

# Small is Beautiful: The Counterterrorism Option in Afghanistan

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by Austin Long

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***Abstract:** Strategy is matching means and ends. If the ends desired in Afghanistan are about al Qaeda, the counterterrorism option is the best fit in terms of means. It is sustainable, always crucial in prolonged conflict, as it limits the expenditure of U.S. blood and treasure. This article fills a gap in the existing strategy debate by detailing what a counterterrorism option would be in terms of force structure and operations.*

One of the most important debates to emerge over the future of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is the so-called “counterterrorism option.” This option would shift U.S. strategy and force posture from one focused on a counterinsurgency campaign seeking both to protect the Afghan population and build the central state to a narrower effort focused on preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a haven for al Qaeda. The most prominent proponent of this option (though not the only one) has been Vice President Joseph Biden, who has become deeply pessimistic about the prospect for state-building in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, respected Brookings analysts Bruce Riedel and Michael O’Hanlon argue that the counterterrorism option is essentially an illusion, doomed to fail if attempted.<sup>2</sup>

While this debate was recently resolved in the case of Afghanistan by President Obama’s decision to pursue a counterinsurgency strategy rather than a counterterrorism one, it still has implications for future U.S. operations. This essay attempts to outline a viable counterterrorism strategy by first defining goals and resources (or ends and means), then describing what

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Baker, “Biden No Longer a Lone Voice on Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> <http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2009/09/column-why-we-cant-go-small-in-afghanistan.html>.

the counterterrorism option in Afghanistan might have entailed, laying out how the United States might still transition to that posture, and finally specifically addressing the concerns of Riedel/O'Hanlon and others. If the Obama administration adheres to the President's exit strategy, it may still be necessary to adopt a counterterrorism approach in the future. This article argues that if the United States can still successfully transition to an effective counterterrorism mission over the course of the next three years, ending up with a force of about 13,000 military personnel (or less) in Afghanistan. The Afghan state would likely survive but would lack *de facto* control over 35-40 percent of its territory compared to about 20-30 percent today.

First, in terms of overall U.S. strategy, as the senior NATO and U.S. commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal noted in an October 2009 speech, the key to strategy is aligning resources with goals.<sup>3</sup> So, before discussing the resources to be used in the counterterrorism option, goals must be clearly defined. The goal as announced by President Obama on March 27, 2009, is "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future."<sup>4</sup> The meaning of *defeat*, is a bit nebulous-what does it mean to defeat an entity that is both social movement/ideology and formal organization? The other two goals are clearer: *disrupt* means to pressure the organization so that it cannot conduct offensive operations against the United States and *dismantle* means to kill or capture the members of the formal organization along with those that provide it with resources.

If that is the U.S. goal, what resources are then needed? According to several assessments, including General McChrystal's, substantial numbers of troops will be needed to secure and build a stable Afghanistan that will then be inimical to al Qaeda and deny it the sanctuary it desires.<sup>5</sup> However, this does not directly disrupt, dismantle, or defeat Al Qaeda, which primarily now operates next door in Pakistan. Only if Pakistan simultaneously takes action against al Qaeda would this approach succeed, essentially squeezing al Qaeda into ever narrower spaces along the border, substantially disrupting and dismantling if not totally defeating.

However, there appears to be little prospect of Pakistan taking these actions in a substantial way. Indeed, two of the principal al Qaeda allies that the international community is fighting in Afghanistan, the Quetta Shura Taliban and the Haqqani network, receive sanctuary in Pakistan and support from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Those operations against militants that Pakistan has undertaken have been directed at the "Pakistani Taliban," principally Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghan-mcchrystal2-2009oct02,0,3727636.story>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy>.

<sup>5</sup> "COMISAF's Initial Assessment," August 30, 2009, pp. 1-4, available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>.

(TNSM).<sup>6</sup> It is these groups that threaten the Pakistani state rather than ISI's Afghan proxies.

This is not to say Pakistan supports al Qaeda—indeed Pakistan has been helpful in collecting intelligence against some al Qaeda targets and has allowed numerous U.S. drone strikes against them. However, in protecting its proxies, Pakistan has indirectly protected al Qaeda, which shelters in the shadow of Afghan as well as Pakistani militants. There is no sign that Pakistan will cease to provide sanctuary to its proxies and by extension to al Qaeda.

