



Afghanistan: The Runaway War

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The real issue in Afghanistan is not the [Runaway General](#) but how to stop a Runaway War. The current phase of the war is now in its ninth year, but in truth the war started in 1980 when the United States, along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, organised and sustained Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion. McChrystal's indiscretions have inadvertently shed a little light not only on the rotten core of the Afghanistan effort, but also on the excessive influence of the military in US politics, more of which later.

Let me start with Afghanistan. Of the many dysfunctional relationships amongst those in charge of the political and military strategies in that blighted country—between President Karzai, local warlords, various little would-be viceroys and the fractured military command—one thing is abundantly clear: this is an American-led war. The sacked general was nominally the “US and NATO commander” in Afghanistan, but first and foremost he was a US general, appointed and dismissed by a US President with no prior consultation among coalition allies. Karzai's appeal to Obama to keep McChrystal (the best commander the war has had, according to the Afghan President) and the [supportive noises](#) coming out of NATO HQ in Brussels fell on stony ground. From day one, the real strategic decision-making has taken place in the White House and Pentagon. NATO and the other ‘international protectorate’ actors in Afghanistan (UNAMA, ISAF, EU, OSCE and a host of private sector and non-governmental acronyms) are largely acting as a *de facto* arm of American foreign policy.

Both Obama and NATO Secretary General Rasmussen are emphasising that the replacement of McChrystal with General Petraeus represents [a change of command and not strategy](#), and that “we must and will complete the job we have started”. And despite politicians across the Alliance trying to persuade voters that there is a point to the war and that hundreds of young soldiers and many thousands more civilians are not dying for nothing, support for the war continues to fade as the [violence and casualties](#), civilian and military, rise again. Over 100 NATO soldiers have died fighting the Taliban in June, the deadliest month in nine years of conflict. A recent [ABC News/Washington Post poll](#) found 53% of Americans believed the conflict was not worth fighting and among many Europeans scepticism runs even deeper.

Confusion about the mission plays a part in the growing public disaffection. While some say it is about making the streets of New York and London safe from terrorists others talk about the need to promote good governance and win “hearts and minds”. Others talk about the need

to improve the condition of women and education for young girls or call for a greater focus on the regional security threat of al-Qaeda and the instability in Pakistan. Some like [Henry Kissinger](#) draw on the spectre of a ‘jihadist Islam’ domino effect as an argument for staying the course, while UK Defence Secretary [Liam Fox](#) has said that it would be a betrayal of the sacrifices of Britain's fallen soldiers if it left “before the job is finished”. How long before that old lie, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, also makes a comeback?

A US Army Soldier patrols with Afghan soldiers to check on conditions in the village of Yawez in Wardak province, Feb 2010 – photo credit: US Army/flickr



While not altogether clear, President Obama's more limited goals (and these are the ones that matter) appear to be threefold. First, deny Al-Qaeda a base in Afghanistan, although since the group has now dispersed to Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other countries, this is a secondary strategic concern. Indeed, recent [estimates](#) suggest that there are “more than 300” Al-Qaeda leaders and fighters in Pakistan and “50 to 100” in Afghanistan – so less than 500 in the Af-Pak border region. Second, create an exit strategy from Afghanistan similar to the one in Iraq by creating the conditions for negotiating with the Taliban. Third, begin withdrawal in July 2011.

But the simple truth is that many of the requirements for a successful counter-insurgency in Afghanistan are simply not there. The first and guiding assumption is that using lethal force against an insurgency intermingled with a civilian population is often counterproductive. Thus, General McChrystal sought to further tighten rules guiding the use of US and NATO firepower to support troops on the ground. This shifted risks from Afghan civilians to NATO and allied (including Afghan) soldiers. But [the troops hate it](#) and discontent on the ground is growing, with complaints that the tactical-level fight is being lost in the chase for an elusive strategic victory. This is not sustainable and pressure is growing for the rules of engagement to be relaxed again.

And as I have [argued previously](#), the numbers required to implement a counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan don't add up. In a permissive environment in Bosnia-Herzegovina (a country a fraction the size of Afghanistan) NATO fielded 60,000 troops in the mid-1990s. General Petraeus' [counter-insurgency manual](#) recommends a minimum of 20 counter-insurgents per 1,000 residents. In Afghanistan, with a population of around 33 million, that would mean at least 660,000 troops trained in counterinsurgency doctrine – over five times the current number deployed by the US and ISAF.



Checkpoint construction in Robat, Afghanistan, March 2010 – photo credit: US Army/flickr

Second, handing over security responsibilities to an Afghan government and national army (beginning next summer) is also central to the strategy. But neither the premise nor the deadline is realistic, despite the optimism of Pentagon officials who say the Afghan National Army is on schedule to meet a goal of 134,000 troops this year, and the Afghan National Police is on track to reach its goal of 109,000 officers in the same period (of which only around [700 are women](#)). But Afghanistan's weak and ineffective government was never capable of meeting US expectations of reform and as [US auditors recently concluded](#), the allies have no effective way of monitoring how successfully Afghan forces operate on their own. Only 23% of Afghan soldiers and 12% of police can work unsupervised, the report says. The auditors also found widespread absenteeism, corruption and drug abuse among Afghan forces. This is hardly surprising since nearly 1,600 Afghan police officers have been killed in the last two years, and the force continues to struggle with a lack of training (the country's main police academy can handle fewer than 600 recruits at a time, or roughly 3,600 a year).

