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**THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS**

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper is a strategic analysis of the war in Afghanistan. It begins by articulating the United States' strategic objectives for the war, the approaches taken to achieve those objectives, and the resources employed in each approach. In other words, it identifies the ends, ways, and means of the United States' strategy for the war in Afghanistan. After describing what the United States is trying to accomplish in Afghanistan and how it is pursuing those objectives, the paper provides an assessment of the strategy. The assessment focuses primarily on whether or not the United States has achieved its strategic objectives. It describes, in broad terms, the United States' strategic successes and failures in Afghanistan. The analysis concludes by describing a number of implications for the future, to include what U.S. successes and failures may mean for the broader, global war on terrorism.



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## PREFACE

The war in Afghanistan has been underway for more than a year. In all that time, however, very little seems to have been written about the United States' strategy for the war. In contrast, a great deal of analysis exists on operational and tactical aspects of the war. Military and civilian analysts, reporters, and pundits have offered perspectives on the contributions of special operations forces, the use of air power, conventional ground combat operations, the use of opposition forces as a proxy, and virtually every other aspect of operations in Afghanistan. While much of that analysis is useful, I found very little in the recent literature to explain the United States' strategy for the war in Afghanistan.

My purpose in writing this paper was to make sense of the United States' strategy for the war. I wanted to understand the objectives, the approaches taken to achieve those objectives, and the resources used in each approach. In other words, I wanted to understand the ends, ways, and means of the United States' strategy for the war in Afghanistan.





## THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

The formulation of national strategy is critically important. In essence, strategy defines how a nation will direct and coordinate the elements of national power to achieve national goals. In times of conflict, strategy determines the nation's approach to that conflict and defines the ends, ways, and means used to prosecute war. Ultimately, success or failure in war is determined by national strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the United States found itself at war with al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden's international terrorist organization. In response to the terrorist attacks, and because al Qaeda utilized it as a base for training and operations, the Bush Administration formulated a national strategy for war in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> As with any conflict, an effective national strategy for war is essential for success. What, then, is the U.S. strategy for the war in Afghanistan? And, more importantly, is it an effective national strategy that will enable the United States to achieve its goals?

What follows is a strategic analysis of the war in Afghanistan. My intent, first and foremost, is to articulate the strategic objectives for the war, the approaches taken to achieve those objectives, and the resources employed in each approach. In other words, my primary purpose is to identify the ends, ways, and means of the United States' strategy for the war in Afghanistan. After describing what the United States is trying to accomplish in Afghanistan and how it is pursuing those objectives, my intent is to provide an assessment of the U.S. strategy. My assessment focuses primarily on whether or not the United States has achieved its strategic objectives. I conclude the analysis by describing a number of implications for the future.

### **NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN**

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Bush Administration established a national policy that would guide the United States' response to the attacks. In essence, the policy of the Bush Administration was to find those responsible for the terrorist attacks and bring them to justice.<sup>3</sup> In his first televised speech following the attacks, President Bush expanded the policy to include not only the terrorist perpetrators, but also nations that harbor them.<sup>4</sup> In essence, the Bush Administration's policy made elimination of terrorist sanctuaries and support systems as important as elimination of the terrorists themselves. In doing so, the United States would disable the terrorist organization in Afghanistan, eliminate the sanctuary provided by the Taliban, and prevent the terrorists from mounting further attacks against the United States.

The Bush Administration elected to focus initial efforts on fighting the al Qaeda terrorist network in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> The al Qaeda network, a global organization with a global reach, included terrorist cells in nations around the world. However, the al Qaeda network thrived in Afghanistan where it enjoyed the support of Taliban authorities. In addition, many key leaders of the al Qaeda network lived in Afghanistan and had directed attacks against the United States from locations inside that country. Although other terrorist organizations also represented a threat to the United States, the Bush Administration decided to pursue those organizations in a broader war on terrorism. For the President and his national security advisors, the first order of business was the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan. As a result, in the days and weeks immediately following the events of September 11, the Bush Administration focused on formulating a strategy for war against al Qaeda and its Taliban supporters in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

## THE ENDS

The Bush Administration developed six strategic objectives for operations in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden and many of his key leaders relocated to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996.<sup>7</sup> They soon established headquarters and training camps in the country and began orchestrating operations from there. Following the attacks on September 11, the Bush Administration wanted military action that would inflict real pain on the terrorists and seriously damage the al Qaeda network.<sup>8</sup> To do so, the primary objective became to disrupt, and if possible destroy, the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan.

The United States also sought to convince, and if necessary compel, the Taliban to cease their support for terrorist organizations; the al Qaeda network in particular. In referring to the September 11 terrorist attacks, President Bush declared, "We will not only deal with those who dare attack America, we will deal with those who harbor them and feed them and house them."<sup>9</sup> Statements from Administration officials made it clear that they saw little distinction between al Qaeda, who had planned and executed the terrorist attacks, and the Taliban, who supported the terrorists' activities.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the objective of the Bush Administration was to deny al Qaeda the sanctuary and support it enjoyed in Afghanistan.

