Integrating a military and peace strategy for Afghanistan: Making ends, ways and means meet
Reflections by Ambassador Douglas Lute

Ambassador Douglas Lute is the former United States Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council, NATO’s standing political body. In 2010 he retired from active duty in the Army as a Lieutenant General after 35 years of service. In 2007 President George W. Bush named him as Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor to coordinate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, serving a total of six years in the White House. General Lute holds degrees from the United States Military Academy at West Point and from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

ABSTRACT

How can political and military strategies be integrated to support a peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan?

This article considers the challenges of managing the contribution of the United States military to an integrated strategy. It is primarily informed by Lieutenant General Lute’s experience of the Obama administrations (2009–17), drawn from a conversation with Michael Semple in early 2018.

Contrasting interpretations of stabilisation led to a flawed strategy: degrading the Taliban’s military capability while building the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). This strategic equation was based on inaccurate analysis of both variables – the Taliban and the ANSF. The efficacy of the 2009 US military surge was undermined by deploying troops to the wrong areas for the wrong reasons, and by a lack of complementary political action. Decision-making at key moments of political-military tension was often driven by US domestic political priorities.

Inconsistency was exemplified by the killing of Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in 2016, rather than seeing him as a potential interlocutor in dialogue. President Obama made some specific commitments to advance a political solution, for example facilitating the opening of the Taliban Political Commission in Qatar. But following the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, it was increasingly hard for him to prioritise political action.

Ends, ways and means

The early years of the Barrack Obama presidency provide an example of the challenge of delivering an integrated strategy. Everyone agreed that there was no purely military solution to the problems in Afghanistan. But the US military continued to act as if there were. The administration said the right things, in terms of talking up the need for political action. But it proved difficult to match that rhetoric with the action on the ground.

Fundamentally, the administration failed to align the essential elements of strategy – ends, ways and means. We were locked into a debate about the contribution of the competing ‘ways’ – diplomatic and political versus military. The problem was that the debate about the end state was not adequately resolved. In retrospect, the problem with the early Obama era strategy in Afghanistan was that the different US actors were inadequately aligned with regard to the ends we were trying to achieve. This left the military free to interpret the ends so as to justify the ways and means they intended to employ – an intensified military campaign. So, we ended up with the military going one direction, while the diplomats pursued regional diplomacy and the aid workers did their own thing.

If I had a chance to do it over again, I would spend more time on ensuring that we really had pinned down what it was that we were trying to achieve. We could have then worked through the ways and means of the military and political actors, ensuring that they were in fact aligned and mutually supportive. That would have allowed us to counter the classic bureaucratic tendency for every actor to prioritise their own effort.

The objective as formulated by the first Obama administration boiled down to the achievement of an Afghanistan sufficiently stable that it could no longer be a base for international terrorism. The US internal statements of the objectives we were pursuing in the years...
after 2009 were deliberately and increasingly narrowly focused. This formula was a reaction to the way that in the preceding years the US had signed up to overly ambitious ends. By 2007, President George W. Bush had been talking in terms of achieving a flourishing market economy and equality for all citizens.

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But even when you shift to a more limited formula of achieving a stable Afghanistan with no room for international terrorism, you still have to unpick it and say what you mean, because the formula is open to different interpretations. And in a sense, to achieve clarity on the ends you have to specify which ways and means are to be prioritised. It would have made sense for us to state explicitly that the primary means we were going to use were political, not military, and that the military was required to support political action.

There are many ways in which the military can support political action. For example, it could have been directed to reduce levels of violence in specified areas, to contribute to confidence-building and diplomacy. The military could support the work of establishing contact between Taliban leaders and the US or the Afghan government. Alternatively, in its work to develop the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), the military could have been tasked to promote forces that were representative of the population in the areas in which they operated. This would have addressed the problem of an army that recruited personnel from northern and eastern Afghanistan and sent them to fight in the south. Similarly, the military effort could have supported diplomacy by prioritising efforts to reduce corruption in contracts. In reality, we prioritised none of these things and left the military to do what it does best: delivering violence. It was as if we read the foreword to Clausewitz but did not bother to finish the book.

To understand why US strategy in Afghanistan played out in the way that it did, you have to refer to our domestic politics. In the first place, the incoming Obama Administration was primarily focused on salvaging the US economy. The free hand that was given to the military also reflected the bureaucratic alignment of the Defense and State Departments. Admiral Mike Mullen, General David Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined forces to support an approach that gave primacy to military action.