This means efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan will continue to be those that have been ongoing—collecting intelligence through various means and then targeting with drone strikes based on that intelligence. A stable Afghanistan will not change that. Moreover, the prospects for a stable Afghanistan are grim while Afghan militants retain support and sanctuary in Pakistan. General McChrystal's report acknowledges this: "While the existence of safe havens in Pakistan does not guarantee ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] failure, Afghanistan does require Pakistani cooperation and action against violent militancy, particularly against those groups active in Afghanistan."<sup>7</sup> Thus, even an increase in U.S. troops and a transformation of counterinsurgency strategy has a high risk of failure if Pakistan does not take action against its Afghan proxies. Again that seems unlikely. Moreover, maintaining troops in Afghanistan will cost between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 per individual per year, meaning a force of 90,000 U.S. troops would cost \$45-\$90 billion per year for an unknown but likely lengthy duration.<sup>8</sup>

So the troop increase authorized by the president for Afghanistan will not directly disrupt, dismantle, or defeat al Qaeda even if executed exactly as General McChrystal proposes. It will only indirectly be able to do so if Pakistan takes action against its Afghan proxies, who in turn allow al Qaeda to shelter with them, yet there is little prospect of that. Finally, the chance of actually succeeding in making Afghanistan stable in the first place is low if Pakistan does not take action against its Afghan proxies. Even attempting to stabilize Afghanistan as General McChrystal proposes will be extraordinarily expensive. This seems to pose an insoluble problem for the United States.

This insoluble problem is why the counterterrorism option is important. If even a costly effort in Afghanistan cannot fully achieve the goal against

<sup>6</sup> On the different groups, see COMISAF's Initial Assessment, pp. 2-6; Gilles Dorronsoro, "The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan," (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), pp. 24-25; Omar Waraich and Andrew Buncombe, "Pakistan Readies for New Assault on Bin Laden Lair," *The Independent* (UK), October 6, 2009; and "Tehrik-e-Nefaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM)," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, October, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> "COMISAF's Initial Assessment," pp. 2-10.

<sup>8</sup> Christi Parsons and Julian Barnes, "Pricing an Afghan Troop Buildup Is No Simple Calculation," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 2009.

al Qaeda, then it is crucial to determine whether a less costly effort can achieve a similar effect by keeping Afghanistan inhospitable to al Qaeda. This would be a clear and cost-effective alignment of resources with goals, the essence of strategy.

Determining the viability of the counterterrorism option requires detailing what it might look like. Most discussion of the counterterrorism option has been vague. Riedel and O'Hanlon sum it up as "a few U.S. special forces teams, modern intelligence fusion centers, cruise-missile-carrying ships and unmanned aerial vehicles. . ." But there has been little effort to put flesh on this skeleton in terms of numbers and locations of U.S. troops. The following section presents a possible counterterrorism force posture.

### **Possible Counterterrorism Force Posture**

First, this posture would require maintaining bases in Afghanistan. Three airfields (see map below) would be sufficient: Bagram (about 50 kilometers north of Kabul), Jalalabad (in eastern Afghanistan) and Kandahar (in southern Afghanistan). This would enable forces to collect intelligence and rapidly target al Qaeda in the Pashtun regions where its allies would hold sway.

In terms of special operations forces, this posture would rely on two squadrons of so-called "Tier 1" operators, one at Jalalabad Air Field and one at Kandahar Air Field. These would be drawn from classified U.S. special mission units (SMUs) attached to Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), U.S. Army Special Forces' Combatant Commanders in Extremis Forces (CIFs), and allied units such as the British Special Air Service (SAS) or Canada's Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2).<sup>9</sup> In addition, the posture would require a battalion equivalent of U.S. Army Rangers, U.S. Navy SEALs, U.S. Marine Special Operations Companies (MSOCs), British Special Forces Support Group, or some mix, with basically a company with each Tier 1 squadron or equivalent and one in reserve at Bagram.<sup>10</sup>

These forces would work together as task forces, with the Tier 1 operators being tasked with executing direct action missions to kill or capture

<sup>9</sup> On JSOC and special mission units, see Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005), pp. 30-32. On Army Special Forces CIFs, see Fred J. Pushies, *U.S. Army Special Forces* (Osceola, WI: Zenith Press, 2001), pp. 92-93. On the SAS and particularly its counterterrorism capability, see Leroy Thompson, *SAS: Great Britain's Elite Special Air Service* (Osceola, WI: Zenith Press, 1994), pp. 91-93. On JTF2, see the official webpage: <http://www.jtf2.forces.gc.ca/index-eng.asp>. Special Forces' CIFs are not true "Tier 1" operators but author assesses that they have more than sufficient capability for the role assigned here.

<sup>10</sup> On the Rangers, see Mir Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors: A History of the U.S. Army Rangers* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2005). On the SEALs, see Dick Couch, *The Warrior Elite: The Forging of SEAL Class 228* (New York: Crown, 2001). On the MSOCs, see Marine Corps official website: <http://www.marsoc.usmc.mil/msor.html>. On the SFSG, see Ministry of Defence official website: <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FactSheets/DefenceInWales.htm>.

al Qaeda targets while the other units would serve as security and support for these missions. According to Sean Naylor's reporting, these direct action task forces are structured like the regional task forces in Iraq in 2006 that were tasked to hunt al Qaeda in Iraq. Naylor also reports similar units are already in place in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>



Map Source: University of Texas, Perry-Castañeda Map Collection.