In addition, the Bush Administration sought to demonstrate that the United States was not at war with the Afghan people or the Islamic religion. The Administration sought to carefully define the conflict in terms of terrorism, and to narrow the scope of the conflict to al Qaeda and its Taliban supporters. In doing so, the Administration hoped to avoid any implication that the United States was embarked on a crusade against Islam or engaged in a fight against innocent Afghans.<sup>11</sup>

The Bush Administration also sought to demonstrate U.S. resolve in this war on terrorism. President Bush, and many of his top national security advisors, believed the Clinton Administration's response to bin Laden and international terrorism had been, "so weak as to be provocative; a virtual invitation to hit the United States again."<sup>12</sup> The objective of the Bush Administration was to convey, as forcefully as possible, the nation's commitment to fighting terrorism. In addition, many in the Bush Administration felt that a perceived aversion to casualties also emboldened terrorists to attack the United States or U.S. interests around the world.<sup>13</sup> To overcome that perception, the Administration intended to demonstrate total commitment to the fight, to include a willingness to accept casualties to win the war on terrorism.

The strategy also included an objective to build international support for the war in Afghanistan. The Bush Administration believed it would need broad international support for the war.<sup>14</sup> Support from a wide array of coalition partners, to include Afghanistan's regional neighbors in particular, would provide the United States with the basing, access, and over-flight rights necessary to prosecute a military campaign in Afghanistan. Support from other nations would provide an added degree of legitimacy and could lessen the burden of war on the United States. Accordingly, the Administration sought to involve as many nations as possible in the war in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

The final objective of the Bush Administration was to stabilize Afghanistan following the fighting there. The intent was to avoid creating a vacuum in a notoriously turbulent, unstable nation.<sup>16</sup> When the fighting was over, the Administration wanted to establish conditions that would foster security and stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, the Administration wanted to eliminate the conditions that promoted terrorism and support for terrorism. The Administration's overall intent was to prevent the re-emergence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary for terrorist organizations.

## THE WAYS

The United States adopted a variety of approaches to accomplish its strategic objectives in Afghanistan. The United States sought, first and foremost, to disrupt or destroy the al Qaeda network. To do so, the United States mounted an effort to kill or capture key terrorist leaders. President Bush wanted to, "take out bin Laden and his top lieutenants."<sup>17</sup> In addition, the United States sought to kill or capture al Qaeda fighters and destroy the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan, such as training camps, safe houses, and meeting places for al Qaeda operatives.<sup>18</sup> The United States also sought to freeze the financial assets of the terror network

to deny them the resources they needed to finance their activities.<sup>19</sup> To facilitate the conduct of operations against al Qaeda, the United States sought to gain intelligence on the terrorist network. Intelligence gleaned from searches and interrogations would provide important leads in the fight against al Qaeda. As the war unfolded, some in the Bush Administration feared that key terrorist leaders would flee Afghanistan and escape to Iran, Pakistan, or Somalia, where they would be much harder to catch. As a result, the United States also sought to prevent the escape of al Qaeda terrorists from Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup>

The United States also adopted a variety of approaches to convince or compel the Taliban to cease supporting al Qaeda. Initially, the United States issued demands for the Taliban to hand over terrorist leaders and cease their support for the al Qaeda organization. President Bush issued an ultimatum demanding that the Taliban turn over bin Laden and his associates or suffer the consequences of a U.S. attack.<sup>21</sup> The immediate goal of the Administration was not to destroy the Taliban, but it was willing to do so if the Taliban failed to cooperate.<sup>22</sup>

When it became evident the Taliban could not be convinced to support U.S. objectives, the effort shifted toward destruction of the Taliban regime. Accordingly, the U.S. strategy included efforts to kill or capture key Taliban leaders. Foremost among them was Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban.<sup>23</sup> The United States also sought to physically destroy the hard core, committed Taliban fighters that kept the regime in power. Ultimately, the United States decided upon regime change and sought to replace the Taliban regime with one more supportive of U.S. objectives in the war on terrorism.<sup>24</sup>

The Bush Administration found a variety of ways to demonstrate support for the Afghan people. The United States conducted humanitarian assistance operations to provide the Afghan people with food, clothing, medical assistance, and other basic necessities. In addition, the United States assisted private organizations in their efforts to aid the Afghans. Military forces also endeavored to minimize collateral damage.<sup>25</sup> Coalition forces hoped to avoid alienating the Afghan populace by limiting civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the United States initiated an extensive de-mining program to eliminate the threat that mines posed to the Afghan people, as well as to coalition forces.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the United States attempted to address the plight of women and children in Afghanistan by improving their living conditions, educational opportunities, and status in society.

As a critical component of this support, the United States also attempted to convey a sense of religious sensibility to avoid the impression that it was engaged in a fight against Islam. Specifically, the United States avoided damaging mosques, openly debated whether or not to

conduct military operations during the highly sensitive Ramadan holiday,<sup>28</sup> limited military operations during the Muslim Sabbath, and even changed the name of the military operation to avoid alienating Muslims.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the United States sought to gain support from Muslim states for the war in Afghanistan.

