By George Friedman and Reva Bhalla

The decision over whether to send more U.S. troops into Afghanistan may wait until the contested Afghan election is resolved, U.S. officials said Oct. 18. The announcement comes as U.S. President Barack Obama is approaching a decision on the war in Afghanistan. During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, Obama argued that Iraq was the wrong war at the wrong time, but Afghanistan was a necessary war. His reasoning went that the threat to the United States came from al Qaeda, Afghanistan had been al Qaeda's sanctuary, and if the United States were to abandon Afghanistan, al Qaeda would re-establish itself and once again threaten the U.S. homeland. Withdrawal from Afghanistan would hence be dangerous, and prosecution of the war was therefore necessary.

After Obama took office, it became necessary to define a war-fighting strategy in Afghanistan. The most likely model was based on the one used in Iraq by Gen. David Petraeus, now head of U.S. Central Command, whose area of responsibility covers both Afghanistan and Iraq. Paradoxically, the tactical and strategic framework for fighting the so-called "right war" derived from U.S. military successes in executing the so-called "wrong war." But grand strategy, or selecting the right wars to fight, and war strategy, or how to fight the right wars, are not necessarily linked.

Afghanistan, Iraq and the McChrystal Plan

Making sense of the arguments over Afghanistan requires an understanding of how the Iraq war is read by the strategists fighting it, since a great deal of proposed Afghan strategy involves transferring lessons learned from Iraq. Those strategists see the Iraq war as having had three phases. The first was the short conventional war that saw the defeat of Saddam Hussein's military. The second was the period from 2003-2006 during which the United States faced a Sunni insurgency and resistance from the Shiite population, as well as a civil war between those two communities. During this phase, the United States sought to destroy the insurgency primarily by military means while simultaneously working to scrape a national unity government together and hold elections. The third phase, which began in late 2006, was primarily a political phase. It consisted of enticing Iraqi Sunni leaders to desert the foreign jihadists in Iraq, splitting the Shiite community among its various factions, and reaching political — and financial — accommodations among the various factions. Military operations focused on supporting political processes, such as pressuring recalcitrant factions and protecting those who aligned with the United States. The troop increase — aka the surge — was designed to facilitate this strategy. Even more, it was meant to convince Iraqi factions (not to mention Iran) that the United States was not going to pull out of Iraq, and that therefore a continuing American presence would back up guarantees made to Iraqis.

It is important to understand this last bit and its effect on Afghanistan. As in Iraq, the idea that

the United States will not abandon local allies by withdrawing until Afghan security forces could guarantee the allies' security lies at the heart of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. The premature withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, e.g., before local allies' security could be guaranteed, would undermine U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. To a great extent, the process of U.S. security guarantees in Afghanistan depends on the credibility of those guarantees: Withdrawal from Iraq followed by retribution against U.S. allies in Iraq would undermine the core of the Afghan strategy.

U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal's strategy in Afghanistan ultimately is built around the principle that the United States and its NATO allies are capable of protecting Afghans prepared to cooperate with Western forces. This explains why the heart of McChrystal's strategy involves putting U.S. troops as close to the Afghan people as possible. Doing so will entail closing many smaller bases in remote valleys — like the isolated outpost recently attacked in Nuristan province — and opening bases in more densely populated areas.

McChrystal's strategy therefore has three basic phases. In phase one, his forces would fight their way into regions where a large portion of the population lives and where the Taliban currently operates, namely Kabul, Khost, Helmand and Kandahar provinces. The United States would assume a strategic defensive posture in these populated areas. Because these areas are essential to the Taliban, phase two would see a Taliban counterattack in a bid to drive McChrystal's forces out, or at least to demonstrate that the U.S. forces cannot provide security for the local population. Paralleling the first two phases, phase three would see McChrystal using his military successes to forge alliances with indigenous leaders and their followers.

It should be noted that while McChrystal's traditional counterinsurgency strategy would be employed in populated areas, U.S. forces would also rely on traditional counterterrorism tactics in more remote areas where the Taliban have a heavy presence and can be pursued through drone strikes. The hope is that down the road, the strategy would allow the United States to use its military successes to fracture the Taliban, thereby encouraging defections and facilitating political reconciliation with Taliban elements driven more by political power than ideology.

There is a fundamental difference between Iraq and Afghanistan, however. In Iraq, resistance forces rarely operated in sufficient concentrations to block access to the population. By contrast, the Taliban on several occasions have struck with concentrations of forces numbering in the hundreds, essentially at company-size strength. If Iraq was a level one conflict, with irregular forces generally refusing conventional engagement with coalition forces, Afghanistan is beginning to bridge the gap from a level one to a level two conflict, with the Taliban holding territory with forces both able to provide conventional resistance and to mount some offensives at the company level (and perhaps at the battalion level in the future). This means that occupying, securing and defending areas such that the inhabitants see the coalition forces as defenders rather than as magnets for conflict is the key challenge.

