



## The bogging down of Western armies: a two-thirds perspective

BRENNUS 4.0

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**This crescendo is reminiscent of the situation following the engagement in Afghanistan from the end of 2001. Born out of the mission to eradicate Al-Qaeda (AQ), kill its leader Osama Bin Laden and punish the Taliban regime that protected him, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF - Operation Freedom In just a few weeks, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) succeeded in retaking Kabul, overthrowing the Taliban whose leaders are fleeing or hiding, while AQ terrorists are hiding in the mountains of Tora Bora, relentlessly pursued by American special forces.**

The United States has deployed a few hundred special forces, primarily to coordinate air strikes and to liaise with the Northern Alliance, the Afghan anti-Taliban force build-up. Success seems to have been achieved and the Pentagon cannot imagine leaving more than 12 to 15,000 men to deal with the residual threats, first of all to secure Kabul, Kandhar and the country's major cities [12]. At the same time, in the wake of the Bonn Conference, the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) was set up, which sees its priority as the restoration of a government and support for reconstruction. There are therefore two missions that are turning their backs on each other, one with a kinetic vocation and the other for stabilisation purposes, which do not work together, do not understand each other and do not pursue the same objectives. Moreover, the 2003 invasion of Iraq diverted a large part of American resources, and although NATO is taking responsibility by extending its influence over the entire country (2005-2006), it lacks the appropriate command mechanisms[13]. such as the ability to be able to train Allies beyond the de facto restrictions on the use of force.

The return of the Taliban, first in the southern provinces and then throughout the country, saw violence resume everywhere from 2007 onwards. This weakened ISAF and, by repercussion, the Atlantic Alliance, which is struggling to take the right measure of the war. In December 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates revealed that the mission in Afghanistan is symptomatic of the limits within which the Alliance is structured, operating and equipped, partly because of the sometimes contradictory visions among Allies. A

strategic response was made at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 which recalled four principles regarding this campaign:

- a long-term commitment;
- support for strengthening Afghan leadership and Afghan ownership;
- a comprehensive approach by the international community, combining civilian and military efforts;
- increased cooperation and engagement with Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Pakistan.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer then recalled that NATO is standing by Afghanistan "for the long haul", which sweeps away accusations of stalemate.

The international context - and the economic crisis of 2008 - coupled with increasingly strong national political constraints, feed criticism of an essentially American war that is incapable of being won, while a growing number of Allies are announcing their unilateral withdrawal in a deteriorating security context<sup>[14]</sup>. <sup>14]</sup> Soon, the chances of success will depend only on the growing strength of operations by Afghan security forces and on the a performative discourse on the effectiveness of transition, characterised by the increasing volume of Afghan security forces recruited, trained and deployed. This "Afghanisation" of the war, like "Vietnamisation" in the past, is becoming the exit strategy. At the same time, the Allies are already planning the withdrawal announced at the Lisbon Summit in 2010 and the final date of which is to be announced at the Chicago Summit in 2012. Although support for Afghanistan is once again being hammered home, this withdrawal is on everyone's mind as the least costly options are sought politically and militarily. It will take another two years to reorganise the arrangements: on 31 December 2014, ISAF will give way to a operational assistance to the Afghan security forces (encompassing various training, advice and assistance activities), Resolute Support Mission (RSM) - still ongoing at present.

In the Afghan case, the stalemate seems to have come about as soon as the strategies led by the Americans on the one hand and ISAF on the other are moving in opposite directions, which is underlined by the failure to define a common war goal. Paradoxically, the decision to leave Afghanistan creates a draught and unblocks the situation - not necessarily in the desired direction since the Taliban seem to be taking advantage of it<sup>[15]</sup>. <sup>15]</sup> On the other hand, it is precisely in this period, from 2009/2010 to 2012, that the military finally manages to define the essential elements to effectively weigh on all possible levers. This dissociation between the political choice to leave, and the way the military wants to leave a solid and stable framework, creates a kind of strategic aporia, which does not facilitate the understanding of the stakes, as the actors concerned are numerous and take advantage of the moment to advance their agenda.