The Bush Administration also adopted several approaches to demonstrate resolve in the war on terrorism. First and foremost, the Administration was intent on executing a meaningful military response to the terrorist attacks. The view of many in the Bush Administration was that recent terrorist attacks had not elicited a meaningful U.S. response. In 1998, al Qaeda bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killed more than 200 people. At that time, the Clinton Administration responded by directing the U.S. military to launch a cruise missile attack against terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and a factory in Sudan. While making a political statement, the attacks had little actual impact on Osama bin Laden and his terrorist organization.<sup>30</sup> To many in the Bush Administration, that operation, and its failure to serve as a deterrent, was indicative of the U.S. response to terrorist attacks during the eight years of the Clinton Administration. The Bush Administration, by contrast, was eager to conduct a more meaningful military response; one that would clearly demonstrate U.S. resolve in the war against al Qaeda and its Taliban supporters, and deter future attacks.<sup>31</sup>

The Bush Administration frequently stressed its commitment to winning the war in Afghanistan. In an address to a joint session of Congress and the American people, President Bush promised the United States would use all of its resources in fighting the war in Afghanistan. He also vowed that, “we will be patient, we will be focused, and we will be steadfast in our determination.”<sup>32</sup> The Bush Administration intended for the themes expressed in public statements to demonstrate resolve in winning the war in Afghanistan. In part, these public statements were also intended to dispel the notion that the United States was averse to taking risks and unwilling to accept casualties.

The U.S. government was also intent on gaining and maintaining international support for the war in Afghanistan. To do so, the United States worked with existing international organizations to build support for the war. Moreover, the United States required access, basing, and over-flight rights to conduct military operations in Afghanistan. Support from a variety of nations around the globe was essential in that regard. Of significance, the United States sought cooperation from certain nations in southern and central Asia to support U.S. efforts. Pakistan and Uzbekistan were two of the most important of these regional states. The United States also sought to build a coalition to actually conduct military operations in Afghanistan. Coalition

nations participated in a variety of ways, from providing ships, airplanes, and ground combat forces to supporting humanitarian assistance operations.

Most importantly, the United States adopted several, initial, post-conflict approaches to prevent the re-emergence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary for terrorist organizations. To do so, the United States worked to establish security and stability throughout the war torn nation. After the fall of the Taliban, this included establishment of a new Afghan government, creation of an Afghan police force and development of an Afghan national army. The United States also began initiatives to support economic development in Afghanistan. In addition, the United States initiated an extensive effort to rid Afghanistan of the vast quantities of weapons and munitions strewn throughout the country. This approach was primarily intended to deny remnant al Qaeda and Taliban fighters continued access to these weapons and munitions. Finally, the United States sought to address the repressive social and religious conditions enforced for years by the ruling Taliban. In sum, the Bush Administration initiated a peacekeeping and nation building effort in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

## THE MEANS

To implement the various approaches in the U.S. strategy, the United States employed all elements of national power. As President Bush explained, "This war will be fought on many fronts, including the intelligence side, the financial side, the diplomatic side, as well as the military side."<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the United States employed every traditional national power tool, diplomatic, economic, informational, and military, to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban, support the Afghan people, demonstrate resolve, build international support, and prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan.

Diplomatically, the United States worked to obtain support for operations against al Qaeda from international organizations and states. In this effort, the United States used diplomatic means to garner support from the United Nations and approval of a Security Council resolution. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 condemned all support for terrorism and called on member states to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. Moreover, it called on member nations to prevent the financing of terrorist acts and freeze the assets of terrorists and terrorist organizations. The United States also received unprecedented support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. On September 12, 2001, NATO invoked Article 5, demonstrating that member nations viewed the terrorist attack against the United States as an attack against all member nations.

Initially, the United States attempted to apply diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to cooperate in the fight against terrorism.<sup>34</sup> This effort was intended to exert pressure on the Taliban to cooperate with the United States and break off support for al Qaeda. Eventually, the United States employed diplomatic leverage to isolate the Taliban and overthrow the regime. Following the defeat of the Taliban, the United States used diplomatic means to gain international support for a new government in Afghanistan.

The United States engaged a variety of international and private organizations to lend their support to the Afghan population. International organizations like the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the Red Crescent, continue to provide support to the Afghan people. A variety of private relief organizations also remain involved in Afghanistan. The United States used diplomatic means to gain the cooperation of many of these organizations.

The United States relied primarily on diplomatic means to build and maintain international support. The Bush Administration mounted a concerted diplomatic effort to gain support from international organizations, such as the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and others. The United States was especially intent on gaining support for U.S. efforts from Muslim organizations. The Administration also mounted a concerted diplomatic effort to gain the support of regional nations. Without regional support, the United States could not conduct military operations in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Support from Pakistan and Uzbekistan was especially important in isolating and attacking al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup> The United States worked with other regional nations, such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, as well as Pakistan and Uzbekistan, to close their borders and prevent al Qaeda or Taliban fighters from escaping Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

To prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, the United States again employed diplomatic power. The United States mounted a diplomatic effort to assist in the establishment of a new government in Afghanistan. The Department of State was instrumental in setting conditions for the Loya Jirga, an ancient Afghan process in which local representatives are selected and assembled to resolve broad political issues. Once the Loya Jirga process was complete, the State department worked with international organizations to assist the Afghans in establishing a new national government. In addition, the State Department re-established the U.S. embassy in Kabul and provided diplomatic recognition for the new Afghan government, as soon as it became feasible.