Adding to the challenge, elements of McChrystal's strategy are in tension. First, local inhabitants will experience multilevel conflict as coalition forces move into a given region. Second, McChrystal is hoping that the Taliban goes on the offensive in response. And this means that the first and second steps will collide with the third, which is demonstrating to locals

that the presence of coalition forces makes them more secure as conflict increases (which McChrystal acknowledges will happen). To convince locals that Western forces enhance their security, the coalition will thus have to be stunningly successful both at defeating Taliban defenders when they first move in and in repulsing subsequent Taliban attacks.

In its conflict with the Taliban, the coalition's main advantage is firepower, both in terms of artillery and airpower. The Taliban must concentrate its forces to attack the coalition; to counter such attacks, the weapons of choice are airstrikes and artillery. The problem with both of these weapons is first, a certain degree of inaccuracy is built into their use, and second, the attackers will be moving through population centers (the area held by both sides is important precisely because it has population). This means that air- and ground-fire missions, both important in a defensive strategy, run counter to the doctrine of protecting population.

McChrystal is fully aware of this dilemma, and he has therefore changed the rules of engagement to sharply curtail airstrikes in areas of concentrated population, even in areas where U.S. troops are in danger of being overrun. As McChrystal said in a recent interview, these rules of engagement will hold "Even if it means we are going to step away from a firefight and fight them another day."

This strategy poses two main challenges. First, it shifts the burden of the fighting onto U.S. infantry forces. Second, by declining combat in populated areas, the strategy runs the risk of making the populated areas where political arrangements might already be in place more vulnerable. In avoiding air and missile strikes, McChrystal avoids alienating the population through civilian casualties. But by declining combat, McChrystal risks alienating populations subject to Taliban offensives. Simply put, while airstrikes can devastate a civilian population, avoiding airstrikes could also devastate Western efforts, as local populations could see declining combat as a betrayal. McChrystal is thus stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place on this one.

One of his efforts at a solution has been to ask for more troops. The point of these troops is not to occupy Afghanistan and impose a new reality through military force, which is impossible (especially given the limited number of troops the United States is willing to dedicate to the problem). Instead, it is to provide infantry forces not only to hold larger areas, but to serve as reinforcements during Taliban attacks so the use of airpower can be avoided. Putting the onus of this counterinsurgency on the infantry, and having the infantry operate without airpower, is radical departure in U.S. fighting doctrine since World War II.

Seismic Shift in War Doctrine

Geopolitically, the United States fights at the end of a long supply line. Moreover, U.S. forces operate at a demographic disadvantage. Once in Eurasia, U.S. forces are always outnumbered. Infantry-on-infantry warfare is attritional, and the United States runs out of troops before the other side does. Infantry warfare does not provide the United States any advantage, and in fact, it places the United States at a disadvantage. Opponents of the United States thus have larger numbers of fighters; greater familiarity and acclimation to the terrain; and typically, better intelligence from countrymen behind U.S. lines. The U.S. counter always has been force

multipliers — normally artillery and airpower — capable of destroying enemy concentrations before they close with U.S. troops. McChrystal's strategy, if applied rigorously, shifts doctrine toward infantry-on-infantry combat. His plan assumes that superior U.S. training will be the force multiplier in Afghanistan (as it may). But that assumes that the Taliban, a light infantry force with numerous battle-hardened formations optimized for fighting in Afghanistan, is an inferior infantry force. And it assumes that U.S. infantry fighting larger concentrations of Taliban forces will consistently defeat them.

Obviously, if McChrystal drives the Taliban out of secured areas and into uninhabited areas, the United States will have a tremendous opportunity to engage in strategic bombardment both against Taliban militants themselves and against supply lines no longer plugged into populated areas. But this assumes that the Taliban would not reduce its operations from company-level and higher assaults down to guerrilla-level operations in response to being driven out of population centers. If the Taliban did make such a reduction, it would become indistinguishable from the population. This would allow it to engage in attritional warfare against coalition forces and against the protected population to demonstrate that coalition forces can't protect them. The Taliban already has demonstrated the ability to thrive in both populated and rural areas of Afghanistan, where the terrain favors the insurgent far more than the counterinsurgent.

The strategy of training Afghan soldiers and police to take up the battle and persuading insurgents to change sides faces several realities. The Taliban has an excellent intelligence service built up during the period of its rule and afterward, allowing it to populate the new security forces with its agents and loyalists. And while persuading insurgents to change sides certainly can happen, whether it can happen to the extent of leaving the Taliban materially weakened remains in doubt. In Iraq, this happened not because of individual changes, but because regional ethnic leadership — with their own excellent intelligence capabilities — changed sides and drove out opposing factions. Individual defections were frequently liquidated.

But Taliban leaders have not shown any inclination for changing sides. They do not believe the United States is in Afghanistan to stay. Getting individual Taliban militants to change sides creates an intelligence-security battle. But McChrystal is betting that his forces will form bonds with the local population so deep that the locals will provide intelligence against Taliban forces operating in the region. The coalition must thus demonstrate that the risks of defection are dwarfed by the advantages. To do this, the coalition security and counterintelligence must consistently and effectively block the Taliban's ability to identify, locate and liquidate defenders. If McChrystal cannot do that, large-scale defection will be impossible, because well before such defection becomes large scale, the first defectors will be dead, as will anyone seen by the Taliban as a collaborator.

