



The Situation in Afghanistan: Uncertain Victory, Uncertain Endgame

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One of the key questions emerging out of the last few days is whether the "fog of peace" in Afghanistan will be any worse than the "fog of war," and whether anyone will be able to tell the difference. No one can predict the events of the next week, but it now seems increasingly unlikely that the fighting will have a neat ending, and that the current struggle will have any clear ending at all:

- The Northern Alliance still isn't really a cohesive alliance. There is separate Hazara rule in the West and Herat, Uzbek rule in Mazaar e-Sharrif, and Tajik rule in the Northeast and Kabul. Bringing in the ex-"President" and Tajiks to Kabul compounds the problem. He is seen as weak and as having presided over corruption and ethnic favoritism, and as never having been able to unite the Tajik warlords - or Tajiks and Uzbeks - much less the country, and Kabul has been seen as a "Tajik" city in the past and one that is a symbol of the problems in post-Soviet occupation rule. Rather than acting as a capital, it has been a symbol of division and corruption. For example, the fact that it had Afghanistan's only real university and that it admitted a grossly disproportionate number of Tajiks was a major problem even before the Soviets arrived. This raises major questions about whether the Northern Alliance can really govern even the Northern half of the country in any cohesive way. Afghanistan may well revert into a symbolic capital and regional government by Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara warlords. In fact, senior State Department, and British and German Foreign Office officials see this as the most likely near-term outcome.
- The Northern Alliance, as such, has yet to fight a single major coherent battle, and may not be able to "win" in the South. The one area where major fighting took place was around Mazaar e-Sharrif and this still involved only several thousand men and Uzbek and Tajik groups fighting as separate factions. The Northern Alliance really did not have to fight a major battle for Taloqan or Kabul. U.S. air power provided the shock effects, many regional warlords changed sides, and the Taliban had to retreat in near chaos, leaving its key loyalists isolated in Konduz. The Tajiks in the Northern Alliance have moved into a military vacuum in their own area, but they have not clearly taken any Pashtun area, control of Jalalabad is uncertain, and the central-southeastern provinces from Uruzgan to Pakita and Nangahar are under a mix of Pashtun warlords that are not part of the Northern Alliance and that it has never had to fight.
- The fighting around Konduz is typical in that the Northern Alliance is waiting on U.S. air power and trying to bargain its way into victory. This is not particularly important in terms of Konduz. The Alliance cannot have gone from a total of around 8-10,000 real fighters in all of Afghanistan to 30,000 around Konduz alone, and the several thousand Taliban/AI Qaida fighters in Konduz seem to have real teeth. Nevertheless, it would still take real talent for the Northern Alliance not to negotiate a surrender or win with the support of U.S. air power, and to isolate or kill the foreign volunteers in the Konduz enclave.

In contrast, the Northern Alliance's lack of proven war fighting capability could be of vast importance if the Taliban really digs in Qandahar. It is unclear that the Northern Alliance has the logistic and support capability to move down into the region for a major siege, that it can really fight a major cohesive battle outside its own territory, and that it is prepared to deal with the Pashtuns in some cooperative way.

- Qandahar and the Hilmund River area remain a highly uncertain prospect. It still seems more likely that the Pashtun warlords and tribal leaders will negotiate some kind of deal with the Taliban that the Taliban/AI Qaida will

fight a coherent and lasting battle for Qandahar or become true guerillas. However, much depends on there not being major clashes between Northern Alliance forces and any major range of Pashtun leaders. If this occurs, there could be a lasting civil war and major guerilla conflict. It is uncertain that the Northern Alliance could take Qandahar under these conditions, or that taking it would matter. The end result could be a serious Pashtun resistance in the countryside. This might also mean Sheik Omar would become a major leader again, or some equally anti-Western Pashtun leader. It would also be a political disaster for Musharaff and Pakistan.

- It is more than possible that if the Pashtun leaders in the South do deal with Qandahar and the Taliban's defeat by playing "lets make a deal," Sheik Omar and many of the core Taliban leaders and fighters may be allowed to go back to their towns or to continue to operate. No one has suggested any shift in the position of the hard-line clergy in the Pashtun areas - and they are matched by some equally unpleasant Hazaras in the West. The end result would not only be Pashtun warlords dominating a "defeated" South, but that the human core of the problem would remain. The end result could be a Pashtun enclave or enclaves that were highly hostile to the West, a major Pakistani power struggle for influence in Afghanistan and border area security, and a lingering problem with training camps and Islamist extremism in the Pashtun areas.
- Pakistani, Pashtun, Arab, and Chechan Volunteers may escape or be allowed to leave. We are currently focusing on a Bin Laden hunt, but Bin Laden may not be the problem. If thousands of Pakistani, Pashtun, Arab, and Chechan volunteers in the South escape - as they probably will - the fighting will leave a long legacy of revanchism and continued tension. We will scarcely have eradicated terrorism. We will simply have won a battle in a way where we have dispersed the enemy.
- Here the success of U.S. special forces and CIA operatives in forging some kind of coherent Pashtun solution will be critical. It is too late to solve these problems with air power if it was ever possible at all. The wild card is how well the United States can do in pushing, aiding, and bribing the Pashtuns into some form of workable military and political solution.
- Bin Laden and Sheik Omar will still be problems whether they escape, are killed, or are captured. Whatever happens, the best the United States and West can hope for is martyrs and continued hostility from those that hated the United States and secular values when this fighting started. Depending on the precise ending, the deterrent value of a U.S. "victory" could be limited. A hidden Bin Laden would be a constant inspiration. A dead Bin Laden or Omar will be viewed by some as symbols of struggle and not defeat. A showpiece trial - and a military tribunal would be a political disaster for the United States - will inevitably mean that the defendants respond by trying to put the United States on trial.
- Far more is involved than political nation building. At least some Western discussion is obsessed with political nation building. The idea the West can impose true nationhood on Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Pashtuns, etc., seems remarkably dangerous, as does the idea any kind of peace keeping force can do this. Western forces are already resented and no one should have any illusions that UN or Muslim forces can do better. Afghani Islamists will not welcome far more liberal Asian Islamic forces - or any forced effort at unity -- and Turkey has long been seen as too secular and pro-Uzbek.
- The State Department seems far more realistic in trying to create a regionalized federation of leading ethnic groups with a common government in Kabul, but this still ignores the fact that Afghanistan essentially has nothing approaching a cohesive economy and no major cash crop other than drugs . It has a crippled infrastructure, and better lines of communication to neighboring states than within. It also has a massive refugee problem, and fighting over aid allocation seems almost inevitable.
- The lingering problem of other Al Qaida cells and the possible use of weapons of mass destruction will remain. We are so focused on Afghanistan that we forget that there are other threats in many other countries, and there is no coherent reporting on how well we are doing against Al Qaida globally, or how other potential attacker are dealing with current events.

In short, this one won't be over when it over. The lingering impact will play out over months or years, and the paradigm of "victory" is far more likely to be Iraq or Kosovo than any neat kind of ending.

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