime, al-Qaida is far from being defeated. The Taliban still have a strong influence, terrorism is a daily threat, and Afghanistan is neither stable nor secure. During these eight years, the U.S. strategy has tried to adapt itself to a changing threat scenario. The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan has made some progress but it has failed to understand the problems that the intervention itself has generated and to counter the threat with a proper strategy.

This article examines the U.S. response to global terrorism and its campaign in Afghanistan from 2001 to today. The aim of this article is first to understand the fallacies, missteps, and misunderstandings of the U.S. approach in Afghanistan. Second, the analysis evaluates the lessons learnt and some possible strategies for achieving long-term stability and security in Afghanistan. In particular, the analysis focuses on the different strategies adopted by the United States and their achievements. Despite a first victory over the Taliban regime, the initial approach was focused on the enemy only and it lacked long-term planning, paving the way to an insur-

gent movement against the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Then, in 2003 the U.S. strategy started to focus on the population, government institutions, and local support. This shift involved a significant change in tactics and operations and achieved positive results from 2003 to 2005. However, since 2005 the situation has deteriorated, casualties have increased and both the Taliban and al-Qaida have gathered strength. Despite the injection of new troops, the U.S. and coalition forces have not found a way to stabilize the country yet. The defeat of al-Qaida and the stability of Afghanistan are, therefore, far from being achieved.

## Global Terrorism: Al-Qaida

The first problem when dealing with terrorism is how to best define what it is and how it is perceived. Many scholars describe terrorism as the "sustained use, or threat of use, of violence by a small group for political purposes such as inspiring fear, drawing widespread attention to a political grievance and/or provoking a draconian or unsustainable response."<sup>2</sup> According to this definition, the 9/11 attacks against the United States can be labelled as acts of terrorism. However, the attacks on the United States revealed a different facet of terrorism. It is no longer a small group acting to attract attention, but an international network of affiliated extremist groups whose principal object is to inflict mass casualties.<sup>3</sup> Al-Qaida seeks to overthrow the current world order, characterised by the primacy of the United States. Therefore, al-Qaida is best understood as an "extremely large-scale, transnational globalised insurgency rather than as a traditional terrorism problem."<sup>4</sup> The difference between terrorist groups and insurgents lies in their different objectives: while the first uses violence to draw attention, the second aims at "overthrowing the political order within a given territory, using a combination of subversion, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and propaganda."<sup>5</sup>

In his speech soon after 9/11, the U.S. President George W. Bush condemned al-Qaida for the attacks and called upon the Taliban to deliver all the leaders of al-Qaida hidden in Afghanistan, as this was the movement's main base. The United States then declared War on Terror arguing that terrorism was a common enemy to all civilized nations.<sup>6</sup> This claim was intended to raise support from all the Western countries and to launch a global crusade against all terrorist movements linked to al-Qaida. It was also aimed at obtaining the United Nation's approval and support for the intervention. However, a war against global terrorism that "will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated"<sup>7</sup> is unlikely to be achieved, since there will always be a certain degree of terrorism in the world. Take for example crime, which can be

decreased by strong policing but not completely eliminated; so also terrorism can be subdued but not completely defeated.<sup>8</sup> The first aim of the War on Terror was, thus, far from being reached even with an effective military campaign. Nevertheless, strikes against al-Qaida training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime began on October 7, 2001 as the Taliban refused to collaborate with the United States.<sup>9</sup>

## U.S. Strategy Against Terrorism: The Case of Afghanistan

The new terrorist threat against the United States called for new tactics and strategies to achieve key objectives including: "the disruption of the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and the attack to the military capability of the Taliban regime."<sup>10</sup> An effective and comprehensive counterterrorist strategy to counter al-Qaida and the Taliban regime was built by combining military action, law enforcement, the freezing of financial assets and repeated drives for international cooperation.<sup>11</sup> The use of tactical aircraft armed with new generation weapons gave the United States a consistent and immediate advantage in the battlefield.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the U.S. military made its commitment visible through the deployment of Special Operation Forces to gain support from the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.<sup>13</sup> The Taliban resistance collapsed almost immediately; the initial campaign lasted less than two months and, thanks to the coalition with the Northern Alliance, compelled Taliban and al-Qaida members to shelter in the mountains in the eastern regions of Afghanistan.