In addition to these ground forces, a battalion task force from the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) would be used to provide helicopter transport, reconnaissance, and fire support for the task forces.

<sup>11</sup> Sean Naylor, "Spec Ops Unit Nearly Nabs Zarqawi," *Army Times*, April 28, 2006 and Sean Naylor, "Special Ops 'Surge' Sparks Debate," *Army Times*, December 23, 2008.

The battalion would bring some mix of MH-47 heavy lift helicopters and MH-60 medium lift helicopters, including the MH-60L gunship.<sup>12</sup> The helicopters have a combat radius of at least 300 kilometers (km), giving the task forces operational reach to almost any part of the Pashtun region.<sup>13</sup> This battalion could be supplemented with additional aviation assets from other units, such as CV-22 tilt rotor aircraft from the Air Force's 8<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron or AH-64 attack helicopters from any one of several Army aviation units.<sup>14</sup>

The JAF based task force would likely need to operate principally in the heartland of the Haqqani network (Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces) as this would be where al Qaeda's principal ally in the east could best protect its members (who are not generally Pashtun). For similar reasons, the KAF based task force would principally operate against targets in Kandahar, the home of the Quetta Shura Taliban, and some of the surrounding provinces such as Helmand and Oruzgan. Both task forces would nonetheless be capable of acting against targets elsewhere in the Pashtun regions.

In addition to these two task forces, a counterterrorism option would retain the three Army Special Forces battalions and other elements that appear to be assigned to Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A).<sup>15</sup> This provides roughly 54 Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs), the basic unit of Army Special Forces. While the task forces would focus purely on direct action, ODAs would partner with local forces to collect intelligence and secure specific areas.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, these ODAs would provide crucial support to critical Afghan allies and reassure them that the United States is not going to entirely abandon them. CJSOTF-A should, in addition, have a dedicated helicopter battalion for its own lift.

This reassurance and support of local allies is a crucial and underappreciated part of a counterterrorism option, though such support to local allies could also be part of a counterinsurgency campaign. Indeed, the recently launched Community Defense Initiative (CDI) seeks to use Special Forces troops to build effective tribal militias to fight the Taliban and other militants.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Fred J. Pushies, *Night Stalkers: 160th Special Ops Aviation Regiment* (Osceola, WI: Zenith Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See entry in *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* database. Both have a greater combat radius under normal conditions but the thin and often hot air in Afghanistan will reduce the radius substantially.

<sup>14</sup> See 8<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Squadron factsheet, online at: <http://www2.hurlburt.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=3481>.

<sup>15</sup> Naylor, "Special Ops 'Surge' Sparks Debate."

<sup>16</sup> On ODA partnering with a variety of local forces, see Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs Publishing, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Jon Boone, "U.S. Pours Millions into Anti-Taliban Militias in Afghanistan," *Guardian*, November 22, 2009. See also Special Forces officer Jim Gant's paper "One Tribe at a Time," online at: [http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/wp-content/themes/stevenpressfield/one\\_tribe\\_at\\_a\\_time.pdf](http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/wp-content/themes/stevenpressfield/one_tribe_at_a_time.pdf).

With 54 ODAs, the United States could potentially support local allies in roughly 50 Afghan districts, assuming one ODA per district with a few deployed in other roles.<sup>18</sup> Logistics might prevent this upper limit from being reached but at a minimum several dozen districts could be supported by CJSOTF-A's ODAs. These local allies would in many cases be from non-Pashtun groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras), which would limit their ability to be effective in Pashtun areas but would likely include at least a few other tribes that see more benefit working with the Afghan government and the United States than against them.

The non-Pashtun groups were the critical allies of the United States in 2001 and remain staunchly against the Taliban and other militants. The Tajiks of the Panjshir Valley, for example, are probably even more anti-Taliban than the United States and have made the province one of the most secure in the country.<sup>19</sup> With U.S. support, these groups will be able to prevent the expansion of militants outside Pashtun areas.

