

A Case for Strategic Design

On “A Diplomatic Surge in Afghanistan”

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In 2010, Daryl Morini argued that a diplomatic surge was the only way to achieve a lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. A decade later, it is unknown whether Morini’s surge would have worked. What is clear is that a lack of strategic design contributed to US and Coalition failures in Afghanistan.

The recent collapse of the Afghan government, the fall of Kabul, and the final chaotic period of American/NATO withdrawal have once again focused attention on what became America’s longest war. In testimony before Congress, General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the withdrawal a “logistical success, but a strategic failure.”¹ The impact of such a strategic failure, often equated with the American withdrawal from Vietnam, will doubtlessly resonate into the future, challenging alliances and relationships around the globe.² For the United States, the fall of Kabul signals a need to evaluate how we assess and link strategy to operations and how we focus the elements of national power toward our strategic goals.

In 2010, Australian Daryl Morini penned an intriguing article looking at the Afghanistan problem at a strategic level from an international relations perspective. Prophetically, he noted, “without a commensurate multilateral diplomatic surge, efforts towards lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan will most likely fail.”³

Looking at the Afghanistan problem through the lens of the major actors—Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, and China—Morini grappled with historical interests and risk calculi, noting their convergences, then proposed diplomatic actions for policy-maker consideration. These actions, he hoped, would create an environment in which stability within Afghanistan could emerge, freed from divisive interventionism.

In Search of a Strategy

As Morini suggested, most Afghanistan War analyses then and since have been operational or tactical. These analyses have often noted that the United States beautifully and effectively executes operations but seems to fail at reaching its strategic goals. While the United States and NATO struggled with Afghanistan’s daunting complexity, Morini set those details aside and instead looked at Afghanistan from a regional point of view, noting “the systematic context of each intervention, including that by

NATO-ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], is arguably as important as military facts on the ground in explaining changes in the Afghan political scene.”⁴

By emphasizing the critical external system links, Morini contributed what could have been an extremely useful set of decisive points. By developing a regional diplomatic strategy, Morini argued, tensions over the precariously balanced Afghan state would be reduced, leading to the potential for stability and a negotiated outcome.

In many respects, this was a road not taken. While the United States articulated strategy or strategies with respect to the region, these strategies took a back seat to a focus within the country on internal influences. The role of Pakistan, for example, was only begrudgingly admitted as successive administrations struggled to maintain rocky relationships with the sixth most populous nation in the world, especially in the wake of the operation that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011.⁵

But successive ISAF plans did not articulate Pakistan’s influence, focusing instead on Hezb-i-Islami, Haqqani Network, and Taliban insurgents. While these groups operated with tacit and sometimes complicit Pakistani support, working from safe havens within the Pakistani state, the planning focus was on the insurgent groups themselves rather than on Pakistan’s regional power calculations.

Similarly, Russian and Iranian influence in Afghanistan was, at least by 2018, a captivating concern for the United States and NATO. In the author’s experience, Russian influence in the north and Iranian influence in the west were seen as eroding potential support for the government in Kabul, while Russia, Iran, and China seemed to be carving Afghanistan into spheres of influence. Still, this influence was of operational interest and did not seem to affect the campaign strategy.

We will never know if Morini’s regional diplomatic strategy would have worked, but it does seem clear, especially with the release of “The Afghanistan Papers” (detailed below) that the strategies under which US/NATO/ISAF involvement were cast were insufficient.⁶ This led not to Morini’s fear of an extended civil war but, worse, the complete collapse of the Afghan government and the seizure of the entire state by the Taliban and their insurgent allies, in particular the Haqqani Network. Milley noted it as a strategic failure. Retired General David C. Petraeus said, “there is a specter here, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, that is going to haunt the US-EU relationship and our other relationships around the world.”⁷

In 2019, the *Washington Post* ran a series of articles based on Freedom of Information Act requests for raw interview transcripts conducted by the

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)—“The Afghanistan Papers.” Established in 2008, SIGAR’s mandate was to focus on reconstruction rather than strategy, but the lack of an overall strategy by successive administrations was one of the key lessons learned by parties analyzing the papers.

