

# The Afghan Model More Than 10 Years Later

## An Undiminished Relevance

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**O**n 10 November 2001, Northern Alliance forces captured Mazar-i-Sharif, thereby accelerating the fall of the Taliban regime one month later. With this significant victory (the first since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom), the entire world saw images of Western horse-mounted military in the midst of cavalry commanded by Gen Abdul Rashid Dostum, Afghan warlord and US ally during the operation. One year later, this involvement of special forces alongside the Northern Alliance, supported by the coalition's airpower, gave birth to the concept of the "Afghan model"—theorized and popularized by US Army War College researcher Stephen Biddle.<sup>1</sup>

What is the legacy of the Afghan model more than 10 years later? Has it seen use in other theatres of operation? Does it still have relevance for future conflicts? To answer these questions and to understand its main principles, we should return to the very beginning—to its premiere use in Afghanistan. Analysis of recent conflicts shows that this model came into play in 2003 during Operation Iraqi Freedom in northern Iraq before it reemerged in Libya during Operation Unified Protector. Based on these three examples, this article describes the characteristics, advantages, and limitations of the Afghan model. As the operations indicate, this strategy, which relies primarily upon airpower, remains perfectly relevant and has high coercive value when forces use it under the correct condi-

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tions. We should fully acknowledge the Afghan model and integrate it within our armed forces' range of strategic options.

### The Birth of a Concept: Afghanistan, October 2001–March 2002

The concept of the Afghan model emerged in the early weeks of Enduring Freedom. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11), the National Security Council offered President George W. Bush two options concerning Afghanistan. The first, presented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, drew upon a conventional approach involving the deployment of five divisions several months before initiating the attack against the Taliban regime. The second, suggested by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), proposed bringing down the regime through a combination of US airpower, special forces, and Afghan allies. The Pentagon dismissed the latter, recalling inconclusive experiences of the Vietnam War when special forces along with indigenous tribal allies unsuccessfully attempted to hold back the stream of troops and supplies passing through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. However, in the case of Afghanistan, the plan caught the attention of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for several reasons. First, it enabled a quick response in line with the expectations of the White House and Americans traumatized by the magnitude of the terrorist attacks launched upon them. Landlocked and isolated Afghanistan was ill suited to a massive troop deployment requiring the negotiation of transit and basing agreements with neighboring countries. The Soviet invasion of December 1979, launched from the USSR's central Asian republics, didn't suffer from any such limitation. Moreover, the CIA's plan relied upon airpower with far greater lethality and precision than that employed in Vietnam. Using airpower alongside special forces equipped with portable laser designators able to provide precise coordinates from the Global Positioning System granted new possibilities widely underestimated in 2001. Rumsfeld, however, having anticipated this scenario, had initiated in-depth reform of the US military, perceived as too heavy and not taking full advantage of its technological superiority.<sup>2</sup> The concept of "shock and awe," developed in 1996 by several researchers from the National Defense University, drew notice from the secretary of defense due to its combination of speed, precision, and firepower able to paralyze the adversary with a minimum amount of force.<sup>3</sup> This concept would find in Afghanistan its first full-scale application but with a ground segment limited to special forces.

The Pentagon finally accepted the CIA's plan, mainly because of the geographic and diplomatic obstacles that Afghanistan presented—as well as the political necessity of acting quickly. The CIA could also rely on strong relationships with the Northern Alliance that it had established in the months preceding 9/11. The rest is history: the air campaign began on 7 October, attacking the rudimentary Taliban air defense network and the command and control (C2) infrastructure. On 15 October, US special forces joined Northern Alliance troops preparing to attack main Taliban strongholds—particularly Mazar-i-Sharif. Having no vehicles, they used ponies—a means of transportation most appropriate to negotiate the narrow trails in the Afghan mountains. One by one, entrenched positions defending the city succumbed to the combined action of the coalition's aviation assets and General Dostum's fighters. The fall of Mazar-i-Sharif on 10 November marked the beginning of the end for the Taliban regime, which abandoned its last stronghold in Kandahar on 6 December, after a campaign that lasted only 60 days.