Local allies in Pashtun areas will not only help contain militants but will also enable collection of intelligence to support the task force operations. One example is the Shinwari tribe in Nangarhar province, which has never valued the Taliban. Shinwari militias are reported to be working with Special Forces in the Achin district of Nangarhar.<sup>20</sup> The Afghan Border Police commander on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border at Spin Boldak, General Abdul Razziq, also derives substantial revenue from cross-border trade and will likely continue to fight the Taliban to maintain this revenue, making him a probable local partner.<sup>21</sup> Another potential ally is the Alokozai tribe in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province, which has a history of resisting the Taliban.<sup>22</sup>

Supporting local allies does not mean abandoning the Afghan government any more than supporting local allies in the Awakening movement in Iraq's Anbar province meant abandoning the Iraq government. However, it does pose risks, as local allies interests may not always align with those of the

<sup>18</sup> One ODA per district seems reasonable based on Jim Gant's description of ODA 316's experience in Kunar province's district of Khas Kunar. See Gant, pp. 16-22.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Arnoldy, "After Afghanistan Election, Governors Seek Distance from 'Illegal' Karzai," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 7, 2009 and author observations in Panjshir, July 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Afghan Militias Battle Taliban with Aid of U.S.," *New York Times*, November 22, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Sean M. Maloney, "A Violent Impediment: The Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar province 2003-2007," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* v.19 n.2 (June 2008), pp. 217-218; Carlotta Gall, "Taliban Rebels Still Menacing Afghan South," *New York Times*, March 2, 2006; "Suicide Bombers Strike Kandahar Police HQ," *Associated Press*, September 7, 2008; and author interviews, Kandahar, July 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Chayes, "A Mullah Dies, and War Comes Knocking," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2007 and M. Karim Faiez and Laura King, "Anti-Taliban Leader Was Target of Deadly Bombing, Officials Say," *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 2008. The resistance of the Alokozai declined when two key leaders died in 2007-2008 but could potentially be revived.

central government.<sup>23</sup> Balancing the two will require deftness which will be discussed later.

In addition to the two task forces and CJSOTF-A, a few more “enablers” would be required. First, this posture would need additional special operations personnel focused on intelligence collection, along with a substantial complement of intelligence community personnel to collect both human and signals intelligence.<sup>24</sup> Second, it would require a significant complement of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) including Predators, Reapers, and other specialized types along with their support personnel, equivalent to perhaps three squadrons. Third, an AC-130 gunship squadron for air support would be needed, along with combat search and rescue teams from Air Force Special Operations Command.

Clearly, “small” is a relative term. This special operations posture alone would be roughly five battalions of ground forces, eight aviation squadrons/battalions, and a few odds and ends plus higher headquarters. This would be approximately 5,000 U.S. and Coalition troops.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, a conventional force component would be needed to serve as a quick reaction force, to provide security for the bases, and to protect convoys. A reasonable estimate for this force would be a brigade or regimental combat team, giving a battalion to each base with the higher headquarters at Bagram. This would add about another 3,500 troops.<sup>26</sup> In addition, about 500 U.S. personnel would remain as advisers and liaisons to Afghan security forces, particularly the Afghan National Army where they would be attached at brigade and corps level.

Additional air support besides the UAVs and AC-130s would also be needed. Two squadrons of fighter-bombers (F-15E, A-10, etc.) likely would be

<sup>23</sup> On Iraq, see Austin Long, “The Anbar Awakening,” *Survival* v.50 n.2 (March/April 2008); Steven Simon, “The Price of the Surge,” *Foreign Affairs*, v.87 n.3 (May/June 2008); and John A. McCary, “The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives,” *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2009.

<sup>24</sup> For discussion of these units and what they might look like, see Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die* and Michael Smith, *Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America’s Most Secret Special Operations Team* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Each Special Forces battalion is roughly 400 personnel, while a Ranger battalion is roughly 575 personnel and two squadrons of Tier 1 operators would hypothetically be about 300 personnel total (including some support personnel). A helicopter battalion is roughly 800 personnel and each UAV squadron has roughly 200 personnel in theater (or less depending on the system). An AC-130 squadron is roughly 500 personnel. See the relevant tables of organization and equipment (TO&E) for each unit. This totals about 4,775 personnel, with an additional 225 for intelligence collection and analysis along with higher headquarters functions.

<sup>26</sup> This is the approximate number of personnel for an Army Stryker Brigade Combat Team, see *Field Manual 3-21.31 The Stryker Brigade Combat Team*, pp. 1-17.



sufficient, adding another 2,000 personnel or so.<sup>27</sup> Finally, this posture would require additional staff, logistics, and support personnel (medical for instance), some but not all of which could be contractors, adding another 2,000 military personnel.<sup>28</sup> This would be a total force of about 13,000 military personnel and some supporting intelligence community personnel and contractors.

This is a high-end estimate and the counterterrorism option could potentially be done with fewer troops. Some military personnel with Afghanistan experience believe this mission could be undertaken with half this number of troops but the posture described above errs on the side of caution.<sup>29</sup> This is small compared to the current posture in Afghanistan, smaller still than the forces implied in General McChrystal's report, and tiny compared to the peak number of forces in Iraq. On the other hand, it is vastly larger than any other counterterrorism deployment.

