

AFGHANISTAN: Vietnam-Like Scenario, Specter of Looming Defeat

The Failure of Modern Warfare

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The specter of defeat, another Vietnam-like scenario, is looming large

NATO's war in Afghanistan will go down in history as a big flop — one that the politicians had failed to end and the generals were unable to win. On the other hand, commentators and historians will ponder the fact that this backward tribal country was able to repulse the Soviets and an international coalition of no less than 50 Western countries led by the United States within a period of 30 years or so.

The US and its allies want to quit Afghanistan in 2014, but the specter of defeat, another Vietnam-like scenario, is looming large. More than 10 years after the US bombed and later occupied this mountainous country in South Asia in retaliation for al-Qaeda attacks on Washington and New York, the purpose of the war and the path to an honorable exit appear to have been lost.

An Afghanistan expert, journalist Michael Hastings, says in his new book, "The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan," that Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was in charge of military operations between 2009 and 2010, rarely mentioned al-Qaeda in his briefings to US congressmen. Even Gen. David Petraeus, who took over from McChrystal, would never talk about al-Qaeda in his meetings with his top aides. Hastings points to the number that former National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones put out, which is that there were less than 100 al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan.

After destroying Osama bin Laden's lair in the mountains of Afghanistan and forcing most of the Taliban leadership to flee in the early days of the invasion, the US focused its attention on solidifying the rule of its ally President Hamid Karzai and on counterinsurgency. But both tasks have proved untenable.

The Taliban insurgency remains a big challenge to NATO forces. In military terms, modern warfare has failed to crush guerrilla warfare. The people, the terrain and culture were all against the invaders. The regime of Karzai was corrupt and unpopular. The tribal nature of Afghanistan and its culture frustrated efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Afghans. American drones and friendly fire have killed more civilians than combatants. The Taliban used the rugged terrain of the south and southwest intelligently. They infiltrated the enemy ranks and were able to carry out stunning attacks inside Kabul.

Last week an Afghan soldier fired his machine gun, killing four French troops in their base

camp. He was avenging the dead Taleban whose bodies were desecrated by US Marines less than two weeks ago. There are 3,600 French soldiers in Afghanistan, part of a total of 130,000 foreign troops in that country.

It was not the first incident of this kind nor will it be the last. France has suspended the training of Afghan soldiers and is considering pulling out its troops before the 2014 deadline. In an election year, both in France and the United States, the image of coffins arriving home from the war front in Afghanistan will not please the public. Until the end of last year, the death toll for coalition soldiers stood at 2,765. Having failed to defeat the Taleban, who rely on support from their brethren in Pakistan's border region, the US is now listening to Karzai's advice to negotiate with the insurgents. Last week it was revealed that US negotiators have been secretly meeting with a representative of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the outlawed Hizb-i-Islami group, which has been battling US forces mostly in the east and north of the country.

It was a step in the direction of widening talks so that they include the Taleban as well. All previous attempts to bypass the Taleban were met by failure. Officially the US refuses to talk to Mullah Omar, the fugitive Taleban leader believed to be hiding in Pakistan. But talks with his lieutenants and senior Pashtun tribal heads are underway — at least through the Karzai government.

But what could these talks lead to? The Taleban want NATO forces out, while Washington would like to see an arrangement that will involve the Taleban in a future government. The gap is wide. Washington has lost the cooperation of a major ally, which is Pakistan. Trust between the US and Pakistan has reached record lows since the Americans carried out a covert operation to kill Osama bin Laden in Pakistani territory without informing their allies in Islamabad.

Two months ago US aircraft bombed two Pakistani border points, killing more than 20 soldiers. Washington later apologized but not before Pakistan suspended all cooperation with the US.

According to Hastings, trust is also lacking between Karzai and President Obama. Gen. McChrystal used to mock the Afghan president, calling him the man with the funny hat. And Hastings reported that he had heard US officials say that Karzai was a manic depressive and that he was a drug addict.

At one point Washington wanted to rebuild Afghanistan and guide it toward democracy. But the rebuilding efforts have been marred by setbacks and corruption. At one point the US was forced to deal with opium-growing warlords in an attempt to win favors and isolate the Taleban.

The Taleban are waging a war of attrition while sending signals that they are willing to talk peace with Karzai and the Americans. All they have to do is to wait, since time is on their side. 2014 is a long way ahead for the Americans and their allies. In the end they will leave the country to its fate, just as they did in Iraq. For the people of Afghanistan the day when NATO soldiers leave will not spell the end of war but only a change in its course.

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