While Inspector General John F. Sopko observed a strategy by the Trump administration, he also noted a disconnect. “There was an overarching strategy that was announced by President Trump early, and I think it is about a year or two ago [in 2020]. The difficulty we have, and have been asking, is how do our individual programs support that strategy?”⁸ Even during periods when there was a strategy articulated by the White House, SIGAR found the agency and department implementation was disconnected and disjointed.

“The Afghanistan Papers” reveal a series of planning and strategic assumptions too quickly taken as facts, namely, the Afghan government could overcome corruption; development would result in political legitimacy for the government in Kabul; and the Afghan national security forces would be capable of supporting their American-style army and air force so long as they had funding. These assumptions seem to have been taken as gospel by higher authorities, becoming so sacred they could not be assailed.

The lack of a cohesive strategy and the inability to coordinate across the elements of national power will probably emerge as key lessons learned as the war is studied. From the perspective of Morini’s article, the pressing need to incorporate regional powers into a comprehensive set of strategic-level talks may have gone a long way toward reducing tensions, though the contradictions and divergent interests would likely not have resulted in overall stability. But Morini’s observations reflected those by Sopko, as proclaimed in his testimony before the Senate in 2020.

[A] comprehensive political outcome requires compromises among the Afghan political elite to reform and govern inclusively. It requires compromises in the ongoing talks between the Taliban and the United States. It requires sustained diplomacy to secure support from Afghanistan’s neighbors, especially Pakistan and Iran, and others including Russia, China, India, and the Gulf States. This is a major political diplomatic effort, a campaign that needs to be undertaken.⁹

Undoubtedly, a sense of strategy within the American diplomatic community existed. But the governance, development, and security lines of effort that framed ISAF’s long-term approach may not have mapped directly to long-term US goals, nor did they appear to account for the interests of those key actors surrounding Afghanistan.

Whether or not Pakistan, Russia, or Iran would have worked with the United States as Morini suggested will remain an unanswerable question, but failure or inability to steer their influences made the counterinsurgency fight harder. The open secret of Pakistan's direct involvement through the Inter-Services Intelligence organization has been often commented upon, while Iranian and Iranian-styled improvised explosive devices transformed the conflict.¹⁰ Russian information campaigns sought to degrade Afghan perceptions of the American intervention through the Russia Today television network and other operations.

The Need for Strategic Design

In 2010, the Government Accountability Office concluded the changing security environment required an evolution of how strategy was formulated.

National security threats have evolved and require involvement beyond the traditional agencies of DOD, the Department of State, and USAID. . . . What has not yet evolved are the mechanisms that agencies use to coordinate national security activities such as developing overarching strategies to guide planning and execution of missions, or sharing and integrating national security information across agencies. The absence of effective mechanisms can be a hindrance to achieving national security objectives.¹¹

As a concentration within the Air Force's Air Command and Staff College, the Joint All-Domain Strategist program teaches a method of connecting strategy to operational-level plans through what Jeffrey Reilly calls "strategic design." This process seeks to reduce or eliminate precisely the kind of disconnect identified by Morini and the Government Accountability Office: connecting clearly articulated national interests of key players to a design at the strategic level, which in turn informs and drives the more familiar design process at the operational level. As Morini suggested, it seeks to identify global nodes and connections that allow planners to devise symmetrical or asymmetrical strategic response options leveraging all elements of national power.

Design is familiar to military planners at the operational level and is taught as a fundamental component of the Joint planning process.¹² The Joint All-Domain Strategist concentration adds design at the strategic level to assess strategy as received through higher-level orders and documents or fill in when it is not. It considers the interests of major players by articulating the observed rather than desired operating environment system and identifies tensions expressed through convergences and divergences.