Holding aside for a moment whether this is a sufficient force to prevent al Qaeda's return to Afghanistan, how would the United States get to this posture? It would not do so overnight and the way it transitions will have consequences. First, the Obama administration should embrace the expansion of Afghan security forces, especially the Afghan National Army (ANA), called for in General McChrystal's initial assessment. This includes accelerating the growth of the ANA to 134,000 by October 2010 from its August 2009 level of 92,000 as well as pushing to rapidly expand the Afghan National Police (ANP).<sup>30</sup> Though the quality of Afghan forces will likely be low and the goals may not be met, some increase in total force levels should be possible and will enable the U.S. transition to a counterterrorism posture.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the President has directed an increase in force levels beginning this year. A counterterrorism strategy would have these additional forces concentrate on achieving the expansion of the Afghan security forces that Gen. McChrystal has called for. 2010 will be a time of feverish arming and training of Afghan forces while Coalition forces hold the line. President Obama has already directed that beginning in early 2011, the United States will begin to draw down its conventional forces as Afghan forces stand up. By the time of

<sup>27</sup> Each squadron would itself have only about 70-85 personnel but would require significant numbers of support personnel. For example, the three fighter squadrons of the 366<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing have only about 225 personnel but the wing itself has about 4,000 personnel for maintenance, logistics, and airfield operations. The analysis here assumes that it will require about half that number in theater to maintain two squadrons. See 366<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing factsheet at: <http://www.mountainhome.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=4366>.

<sup>28</sup> This is slightly more than an old Division Support Command (DISCOM) for a light infantry division (about 1600 personnel) for a somewhat smaller force. See TOE associated with *Field Manual 63-2-1 Division Support Command Light Infantry, Airborne, and Air Assault Divisions*.

<sup>29</sup> Author personal communication, September 2009.

<sup>30</sup> COMISAF Initial Assessment, pp. G-1 to G-3.

<sup>31</sup> For pessimistic assessments about expansion, Thom Shanker and John Cushman, "Reviews Raise Doubts on Training of Afghan Forces," *New York Times*, November 5, 2009.

the 2012 presidential election or soon thereafter, the United States would shift fully to the posture described above (essentially a 20-24 month drawdown).

The strategic goal of this transition is to ensure the survival of an Afghan state while acknowledging that probably 35-40 percent of the country (i.e. almost all of the Pashtun regions) will be under the *de facto* control of militants. At present, militants control, by fairly pessimistic estimates, perhaps 20-30 percent of the country (though they are able to conduct attacks in a larger area than that).<sup>32</sup> Rather than seeking to reverse this control, the counterterrorism option seeks to contain it. This will limit al Qaeda's potential haven and ensure that the United States has continued access to the bases it needs through reassurances to the government and local allies.

There are a few critical regions that will have to be defended, but this should not be too arduous. The first is Kabul and its surrounding area, for both symbolic reasons and to ensure the viability of Bagram airbase. The second is Jalalabad and the surrounding area, along with the road links east to the Kyber Pass and west to Kabul. The third is Kandahar City and the surrounding area, along with the road link to Kabul. This is a total of about 750 kilometers of highway along with the three cities.

The 750 kilometers could probably be guarded reasonably effectively by about ten ANA *kandaks* (battalions) a total of about 6,000 personnel (less than 5 percent of the force goal for late 2010). This would yield one *kandak* for every seventy five kilometers. These forces could be replaced or supplemented by ANP along with local defense organizations such as Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) or CDI. Similarly each of the three cities could be allocated ten *kandaks* to secure it. This total of forty *kandaks* is less than the number deemed combat ready in 2007 (forty six according to the Afghan Ministry of Defense). Consequently, there should be plenty of Afghan security forces to accomplish this mission even if the expansion of security forces in 2009-2010 is not very successful.<sup>33</sup> These forces would retain the ability to call

<sup>32</sup>This is derived from a count of the districts in provinces with substantial insurgent presence, based on figures in the June 2009 Department of Defense Report *Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, p. 23; Dorronsoro, "The Taliban's Winning Strategy," pp. 24-25; and author's observations and interviews in Afghanistan in July 2009. This gives militants credit for controlling most (75-100%) of the districts in Helmand, Kandahar, Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Kunar, Nuristan, and Zabul along with some (25-50%) of the districts in Ghazni, Oruzgan, Farah, Laghman, Wardak, and Logar. In addition, insurgents control a few districts in Nangarhar and Kunduz. This gives a range of districts controlled by insurgents from about 92 to 132 out of 398 (23-33%) and probably overstates the extent of insurgent control. If the militants controlled all the districts in the provinces listed above (except Nangarhar and the Hazara districts of Ghazni, Oruzgan, and Wardak), which would represent virtually all the Pashtun districts, this would give them about 155-160 districts (39-40%). However, Nuristan and Kunar (22 districts, about 5% of the total) are dominated by the Hezb-i-Islami Gullbuddin (HIG), which is separate from the Quetta Shura Taliban and Haqqani network and not strongly affiliated with al Qaeda.