The strategy applied by the U.S. military, a network-centric combined with an enemy-centric approach, resulted in a short-term victory only. The network-centric warfare was focused on attacking a handful of key targets such as communication lines or Taliban's training bases, but this was not enough to secure long-lasting success.<sup>14</sup> The enemy-centric warfare drew attention to the enemy ignoring the population, the process of institution-building, infrastructures, and services for the local communities.<sup>15</sup> Until 2003, the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan lacked a population-centric warfare aimed at eradicating the social support for al-Qaida and the Taliban, building a strong and reliable government, and guaranteeing security to the population. In fact, despite the fact that the Northern Alliance had established a new government in Kabul in June 2002, the majority of the population, especially the Pashtuns, felt excluded from the executive.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, the Taliban canvassed support from the Pashtuns and began to move back into Afghanistan. With the institution of an elected government, the Bush administration shifted its attention to

Iraq, confident in the stabilizing role that the new Afghan National Army (ANA) would have played in maintaining stability and order. However, this shift proved to be fatal as "the war in Iraq drew attention and resources before the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan had been properly developed."<sup>17</sup>

The lack of long-term planning had significant consequences on the resurgence of the Taliban. By May 2003, it had become evident that a resurgence of activity against the government and the U.S.-led coalition was operating not only in the eastern but also in the southern regions of Afghanistan. The U.S. strategy lacked a counterinsurgency approach and until 2003 did not do anything to counter the resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaida. Instead of a nation-building approach, the United States focused only on gaining tactical victories on the ground, resorting to raids and deploying a small number of troops. The result was a separation of the coalition forces from the Afghan people. The major mistake was the misunderstanding of the causes of local insurgencies. They were motivated not by ideology but by the lack of security and economic stability, tribal rivalries, coercion, and the perception of a corrupt government unable to exercise authority and to provide security.<sup>18</sup>

A change in the U.S. strategy finally began to take shape in late 2003 as a consequence of the increased resurgence of Taliban attacks on the U.S. military. The new approach was based on counterinsurgency operations to erode the Taliban's popular support and growing strength, which became the driving tactic in Afghanistan. The core principle animating the new strategy was the identification of the Afghan people as the center of gravity in the counterinsurgency.<sup>19</sup> The main objective was maintaining popular support in order to prevent local insurgencies and coalitions forming with the Taliban and al-Qaida. Therefore, the number of U.S. ground forces was increased, as were the number of experts on Afghan culture and tradition. These experts and military forces were primarily engaged in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, in building relations with the local population, and in strengthening confidence in the Afghan Government.

The population-centered counterinsurgency approach also impacted military operations. The number of air strikes based on technical intelligence decreased to avoid local unrest. The casualties among the population caused by air strikes were, in fact, one of the principal reasons for local protests against U.S. forces. Conversely, the increased engagement of troops on the ground helped engender support for the objectives of coali-

tion forces. This shift in strategy resulted in a more stable operating environment and increased local support both for the Afghan Government and the coalition forces.

## Local Support Wanes: A Renewed Emphasis on NATO

However, all the achievements made up through 2005 began to fade away in a few months. As Lieutenant General David Barno highlighted, "Since 2006 the Taliban and al-Qaida gathered strength, changed tactics, and increased their capabilities and attacks especially across the border in Pakistan."<sup>20</sup> This step backwards was a reflection of the U.S. announcement to withdraw 2500 combat troops and shift responsibility for military operations to NATO. This decision was perceived as the first signal of a U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan. Moreover, the Karzai Government and the ANA were not ready to provide security in many villages of the country. The United States' willingness to withdraw troops, together with the unpopularity of the government, created a vacuum that was quickly filled by insurgent groups. The Taliban's aim was to eliminate the government's contact with the population, thereby discrediting the capacity of the ANA to provide order and security. By forcing the United States to take charge of local security, the Taliban portrayed the United States as a belligerent occupying force that sought to control and manipulate the Afghan Government.

