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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE MOST SIGNIFICANT WAR SINCE WORLD WAR II**

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## THE MOST SIGNIFICANT WAR SINCE WORLD WAR II

### THE CHALLENGE

The horrific acts of terrorism inflicted on American soil on 11 September 2001 have hurled our great Nation to war because the conditions necessary to safeguard and enhance Americans' survival and well being in a free and secure nation no longer exist in the face of modern terrorism. In short, America's most vital national interest, as defined by the Commission on America's National Interests,<sup>1</sup> has been defiled, and the threat to this interest unmistakably remains. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard B. Meyers described America's war on terrorism best, during the 18 October 2001 Department of Defense press briefing, when he said that this is "The most significant war since World War II."<sup>2</sup>

The first battle, of the first campaign of what President George Bush has warned could be a very long war, began on 07 October 2001 with strikes against the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan. What began nearly a month earlier with a high concept low technological asymmetric attack on the United States is being answered by what may be described as a reverse asymmetric war on terrorism. The United States is utilizing the full spectrum of its incredible military capability against low technology threats and an enemy that lacks formal armies, navies and air forces.<sup>3</sup> Finding the right capabilities and enough of them to produce desired military

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<sup>1</sup> Graham T. Allison and Robert Blackwill, "America's National Interests, A Report from The Commission on America's National Interests," *The Commission on America's National Interests*, 2000, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Statement by Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Meyers, during 18 October 2001 Department of Defense press briefing.

<sup>3</sup> Statement by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld during 18 October 2001 Department of Defense press briefing.

effects that accomplish military objectives in support of our political objectives is challenging at best. The character and conduct of war have dramatically changed in what the Bush administration aptly describes as a “new kind of war.”<sup>4</sup> The risks and challenges of this effort are enormous and we could find ourselves engaged in a whole range of conflicts from events that we cannot even anticipate today. Andrew Bacevich, a professor of international relations at Boston University, said it is possible “that we are sliding toward a summer of 1914 sequence of events” – when a cascading series of international incidents spun out of control and led to World War I.<sup>5</sup>

This paper will attempt to identify and analyze the interplay between United States’ military objectives and political objectives under the backdrop of this evolving “new kind of war.” If not properly strategized, the risks of competing political and military objectives may not serve to secure our vital national interests.

## **OBJECTIVES**

In his 07 October 2001 address to the nation, President George Bush provided the first limited insight into political and military objectives of our war on terrorism. “These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.” “By destroying camps and disrupting communications, we will make it more difficult for the terror network to train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans.” “Our military action is also designed to clear the way

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<sup>4</sup> Unknown, “Afghan War Will Shape Future U.S. Military Structure,” *Strategic Forecasting*, [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com), 2100 GMT, October 23, 2001

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Ricks, “At Pentagon: Worries Over War’s Costs, Consequences,” *Washington Post*, October 21, 2001.

for sustained, comprehensive and relentless operations to drive them out and bring them to justice.”<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld further clarified the President’s objectives as eliminating the terrorists themselves along with their supporting infrastructure.<sup>7</sup>

Given the above, and recognizing the absence of any official publication of our Nation’s political and military objectives, inferences must be drawn from official statements in the context of reported military action to date. The following relevant Bush administration objectives are manifest:

**Political Objectives:**

1. Protect American citizens at home and abroad.
2. Eliminate terrorist threats to the United States, including individual terrorists and their supporting infrastructure.
3. Maximize world support for the war on terrorism (coalition building).
4. Prevent the collapse of allied governments and governments supporting our war on terrorism.
5. Replace the Taliban regime with a government that will not harbor terrorism.
6. Build/Enforce a world order that does not harbor terrorism.
7. Reduce humanitarian suffering in Afghanistan.

**Military Objectives:**

1. Ensure homeland security.
2. Disrupt terrorist to prevent further terrorist acts.

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<sup>6</sup> Presidential Address to the Nation, The Treaty Room, 1:00P.M. EDT, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

<sup>7</sup> Statement by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld during 18 October 2001 Department of Defense press briefing.

3. Sever terrorist's lines of communication.
4. Topple governments supporting terrorism.
5. Kill or capture all terrorists including their leaders.
6. Deliver humanitarian assistance.

## **THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN**

The military campaign thus far appears to be focusing on the Taliban as the center of gravity for Osama Bin Laden and his al Qaeda network. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld explained that our military intends to create an air environment where we dominate, then use air power to create conditions on the ground conducive to the application of ground forces. Then the combined use of air and ground forces will be used to bring the terrorist to justice.<sup>8</sup> Our air campaign has clearly dominated the air environment, but the use of air power to set up conditions for successful ground operations, and the projected success of ground operations are not so assured and are especially subject to political and time constraints that can prevent achieving our political objectives. The Pentagon acknowledged for the first time on 24 October 2001 that Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia is proving to be a tenacious opponent and is hunkering down for a long fight that could drag on for months through the harsh Afghan winter.<sup>9</sup> Terrorists and terrorism are a much different kind of threat than we have ever faced before militarily. The reality of prolonged conflict in the war on terrorism is likely the most important factor that will determine if our military and political objectives are achieved. The hazards of prolonged military action may serve to undermine our political objectives.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Vernon Loeb, "Pentagon Says Taliban Is Ready for Long Fight," Washington Post, October 25, 2001.