The United States used economic means to freeze the financial assets of the al Qaeda organization and deny al Qaeda access to other financial resources.<sup>38</sup> The U.S. Treasury Department froze the financial assets of terrorist organizations, terrorist leaders, front



companies, and some non-profit organizations that supported terrorist groups. In addition, the United States used economic power to apply pressure on foreign banks and financial institutions to cooperate in this effort. Although the United States could not directly influence foreign banks and financial institutions, the Treasury Department could prohibit them from conducting transactions in the United States. The United States used this leverage to gain the cooperation of overseas banks and financial institutions.<sup>39</sup>

The United States employed economic means to support reconstruction and promote economic development in Afghanistan. Combining diplomatic and economic means, the United States was instrumental in conducting a conference in Germany for nations willing to donate funds for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> Economic means also supported establishment of the new Afghan government.

The United States used information means to convey support for Afghanistan. The Bush Administration incorporated key themes in public statements to emphasize that the war in Afghanistan was not directed against the Afghan people.<sup>41</sup> Statements from the Administration highlighted U.S. support for the Afghans during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, and emphasized that the United States had no territorial desires or plans for permanent bases in the region.<sup>42</sup> In addition, during the process of establishing of new government in Afghanistan, Administration rhetoric avoided any suggestion that the United States was trying to determine who would run Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the United States employed information means to demonstrate that the war in Afghanistan was not directed against Islam. The Bush Administration used public statements to counter any suggestion that the United States was involved in a “crusade” or engaged in a war against the Islamic religion.<sup>44</sup> The United States also conveyed support for Afghanistan by working to improve educational opportunities, addressing human rights issues, and improving access to information in Afghanistan.

The United States also employed information means to demonstrate U.S. resolve. By mobilizing the entire government for action, the Bush Administration intended to convey a willingness to use every means at its disposal to fight terrorism.<sup>45</sup> In essence, all of the diplomatic, economic, and informational efforts employed to accomplish other objectives also served to demonstrate U.S. commitment to the war in Afghanistan. In addition, the Administration continually voiced its resolve to see the war through to conclusion.

The most visible means employed by the United States involved the military element of power. U.S. military forces conducted both conventional operations and unconventional warfare against al Qaeda. The United States employed air power to attack terrorist targets and destroy terrorist infrastructure. The United States relied heavily on special operating forces to conduct

direct action against high payoff targets, special reconnaissance to gain intelligence on the al Qaeda network and key terrorist leaders, and unconventional warfare to gain the support of opposition forces and the Afghan people. The United States also employed conventional ground forces to search for and destroy al Qaeda fighters. In addition, the United States employed naval forces to conduct “leadership interdiction operations” in the North Arabian Sea. These operations were intended to prevent the escape of al Qaeda leaders across the North Arabian Gulf and into safe havens in Somalia or Yemen.<sup>46</sup>

Other military forces and paramilitary forces also contributed to the U.S. effort against al Qaeda. The United States employed Taliban opposition forces, such as the Northern Alliance, as a proxy force to accomplish U.S. objectives. Although these opposition forces normally engaged al Qaeda fighters in concert with U.S. military forces, they were a major component of the U.S. strategy. Coalition forces also participated in disrupting and destroying the al Qaeda network. Coalition forces from a wide variety of nations conducted many of the same missions as U.S. forces, including conventional and unconventional operations. In particular, the United States relied heavily on Pakistani troops. Pakistani forces patrolled the border with Afghanistan to prevent the escape of al Qaeda fighters, and conducted operations against al Qaeda from inside Pakistan.<sup>47</sup>

The Central Intelligence Agency participated directly in disrupting and destroying the al Qaeda network. Agency paramilitary operatives coordinated with opposition forces, distributed large sums of money to buy arms, clothing, and supplies for those forces, and worked directly with coalition military forces to disrupt and destroy the al Qaeda network.<sup>48</sup> Information also played an important role in disrupting or destroying the network. The Central Intelligence Agency, foreign intelligence services, and a variety of military organizations worked to gather information and share intelligence.<sup>49</sup> Military efforts included interrogation of detained terrorists, as well as operations conducted to gather intelligence from caves, training camps, safe houses, and meeting places. In addition, the Central Intelligence Agency established a rewards program, offering vast sums of money for intelligence on key al Qaeda leaders.

The United States employed the same military means against the Taliban that it employed against al Qaeda. U.S. forces conducted many of the same operational missions against the Taliban that it conducted against al Qaeda, including, air attacks, direct action, special reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, and conventional ground operations. Naval forces conducted leadership interdiction operations in the North Arabian Sea to prevent the escape of key Taliban leaders, just as they did for al Qaeda.

Other military and paramilitary forces participated in the fight against the Taliban, just as they did in the fight against al Qaeda. Afghan opposition forces were an important element in the fight against the Taliban. Military forces from coalition partners also played a significant role. Para-military forces from the Central Intelligence Agency also participated in fighting the Taliban, much as they did in fighting al Qaeda. CIA operatives focused primarily on intelligence collection efforts, but they also established liaison with leaders of the opposition forces and facilitated unconventional warfare operations.

For intelligence in support of military operations, a variety of organizations worked to gather and share information on the Taliban, just as they did on al Qaeda. The CIA reward program was also an important part of the intelligence collection effort, offering large sums of money for information on Taliban leaders, just as it did for al Qaeda leaders.