In November 2002, Biddle published the first description of the Afghan model's main characteristics, including both its advantages and limitations as displayed in the first months of that year.<sup>4</sup> The coalition's reliance on Afghan allies to finish the job and kill al-Qaeda troops entrenched in Tora Bora or in the Shah-e-Khot Valley (Operation Anaconda) did not prove as successful as expected. In the second case, the poorly motivated Afghan fighters who were supposed to dislodge the enemy and push him out of the valley withdrew at the first sign of trouble, thus leaving US troops to confront a determined enemy by themselves.

### Application in Iraqi Kurdistan, March–April 2003

Although the first months of Enduring Freedom are relatively well documented in France, one cannot say the same for utilization of the Afghan model in northern Iraq during the spring of 2003. Once again, the geographic circumstances and diplomatic environment forced the Pentagon to reproduce the Afghan modus operandi. The plan that US Central Command (CENTCOM) had established for the fall of Saddam Hussein called for the 4th Infantry Division to deploy in northern Iraq from Turkey. By mid-March, the command finally realized that in spite of intense diplomatic activity, Turkey would neither join the coalition nor authorize the opening of a northern front from its borders. In extremis, Gen Tommy Franks decided to use special forces to pin down the 13 Iraqi divisions that Saddam had deployed to cover the northern borders. For CENTCOM the danger lay in seeing those divisions redeployed to the south, facing

Kuwait, by the time the Iraqi dictator realized that the threat from Turkey had vanished. CENTCOM then decided to commit 48 teams of 12 personnel each from the 3rd and 10th Special Forces Groups, which, supported by coalition airpower, had infiltrated the Kurdish Peshmergas in an attempt to undertake the role initially designed for the 4th Infantry Division.

This task proved extremely difficult. The 50,000–70,000 Kurdish militia troops were brave and well motivated but only lightly armed. Unable to conduct an offensive, they preferred tactics that consisted of carrying out costly frontal assaults against 70,000–110,000 troops of the Iraqi regular army and 20,000 in the Republican Guard. On 23 March, US special forces from the Joint Special Operations Task Force–North (JSOTF-N) infiltrated via air pathways without vehicles or communications equipment (which remained stuck in Turkey). Strikes were guided mainly by radio, without data links. Neither was air support up to the task undertaken in Afghanistan. The coalition had based its air assets in the Persian Gulf, far from northern Iraq. In the absence of bases in Turkey, naval air assets on carriers stationed in the Mediterranean Sea offered the only available option although they were far away as well and had limited capabilities.

However, US special forces carried out the three objectives assigned to them: pinning down most of the Iraqi divisions on the Green Line dividing Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq, destroying training camps of the Ansar al-Islam terrorist group, and stabilizing the towns of Mosul and Kirkuk. Distributed along the Green Line in groups consisting of one team of 12 men and one US Air Force combat controller attached to a unit of 100–300 Peshmergas, special forces used field knowledge and their Kurdish allies' intelligence to direct air strikes on Iraqi units. During the 16-day operation, Saddam's troops could not counter such action. Effectively guided by the combat controllers, airpower finally offset the Kurdish allies' numerical, material, and tactical disadvantage.

Nevertheless, JSOTF-N sometimes enjoyed success by only a narrow margin and at the cost of collateral damage; thus, during the Battle of Debecka Pass, two US teams and their allies narrowly escaped annihilation by an Iraqi motorized company reinforced with large numbers of armored vehicles. Hampered by poor weather conditions, an F-14D fighter mistakenly bombed the wrong position, killing 17 Kurdish combatants. Special forces survived only because Javelin anti-tank missiles repelled the enemy's armored vehicles. Mercifully, weather conditions improved on the following day, enabling the special forces to destroy the Iraqi column. JSOTF-N faced another major challenge—lack of intelligence,

surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) devoted to its own activity since the US advance in the south had priority. The coalition, therefore, lost track of the elite Nebuchadnezzar Division while the latter managed to redeploy in the center of Iraq and face the attack conducted through the Karbala Gap.

The Afghan model, of course, is not without risk. Even if one could rightly describe its application in northern Iraq as a success for the coalition, that operation also revealed its limitations, mainly related to scarce air-based assets.

### The Afghan Model :Antidote to Mission Creep in Libya

As the Iraqi example shows, special forces can act as an effective catalyst for airpower only with significant presence on the ground. The JSOTF-N included no fewer than 600 troops alongside the Kurdish Peshmergas. With significantly fewer personnel, the clandestine services alone could not have conducted an operation of this magnitude. Given the associated risks of loss and the fact that special forces are too numerous to remain invisible, their government must acknowledge that using them could have political ramifications.

