

THE AFGHAN “FOG OF WAR”

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Abstract: *The terrorist attacks of 9/11 took the USA and NATO by surprise, as they are still under the euphoric effect of celebrating the fall of the Eastern European ideological walls and the collapse of the communist bloc. The immediate response of the military operations led to the neutralization of the Taliban forces or more precisely to their removed from political power and denial the influence of Al Qaeda. The purely military approach dominated the initial kinetic clashes and conquered the physical terrain but failed to dominate the society marked by perennial conflicts, widespread corruption, poverty and multiple ethnic and tribal fragmentations. The Afghan insurgency that formed seems to have managed to slow down and finally block the reconstruction and development effort made by the strong NATO-centred coalitions. The article examines the causes of the Afghan "fog of war" that led to this great failure and makes recommendations that must be taken into account in future military conflicts.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, fog of war, corruption, comprehensive approach, political issues

1. Introduction

The emergence and spread of the pandemic caused by the corona virus is as shocking as the terrorist attacks in New York. COVID 19 will cause a revolution in the medical field that will change society forever and social distancing is only the temporary solution in waiting for the vaccine truly able to stop the deadly effects of the disease. The previous cures are not effective and a possible vaccine will most likely only cope with the current corona virus, not the subsequent transformations that the virus will register. As in war, the manifestation of the disease is unique, similar to wars, which, as Clausewitz said, "another side of the chameleon" [1], so we must look for unique solutions to identify and neutralize that chameleon. Even if each war is unique and has its own approach, the study of previous conflicts is mandatory to

generate lessons learned that become the starting point in achieving the new objectives, more or less military. Questions about the reasons The Coalition failed to identify the "face of the new chameleon" I have been asking myself since previous missions to Afghanistan. In the scientific approach of this paper I have used as a research method the analysis of documents and the review of information published by theorists and practitioners in the military field, especially the public reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). These periodically published reports from 2002-20016 examined, in an independent and impartial manners, the effectiveness of the reconstruction programs carried out in the Afghanistan Theater of Operations.

2. The main objective

The ease with which the Taliban government was ousted at the end of 2001 confirms the superiority and training of US and NATO military forces in kinetic operations. But after this stage, the objective of the military forces changed from the search and destroys of the terrorist group to the reconstruction of the country. The new goal of stabilizing Afghanistan continued to be based on pure military force, although it had to be complemented by predominantly non-kinetic actions in areas other than the military. While the Coalition forces remained stuck in an operational design based on military action, the adversary sought new ways of manifestation and solutions to help it achieve its goals both from a military and economic point of view.[2]

War is an instrument, a tool used to achieve goals that should be much higher than the violence through which military operations are staged. Unfortunately, as American General James Dubik stated, *"our Army too often looks at war as independent from its purposes."* Every soldier, from the first moment, is stripped of his civilian clothes and taught to be ready to kill. No matter what the enemy looks like, soldiers are trained and sent to solve problems that other peaceful solutions have failed to complete. So the soldier sent to fight will do so mainly by using violence, applying intimidation in the first phase and escalating to lethal coercion when the opponent cannot be discouraged only by the military presence. He will seek to neutralize his enemy by applying the principles underlying his ongoing training, and he will probably not have time to analyze, identify, and understand the real cause and motivation that gives his opponent the strength to continue. It will certainly omit those that go beyond the military field. If we look at the specific case of the theater of operations in Afghanistan, we initially identify the conduct of military operations in order to punish terrorist groups that

attacked the WTC towers and became a threat to Western democratic principles. But this goal was met after the first weeks of international intervention and can no longer justify the more than 10 years of consistent military presence in Afghanistan from 2003-2014. Following the neutralization of Taliban groups supporting Al Qaeda, the mandate of the International Security Afghan Forces (ISAF) was *"to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists."* ISAF also *"contributed to reconstruction and development in Afghanistan through multinational Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) - led by individual ISAF nations - securing areas in which reconstruction work was conducted by national and international actors"* [5].

The forced removal of the Taliban group backed by Al Qaeda required the military to be sent to the front line, but later they had to be replaced or assisted by specialists in other fields. Especially in the political field because it is unanimously known that the military are apolitical so it is hard to believe that they would face the challenges of implementing effective reforms in the field. So the main goal, of rebuilding peace and stability in Afghanistan, fell on the shoulders of the ISAF soldiers who were not trained to face challenges in which non-kinetic abilities are more effective than combat ones.

3. Continuation of politics by other means

This change of the main objective had to lead at that moment to the reanalysis of the necessary forces because as General Dubik pointed out in his work *"Purpose gives war its meaning, and purpose determines the war's character. To describe our future as one of hybrid wars, or asymmetric wars, gray zone operations, wars among the people, three-block wars or any other of*

war's various forms that some are now using is to miss the essential point: They are all ways to achieve purposes set forth by political communities. [6] In the field, the military continued to look only at the opponent's forces, seeking to identify and neutralize insurgent groups that reorganized their forces and adopted specific irregular warfare actions. As

highlighted in a 2017 SIGAR report [7], the initial plans for military operations included neither the development of Afghan security forces (such as the army and police) nor the increase in the capacity of government sector institutions to plan and implement sustainable projects on the ground. long-term (see figure no. 1).