That is only the start of the recent bad news. Another [Congressional study](#) says that US taxpayers' money is funding a "shadowy network of warlords, strongmen, commanders, corrupt Afghan officials, and perhaps others" to protect supply convoys. Not only is part of this \$2 billion contract ending up in the hands of the Taliban, paid as bribes to stop them from attacking the convoys, it is also sowing the seeds of further chaos and instability. The 70,000 largely unsupervised gunmen working for hundreds of unregistered private security firms and warlords in Afghanistan are undermining the 'legitimate' Afghan government that the international community is struggling to build: "Not only does the system run afoul of the Department's own rules and regulations mandated by Congress, it also

appears to risk undermining the US strategy for achieving its goals in Afghanistan", the investigators said. Also undermining the strategy are [allegations](#) that officials in Karzai's government have been blocking corruption investigations of political allies and [capital flight](#) from Afghanistan of \$10 million a day.

And wealth is not the only thing heading for the exit. The list of Alliance political leaders readying early withdrawals from the NATO mission also grows longer by the day. Poland is the latest country to reveal a desired [2012 deadline for the exit of its 2,600 soldiers](#), the seventh largest national contingent in NATO. The Netherlands and Canada have already committed to an early exit from Afghanistan: the former are withdrawing in August and the latter plan to remove their combat troops by the middle of next year. The new British Prime Minister has indicated that he wants to see UK troops out by 2015 (although no one seems to have told his defence secretary). And while urging other countries not to follow suit, insisting that the plan to support President Karzai's government must be given time to work, President Obama set the tone by signalling his own intention to begin withdrawing US troops in 2011. None of this is consistent with a counter-insurgency doctrine that calls for a long-term and labour-intensive military deployment and military-centric nation-building at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars.

Parallels with Iraq ([hardly a success story](#)) are also misplaced. The Kabul government lacks the political base, power or legitimacy of the government in Baghdad. And Afghan tribal groups are much less coherent and have weaker associations with state structures, compared to Iraqi Sunni tribes (who ended up fighting against their former Al-Qaeda allies, whereas Afghan tribal groups generally fight for their clans and ethnic groups and try to co-exist with the Taliban). In addition, the Taliban can exploit the ideology of religious resistance that the US and others fostered in the 1980s to defeat the Russians – except today it is NATO that is depicted as an infidel occupying force.



Kandahar – photo credit: startledrabbit III/flickr

The bottom line is that the allies have neither the means nor the willpower to see the job through. So, contrary to what the US President and NATO Secretary General say, it is not personnel change but policy change that is needed in Afghanistan. It is time to change the course of the war and start winding it down. Means must be matched to ends. Given that the mere presence of foreign soldiers fighting a war in Afghanistan is probably the single most important factor in the resurgence of the

Taliban, as [Gilles Dorrondo](#) of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has argued, the best way to weaken, and perhaps divide, the armed opposition is to reduce military confrontations. Military resources (both Afghan and NATO) should be targeted on protecting strategic cities and transportation routes, while the number of foreign troops is progressively withdrawn over the next 24 months, perhaps to around 20,000 by the end of 2012.

Coupled with this military drawdown should be a renewed emphasis on three key objectives: a comprehensive peace process including all relevant internal actors and neighbours (the reality is that the Afghan insurgency, like others, will end with a messy political settlement); increased development, especially in non-Taliban controlled areas with a particular emphasis on women-centred projects; and a counter-terrorism strategy to combat Al-Qaeda that is both civilian-led and rooted firmly within international law (which means, for example, an end to the use of targeted assassinations with drones and limited use of special forces). NATO should be prepared to accept a situation like the one in Yemen, where a government supported by the West is incapable of controlling its territory. That is the best possible outcome in the short to medium term.

Finally, turning to the reaction within the United States to the dismissal of McChrystal, most analysts applauded the decision of President Obama as a visible sign of the civilian leadership asserting control over the military. But in many respects this is a chimera masking more profound concerns about civil-military relations in the United States today. George Orwell once said of the goose step that it is "only possible in countries where the common people dare not laugh at the army". That the US President was unable to laugh off a magazine article by the architect of the strategy that prompted him

to gamble on massive force build-up to change the direction of the Afghan war says much about the continuing impact of the post 9/11 legacy. In a nation that is 'perpetually at war' unquestioning patriotism is now the dominant orthodoxy; and a US President has to be seen to asserting his authority even if he is "uncomfortable and intimidated" by a roomful of military brass.

An impromptu shura, or town meeting, in the Tul district of Afghanistan, May 2007 – photo credit: US Army/flickr

And the irony of a US Defence Secretary [berating a 'demilitarised Europe'](#) unwilling to fight its corner, while presiding over armed forces that wield growing political and social influence in an increasingly militarised society appears lost on the 'Fox News' generation. But defence spending approaching \$1,000bn a year is no laughing matter. (Particularly as the budget crisis is [threatening the social fabric](#) of many US communities). The historian and former Vietnam veteran, [Andrew Bacevich](#), has written about how Americans have increasingly found themselves in thrall to military power and the idea of global military supremacy. And out-of-control generals are a symptom of what he calls the "normalisation of war". And so, it is almost certain that McChrystal will reappear, after a suitable period of grace, as a well-paid outside consultant to the Pentagon, a government intelligence agency or one of the many defence contractors lining the Beltway around Washington.

In sum, whichever way you look at it, Afghanistan is an allegory for much that the US and NATO allies have got wrong since 9/11. It is clear that the strategy for the war is not working. And while existing calls among allies for troop withdrawals are largely 'conditions-based', those conditions are being diluted all the time. But who has the courage to apply the brakes to this runaway war?