Morini, citing Kaveh Afrasiabi, states, “there is a convergence of interests in Afghanistan.”¹³ And, as Reilly notes, “the natural tendency is to concentrate on divergence in an effort to prevent an adversary from reaching their goals. . . . However, using convergence to influence actors provides a mechanism that can advantageously shape current and future strategic environments.”¹⁴ Perhaps a focus on convergence in Afghanistan would have yielded better tools at the strategic level and better outcomes.

Reilly’s strategic design compares the desired system with barriers to implementation, setting expectations and laying out both capabilities and limitations.¹⁵ This was clearly never well understood in the Afghan case. If it had been, strategists would have set political and military expectations allowing successive administrations to manage the narrative toward more sustainable and desirable outcomes, even if those outcomes were not as rosy as the success-is-just-around-the-corner assessments seemed to constantly suggest.

Flowing from this analysis, strategic design considers problem sets and linkages that enable the multivariate articulation of problems to be addressed through strategic lines of engagement, which in turn enables operational planners to embed their plans within a nested strategy that begins with national interests. While interests may shift from one administration to the next, at the macro level, they tend to be remarkably consistent. The United States Objectives and Programs for National Security—NSC-68—is one of the best examples of an effective, durable strategic design that survived political oscillations throughout the Cold War.¹⁶

While not a replacement for national-level strategy, strategic design is an excellent way of either validating strategy as received or proposing a strategic framework in which operational planning can commence, embedding it within a schema of national interests. The process parallels the operational design process, making it a familiar approach for military planners. Hopefully, strategic design will arm them with the awareness to press for strategic guidance from across the federal government when it is vague or missing.

Conclusion

Morini’s essay identifies one of the most compelling tensions underlying the Afghanistan War: the lack of a clear strategy at the regional or international level. As we continue to conduct autopsies on the loss of the war, writers such as Morini emerge as luminaries, highlighting flaws with our strategic approach 9 years prior to the release of “The Afghanistan Papers” and 11 years prior to the frenetic withdrawal from Kabul.

One positive outcome from this might be a recognition of the need for connections between how the United States conducts its wars and its strategic and grand strategic interests. Using tools like strategic design, perhaps military planners will have the clarity and courage to press for strategic goals embedded within America's national interests for any campaign. **SSQ**

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Notes

1. Quoted in Morgan Chalfant, Ellen Mitchell, and Rebecca Beitsch, "Five Takeaways from the Senate's Hearing on Afghanistan," *The Hill*, September 28, 2021, <https://thehill.com/>.
2. For example, see Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Eastern Europeans Angst over US Posture after Afghanistan Withdrawal," *Defense News*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.defense.news.com/>.
3. Daryl Morini, "A Diplomatic Surge in Afghanistan, 2011–2014," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 68.
4. Morini, "Diplomatic Surge," 70.
5. Assessment based on author's personal experience in the field.
6. Craig Whitlock, Leslie Shapiro, and Armand Emamdjomeh, "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
7. Adamowski, "Eastern Europeans Angst."
8. *The Afghanistan Papers: Costs and Benefits of America's Longest War: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management of the Committee on Homeland Security and Government, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., February 11, 2020* (statement of John F. Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction), <https://www.govinfo.gov/>.
9. Sopko, Statement, 17.
10. Abubaker Siddique, "Pakistan Seen as Repeating 'Pyrrhic Victory' in Afghanistan," *Gandhara*, April 20, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/>.
11. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *National Security: Key Challenges and Solutions to Strengthen Interagency Collaboration* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2010), 3, quoted in Jeffrey M. Reilly, "Strategic Design" (unpublished manuscript, February 10, 2018), Microsoft Word document.
12. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Joint Publication 5.0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: CJCS, December 1, 2020), chap. 4; and Jeffrey M. Reilly, *Operational Design: Distilling Clarity from Complexity for Decisive Action* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012).
13. Morini, "Diplomatic Surge," 88.
14. Reilly, "Strategic Design," 8.
15. Reilly, "Strategic Design," 10.
16. National Security Council (NSC), "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security" (Washington, DC: NSC, April 14, 1950), <https://irp.fas.org/>.

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