To specifically demonstrate support for the Afghan people, the United States employed military means to conduct stability and support operations and provide assistance to civil authorities in Afghanistan. Support from military forces included extensive humanitarian assistance operations, the opening of roads and airfields to facilitate those operations, escorts for humanitarian assistance convoys from Pakistan, and providing a degree of security for private organizations to operate effectively.

Military forces also employed rules of engagement and weapon systems that would minimize collateral damage. The rules of engagement prevented indiscriminate fires and often required collateral damage determinations before a target could be attacked. Moreover, by employing large numbers of precision guided munitions, U.S. and coalition forces were able to attack targets while minimizing the chances of civilian casualties or damage to civilian infrastructure. In essence, the United States used military forces to convey, in a variety of ways, that the nation was committed to improving conditions in Afghanistan and helping the Afghan people.

To demonstrate resolve, the United States employed a variety of military means. The United States employed military forces in direct ground combat in Afghanistan. This employment of military forces included conventional forces, as well as special operating forces, to take the fight directly to the enemy. The United States inserted special forces early in the operation to begin the unconventional warfare effort. Other special operations forces conducted a daring raid on the compound of Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. By mid-October, Marine forces had deployed into Afghanistan and were conducting operations in and around Kandahar. Army troops were soon deployed to continue the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda. Each of these actions served to demonstrate resolve by directly involving U.S. forces in

combat. In assuming the risks associated with ground combat, the Bush Administration also hoped to dispel the notion that Americans were risk averse and unwilling to accept casualties. Overall, the United States employed air, ground, and maritime forces as a demonstration of U.S. commitment.<sup>50</sup>

The United States also used military means to build and maintain international support. A variety of military activities served to promote coalition building and support for the war in Afghanistan. The United States sought military contributions from nations around the world, integrated coalition troops, ships, and air forces, and employed coalition forces as part of a coordinated military campaign. These activities served to establish and maintain coalition support for the war in Afghanistan.

To prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, the United States employed military means to provide security and stability. In addition, the United States used military forces to providing a safe and secure environment for the Loya Jirga process. Combining both diplomatic and military means, the United States also supported establishment of the International Security Assistance Force, which provided security and stability around the capitol in Kabul. A safe and secure environment facilitated the restoration of civil administration throughout Afghanistan. Finally, the United States used military means to help establish an Afghan police force and an Afghan army for the fledgling Afghan government.

The United States used every element of national power to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban, support the Afghan people, demonstrate resolve, build international support, and prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan.

## **ASSESSMENT OF THE STRATEGY FOR THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN**

More than a year after the terrorist attacks, the United States remains at war in Afghanistan. The United States continues to execute the national strategy formulated by the Bush Administration in the days and weeks following the attacks. Although the United States has enjoyed considerable success against al Qaeda and the Taliban, its strategic objectives have not been fully realized. The campaign in Afghanistan is still underway, but so far the United States has not been entirely successful in achieving its strategic ends.

### **THE FIGHT AGAINST AL QAEDA**

The United States disrupted the al Qaeda network to a great degree, but has certainly not destroyed it. The Bush Administration wanted Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders killed, captured, or on the run so they would not be able to plan and execute additional terrorist attacks.<sup>51</sup> To date, the United States has been successful in killing or capturing a number of key

al Qaeda leaders. In doing so, the United States has undoubtedly disrupted the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan. Moreover, the war in Afghanistan has forced the leadership farther under ground, prompted many to run for cover, and has clearly made their roles far more difficult to perform.

However, many key leaders remain at large; their whereabouts unknown. Although the operation did not focus on Osama bin Laden, the spiritual leader of al Qaeda remains on the loose.<sup>52</sup> Despite claims that the capture of Osama bin Laden is not a primary focus of the U.S. effort, his ability to elude capture does have significance. As Gerald Sieb contends, "Any perception that bin Laden is beyond America's reach is dangerous; it will only encourage other terrorists to emulate him."<sup>53</sup> Consequently, coalition troops and covert operatives continue to search in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan hoping to come across bin Laden or other key al Qaeda leaders. In that sense, the United States has not been completely successful. While the United States may have initially disrupted the al Qaeda network, the organization remains a threat and continues to possess the capability to plan and execute attacks against the United States.

The Bush Administration also wanted low level al Qaeda fighters killed or captured. Again, the United States has been successful in killing or capturing a great many al Qaeda fighters. During combat operations, the United States virtually destroyed the al Qaeda irregular forces, consisting primarily of the 5,000 man 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the United States captured thousands of al Qaeda fighters, many of whom remain incarcerated as detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In either case, the United States significantly disrupted the al Qaeda network by killing and capturing so many al Qaeda fighters.

The United States was also successful in destroying infrastructure, freezing financial assets, and gaining information on the al Qaeda network. U.S. military forces destroyed terrorist training camps, safe houses, and other facilities used by the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan. The Bush Administration also saw the disruption of the al Qaeda financial network as an important aspect of the war against al Qaeda.<sup>55</sup> Although the exact impact is difficult to ascertain, there is little doubt that efforts to deny the terrorists access to funds has made it more difficult for them to mount additional attacks. The United States used intelligence gleaned from searches and interrogations to further disable the terrorist network inside Afghanistan and enable other anti-terrorist operations outside Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> All of these efforts helped disrupt the al Qaeda organization, and by employing every element of national power and adopting a variety of approaches, the Bush Administration increased the chances for success.