The Taliban have since gained control of many villages in the Southern and Eastern provinces, but their presence is also strong in cities like Kandahar and Ghazni. In these places, coalition forces are operating without the support of the local population and are facing many difficulties in maintaining stability and order. The situation is worsening in the regions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where al-Qaida and the Taliban continue to maintain a strong presence. This region is barely controlled by the Pakistani Government, and U.S. forces are running into many difficulties along the border. As a result, despite some efforts the stability and security of the borders are deteriorating.<sup>21</sup>

## U.S. Policy in Afghanistan Under President Obama

Under the Obama Presidency, the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has undergone another change. In February 2009, President Obama launched a new approach based on what seem to be attainable goals that will hopefully be matched with adequate resources.<sup>22</sup> The end game is to:

"disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida and its extremist allies,"<sup>23</sup> although the U.S. commitment is primarily focused on protecting the Afghans, not to kill the Taliban among them. The new counterinsurgency strategy is aimed at pursuing judicial reforms, building good governance and a reliable police, and protecting civilians through a patrolling contingent in villages and towns to stop insurgents from intimidating and recruiting locals. General Stanley McChrystal, the new U.S. and NATO forces' Commander in Afghanistan, has called for a limited use of air strikes and for troops to be stationed and integrated with the locals. The nation-building approach and the commitment of more troops on the ground are aimed at countering the insurgency, while military operations are to be conducted in the border regions with Pakistan to defeat al-Qaida and the Taliban. As President Obama said, "This is not a war of choice, this is a war of necessity."<sup>24</sup>

President Obama proposed sending more troops not only to prevent al-Qaida from re-establishing safe havens in Afghanistan, but also to prevent the country from collapsing and becoming the terrain of tribal fights.<sup>25</sup> On December 2, 2009, President Obama called for an infusion of 30,000 troops within six months. Many of the troops will operate as trainers for the Afghan forces as a means to preserve stability and security once the U.S. troops leave. This increase in troops reflects a willingness to end a period of losses and stalemate, and to gradually shift the responsibility for the security of the country to the Afghan military. Ultimately, however, more U.S. troops in Afghanistan will be not enough to reverse the collapse of security in the country.

In the more recent "Afghanistan Conference" in London, the NATO coalition and the Afghan Government proposed a "reintegration strategy," aimed at reintegrating the Taliban and the insurgents into the government and civil society through offers of money. However, questions arise about whether the insurgents will be motivated to reintegrate. For the time being, every proposal and negotiation has thus far been rejected by the Taliban, whose only condition is the withdrawal of the foreign troops.<sup>26</sup> Whether this strategy will prove effective is a matter of time: "counterinsurgency campaigns usually take many years, cost a fortune in blood and treasure, and end in failure."<sup>27</sup>

## Lessons Learned

After eight years in Afghanistan, the U.S. troops and their allies have achieved neither stability nor security. Despite the prompt defeat of the Taliban regime in 2001, the local population felt alienated from the new

Afghan Government, which was perceived as corrupt and weak. Strategies applied by U.S. troops did not always yield positive results. In particular, the lack of a prompt and effective counterinsurgency campaign, the extensive use of air strikes, and the lack of contact with the local population nullified most military efforts and achievements. Many lessons can be learnt from the U.S. approach to Afghanistan and many changes should be implemented to attain the initial objectives.

First, in order to prevent al-Qaida from re-establishing safe havens in Afghanistan, it is necessary to stabilize the country. Stability, however, is closely linked to a strong, reliable, and efficient government, a crucial element that Afghanistan still lacks. Moreover, the ANA is still not able to provide security by itself and it, therefore, relies on foreign militaries for maintaining order and delivering services to the population. However, the longer U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan, the more concerned the local population will likely remain, since the U.S. presence is perceived as a source of instability and as a threat to civilians.

The lack of understanding of Afghan culture, traditions, and institutions negatively influenced the attempts to build a strong government. "A strong central government has not been part of the history of Afghanistan"<sup>28</sup> since tribes and clans were run by the tribal elders and local institutions. A possible alternative could be the establishment of a decisional body with representatives elected by villages and ethnic groups. The chance to be represented fairly by trusted members of different minorities could reassure local populations and make them feel more secure and willing to collaborate with the government. The Taliban were supported by the locals not because of ideology, but because they were strong enough to exert a coercive power that the official government lacked. Therefore, reforms in the government to counter corruption and incompetence are necessary to build a valid alternative to the Taliban regime.

