

# Afghanistan: NATO's Lost Cause

Wednesday 2 July 2008, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 12 June 2008).

**The west's 'good war' in Afghanistan has turned bad. A local solution, rather than a neocolonial one, is what's needed.**

In the latest clashes on the Pakistan-Afghan border, Nato troops have killed 11 Pakistani soldiers and injured many more, creating a serious crisis in the country and angering the Pakistan military high command, already split on the question.

US failure in Afghanistan is now evident and Nato desperation only too visible. Spreading the war to Pakistan would be a disaster for all sides. The Bush-Cheney era is drawing to a close, but it is unlikely that their replacements, despite the debacle in Iraq, will settle the American giant back to a digestive sleep.

The temporary cleavage that opened up between some EU states and Washington on Iraq was resolved after the occupation. They could all unite in Afghanistan and fight the good fight. This view has been strongly supported by every US presidential candidate in the run up to the 2008 elections, with Senator Barack Obama pressuring the White House to violate Pakistani sovereignty whenever necessary. He must be pleased.

That the "good war" has now turned bad is no longer disputed by a number of serious analysts in the US, even though there is no agreed prescription for dealing with the problems. Not least of which for some is the future of Nato, stranded far away from the Atlantic in a mountainous country, the majority of whose people, after offering a small window of opportunity to the occupiers, realised it was a mistake and became increasingly hostile.

The "neo-Taliban" control at least 20 districts in the Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan provinces where Nato troops replaced US soldiers. It is hardly a secret that many officials in these zones are closet supporters of the guerrilla fighters. As western intelligence agencies active in the country are fully aware, the situation is out of control. The model envisaged for the occupation was Panama. The then US secretary of State, Colin Powell, explained that: "The strategy has to be to take charge of the whole country by military force, police or other means". His knowledge of Afghanistan was limited.

Panama, populated by 3.5 million people, could not have been more different to Afghanistan, which has a population approaching 30 million and is geographically quite dissimilar. To even attempt a military occupation of the entire country would require a minimum of 200,000 troops.

A total of 8000 US troops were dispatched to seal the victory. The 4000 "peacekeepers" sent by other countries never left Kabul. The Germans concentrated on creating a police force that could run a police state and the Italians, without any sense of irony, were busy "training an Afghan judiciary" to deal with the drugs mafia. The British were in Helmand amidst the poppy fields. As for the new satellite states involved - Czechs, Slovenes, Poles, Estonians, Slovaks and Romanians - it was useful training for the future.

Five years later, in September 2006, an attempted bombing of the US embassy came close to hitting its target. A CIA assessment that same month painted a sombre picture, depicting Karzai and his regime as hopelessly corrupt and incapable of defending Afghanistan against the Taliban. Ronald E Neumann, the US Ambassador in Kabul supported this view and told an interviewer that the US faced “stark choices” and defeat could only be avoided through “multiple billions” over “multiple years”.

The repression, striking blindly, leaves people with no option but to back those trying to resist, especially in a part of the world where the culture of revenge is strong. When a whole community feels threatened it reinforces solidarity, regardless of the character or weakness of those who fight back.

Many Afghans who detest the Taliban are so angered by the failures of Nato and the behaviour of its troops that they are hostile to the occupation. Nato itself has stopped pretending that its occupation has anything to do with the needs of the Afghan people and acknowledge it as an open-ended American military thrust into the Middle East and Central Asia. As the Economist summarises, “Defeat would be a body blow not only to the Afghans, but” - and more importantly, of course - to the Nato alliance”. As ever, geopolitics prevail over Afghan interests in the calculus of the big powers.

The basing agreement signed by Washington with its appointee in Kabul in May 2005 gives the Pentagon the right to maintain a massive military presence in Afghanistan in perpetuity. That Washington is not seeking permanent bases in this fraught and inhospitable terrain simply for the sake of “democratisation and good governance” was made clear by Nato’s secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Brookings Institution in February this year: the opportunity to site military facilities, and potentially nuclear missiles, in a country that borders China, Iran and Central Asia was too good to miss.

More strategically, Afghanistan has become a central theatre for uniting, and extending, the west’s power-political grip on the world order. On the one hand, it is argued, it provides an opportunity for the US to shrug off its failures in imposing its will in Iraq and persuading its allies to play a broader role there. In contrast, as one report (pdf) suggests, America and its allies “have greater unity of purpose in Afghanistan. The ultimate outcome of Nato’s effort to stabilise Afghanistan and US leadership of that effort may well affect the cohesiveness of the alliance and Washington’s ability to shape Nato’s future.”

There are at least two routes out of the Khyber impasse. The first and the worst would be to Balkanise the country. This appears to be the dominant pattern of imperial hegemony at the moment, but whereas the Kurds in Iraq and the Kosovans and others in the former Yugoslavia were willing client-nationalists, the likelihood of Tajiks or Hazaris playing this role effectively is more remote in Afghanistan.

The second alternative would require a withdrawal of all US/Nato forces, either preceded or followed by a regional pact to guarantee Afghan stability for the next ten years. Pakistan, Iran, India and Russia could guarantee and support a functioning national government, pledged to preserving the ethnic and religious diversity of Afghanistan and creating a space in which all its citizens can breathe, think and eat every day. It would need a serious social and economic plan to rebuild the country and provide the basic necessities for its people.

Nato’s failure cannot be simply blamed on the Pakistani government. It is a traditional colonial ploy to blame “outsiders” for internal problems. If anything, the war in Afghanistan has created a critical situation in two Pakistani frontier provinces and the use of the Pakistan army by Centcom has resulted in suicide terrorism in Lahore with the federal intelligence agency and a naval training

college targeted by supporters of the Afghan insurgents.

The Pashtun majority in Afghanistan has always had close links to its fellow Pashtuns in Pakistan. The present border was an imposition by the British empire, but it has always remained porous. It is virtually impossible to build a Texan fence or an Israeli wall across the mountainous and largely unmarked 2500km border that separates the two countries. The solution is political, not military. And it should be sought in the region not in Washington or Brussels.

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**P.S.**

\* Published on Thursday, June 12, 2008 by The Guardian/UK.

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