On the other hand, the United States may have missed an opportunity to completely destroy the al Qaeda organization in Afghanistan. During the battle in the mountains and caves of Tora Bora, many al Qaeda fighters may have slipped away, escaping across the border into Pakistan. In addition, many other al Qaeda fighters appear to have blended back into the local population and remain active in Afghanistan. Again, despite success in disrupting the al Qaeda network, the organization remains a threat and continues to operate inside Afghanistan.

The United States has achieved limited success in fighting al Qaeda. That limited success is a reflection of two factors. First, the strategic objective may not be achievable. While it may be reasonable to expect the United States to disable the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, it may be too much to expect that al Qaeda could be destroyed. The nature of the al Qaeda network makes it very difficult to find, engage, and ultimately capture or kill key leaders or hard core fighters. In addition, Afghanistan and its neighbors, such as Pakistan, provide al Qaeda an abundance of hiding places, escape routes, and popular support. With respect to al Qaeda, the U.S. strategy should have included a more achievable objective. Second, the military means employed against al Qaeda are not entirely appropriate. The military means employed in Afghanistan have not enabled the Coalition to surround al Qaeda, cut off the escape routes, destroy the hiding places, or obtain the actionable intelligence required to capture or kill al Qaeda leaders and fighters. To be completely successful against al Qaeda, the U.S. strategy needed to include a better match between the end and the means.

#### THE FIGHT AGAINST THE TALIBAN

Similarly, the United States forced the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, but may not have compelled them to cease their support for terrorist organizations. By removing the Taliban from power, the United States denied the terrorists the sanctuary they enjoyed in Afghanistan and the open support they received from the Taliban. In addition, the United States was successful in killing or capturing many Taliban leaders and Taliban fighters. However, many important Taliban leaders remain at large and continue to support al Qaeda. Mullah Omar, for example, remains in hiding in the rugged Afghan interior and continues to provide tacit support for al Qaeda. In addition, Taliban fighters, who survived combat and avoided capture, have blended back into the population where they continue to threaten security and stability. These fighters have mounted a number of attacks against coalition forces and the new Afghan government. In the final analysis, military efforts against the Taliban were successful to some degree, but did not achieve everything the Bush Administration may have hoped for.

Diplomatic efforts produced similar results. The ultimatum issued by the Bush Administration did not convince the Taliban to cooperate with the United States. The Taliban did not turn over bin Laden and his associates as President Bush demanded, and the Taliban refused to cease support for al Qaeda. Despite this fact, the ultimatum was an important diplomatic success. By issuing this public demarche, the United States gained a degree of legitimacy and international support in the fight against the Taliban.

Conspicuously absent in the Bush Administration's strategy was a concerted effort to employ economic means in the fight against the Taliban. However, the impact of economic sanctions would have been limited in war ravaged and economically depressed Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan people would have suffered the consequences of economic sanctions, and this would have negatively impacted the Bush Administration's desire to avoid any impression that the United States was at war with the Afghan people.

The United States has achieved limited success against the Taliban. That limited success reflects the United States' inability to win the hearts and minds of the Taliban and al Qaeda supports in Afghanistan. Although the U.S. strategy included elements to address the issue, the United States has not been successful in convincing the Taliban to cease support for al Qaeda. This objective is simply not achievable, until the United States and its allies eliminate the causes of radical Islamic fundamentalism, and the support it engenders in the Muslim world.

#### DEMONSTRATING SUPPORT FOR THE AFGHAN PEOPLE

The United States appears to have been successful in demonstrating that the war in Afghanistan was not directed against the Afghan people or against the Islamic religion. The humanitarian assistance effort was particularly successful in that regard. President Bush insisted on conducting a humanitarian assistance effort in conjunction with military action.<sup>57</sup> As a result, military forces integrated humanitarian assistance operations at the very outset of operations in Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the humanitarian assistance effort limited the impact of war on the Afghan people, and clearly conveyed a sense of U.S. support. The inclusion of a humanitarian approach in the strategy worked to the United States' advantage.

However, the effort by coalition forces to limit collateral damage was somewhat less successful. Although the employment of precision guided munitions was essential in reducing the potential for collateral damage, military forces committed a number of highly publicized incidents of fratricide. Civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure did occur. In one case, an Afghan wedding party may have been the unintended target of coalition fires. As an

aspect of strategy, the inability to sufficiently minimize collateral damage was difficult to achieve and negatively impacted the United States' ability to obtain full support of the local populace.

Demonstrating that the war in Afghanistan was not about Islam was another significant goal. The Administration tried to demonstrate, in both words and deeds, that the United States was fighting a war against terrorists and terrorist supporters, not against Islam. Public statements, coupled with U.S. actions, helped convey that purpose for the war in Afghanistan.