Ultimately, the entire strategy depends on how you read Iraq. In Iraq, a political decision was made by an intact Sunni leadership able to enforce its will among its followers. Squeezed between the foreign jihadists who wanted to usurp their position and the Shia, provided with political and financial incentives, and possessing their own forces able to provide a degree of security themselves, the Sunni leadership came to the see the Americans as the lesser evil. They controlled a critical mass, and they shifted. McChrystal has made it clear that the defections he expects are not a Taliban faction whose leadership decides to shift, but Taliban

soldiers as individuals or small groups. That isn't ultimately what turned the Iraq war but something very different — and quite elusive in counterinsurgency. He is looking for retail defections to turn into a strategic event.

Moreover, it seems much too early to speak of the successful strategy in Iraq. First, there is increasing intracommunal violence in anticipation of coming elections early next year. Second, some 120,000 U.S. forces remain in Iraq to guarantee the political and security agreements of 2007-2008, and it is far from clear what would happen if those troops left. Finally, where in Afghanistan there is the Pakistan question, in Iraq there remains the Iran question. Instability thus becomes a cross-border issue beyond the scope of existing forces.

The Pakistan situation is particularly problematic. If the strategic objective of the war in Afghanistan is to cut the legs out from under al Qaeda and deny these foreign jihadists sanctuary, then what of the sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal belt where high-value al Qaeda targets are believed to be located? Pakistan is fighting its share of jihadists according to its own rules; the United States cannot realistically expect Islamabad to fulfill its end of the bargain in containing al Qaeda. The primary U.S. targets in this war are on the wrong side of the border, and in areas where U.S. forces are not free to operate. The American interest in Afghanistan is to defeat al Qaeda and prevent the emergence of follow-on jihadist forces. The problem is that regardless of how secure Afghanistan is, jihadist forces can (to varying degrees) train and plan in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia — or even Cleveland for that matter. Securing Afghanistan is thus not necessarily a precondition for defeating al Qaeda.

Iraq is used as the argument in favor of the new strategy in Afghanistan. What happened in Iraq was that a situation that was completely out of hand became substantially less unstable because of a set of political accommodations initially rejected by the Americans and the Sunnis from 2003-2006. Once accepted, a disastrous situation became an unstable situation with many unknowns still in place.

If the goal of Afghanistan is to forge the kind of tenuous political accords that govern Iraq, the factional conflicts that tore Iraq apart are needed. Afghanistan certainly has factional conflicts, but the Taliban, the main adversary, does not seem to be torn by them. It is possible that under sufficient pressure such splits might occur, but the Taliban has been a cohesive force for a generation. When it has experienced divisions, it hasn't split decisively.

On the other hand, it is not clear that Western forces in Afghanistan can sustain long-term infantry conflict in which the offensive is deliberately ceded to a capable enemy and where airpower's use is severely circumscribed to avoid civilian casualties, overturning half a century of military doctrine of combined arms operations.

The Bigger Picture

The best argument for fighting in Afghanistan is powerful and similar to the one for fighting in Iraq: credibility. The abandonment of either country will create a powerful tool in the Islamic world for jihadists to argue that the United States is a weak power. Withdrawal from either place without a degree of political success could destabilize other regimes that cooperate with the

United States. Given that, staying in either country has little to do with strategy and everything to do with the perception of simply being there.

The best argument against fighting in either country is equally persuasive. The jihadists are right: The United States has neither the interest nor forces for long-term engagements in these countries. American interests go far beyond the Islamic world, and there are many present (to say nothing of future) threats from outside the region that require forces. Overcommitment in any one area of interest at the expense of others could be even more disastrous than the consequences of withdrawal.

In our view, Obama's decision depends not on choosing between McChrystal's strategy and others, but on a careful consideration of how to manage the consequences of withdrawal. An excellent case can be made that now is not the time to leave Afghanistan, and we expect Obama to be influenced by that thinking far more than by the details of McChrystal's strategy. As McChrystal himself points out, there are many unknowns and many risks in his own strategy; he is guaranteeing nothing.

Reducing American national strategy to the Islamic world, or worse, Afghanistan, is the greater threat. Nations find their balance, and the heavy pressures on Obama in this decision basically represent those impersonal forces battering him. The question he must ask himself is simple: In what way is the future of Afghanistan of importance to the United States? The answer that securing it will hobble al Qaeda is simply wrong. U.S. Afghan policy will not stop a global terrorist organization; terrorists will just go elsewhere. The answer that U.S. involvement in Afghanistan is important in shaping the Islamic world's sense of American power is better, but even that must be taken in context of other global interests.

Obama does not want this to be his war. He does not want to be remembered for Afghanistan the way George W. Bush is remembered for Iraq or Lyndon Johnson is for Vietnam. Right now, we suspect Obama plans to demonstrate commitment, and to disengage at a more politically opportune time. Johnson and Bush showed that disengagement after commitment is nice in theory. For our part, we do not think there is an effective strategy for winning in Afghanistan, but that McChrystal has proposed a good one for "hold until relieved." We suspect that Obama will hold to show that he gave the strategy a chance, but that the decision to leave won't be too far off.

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