Although this aspect posed no particular problems for the White House, either in the case of Afghanistan or Iraq, it appeared far more problematic for France and Great Britain during Operation Unified Protector. United Nations Security Council resolution 1973 authorized “all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory.”<sup>5</sup> As assessed by members of the coalition, the statement was ambiguous enough to allow active support for the Libyan opposition. Nevertheless, since the resolution excluded ground troops, such support drew solely upon air and sea assets, leaving little possibility of closely coordinating with the insurgents.

In the early weeks of the operation, the use of special forces was officially limited to providing advice to the National Transitional Council. However, special forces from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as well as France and the United Kingdom deployed alongside insurgents during the fall of Tripoli at the end of August. Their role suggests an application of the Afghan model in which, as Jean-Christophe Notin explains, “the organization put in place by the French Special Operations Command greatly facilitates the observation to destruction process.”<sup>6</sup> Why this change? Was it the result of a deliberate strategy implemented by the coalition from the beginning of Unified Protector, or was it an adjustment

to the circumstances at hand? The first analyses of the campaign conducted against Mu'ammarr Gadhafi incline toward the second reasoning. After toppling the offensive on Benghazi by loyalist forces, the coalition faced a risk of mission creep, visible toward the end of April. A study conducted at that time by the Paris-based think tank *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique* (Foundation for Strategic Research) had already illuminated the limitations of the insurgency, which alone could not force the enemy to concentrate and maneuver and thus present a more vulnerable target to airpower. It also suggested deploying tactical air control parties of the special forces to increase the effectiveness of air strikes.<sup>7</sup> In light of scant evolution on the Brega and Misrata fronts, recourse to the Afghan model seemed the obvious thing to do, as also acknowledged by the political powers of the coalition's most determined states. It is symptomatic that in spite of the helicopter and fighter-bomber assaults intended to unblock the coastal towns, critical help for the insurgency came from the Nafusa Mountains, where Western and Arab special forces had been particularly active since the spring of 2011. As explained by a study of the Royal United Services Institute, the special forces had extensive roles for the Berber insurgents, including providing weaponry and equipment by land and by air, forming and training the insurgents to prepare them for the assault on Tripoli, integrating the ground offensive with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's air campaign, and providing intelligence and guidance for strikes.<sup>8</sup>

Given the risk of mission creep, the coalition employed its special forces in a fashion that increasingly came to look like the Afghan model in order to compensate for the pro-Gadhafi forces that were adapting to an air campaign insufficiently integrated with the insurgents' actions. Thus, the Libyan example confirms the undiminished relevance of the Afghan model more than 10 years after its development. It also highlights one of the paradoxes of airpower in the case of Unified Protector—that airpower meets political requirements by marking and solidifying one's determination from the very first hours of operations without committing ground troops. Nevertheless, it is truly effective on a military level only if a ground segment can catalyze its effects and help the insurgency succeed.

### **The Afghan Model under the Magnifying Glass: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Based on the examples of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, one can define the principal characteristics of the Afghan model and explore both its benefits and

limitations. One can simplify the model to the following triptych: airpower and special forces used in partnership with indigenous forces to conduct air-land operations. The special forces act mainly as a catalyst for airpower, permitting local partners to win in spite of numerical or material disadvantage. During the battle for Mazar-i-Sharif, the Northern Alliance won even though its 2,000 soldiers faced 5,000 well-entrenched and better-equipped Taliban troops. Special forces can also perform several tasks beyond directing the strikes, such as forming, guiding, or providing technical advice and intelligence to the indigenous command. The concept of full-spectrum targeting most appropriately captures all of the effects made possible by this model. That is, lethal air assets guided by the special forces strike opposing forces, and nonlethal assets provide intelligence and supply weaponry or food. Morale, military capabilities, and the population supporting local allies come under protection while the enemy's morale, C2, and military capabilities become targets to destroy. The psychological impact of the air weapon on the adversary is all the stronger, given that the latter cannot counter its effects, as proven by the accounts of Taliban prisoners captured during Enduring Freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Several requirements affect the Afghan model's three components and determine its limitations. In terms of airpower, the success experienced in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya should not make us forget that acquiring and maintaining air supremacy are an essential prerequisite to applying this model—one that could involve a long and costly (and thus prohibitive) campaign against an enemy with a strong air defense. Debates reported in the media about a potential military intervention in Syria offer a good example.<sup>10</sup> Without air supremacy, this model simply becomes inapplicable. However, even the presence of air supremacy does not guarantee success. Local allies and special forces remain particularly vulnerable when outnumbered by better-armed enemy troops, as reflected by the Battle of Debecka. Flawless air support must compensate for such disadvantages. To avoid unpleasant surprises, one must possess high-endurance ISR capabilities; thus, one often finds a highly sophisticated air component used in conjunction with rather primitive ground troops. According to a study conducted by the RAND Corporation, the first months of Enduring Freedom demanded far more data links than the more conventional Iraqi campaign of 2003.<sup>11</sup>