#### DEMONSTRATING RESOLVE

Public statements and military actions also helped demonstrate the United States' resolve for the war in Afghanistan and a willingness to accept casualties if necessary to win the war. The Bush Administration elected not to limit the initial response to an ineffective cruise missile attack. Instead, President Bush selected the most robust military option, one that included commitment of U.S. troops in ground combat.<sup>59</sup> The United States employed special operations forces to work with the opposition forces very early in the military campaign. Later, the United States also employed conventional forces in combat operations. The employment of U.S. forces placed American troops at risk, demonstrating the Administration's willingness to accept casualties to win the war. These employments demonstrated U.S. resolve by putting ground forces in Afghanistan to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban. The United States may not realize the impact of this aspect of U.S. strategy for some time to come. It stands to reason, however, that the U.S. strategy clearly demonstrated the Bush Administration's resolve and may provide a degree of deterrence against future attacks on the United States.

#### GAINING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

The United States was also effective in gaining international support and assembling a coalition of nations willing to fight the war on terrorism. Ultimately, the Bush Administration's strategy achieved considerable international support, regional cooperation, and coalition participation. The United Nations Security Council, for example, passed a unanimous resolution condemning the terrorist attacks against the United States. In addition, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization invoked Article 5, demonstrating that NATO viewed the terrorist attacks against the United States as an attack against all NATO members. Also, the strongly worded statement from the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a group representing 57 Muslim nations, also condemned the attacks against the United States.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps most important was the Coalition's operational involvement in support of post-conflict, nation building efforts in Afghanistan. The effect of this aspect of U.S. strategy was to provide legitimacy for the war in Afghanistan and lessen the burden for war on the United States.



## PREVENTING THE RE-EMERGENCE OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

The effort to prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan is well underway, but is not yet complete. Nation building efforts continue in Afghanistan and military forces remain involved in providing security and stability. It is evident that diplomatic efforts have overcome significant obstacles in establishing a viable central government in Afghanistan. In addition, the U.S. strategy included provisions for creation of an embryonic Afghan police force and army. U.S. and Coalition efforts to rid Afghanistan of mines, weapons, and munitions, as well as attempts to improve living conditions in Afghanistan may also contribute to ultimate success in Afghanistan.

U.S. efforts will largely have been in vain, until the United States succeeds in establishing conditions that will prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, and the use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary. In that sense, the last objective for the war in Afghanistan may be the most important. To achieve ultimate success in Afghanistan, the United States must ensure its strategy includes viable approaches and sufficient means to accomplishing this objective.

## OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF U.S. STRATEGY

The ultimate goal of any strategy is to achieve its political objectives. In the final analysis, it appears the U.S. strategy for war in Afghanistan has been marginally successful in doing so. The strategy enabled the United States to disrupt the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan and eliminate the sanctuary provided by the Taliban. Moreover, the strategy enabled the United States to focus the war on the terrorist organization and its supporters, demonstrate U.S. resolve in the war against terrorism, and gain broad international support for the war in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the strategy did not enable the United States to fully rid Afghanistan of al Qaeda or its Taliban support. More importantly, the strategy has not provided the United States the ability to restore a sense of security and stability to Afghanistan. Ultimately, success of the U.S. strategy will only occur when conditions in Afghanistan are no longer conducive for terrorist organizations to recruit new personnel, develop infrastructure, and plan and train for operations.

The great strengths of the U.S. strategy, however, are that it is flexible, includes a wide variety of ways and means, and recognizes the many dimensions of the problem in Afghanistan. In formulating and executing the national strategy, the Bush Administration included several approaches to accomplish each objective. The Administration did not limit the strategy to any single approach or rely solely on any single concept to achieve an objective. Also, the

Administration incorporated every element of national power in the U.S. strategy and applied several elements of power to achieve each objective. In other words, the U.S. strategy employed a variety of means in a variety of ways to achieve the strategic objectives, allowing for adjustment as necessary. This multi-faceted approach greatly increased chances for attaining the strategic objectives, and may yet combine to produce ultimate success, as the United States continues its efforts in Afghanistan.

The multi-faceted U.S. strategy also reflects a recognition that success in Afghanistan would require more than just attacking al Qaeda and the Taliban. Accordingly, the strategy included other objectives, such as gaining international support and demonstrating U.S. resolve. Most importantly, the strategy included efforts to prevent the re-emergence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and the continued use of Afghanistan as a sanctuary for terrorists. Any success against al Qaeda and the Taliban would only be temporary, unless the United States addressed the conditions that allowed terrorists to thrive in Afghanistan. In essence, the multiple dimensions of U.S. strategy enabled the United States to tear down the terrorist network while building up a more stable Afghanistan. Ultimately, the United States can only succeed in Afghanistan by addressing both aspects of the problem.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

Despite the strengths and successes of the U.S. strategy, the implications of the war in Afghanistan do not bode well for the future.

First, the war in Afghanistan demonstrates how difficult it is to actually destroy terrorist networks. Although the United States showed it was capable of disabling the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, it was unable to completely destroy the organization. Al Qaeda fighters, and perhaps many al Qaeda leaders, still remain in Afghanistan. Although they may not enjoy the support of a state sponsor, they maintain sufficient ability to continue their fight against the United States, as well as U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Many in the al Qaeda organization appear to have escaped. Once outside of Afghanistan, they may be much harder to capture and will likely continue their fight against the United States from other nations in the region. Moreover, the al Qaeda organization includes cells in nations around the world. Even if the United States could destroy the network in Afghanistan, al Qaeda would remain a global threat. The war in Afghanistan may also teach terrorist organizations valuable lessons that will make U.S. efforts less effective in the future. Terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda, will likely attempt to exploit asymmetric advantages by learning from the U.S. effort in Afghanistan, enabling them to adapt to U.S. strengths while exploiting U.S. weaknesses. In the final

analysis, the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that the United States may be able to disrupt terrorist networks, but will find it very difficult to completely destroy them.