Then there was the personality factor. Special Representative Richard Holbrooke was the person most clearly charged with championing a holistic political-led approach. But for some reason his personality generated ‘antibodies’ and he was unable to assemble enough support within the administration to give him a chance of bringing the military into line. And in Kabul, the larger-than-life generals, McChrystal and Petraeus, simply overwhelmed our ambassadors. Finally, there was the issue of the most basic ways and means – resources. The military had at its disposal resources that just dwarfed anything the diplomats had access to.

What the military read into the commitment to stabilise Afghanistan

The military identified the Taliban as the main factor destabilising Afghanistan. They therefore read the commitment to stabilise Afghanistan as carte blanche for pursuing defeat of the Taliban. In the strategy debate, we pushed back against the notion of defeat. Instead we all settled on the strategic idea that the Taliban had to be degraded while we built up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The idea was that you would reach a moment where the threat posed by the Taliban was reduced to a level which was within the capability of the ANSF. This strategic equation was based on a flawed analysis of both variables, the ANSF and the Taliban.

Taliban

The military seemed never to appreciate that the Taliban were embedded in the social fabric of rural Afghanistan. They were inherently not a force which was external to the areas where it fought and indeed, in some places in the south and east, they barely even had a defined force structure distinct from the civilian population. In such parts of the country, by taking on a commitment to fight the Taliban, you were essentially lumbered with fighting against the Pashtun population.

The military’s troubled effort to downgrade the Taliban became entangled with the debate over the insurgents’ ‘safe haven’ in Pakistan. In effect, the more difficult we found it to degrade the Taliban, the more we felt that we needed to blame the Pakistan safe haven, far more than was ever justified by the evidence. The majority of Taliban fighters fought within walking distance of their own homes. This meant that, although the Taliban seniors tended to base themselves in Pakistan, the men who did the fighting were mainly based in Afghanistan. A sort of mythology grew up around the Taliban hordes crossing over the border from Pakistan seasonally. But we never saw
them. Because there was no such mass migration – the relationship between the safe haven and the battlefield was more nuanced. To understand how the Taliban exploited Pakistan, you really have to understand who they are and why they fight. You have to go beyond the myths of the Taliban as a force external to Afghanistan.

Afghan National Security Forces

On the other side of the equation was the ANSF. We were to aim for that tipping point where ANSF capability exceeded that of the Taliban. But we unintentionally created hurdles in the process. We were late in joining the effort to build the security forces. Then we followed a dead end on the police. We made the classic mistake of imagining that the police would develop as a force in our image. More generally, we seriously over-estimated the human resources which would be available to the security forces. We allowed ourselves to be rushed and therefore accepted major flaws in the ANSF that we were building. Under-performing ANA leadership were tolerated rather than being replaced. We failed to take a stand on corruption in the Afghan military.

Then we allowed ourselves to get trapped in a production-line version of building a military. Everything was measured in terms of numbers of inputs and outputs, rather than quality. The training mission reported on how many guns had been delivered and how many battalions formed. You pay a price when you focus on quantity and discount quality. The most telling statistic regarding the ANA was their attrition rate, which hovered around 30 per cent, including both outright desertion and people marked down as Absent Without Leave. It is impossible to bring an army up to its full planned strength if you are having to replace nearly a third of the personnel annually before you progress. The constant leakage weakens leadership, renders it impossible to build unit cohesion and obliges you to focus on the most elementary unit capabilities. Thus, both sides of our equation for the military component of strategy, the degrade side and the enabling of the ANSF, were seriously flawed.

There was an analytical element to the flaws in the military component of the strategy. We never developed adequate understanding of either the enemy or our Afghan allies. This ignorance hampered our ability to adapt over time. The one-year tours of duty were a compounding factor. The whole US army took one-year courses on Afghanistan. Even personnel with multiple tours of duty never went back to the same area or role, where they might have acquired some experience. So, everyone was perpetually locked into lesson 1-0-1.

Extent to which the efficacy of the military surge was undermined by the lack of complementary political action

The nature of the mistakes in the execution of the military surge in 2009 is professionally embarrassing. For starters, the US army should never have gone to Helmand. This was a basic mistake. Firstly, we had limited resources and the president had laid it out that we were not going to stay forever. The prevailing doctrine was clear: hold, build, transfer. It made no sense to go somewhere of secondary importance first. We launched our military effort in a province which was of secondary importance and which was home to only three per cent of the country’s population. It was difficult for the US to claim to be acting to protect the population when it devoted maximum military resources to somewhere which accounted for so few people. We talked a good game but acted as if we were really there to fight the Taliban rather than protect civilians. There would have been a case for prioritising Kandahar, on the basis of the province’s political importance and its greater population size. Exotic places like Musa Qala and Marja were more appropriate as subjects for National Geographic features rather than as the focus of US army operations.