<sup>33</sup><http://www.mod.gov.af/>.

on U.S. air support if needed through the brigade level U.S. advisers and in extremis could be supported by the U.S. conventional forces stationed at the three air bases, giving high confidence that they can hold these cities.

Both the central government and local allies will also continue to benefit from U.S. aid, greatly reducing their incentive to turn on the United States. The United States, via the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and special operations forces, very effectively paid off various groups when it toppled the Taliban in 2001-2002.<sup>34</sup> According to one report, the United States continues to pay the brother of President Hamid Karzai for his support, including providing individuals to serve in a paramilitary force.<sup>35</sup> If the largesse continues to flow, there seems little reason to believe support for the United States will not continue among the beneficiaries (i.e. key elites and their followers).

During this transition, the United States will have to continue supporting the central government even as it builds up local allies. This balancing act is required to ensure the continued existence of a formal, if weak, central state, which will in turn simplify the negotiations for the U.S. counterterrorism posture. Tying the local allies to the central state in some way would help with this and an expanded CDI or the similar Afghan Public Protection Program provides a means to do this.<sup>36</sup> Some might argue that this increases the risk of warlordism, which may or may not be true but is also irrelevant to the strategic goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda.<sup>37</sup>

The transition will also mitigate the moral hazard endemic to support to counterinsurgency. Put simply, the United States and its allies are more committed to a stable, democratic Afghanistan than the Afghan government. The McChrystal Report rightly notes the massive problems with corruption and poor governance in Afghanistan that hobble the counterinsurgency effort.<sup>38</sup> Yet as long as the United States and its allies are willing to pour ever more

<sup>34</sup> On this period and pay-offs, see Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005); Gary Berntsen and Ralph Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005); Dalton Fury, *Kill Bin Laden: A Delta Force Commander's Account of the Hunt for the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008); and Henry A. Crumpton, "Intelligence and War: Afghanistan 2001-2002," in Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber, eds., *Transforming U.S. Intelligence* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Dexter Filkins, Mark Mazetti, and James Risén, "Brother of Afghan Leader Said to Be Paid By C.I.A.," *New York Times*, October 27, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> The apparent difference in CDI and AP3 is the level of training and vetting of personnel, which is apparently higher in AP3. The trade-off is that AP3 takes longer to put in place. See Boone, "U.S. Pours Millions. . ." and Farah Stockman, "Shifting Afghan Loyalties Test U.S. Bid for Permanent Gains," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> For a critique of the use of tribal forces, see Kim Marten, "The Danger of Tribal Militias in Afghanistan," *Journal of International Affairs*, v.63 n.1 (Fall/Winter 2009).

<sup>38</sup> "COMISAF Initial Assessment," pp. 2-8 to 2-9.

troops into the country, it has little leverage over the government.<sup>39</sup> In this circumstance, the threat to cut support, which Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has suggested, is not terribly credible.<sup>40</sup> With a transition to a small footprint and the development of local allies, a clearer signal will be sent that the Afghan government has to do more. Clearly the transition will not solve this problem, but it will at least be a step in the right direction.

It will therefore take about three years to get to this posture. But will it work? First, this is clearly not the U.S. posture before September 11, 2001, so any comparisons to that period are inapt. Second, arguments that this was essentially the United States posture from 2002-2006 are much closer to the mark. However, here the argument is that this posture “failed” because the militants have made a comeback. Yet this misinterprets the strategic goal completely. If the strategic goal is a stable Afghanistan, then the strategy was a failure. If the strategic goal is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan, it was a success: there are, at present, few al Qaeda members in Afghanistan and certainly no senior leadership. In an interview on October 5, 2009 national security adviser James Jones noted of al Qaeda in Afghanistan that the “maximum estimate is less than 100 operating in the country, no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies.”<sup>41</sup> The counterterrorism option merely seeks to ensure that this minimal level of al Qaeda presence continues in the future.

