

# The US Strategy in Afghanistan and its implications for the US Air Force

By  
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Following the July 2010 Senate hearings and confirmation, General David Petraeus finds himself responsible for implementing a “winning” strategy in Afghanistan. It is an understatement to say that he faces significant challenges in this effort. Support for the war among the American public is waning. CNN polling data in 2006 showed that 50 percent of the American public support the war, with 48 percent opposed. CNN polling data now show the numbers at 37 percent supporting and 62 percent opposing.<sup>1</sup> Entering midterm elections, Democrats who openly opposed the war in Iraq now find themselves tied, if by nothing else through party affiliation, to President Obama’s policies in Afghanistan. Republicans, who see a chance to retake the House, and possibly the Senate, have difficulty criticizing President Obama’s policies in this region for fear of appearing “soft” on supporting the troops. With this backdrop, the timetable for success will remain short.

US national interests in Afghanistan are and have been narrow—protecting US citizens and interests from terrorist attacks through the elimination of a homeland for terrorist groups like al Qaeda. General Petraeus stated recently, "We're here so that Afghanistan does not once again become a sanctuary for transnational extremists the way it was when al-Qaida planned the 9/11 attacks in the Kandahar area."<sup>2</sup> The US would prefer a stable, democratic type government in Afghanistan to prevent a future terrorist homeland, however, it would settle for an Afghanistan that is not a threat to its neighbors—Pakistan and India—and no longer proves a threat to the US. However, the US cannot appear to have abandoned the Karzai government. No administration would wish to see images like those when Saigon fell in 1975 running repeatedly on the 24 hour news channels.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>, 19 Aug 20

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/15/david-petraeus-insists-th\\_n\\_682537.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/15/david-petraeus-insists-th_n_682537.html), 16 Aug 20

Ultimately, though, the security of the Afghan national sovereignty is the responsibility of the Afghan government and its people and General Petraeus is already setting expectations. He is reshaping the argument with recent statements, such as, “What we face is not some kind of monolithic Taliban enemy. In fact, it’s more like a syndicate, is the term that we often use for the enemy that faces our troopers and our Afghan counterparts; and the Afghan civilians.”<sup>3</sup> By implication, the US can negotiate with “a syndicate,” even breaking it apart or finding some accommodations. Negotiating with an enemy that may eventually become a part of the government has significantly different connotations. This approach is not that different from the one already openly discussed by the Karzai government, one of engagement and accommodation. Regardless of the strategy selected, the strategic implications are inevitably the eventual withdrawal of US ground troops from Afghanistan. With the removal of ground forces from the region, i.e., Iraq and Afghanistan, the political and military options remaining will be significantly narrowed. Leslie Gelb, President Emeritus and Board Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations proposes that the US “needs to build a containment policy against the Taliban with Afghan's neighbors. This includes Russia, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and yes, Iran. All share strong interests in preventing the spread of Taliban influence and curtailing the drug trade.”<sup>4</sup> As a simple geography lesson reminder, Afghanistan is landlocked and because of this, the US will be forced to rely upon air, space, and cyber capabilities. Thus, as these are recognized operational areas of the US Air Force, US national interests in the region will be protected principally by the US Air Force.

While serving US national interests in the region, the US Air Force will find itself facing increased basing pressures. Due to the threat, the Taliban in Afghanistan and al Qaeda in Pakistan, the need for secure airbases in Afghanistan will remain. The governments in Pakistan, Iraq, and NATO ally Turkey will not have their public’s support for air operations against targets in the region and overflight from bases in Qatar will prove problematic. Sufficient forces will have to remain to protect the airfields in Afghanistan required for operations across the region. The implications, though, are that this will be Airmen supporting the Afghan Army. Following the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, the Air Force has been

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article573850.ece>, 16 Aug 20

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cfr.org/publication/22740/way\\_out\\_of\\_afghanistan.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/22740/way_out_of_afghanistan.html), 1 Aug 10

becoming increasingly more responsible for its own airbase security. Basing pressures will also place an increased demand for use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) that require shorter airstrips, and present less of a visual presence in the immediate area. Air operations from Afghanistan will ultimately become more problematic, driving technological innovation and the requirement for RPAs with greater range. Even then, the solutions are not simple, as overflight across India (from aircraft carriers) or Iran will not likely be tolerated by either nation.

When Operation Enduring Freedom began, al Qaeda was principally in Afghanistan. Today al Qaeda has moved operations from Afghanistan to a well established stronghold in the mountains of Pakistan, a coalition partner and a nuclear state. Eliminating al Qaeda in Pakistan is preferable, but this will occur at the time and choosing of the Pakistani government, not the US. Pakistan will take actions against al Qaeda only when al Qaeda directly threatens the Pakistani government. The US cannot openly commit ground troops to the region, as it would not wish to invite international condemnation nor suffer the repercussions that invading a coalition partners' sovereign territory would entail. Fighting in the mountains of Pakistan does not play to the strengths of the American military, and would expend resources—both personnel and money—over which the American public has grown weary. Further the US has an enduring interest in preserving the stability of the Pakistani government—any violation of Pakistani sovereignty by US ground forces could precipitate a violent regime change in Islamabad. Finally, Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons. While Pakistan would not likely use nuclear weapons directly against US forces, it might well use surrogates, such as terrorist or other nations, like North Korea, to act against the US in their stead. Thus, with the withdrawal of ground troops from Afghanistan, what might be a viable long-term strategy toward the region and what are the implications of that strategy for the US Air Force?

Without a significant ground presence in the region, the US must move to a similar strategy against al Qaeda as that proposed by Leslie Gelb in Afghanistan, one of containment. Containment, reinforced by surveillance, requires the presents of US Air Force assets, though as a part of a larger national strategy that will involve US intelligence agencies and Special Forces. Surveillance through space, ground, and air capabilities will allow the combatant commander to contain the threat posed by insurgents while also keeping a close watch on the Pakistani nuclear capability. The strategy of containment does have Cold War

implications, but it served as a successful policy against a very capable adversary for 50 years. Many proposed that containment was a viable policy in Iraq when viewed against the implications of invasion and occupation. George Lopez, Director of Policy Studies at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and David Cortright, President of the Fourth Freedom Forum and Research Fellow at the Kroc Institute contend that containing Iraq through sanctions worked in destroying the Iraqi war machine and that invasion was not necessary.<sup>5</sup> In any case, containment may be the only policy alternative available in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

We will soon be looking back at 10 years since the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Even at that time, September 2001, the US Air Force had been flying combat operations for 10+ years since the opening of Desert Storm in December 1990. Looking forward 10 years, it is easy to see the US Air Force once again carrying the combat load for the nation. However, by 2021 the US Air Force will have fewer assets than it does today. F-22s and F-35s are not replacing F-16s and F-15s at a one-to-one rate. The B-1 will most likely be out of the inventory, as maybe the B-2, as well. That will leave the remaining B-52s and possibly a new long range strike platform, e.g., manned bomber, to carry the remaining load. The nation will find the Service either a very tired force or one further leveraging technologically to meet the challenges it will face at the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will present. This challenge can either be viewed as a “Service in crisis” or on standing at a transition point. The decisions reached in relation to Afghanistan and Pakistan may well be the impetus that drives the US Air Force forward and where it will ultimately find the right force mix and strategy to be successful in the post-Cold War era.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/59924/george-a-lopez-and-david-cortright/containing-iraq-sanctions-worked>, Jul/Aug 2008