

OPINION | JULY 29, 2010

## The CIA Solution for Afghanistan

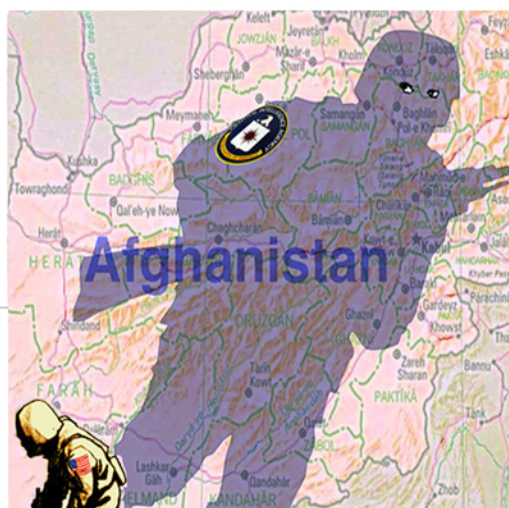
*There's no 'victory' to be had there. But we can prevent it from becoming a haven for al Qaeda with a covert strategy based on Predator drones and alliances with local leaders.*

By JACK DEVINE

The U.S. military will not achieve anything resembling victory in Afghanistan, no matter how noble the objective and heroic the effort.

It's time to face this reality. We should start by developing a new covert action plan to be implemented by the Central Intelligence Agency. The strategy should focus on forging the kinds of relationships necessary to keep Afghanistan from re-emerging as al Qaeda's staging ground once our forces depart, and also on continuing the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

If there is any lasting lesson from the recent demise of Gen. Stanley McChrystal, it's that the large and visible occupying army he commanded in Afghanistan is simply the wrong force to wage the battles being fought there. The British and the Russians know this too well.



David Klein

Having run the CIA's Afghan Task Force—which covertly channeled U.S. support to the Afghans fighting to drive the Soviets out of their country—I recognize the playbook our policy makers are using today. It didn't work for the Soviets then, and it won't work for us now. However different our current objective, our efforts are alarmingly similar to those of the Russians. Instead of ignoring the lessons of that history, what we need to do is to be more like ourselves in the 1980s and in the months immediately following the attacks of 9/11.

In the '80s we essentially ended the Cold War with a well-funded and broadly supported covert action program. In 2001, under similar political circumstances, a small band of CIA operators restored old ties to Afghan tribal leaders, teamed up with U.S. Special Forces and, backed with U.S. air power, toppled the Taliban in a matter of weeks.

Our presence in Afghanistan is better left unseen. Most Afghans, even those willing to deal with us, would rather we get our military out of their country. A covert action program would address this concern. It would also cost less than a military effort in treasure and lives, and allow the U.S. to continue to protect its interests and the interests of the Afghans who desire nothing more than to see their country enter a period of calm.

A smart covert action program should rest on worst-case scenarios. Afghanistan will likely enter a period of heightened instability leading up to and following our planned 2012 departure, so we should figure out now which tribal leaders—and, under specially negotiated arrangements, which Taliban factions—we could establish productive relationships with. We must also consider the possibility that our departure could precipitate the eventual collapse of the Karzai government. Thus we should cultivate relationships with leaders inside and outside the current regime who are most likely to fill the power vacuum.

It's a good bet that the CIA already has substantial relationships with many of these personalities, particularly in areas where agency operators have long enjoyed relative freedom of movement. Afghanistan is a tribal society, not a nation state, and tribal interests are often easy to accommodate with cash and other assets that help tribal leaders maintain their power. Make no mistake: We're not talking about supporting advocates for Jeffersonian democracy here. But these partnerships have proven dependable and highly advantageous to U.S. policy makers in promoting regional stability in the past.

The cornerstone of a revitalized covert action plan in Afghanistan must be based on an updated Presidential Finding, which is required for any covert initiative. The president himself would have to authorize ample funding for the remains of the Karzai government, its opposition, tribal warlords and even some Taliban elements, as long as they're willing to help us achieve our objectives. The fact that many of them don't like each other will probably work to our benefit and against our enemies in al Qaeda.

My experience at the CIA helped me develop a few rules of engagement that I consider critical to successful covert action programs. First, they must have sufficient funding and bipartisan congressional approval. Second, a general consensus backing the effort must exist among the American public. Third, there must be robust support among key players and interest groups in the country where our covert action program functions. Perhaps most importantly, the rationale behind the program must be anchored in sound policy objectives.

It bears mentioning that covert action has been controversial, and has many opponents in and out of government. But such critiques often highlight flawed policy rather than failed execution. The CIA's work in Chile during the 1970s and in Central America during the 1980s are generally viewed as mistakes or failures. But in both cases the agency was operationally successful. The real issue was the flawed policy, which the CIA has no part in determining.

Congress, the executive and the public were justifiably disturbed by some of the means used to carry out covert action since 9/11, including waterboarding and other "enhanced interrogation techniques." Advocates for the expanded use of covert action must be clear in their refusal to countenance these practices, and in their commitment to strong oversight measures. More generally, an updated covert strategy should establish clearer rules of engagement. Predator drone attacks, which have been effective in killing al Qaeda leaders, should be relied upon. Covert activities should not be outsourced to private contractors, as has reportedly occurred in Afghanistan.

Preventing a return to a pre-9/11 version of Afghanistan is a realistic and achievable goal as long as our strategy is calibrated to the Afghan political, cultural and physical landscapes. A CIA-run covert action program is by nature custom-tailored to the reality on the ground. As such, it is a highly valuable tool that we should use to advance a modified objective in Afghanistan.

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