Alternately, this argument conflates all militants under the rubric al Qaeda. This is problematic: if any thug with a Kalashnikov is a threat to U.S. national security then readers should prepare for a rough future as there are millions of them spread across the globe. It is this conflating of the local fighter with the global terrorist that David Kilcullen’s *Accidental Guerilla* rails against, so it would behoove the United States to avoid this error.<sup>42</sup>

More generally, Riedel and O’Hanlon claim this small footprint posture will be ineffective because actionable intelligence will not be obtained without a substantial conventional force ground presence. Yet this is belied by the fact that the United States gains actionable intelligence against targets in even very dangerous areas in which it has essentially no ground forces. In Somalia in 1993, a small U.S. task force, supported by a small conventional force, was able to collect intelligence on the Habr Gidr clan.<sup>43</sup> CIA and special operations

<sup>39</sup> For a lucid discussion of the problem of leverage in counterinsurgency, see Ben Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “Gates Says U.S. Could Withhold Aid if Afghanistan Cannot Curb Corruption,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> “Adviser Downplays Threat of Renewed al-Qaida Haven,” Associated Press report, October 4, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs Publishing, 2004) and Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999).

personnel were also able to collect intelligence in Iraq before the 2003 invasion.<sup>44</sup>

The United States also has a good track record of gaining actionable intelligence specifically against al Qaeda in hostile environments without conventional forces. At least three times in 2007-2009, the United States collected sufficient intelligence to enable strikes on al Qaeda affiliates in Somalia, where there are no conventional U.S. forces.<sup>45</sup> A similar strike was launched in Yemen in 2002, another country lacking U.S. conventional forces.<sup>46</sup> Across the border from Afghanistan in Pakistan it has struck even more targets (according to one source at least thirty eight from September 2008 to March 2009) despite having no conventional presence.<sup>47</sup>

Some will protest that the Pakistanis serve as the ground presence in Pakistan, but they do not have a substantial security force (or in some cases any at all) presence in many areas where the United States has targeted al Qaeda. For example, in the militant redoubt of South Waziristan, where the United States has launched multiple drone strikes, Pakistan had no significant conventional ground force presence until October 2009.<sup>48</sup> Others argue Somalia and Yemen are poor comparisons because they are mostly flat and on the coast, making offshore intelligence collection easy. While true, this argument stresses access, not ground force presence, which enables collection. Yet with the posture recommended in this article, the United States is assured vastly greater access than it has in either Somalia or Yemen.

In the period immediately after September 11, 2001, even with essentially no conventional ground presence in Afghanistan, small teams of U.S. intelligence and special operations forces worked with local allies to gain substantial intelligence on al Qaeda in an environment filled with hostile Taliban. A poorly executed operation at Tora Bora enabled Osama bin Laden to escape, but this was not because intelligence was unavailable. Even this failure resulted in the deaths of many al Qaeda associates and forced its

<sup>44</sup> Michael Tucker and Charles Faddis, *Operation Hotel California: The Clandestine War Inside Iraq* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2008) and Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*.

<sup>45</sup> Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Strike in Somalia Targets Al-Qaeda Figure," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2007; Eric Schmitt and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Qaeda Leader Reported Killed in Somalia," *New York Times*, May 2, 2008; and Ian Black, "Somalia Raid: Warning that U.S. Can Strike at Will," *Guardian*, September 15, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Tony Karon, "Yemen Strike Opens New Chapter in War on Terror," *Time*, November 5, 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Greg Miller, "Predator Strikes in Pakistan: U.S. Says Drones Ravage Al Qaeda," *Chicago Tribune*, March 22, 2009; Salman Masood, "Taliban in Pakistan Confirm That Their Leader Is Dead," *New York Times*, August 25, 2009; and Tim Reid, "Former CIA Agent's Hunt for Bin Laden in Pakistani Badlands," *Times (UK)*, September 9, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Zahid Hussain and Matthew Rosenberg, "Pakistan Begins Offensive Against Taliban," *Wall Street Journal*, October 18, 2009.

leadership to flee the country.<sup>49</sup> It seems implausible that a vastly more robust presence in Afghanistan would be significantly less capable of collecting intelligence than these small teams, or similar U.S. efforts in Somalia and Pakistan.

At best, large numbers of U.S. troops make the work of intelligence collectors easier. Their presence helps prevent militants from massing forces to attack small units and provides readily available quick reaction forces, allowing collectors to assume more risk in collection. Conventional forces also collect some intelligence organically via patrols and engagements. With a reduced force posture, collectors will have to be more circumspect and work harder. Yet as the above examples of collection in hostile environment demonstrate, this will not prevent them from operating.

