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Dienbienphu, Afghanistan

By Stanley Kober

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In December 2009, President Barack Obama announced an increase in the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, arguing that the additional troops would break the Taliban's momentum and deny al Qaeda a safe haven. The strategy was based on how small the effort had been compared to Iraq, and the fact that the Taliban had used the opportunity to recover from its original setback.

A year later, the president's strategy seems fraught with risk. Although the defense department claims progress has been made, its own reports reflect unease. In the words of a recent review, "the Taliban have sufficient organizational capability and support to pose a threat to the government's viability, particularly in the south."

Not unexpectedly, the strategy has become the subject of controversy. Having been criticized for proclaiming an initial withdrawal of American forces in July of this year, the president has now indicated they will stay until 2014, and the vice president has just assured the Afghan government they will stay longer, if necessary.

The debate has focused entirely on American strategy, with little interest in discussing what the Taliban strategy might be. The Taliban seem to be regarded merely as responding to our actions

and not as opponents who have a strategy of their own, which we should try to understand if we are to succeed in defeating them.

Instead, it is all about us. "President Obama's original announcement of a July 2011 withdrawal start date had signaled to the Taliban that they could wait the U.S. out," the Wall Street Journal argued in an editorial, while Vice President Biden's extension of the deadline would send the right message "to those in the Taliban whose appetite for fighting may be ebbing under U.S. military pressure."

Perhaps, but since the Taliban live there, and we don't, it would seem perfectly natural for them to think they can wait us out, whatever U.S. officials say in speeches. And hoping their appetite for fighting may ebb is uncomfortably reminiscent of our war in Vietnam. We destroyed the Vietcong in the Tet offensive and inflicted horrible casualties on North Vietnamese forces, but they still fought on.

It may be a cliché, but as Sun Tzu wrote in the Art of War, to be victorious, you should know yourself and know your enemy. Thus, any strategy must begin with the recognition that the Taliban, who are locals, have more staying power in Afghanistan than we do. Whether it is in 2011, 2014, or some later date, we will reduce the size of our forces -- and so will our allies. That is why we are trying to train Afghan forces: like the Taliban, they also live there.

After we come to this recognition and abandon the delusion that the Taliban will be intimidated by our speeches, we need to come to some understanding of their strategy. In this regard, useful insight might be gained from looking at the Vietnam war, but more specifically, at the French campaign.

The decisive battle of the French war was Dienbienphu. It was the climax of a conflict that had extended for years. The French were not attempting to achieve a military victory. Instead, as Bernard Fall, one of the greatest chroniclers of the Vietnam conflicts, put it, their "totally stalemated situation required the French to create a military situation that would permit cease-fire negotiations on a basis of equality with the enemy."

The idea was simple. Create a strong point the enemy could not ignore. Ideally, a set-piece battle would play to France's strengths, allowing it to inflict casualties on the Viet Minh and thereby achieve a more satisfactory peace.

That is not the way things turned out. The French badly underestimated the Viet Minh, who surprised them by secretly hauling artillery into the mountains surrounding the fortress. This achievement effectively cut off the French garrison from adequate resupply, sealing its fate.

Our enemies are trying to imitate the Viet Minh by attempting to cut our forces off from their supplies. "We have assigned our fighters to go after the NATO supply tankers wherever in Pakistan," Azam Tariq, a Pakistani Taliban spokesman, told the Associated Press. "We want to make very, very difficult all land routes for NATO in Pakistan."

Tariq was bragging because the Taliban had destroyed fourteen tankers carrying fuel to our forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, these attacks are now a regular event.

Dienbienphu is a warning: do not underestimate your enemy, and do not mistake posturing for reality.