Similarly, the war in Afghanistan also demonstrates how difficult it is to eliminate non-state support for terrorist organizations. Although the United States showed it can defeat a state sponsor like the Taliban, it has not entirely eliminated non-state, tribal support in Afghanistan for terrorist organizations. In fact, Taliban fighters still have a base of support in Afghanistan and continue to work in concert with al Qaeda. Moreover, terrorist organizations enjoy varying degrees of support in friendly states, as well as states that actually sponsor terrorism. This is a problem that will be very difficult to overcome until the world, to include the United States, is able to address and eliminate the fundamental causes of terrorism. These causes include a diverse array of issues, from poverty and repression in authoritarian regimes, to the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

The third major implication of the war in Afghanistan is the need for a multi-dimensional strategy for fighting terrorism. The United States will need to formulate and execute holistic strategies that incorporate a variety of ends, ways and means that are endowed with a degree of flexibility. By doing so, the United States can employ all of the elements of national power and increase its chances for success. It will not be enough for the United States to simply defeat terrorist organizations. U.S. strategy must also include efforts to ensure that the fundamental causes of terrorism are addressed. To be successful in the long term, the United States and its allies must overcome the conditions that spawned the acceptance and growth of terrorism. That implies the need for a nation building aspect to U.S. strategy. In nation states that serve as a terrorist sanctuary, the United States will need to conduct a nation building effort to ensure that sanctuary is permanently eliminated.

A final implication is associated with the need to address national resolve and cost. The costs of fighting a terrorist organization, coupled with a nation building effort, will be very expensive for the United States. Although the Bush Administration demonstrated great resolve for the war in Afghanistan, the United States must be willing to expend additional resources in the long term fight against terrorism, in order to achieve long term solutions. Moreover, fighting terrorist organizations and conducting nation building will require an extended effort. As necessary, the United States must be ready for a protracted, global war against terrorism.

## **CONCLUSION**

Following the terrorist attacks against the United States in September 2001, the Bush Administration formulated strategic objectives for war in Afghanistan, developed a number of

approaches to achieve each objective, and employed a variety of resources in executing each approach. The resulting strategy has only been marginally successful. As Frederick W. Kagan recently commented, “We have not failed in Afghanistan, but neither have we succeeded.”<sup>61</sup>

Although the United States continues its efforts in the region, there are already major implications for the broader war on terrorism. The war in Afghanistan demonstrates some of the difficulties facing the United States in the fight against terrorism, to include the need for a holistic approach to the fight.

It remains to be seen whether the U.S. strategy for war in Afghanistan will ultimately succeed, as well as what the implications of the war will be for future conflict. It does appear certain that the United States must be prepared for a protracted, global war that addresses the fundamental causes of terrorism. As Max Boot suggests, there may be no final triumph in the War on Terrorism, just as there will be no final triumph in the war on drugs, the war on crime, or the war on poverty.<sup>62</sup> But, U.S. strategy can be amended to create a greater chance for success in the war against terrorism.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Earl H. Tilford, Jr., "Operation Allied Force and the Role of Air Power," Parameters 24 (Winter 1999-2000): 37

<sup>2</sup> Dan Balz and Bob Woodward, "10 Days in September." The Washington Post, Eight Part Series, 27 January – 3 February 2002, accessed on line from [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Bob Woodward, Bush at War (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 223.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>9</sup> William R. Hawkins, "Terroism, Missile Defense and Decisive Warfare," Army, November 2001, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Woodward, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>13</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Woodward, 193.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>18</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>19</sup> Woodward, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>21</sup> Woodward, 98.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>23</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Woodward, 272.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>27</sup> Alberto Betancourt, "Coalition Team Clears Land Mines," Soldiers, May 2002, 8–9.

<sup>28</sup> Woodward, 268.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>45</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>46</sup> Captain Phil Wisecup, U.S. Navy, and Lieutenant Tom Williams, U.S. Navy, "Enduring Freedom: Making Coalition Naval Warfare Work," Proceedings 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>48</sup> Woodward, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>53</sup> Gerald F. Seib, "What Bin Laden is Doing and Why it Still Matters," The Wall Street Journal, 19 February 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Background to the War," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 24 October, 2001; available from [http://www.csis.org/features/cord\\_011024.htm](http://www.csis.org/features/cord_011024.htm); Internet; accessed 21 February 2003.

<sup>55</sup> Woodward, 111.

<sup>56</sup> David E. Kaplan, "Run and Gun: Al Qaeda Arrests and Intelligence Hauls Bring New Energy to the War on Terrorism," U.S. News and World Report, 30 September 2002, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Woodward, 130.

<sup>58</sup> Balz and Woodward.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>61</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, "Did We Fail in Afghanistan?" Commentary 115, no. 3 (March 2003): 44.

<sup>62</sup> Max Boot, The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002), xiv.





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