Another argument against the small footprint is that U.S. ground forces in substantial numbers in Afghanistan have given the United States more leverage over Pakistan. According to this explanation, the increase in troops in Afghanistan provides the rationale for Pakistani offensive operations against militants in 2009 and also why U.S. drone targeting has been more successful in the same period. Yet the timing suggests that this change in behavior has more to do with Pakistani perceptions of the militants' threat. Pakistani operations began when in April 2009 militants broke a ceasefire that was only a few weeks old and sought to expand their control towards the Punjabi heartland of Pakistan.<sup>50</sup> This timing seems significant in explaining Pakistan's offensives. In contrast, U.S. drone strikes increased in tempo beginning in late 2008, months before a decision to send more troops to Afghanistan was made.<sup>51</sup>

Even if troops do give leverage over Pakistan, how much is that leverage worth in U.S. blood and treasure? There is no sign that additional troops will cause Pakistan to stop supporting its proxies. In terms of the strategic goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda, Pakistan was aiding U.S. intelligence collection and began allowing drone strikes in June 2004 when there were less than 18,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Thus, it seems likely they will not simply stop it with 13,000 there.<sup>52</sup>

The final argument marshaled against this small footprint posture is that it hands al Qaeda a major propaganda victory. It could claim it drove another superpower out, that the West lacks will, and the like. There is some merit in this argument but with 13,000 U.S. military personnel in the country

<sup>49</sup> In addition to the sources in fn 34, see Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die* and Peter Krause, "The Last Good Chance: A Reassessment of U.S. Operations at Tora Bora," *Security Studies*, October 2008.

<sup>50</sup> See "Taliban Deceived Govt., Staged Withdrawal Drama," *Daily Times (Pakistan)*, April 29, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> See Miller, "Predator Strikes in Pakistan."

<sup>52</sup> See Lisa Burgess, "U.S. Troop Presence in Afghanistan at 17,900, and Expected to Hold Steady," *Stars and Stripes*, July 9, 2004 and Ismail Khan and Dilawar Khan Wazir, "Night Raid Kills Nek, Four Other Militants," *Dawn*, June 19, 2004.

hunting for al Qaeda day and night, it would probably not prove to be a resounding victory.

More importantly, it is far from clear what this propaganda victory would mean in terms of the strategic goal. It would not appear to have much effect on the first two goals, as al Qaeda would continue to be disrupted and dismantled by operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the latter of which will remain highly unsafe for al Qaeda. It might make it harder to achieve the third goal, defeat. Yet it is this goal that is most unclear anyway. In fact, Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker argue in *War 2.0* that, while it has become impossible for al Qaeda to “win” in any meaningful sense, its existence as a transnational social movement using various media means it cannot be totally defeated either.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the United States has to leave Afghanistan at some point, so it is inevitable that it will make the claim to have driven the United States out.

As policymakers have sought to grapple with the challenge of Afghanistan, the lessons of Vietnam have been invoked and debated by both those favoring an increase in U.S. troops and those against it.<sup>54</sup> Yet Vietnam was not the United States only experience with irregular warfare in Southeast Asia. The U.S. experience in Laos provides a better historical analogy for U.S. strategic ends and means in Afghanistan.

In Laos, the United States supported both a weak central state and minority tribes, principally the mountain dwelling Hmong. The U.S. goal was limited, seeking both to interdict the use of Laotian territory to supply Communist forces in South Vietnam and to tie down as many North Vietnamese units as possible. Beginning in 1961 and with only a handful of CIA case officers, development workers, and Special Forces personnel, the U.S. mission worked with Hmong leader Vang Pao to create an effective guerilla force. This force had notable successes against the Communists, evolving into a force capable of holding territory when supported by U.S. airpower and small numbers of Thai ground forces. Other CIA-supported irregular units and even a few Laotian government units were also effective. In addition, the strategy was able to tie down multiple North Vietnamese divisions and ensure that the Laotian government held about as much territory in 1972 as it did in 1962.<sup>55</sup>

As with Laos, U.S. goals in Afghanistan are strictly limited and do not require a major state building enterprise. If anything, U.S. goals in Afghanistan

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker, *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> See for example Lewis Sorley, “The Vietnam War We Ignore,” and Gordon Goldstein, “From Defeat, Lessons in Victory,” contrasting op-eds in the October 17, 2009 *New York Times*.

<sup>55</sup> See Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006-declassified 2009); Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972-declassified 1980); Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1996); and Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995).

are more limited than in Laos, as the goal in the former is to keep out at a few hundred irregular fighters while the latter sought to oppose tens of thousands of disciplined soldiers. The limited goals in Laos could be achieved with limited means, making it sustainable for more than a decade. A similar limited means strategy will likewise make U.S. strategy in Afghanistan sustainable for the long term.

To return to the point from which this analysis began—strategy is matching means and ends. If the ends desired are about al Qaeda, the counterterrorism option is the best fit in terms of means. It is sustainable, always crucial in prolonged conflict, as it limits the expenditure of U.S. blood and treasure. It is also less dependent on Pakistan choosing to abandon its proxies, a possibility that seems remote at present. The counterterrorism option is not only possible, but as Steve Simon and Jonathan Stevenson argue, it is the best alternative for the United States.<sup>56</sup>



<sup>56</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, “Afghanistan: How Much is Enough?” *Survival*, October 2009.