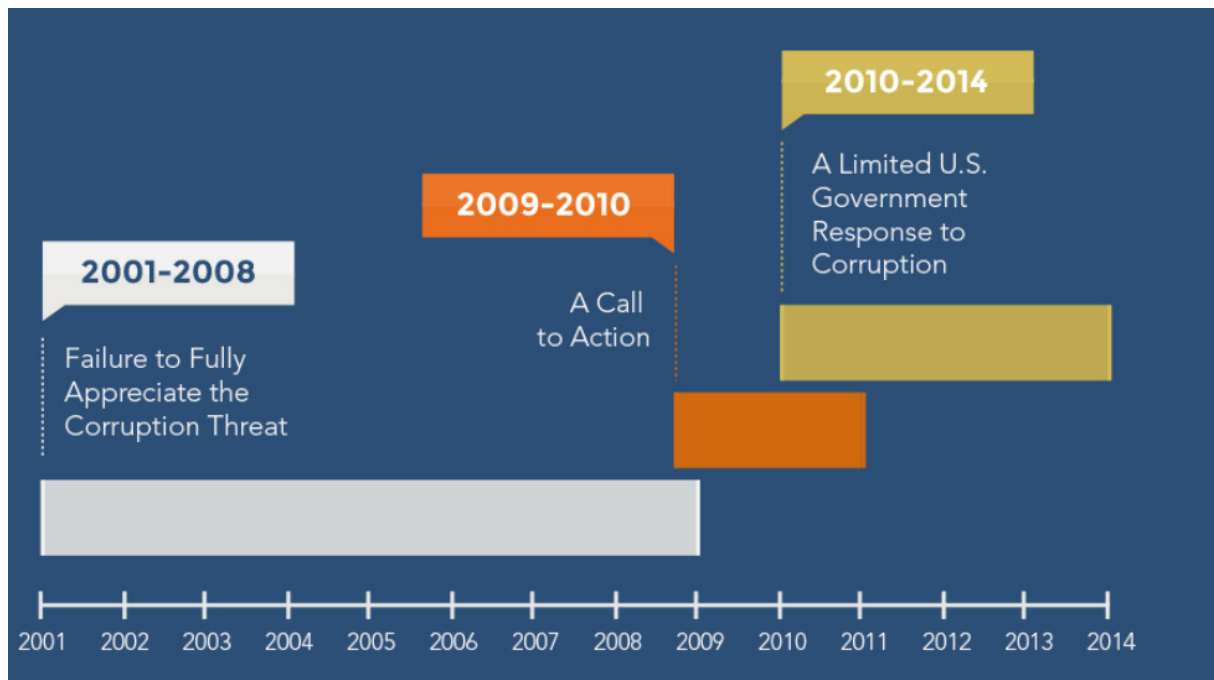


Figure no. 1 – failure to appreciate the political vulnerability of the afghan environment [8]

The same report highlights that the insurgency has been supported by corruption that has exacerbated pre-existing poverty in Afghanistan and deployed forces have failed to identify the seriousness of the problems posed by endemic corruption.

4. The fog of war

Unfortunately, the Coalition's subsequent efforts failed to gain the legitimacy of the Afghan government among its people. The actual statements published by the US audit teams in the SIGAR reports covered the following issues:

- specific corruption before the military intervention continued to manifest itself even after the Taliban government was removed. The new government institutions have proved to be not only

inexperienced but also lacking in solving the problems facing a country in the top failed states. Coalition forces focused only on insurgent actions have omitted the identification of an invisible enemy, much more devastating if we look at the current results: the corruption of the political system. It was the real fog of war in Afghanistan and was initiated from the first moments of the conflict when warlords and other elites, once in power, began to engage in rampantly corrupt activities;

- the banking system before 2001 was non-existent and the one developed later proved to be extremely fragile due to the lack of professionalism or corruption of the staff involved. Reports of the fall of Kabul Bank in 2010, the largest banking

institution at the time, also responsible for paying government wages, showed that the most important “banking institution” was used to run an investment scheme in a “regulatory vacuum,” diverting savings assets to personal and business ventures”. [9] The bank's rescue efforts cost nearly \$ 1 billion that could be used in other sustainable development programs in the country;

- the findings of the report on the Afghan justice system showed that “after 13 years and over \$ 1 billion spent, U.S. agencies are still not consistently assessing the sustainability of their rule of law programs in Afghanistan ”[10]. Efforts have not been made because, among other things, the Afghan government has lacked the political will and commitment to tackle corruption in the justice system. It is a non-performing one and there are no real signs regarding its recovery, in a reasonable time, to an acceptable level;
- although agriculture is the main driver of the Afghan economy "only 12% of the land is arable and less than 6% is cultivated" [11]. This makes us understand the growing interest in narco afghan economy and the specific challenge of eradicating opium-poppy crops in favor of viable alternatives. The irony is that in 2001 poppy cultivation was carried out on “only 7,606 hectares, approximately 1 / 43rd of the estimated 328,000 hectares in 2017”[12].

Unfortunately, drug trafficking finances the Afghan insurgency, fuels government corruption and destroys all military efforts.

5. Conclusions

The information presented in this paper identifies one of the reasons why the financial, material, but especially the human losses among the military and the civilian population in Afghanistan have been in vain. The deployment of military forces in operations aimed at political or economic objectives cannot lead to positive results. The purely military approach to conflicts is gone, it is a thing of the past, from the time of conventional military actions carried out in the open field. The present and probably the future require a comprehensive approach and depending on the main objective of the actions it is possible that the kinetic actions, purely military, must take a back seat. The synergy of efforts is mandatory to address the challenges adjacent to the military field and especially those specific to the political, economic, social and information domain. And it is not limited to these because the challenge of the Afghan narco economy has other solutions than those specific to religious extremism. Sending a soldier, who by definition is apolitical, to deal with the corruption of a governmental system is indeed the mistake of identifying another face of the chameleon or, as John Nagl said, learning to Eat Soup with a Knife.

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