Providing support to friendly forces also calls for genuine knowledge of close air support—both its lethal and nonlethal aspects. The guided weaponry not only should be precise but also should offer adjustable lethality as a function of the

enemy's ability to adapt. Having experienced the destructive effects of allied airpower on their exposed vehicles, as in *Tarin Kowt* on 18 November 2001, Taliban troops established carefully prepared and concealed defensive positions that the 2,000-pound Joint Direct Attack Munitions could not fully reduce. Moreover, during *Anaconda*, conducted in March 2002, US forces deployed by helicopter to objective "Ginger" were constantly set upon by al-Qaeda militants extremely well entrenched in positions that resisted several consecutive strikes.<sup>12</sup> Unified Protector also confirms this need for a wide range of weaponry covering the entire spectrum of destructive effects. In the Libyan case, limited-effect munitions such as laser-guided inert bombs struck an enemy spread across an extremely dense urban environment without causing collateral damage. Indeed the Royal Air Force used highly accurate *Brimstone* munitions so intensively that the service almost depleted its stock.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding nonlethal assets, one must employ strong tactical-transport aviation to infiltrate and supply special forces and possibly supply indigenous allies—witness the *Nafusa Mountain* campaign in Libya. Precision airdrop systems can compensate for the absence of secured landing strips and isolation of friendly troops.<sup>14</sup> To these, one must add assets inherent to any air campaign: C2, in-flight refueling, combat search and rescue, and so forth. Clearly, then, air forces should master all air-centered courses of action, which limits the number of air forces able to apply the Afghan model autonomously or at least to have a decisive role within a coalition that applies it. Requiring such a significant air component could restrict the appeal of a model whose ground segment seems to involve so few human and material resources. Obviously, operating within a coalition offsets certain shortcomings.

In terms of the ground segment, special forces should master all of the techniques and procedures for close air support. However, their role goes far beyond guiding strikes. *Anaconda* highlighted the limitations of airborne ISR capabilities. Specifically, even though the 100-square-kilometer operations area had come under intensive observation for one month, half of the enemy positions remained undetected before the operation began. Therefore, troops within contact range should deploy to compensate for such limitations when the local geography is challenging, as in the case of the mountainous terrain in much of Afghanistan and the urban environment in which modern conflicts increasingly take place. Special forces offset as many of the sensors' limitations as possible by conveying intelligence—either firsthand or from indigenous allies. Of course, this works both

ways, allowing allies to benefit from intelligence collected by airborne sensors. The first analyses of Unified Protector clearly point out that Western special forces assumed this role during the rebel advance on Tripoli.<sup>15</sup>

Special forces should also include linguists and regional experts able to interact with local partners quickly and effectively. While US teams in Afghanistan relied on CIA contacts with the Northern Alliance, several weeks passed before Arab and Western special forces could build an effective partnership with Libyan allies because of geographic dispersal and the lack of a unified command.

The third component of the Afghan model is the availability of ad hoc allies. The model's success depends upon the presence of relatively credible indigenous troops, both on a political and military level. The choice of this local partner is not a neutral one. In a conflict involving different insurgent groups opposing a common enemy, one must consider the balance of power that will dictate the country's future governance before supporting one group to the detriment of the others.