Second, the U.S. intervention should be primarily focused on maintaining the achievements through a commitment to the local population. Until now, the extensive use of air strikes and drones to carry out offensive attacks has resulted in heavy civilian casualties, raising suspicion and anger among many Afghans.<sup>29</sup> The air strikes result in zero casualties among U.S. troops, but they are almost useless in the process of pacifying the country since they do not guarantee security on the ground once the strikes end. As Gen. McChrystal has said, "under the new strategy the air strikes should be used only if NATO troops were in danger of being overwhelmed." The problem lies in establishing when troops would be considered in such danger.



A possible alternative could be training the ANA together with U.S. troops in order to build confidence and support from the local military. The Afghan army and police should become strong enough and trusted by Afghans in order to replace foreign troops and enable their withdrawal in the near future. Moreover, while it is undeniable that several civilian casualties were caused by air strikes, it is also true that many resulted from suicide attacks perpetrated by the terrorists. Raising awareness among the population of the threat posed by these suicide bombers could shift the resentment from U.S. troops and coalition forces to the terrorist cells. The commitment of more troops in villages and cities should not result in isolation of troops from the local population.

The military should be trained on how to communicate effectively with locals and how to be part of the community and, therefore, be accepted as a friendly presence. This strategy, however, requires time, adequate forces, and resources. The infusion of 30,000 troops recently announced by President Obama seems to be aimed mainly at training Afghan forces in order to facilitate a U.S. withdrawal in the near future. However, this declaration could be counterproductive as it might undermine local support for U.S. forces, perceived as transitory and not reliable in the future of Afghanistan.

Third, the lack of collaboration between the United States and countries bordering Afghanistan has hampered U.S. efforts to stabilize the country. The unwillingness of the Bush Administration to reevaluate its strategic priorities in the region after the overthrow of the Taliban caused stagnation in negotiations for a comprehensive multilateral approach to Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> The prospects for stability largely depend on collaboration with Pakistan over the Taliban's bases along the border with Afghanistan, along with other players in the region. The geography of Afghanistan makes the country the center of gravity of the region. Unless the United States actively involves other regional players in the stabilization of Afghanistan, no long-term objectives will be achieved. A possible solution could be reopening the dialogue with Iran and reconsidering the role of Pakistan for a peace settlement with the Taliban. Al-Qaida and the Taliban receive arms, and recruit and train people especially from Pakistan. A firmer U.S. stance toward Pakistan is needed to stop support to terrorists, which may produce more results than even a military campaign.

## Conclusion

The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has adopted different approaches since 2001: From counterterrorism to counterinsurgency; from enemy-centric

to population-centric warfare; and, finally, from extensive use of air strikes to a commitment of more troops on the ground. Despite some initial achievements, the situation in Afghanistan is still complicated and far from being solved. The lack of a trusted government, opposition of the local population to foreign troops, regional interests and lack of collaboration among neighbouring countries almost nullified the military results in overthrowing the Taliban and marginalizing al-Qaida. The change in the U.S. administration called for a new strategy, focused on nation-building, popular support, and long-term stability. It reflects a shift toward a counterinsurgency approach that could achieve more positive results than a conventional military campaign. However, it might take many years to stabilize and secure Afghanistan in order to prevent al-Qaida and the Taliban from gaining ground. As Larry Goodson from the U.S. Army War College has said, "Time is running out in Afghanistan."<sup>31</sup>

For American policy in Afghanistan to have any hope of success, it is necessary to learn from three lessons of the war in Afghanistan. First, U.S. strategy should be aimed at creating security and stability through a trusted government and a reliable national army. Second, U.S. strategy should be focused on maintaining positive results through a robust commitment to the local population. Finally, it should involve regional players in a more proactive and constructive dialogue to create a stable and secure regional environment that could lead to the security of Afghanistan.

## About the Author

Valentina Taddeo earned her Master of Strategic Affairs, Graduate Studies in Strategy and Defence (GSSD), at the Australian National University, Canberra where she received a T.B. Miller Scholarship. Valentina's studies have focused on the Asia-Pacific Region, transnational security challenges, and defence and security policies. Valentina also holds a Master's degree in Foreign Languages, Cultures and International Communication from the University of Milan, Italy. Her thesis' argument was Japan's energy policy and its geopolitical implications. In addition to working as a consultant for the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) in Milan, Ms. Taddeo has also interned for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Multilateral Office for the Asia-Pacific Region. Valentina Taddeo may be reached for comment at: [valentina.taddeo@hotmail.it](mailto:valentina.taddeo@hotmail.it).

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