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Taliban's Time Horizon Longer Than America's

By Ivan Eland

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In contrast to World War II and Desert Storm – which had clear goals, even though those of the latter were limited – the war in Afghanistan resembles the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War. In the former, the goal changed from defeating the Spanish in a conventional war to subduing Philippine guerrillas in order to imperially conquer the archipelago. In the latter, contrary to popular belief, Lyndon Johnson's goal was never to win, but to alter the conditions on the battlefield to compel the enemy to negotiate.

In the Spanish-American War, America was able to take out the adversarial regime relatively easy. The hard part came in getting rid of the guerrillas, who were sure they were promised by the McKinley administration that if they helped the Americans get rid of the Spanish, the Philippines would win its independence. The latter didn't happen, and it took several years of brutal American counterinsurgency tactics and torture to subdue the local Thomas Jefferson wannabes.

Similarly, in Afghanistan, taking down the Taliban only required 700 U.S. Special Forces and CIA personnel calling in American air strikes to support the ground fighters of the Afghan anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. The hard part has been battling a resurgent Taliban, which uses guerrilla tactics.

In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, proper skepticism of an outright U.S. military victory abounds, leading to an escalation aimed at gaining military advantage for ultimate negotiations with the Taliban. Yet President Obama has given the escalation only 18 months in which to reach this goal, as well as the equally unrealistic objectives of

crippling al-Qaeda and training Afghan security forces to operate on their own. To get the U.S. military to buy into the 18-month period prior to commencement of withdrawal, Obama had to consent to the escalation of an extra 30,000 troops.

The 18-month timetable to begin withdrawal was the standard naïve liberal dogma that this would jolt the Afghan government into becoming a clean, democratic governing force that could effectively battle the Taliban. Instead, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has made clear he doesn't think the United States can win, is trying to cut deals with the Taliban and their patrons in the Pakistani military (also ostensibly an American ally), and has even threatened to join the Taliban if the United States keeps killing Afghan civilians.

Almost as bad, the troop surge to win military advantage for negotiations with the Taliban has been a bust. Marjah has not been tamed, and the offensive in Kandahar has been significantly delayed. But the very premise that the zealous Taliban would negotiate instead of waiting for the Americans, historically with a limited attention span, to leave resembles the same flawed assumptions the United States made about the North Vietnamese during the war in Southeast Asia. Like the North Vietnamese, the Afghan Taliban want their country back from the foreign occupier and have a longer time horizon than the Americans. Furthermore, Afghans have been accustomed to continuous war for more than 30 years, hate foreigners, and know that their history indicates that would-be foreign rulers can be out-waited – as they have many times before.

These factors illustrate that U.S. neoconservatives are equally naïve to believe that without the 18-month deadline, the U.S. has a prayer of success in historically unforgiving Afghanistan – however that vague term is defined. Eighteen months is not long enough to ramp up a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that could win “hearts and minds,” but the aforementioned underlying realities make it unlikely that even an 18-year counterinsurgency strategy would work (the U.S. government has already spent nine years without getting it right).

Finally, the Taliban may be violent and ruthless, but in the eyes of the Pashtun people, the dominant group in Afghanistan, they are the only hope for Pashtuns. Even though Hamid Karzai is a Pashtun, he is regarded among them as a puppet of the United States and rival Uzbek and Tajik groups. Thus is explained the curious support of many Afghans for the brutal Taliban. This major factor is often ignored in overly optimistic forecasts of the potential for U.S. pacification of Afghanistan.

The only solution is to cut the U.S. losses and leave Afghanistan for good. The good news is that removal of U.S. occupation forces from a Muslim land might actually reduce blowback anti-U.S. terrorism around the world.