## PAKISTAN, THE COALITION, AND ALLIED GOVERNMENTS

A sustained bombing and military campaign can destabilize the fragile Pakistani government. Since the operation began, President Pervez Musharraf's post 1999 coup government has come under escalating domestic pressure and is relying on repression to moderate it. Pakistani's predominantly Muslim population appears to be generally sympathetic to the Taliban. Additionally, the disputed Kashmir has again become a flash point and if tensions with India grow, this will increase Islamic fervor inside Pakistan and further destabilize an already delicate situation.

If Pakistan's nuclear weapons end up in the hands of radicals it greatly increases the threat to Americans and the region. India is not likely to stand idly by if it appears that the Pakistani nuclear arsenal has fallen or is about to fall into the hands of extremists. It is not difficult to imagine India conducting preemptive action to destroy Pakistan's nuclear stockpile that would, in turn, provoke a broader war on the subcontinent.

Complicating this is President Bush's determination to do "whatever it takes to defeat terror abroad, wherever it grows or wherever it hides."<sup>10</sup> The administration makes it very clear that it intends to extend the war well beyond Afghanistan. Although this has great appeal to those "Jacksonian" Americans among us, talking broadly, and even worse, specifically about what comes after Afghanistan can reduce support for the United States' led campaign and destabilize Pakistan and the other Muslim countries who now support us. If the Pakistani government falls, it is conceivable that other Muslim governments friendly to the United States

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<sup>10</sup> Presidential Bush's remarks to California audience, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia could follow suit. “The ultimate nightmare is a pan-Islamic regime that possesses both oil and nuclear weapons.”<sup>11</sup>

To compensate for these destabilizing factors, the Bush administration should take several measures:

1. Increase and improve military-to-military relations with Pakistan.
2. Substantially increase our Public Diplomacy in the region.
3. Provide additional economic aid to Pakistan.
4. Provide additional assistance to handle displaced Afghan refugees.
5. Attempt to end the bombing and fighting as soon as possible.
6. Minimize casualties to innocent civilians.
7. Avoid publicly addressing what comes after Afghanistan.

Unfortunately these measures are not all compatible with using military force to obtain military objectives under competing political objectives.

## **BALANCING COMPETING POLITICAL GOALS**

Our unrelenting air strikes in Afghanistan and the ongoing military campaign make the United States look like a high tech bully – even if that is not the case. Additionally, the longer the bombing goes on, the more susceptible the United States is to criticism, both justified and unjustified, in the Muslim world.

Herein lies the dilemma. Accomplishing our military goals in an expedient manner requires the use of more force and intense bombing than applied to date. This is especially true

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<sup>11</sup> Harlan Ullman, Defense Analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “At Pentagon: Worries Over War’s Costs, Consequences,” Washington Post, October 21, 2001.



considering how doggedly Mohammed Omar and his Taliban regime are hanging on to power. Unfortunately our political objectives of: preventing the collapse of governments supporting our efforts, maximizing world support, and preventing the repercussions of a perceived war on Islam, each impose restraints on the intensity of applying force that ironically can lengthen the campaign and prevent accomplishing these very objectives. Increasing the intensity can shorten the time required to accomplish military objectives, however time is not a luxury we have and is itself a competing factor. The administration is truly faced with a “Catch-22” situation. This is further complicated by the fact that strikes must be limited with sufficient time allowed to lay the groundwork for a postwar Afghan government that will prevent terrorist networks from returning. There is no legitimate government of Afghanistan waiting in the wings to replace the Taliban. Destroying the Taliban before a legitimate successor government composed of Afghan groups has been organized will most likely result in a new round of civil war and continued support of terrorism. Because of this we have seen the pace of the campaign and selection of targets take a measured approach to balance our competing political objectives. We have not seen carpet-bombing of dug-in Taliban troops around Kabul and Maza-e Sharif. Strikes that experts say would be needed to punch a hole through the Taliban trenches and dug-in artillery positions to clear the way for the opposition Northern Alliance to drive about 25 miles to take the capitol.<sup>12</sup> The Holy Month of Ramadan, which begins in mid-November, and subsequent on set of winter also pressure planners to increase intensity and accelerate the campaign.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Ricks, “Attacks Restrained by Political Goals,” Washington Post, October 23, 2001.

## **HUMANITARIAN GOALS**

Prolonged conflict is also a negative factor in achieving humanitarian goals. A sustained bombing campaign without the interdiction of troops and resultant control of territory will increase the number of refugees beyond the millions who have already fled their homes. In spite of our militarily dropping more than half a million Humanitarian Daily Rations in a very visible effort of public diplomacy, real sustained relief needs to be delivered on the ground. Increased suffering, strife and death of innocent Muslims will only serve to accentuate the risks already highlighted in this paper.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our administration's balanced approach of a limited military campaign coupled with all the other applications of diplomatic power and influence at our Nation's disposal appears to be the best course of action given today's domestic and international environment. President Bush and his administration are making the best of what is undoubtedly a bad situation, but they must continually assess the environment and risks involved with increasing or decreasing military intensity. The wrong answer is to remain fixated on one particular plan that does not result in meeting our political objectives. Adjusting our strategy to meet changing conditions will be key.

If we do not get this right a long war may be the least of our worries. We may find ourselves fighting generations of radical Islamic terrorists in a perpetual "new kind of war." Americans could find ourselves living like the Palestinians and Israelis do, tolerating oppressive security everywhere at the expense of the freedoms we enjoy today, and our most vital national interest may never be fully restored. This truly is the most significant war since World War II.