The level of military credibility is not necessarily a decisive criterion in the choice of the local ally if it is offset by a strong capacity to commit enough potential fighters. Experience shows that one can adapt to a wide range of situations. The potential combatant does not need to possess previous military training if he can be taught the necessary basics of combat in areas out of enemy range. Coalition forces may also supply equipment by air if necessary, as occurred during the Nefusa Mountains campaign. Once the combatants are ready to fight, special forces provide guidance, ensure the coordination of air strikes, and help synchronize actions of ground troops with the air campaign plan. Against all odds, armed pastry chefs can overcome professional soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

However, one must know the tactical limitations of indigenous partners because they cannot necessarily understand and carry out complex maneuvers when confronted by a sophisticated enemy. Special forces in limited numbers will always find themselves vulnerable after a sudden rout of their allies. A successful Afghan model must have parties that share more or less common strategic objectives. On the one hand, overthrowing the Taliban regime in the early weeks of Enduring Freedom or bringing down Gadhafi provided such shared interest necessary for mutual success. On the other hand, both Tora Bora and Anaconda reveal the danger of not having enough ground troops to compensate for an Afghan ally poorly motivated to hunt down al-Qaeda's foreign fighters—during wintertime and in a particularly mountainous environment.<sup>17</sup>

## Implications for Air Forces

The Afghan model is far from a panacea to modern conflicts. Its successful use depends upon specific criteria, and indigenous allies who depend on foreign air support may find themselves at risk, just as special forces commandos may become vulnerable if their local partners withdraw. The model may also require a certain amount of strategic patience before it produces effects. However, because it can be quickly implemented, compared to a more conventional campaign, the model optimizes airpower's inherent attributes of rapid power projection, reach, agility, ubiquity, firepower, and flexibility. Still, the Afghan model does not assure peace after the campaign has ended—consider, for example, the Taliban's return to Afghanistan, the deteriorating situation in northern Iraq during the months following the fall of Saddam, and the uncertain future of Libya.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the campaign in Libya has proven the Afghan model's validity and relevance. Its inherent role as catalyst for airpower helps increase its strategic value. On both the political and financial levels, the Afghan model involves lower costs than conventional campaigns. It does not necessarily solve conflicts by itself, but such is the case for all military interventions, conventional or not. The Afghan model appears replicable within the arc of crisis where subsist many hostile totalitarian regimes that remain vulnerable to a determined insurgency. In the opinion of US strategists, the withdrawal from Iraq, the death of Osama bin Laden, and a reduction in the public deficit prompted President Barack Obama to adopt new strategic guidelines that contrast sharply with those of the past decade. Now more exacting in terms of the nature and place of its military engagements, the United States seeks credible partners able to share the security burden, particularly when its vital interests are not at stake. The Afghan model offers a way to take best advantage of American air supremacy with minimal involvement.

At a time when France is making capability choices, one must recognize that some remain wary of the Afghan model and may even reject it. References to it as proxy interventionism reflect an underestimation of the political and military involvement that this model requires. Its limitations are pointed out regularly to the detriment of the model's coercive value although it can increase the effectiveness of military interventions whenever circumstances require support from a local partner without massive deployment of ground troops. A recent article points out the potentially harmful effects it might have on the evolution of the composition of armed forces: "Moreover, this model . . . could account for cuts in the format of ground forces."<sup>19</sup> Such criticism tends to overlook the conditions necessary to

implement the Afghan model, which are particular enough to reduce the temptation to apply it regularly.

Denying our armed forces a tool with proven coercive value would be all the more detrimental if they already have all elements required to use it. We should preserve the model's attributes, such as the knowledge related to close air support, shaped in Afghanistan and proven in Libya, and the strong air component integrated within a wide framework of joint special forces able to form, train, and provide advice to foreign partners. Of course, an air force must offer the necessary framework to apply the Afghan model, including C2, ISR, and both lethal and nonlethal assets. All of these elements exist and have proven their worth. We should now acknowledge their symbiotic character within the Afghan model and fully integrate the latter with the range of our armed forces' strategic options. As some of the model's best advocates observe, "Future planners must consider the model as a primary option, rather than an emergency procedure."<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

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15. Clark et al., *Accidental Heroes*, 12; and Notin, *Notre guerre en Libye*, 470–71.
16. Notin, *Notre guerre en Libye*, 526.
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