The most plausible explanations as to why US military deployment went counter to the imperatives of the broader strategy were partly historic and partly tactical. In the earliest days of the intervention in Afghanistan, US Marines had operated in Camp Rhino and other bases around the South. That was because initially they operated from the north Arabian Gulf and their operating range did not stretch any further than southern Afghanistan. When it was time for the Marines to return to Afghanistan as the leading part of the surge, they went to the places they were familiar with. More importantly, as the Marines planned their share of the surge, they needed a part of the theatre where they could carve out the bureaucratic isolation to run their war on their own. The Marines operate with their own resources and brought their own chain of command, reporting to
a two-star general in Central Command, not to Stanley Mc Chrystal, the Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan. Helmand was the least crowded part of the theatre, where they could run their own show.

If we want positive examples of the military contributing to an integrated approach, we probably have to look at the best Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). There were examples of PRTs which operated as planned, as fundamentally integrated civil–military teams. In the best PRTs, there was a real synergy. They worked best where the PRT did not have to compete with a heavy military presence. The other example of a significant military contribution to the overall strategy was in force development, in particular the work to develop Afghan commando units. In this initiative, we succeeded in addressing the human capital problem by skimming off the best people from the regular military units. We also deployed the best-suited US unit for the job, the Green Berets [Special Forces], and kept them assigned to the mission over the years, long enough to achieve a result.

**Interplay with US domestic politics**

You again have to consider domestic political compunctions if you want to understand the decision-making at key moments of tension between the political and military elements of the strategy. The killing of the Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in a drone strike provides a classic example. [Note, at the time of the killing of Mansour in 2016, General Lute was assigned to NATO headquarters and therefore he was not directly a privy to the decision-making]. There was a potential dilemma – do you treat Mansour as the head of a militant organisation against which you are fighting and thus kill him when you get a chance, or do you treat him as a potential interlocutor in dialogue and thus keep him alive?

From the outside, it looked as if the US finally got an opportunity to kill him with minimal physical or diplomatic collateral damage, and so they authorised the shot. Probably there was no one even there to champion the diplomatic path. The problem was that the narrative, as it had been developed up to that moment, had not adequately played up the possibility of leading through political action. The US had never adequately prioritised the political effort of engaging with the Taliban. This made it impossible for the President just to ‘pass’ on the shot. The President was therefore he was not directly a privy to the decision-making. It had to be done, and the killing of Mansour was going to play out much better in the media and Congress than passing on the shot in the name of hope for future political cooperation.

**When the President backs the ends, ways and means**

When you look at the outcome from the years that the US under President Obama remained engaged in Afghanistan, you can clearly see the price that you pay when you fail to align fully ends, ways and means. Obama originally got elected on the basis that Afghanistan was the good war, in contrast to Iraq, the bad war. But, more generally, everyone knew that Obama was committed to winding down US overseas military adventures. He stated that his objective in the region was to disrupt Osama bin Laden. But that meant that, come 2011, and the killing of Osama, it became even harder for Obama to explain that he wanted to prioritise political action.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge some of the specific ways in which direct interventions by the president helped strengthen the political elements of the US approach to the war. In his dealing with both Afghan president Hamid Karzai and Pakistan, he was consistently clear that he was in favour of a politically led approach. Even in his 2009 West Point speech, in which he outlined his strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan, he deliberately included a line which communicated that there was an opening for the Taliban to become part of a political process. The president intervened directly to help bring about the first meeting between the US and then Taliban political representative Tayyab Agha. He then helped make it possible for Qatar to host the Taliban Political Commission. He clinched the agreement in a meeting with the Qatari Amir and he persuaded Hamid Karzai to go along with it.

Once the five Guantanamo prisoners were transferred to Qatar, things became messier, because there was a concerted effort to portray Bergdahl as a traitor. Despite that controversy, it is possible that the parking of the five Taliban leaders in Qatar may turn out to have been one of the important political investments made by the US towards achieving a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan. After all, these influential Taliban have lived peacefully since their release, with perhaps a better quality of life than has been available to any other Taliban leaders. If they do end up playing a role in promoting a political settlement in Afghanistan, it will have been made possible because, in this case, the US military and civilian institutions prioritised a political approach and cooperated on ways and means, as directed by the national leadership.