### **A strategy of (low) means?**

In Vietnam, as in Afghanistan or Iraq, the main problem facing the military is the right definition of the type of war that is being waged, and which conditions the rest. American military culture in its classical tradition is then largely based on the idea of a total and massive war, driven by ideological and moral foundations. However, there are moments of adaptation which finally lead to a distinction being made between the alternation of two strategies. The first strategy is heavily kinetic, conventional and industrial, according to the principle of "search and destroy", and is aimed at the adversary who is to be destroyed. It gives pride of place to the Jominian sources of the American spirit by calling for its superiority in all industrial and

technological fields. The "Revolution in Military Affairs", which was baptised during Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991, continued with the inscription of the "Shock and awe" (shock and awe) tea model. orized in 1996 and which aims to strike hard to ensure the conquest of a country with a limited number of troops, before withdrawing from it, leaving it in the hands of a liberated and grateful population.[16].

16] As Pierre Hassner points out, this means ignoring "factors such as nationalism or religion among peoples who are no doubt happy in the majority to be liberated....res from their dictators, but did not identify with their liberator-occupiers and were divided by all sorts of internal rivalries"[17]. 17] In Iraq, American leaders are discovering that tactical successes do not necessarily translate into strategic gains and that a change of portage may be necessary. Failure - if not defeat - stimulates the process of operational adaptation of armies [18]. Seeking and exploiting historical analogies - Malaysia in the 1950s or Algeria in the 1960s - US military leaders target the population, which has become the centre of gravity. This doctrinal renewal led to the drafting of a manual, Field Manual 3-24 - Counter-Insurgency, under the direction of Generals Petraeus and Mattis. Their aim was to respond to the risk of bogging down by transforming both the way operations were conducted in the field and their integration into a broader socio-political and economic framework.

Defined by the principles of "shape, clear, hold, and build," this doctrine seeks to marginalize the insurgency: one militarily controls a territory from which one eliminates the insurgents and tries to separate them from the rest of the population. Once the territory is cleared, an ambitious aid and administration effort is undertaken to gain the population's support. The partner takes charge of the stabilized areas while operations move to another contiguous area, in order to bring larger areas under the control of the legitimate government. This inkspot strategy gives pride of place to models inherited from British or French pacification principles, such as Lyautey or Gallieni. The idea is therefore to make the new soldier a fighter as much as a builder, and the bulwark against which a new government and new indigenous armed forces can be established.

But FM 3-24 does not hide the fact that the success of a counter-insurgency campaign depends on a multitude of factors - and actors. Critics of the lack of immediately visible results and the risk of bogging down stress the importance of the duration of engagement in counter-insurgency conflicts and the size of the force to be committed. In other words, the drafters use data from two centuries of "small wars" to define an average duration of intervention: on average, an asymmetric conflict would last around 12 years, which does not hide rather surprising differences between the historical cases that have been invited [19]. Several studies reinforce this essential question of long-term commitment by pointing out that since 1945, these conflicts have tended to lengthen - up to double [20].

12] Guillaume Lasconjarias, "Afghanistan (2001-2002)" in Frédéric Ramel, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène-Vilmer and Benoit Durieux, Dictionnaire de la Guerre et de la Paix, Paris, PUF, 2017.

13] The Joint Operational Center in Kabul was only inaugurated in 2006 but does not function as a coordinating body. as of 2009.

14] Gilles Dorronsoro, Christian Olsson and Raphaël Pouyé, Insurrections et contre-insurrections, éléments d'analyse sociologiques à partir des théâtres irakien et afghan, Paris, IRSEM, Etude n°20, 2010. See also an article in Libération, "France's commitment in Afghanistan: the opposition's doubts", 3 August 2009 and the interview with General Desportes au Monde, 2 July 2010.

15] Antonio Giustozzi, "Comment les talibans regain le terrain," Alternatives Internationales, 2008/6 (no. 39), p. 10.

16] Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, Shock and Awe. Achieving Rapid Dominance, Washington DC, National Defense University, 1996.

17] Pierre Hassner, "Puissance et impuissance des interventions extérieures", CERISCOPE Puissance, 2013 (<http://ceriscope.sciences-po.fr/puissance/content/part1/puissance-et-impuissance-des-interventions-exterieures>).

18| Pascal Vennesson (dir.), Innovations et conduite du changement dans les armées : recueil du cycle 2000-2001 des conférences du C2SD, Paris, C2SD, 2002.  
19| On this issue, the reference text is Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict", International Security, 26(1), 2001, pp.93-128.  
20| Patrick B. Johnston and Brian R. Urlacher, Explaining the Duration of Counterinsurgency Campaigns, presentation to the Congress of Midwestern American Politicians, 5 April 2011.

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