



# DEMOCRACY ARSENAL

Opinion and commentary on US foreign policy and global affairs

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## A Bit More on that Afghanistan Study Group Report

Posted by Michael Cohen

Over the next few days I'm going to be writing a bit about the situation in Afghanistan, which based on a set of recent interviews and discussions seems increasingly dire and immune to good alternatives.

But the recent, rather heated debate, about the Afghanistan Study Group report merits further discussion. [Josh Foust](#), in [indomitable Foustian style](#), unleashed a [3,600 word howitzer-style attack](#) on the group, which led to heated responses from ASG signatories, [Bernard Finel](#) and [Justin Logan](#).

Finel pungently criticized both me and Foust for engaging in a "circular firing squad" by attacking individuals who basically share the same goal as we do - namely, de-escalate the US presence in Afghanistan. It's a fair critique, but I would simply note to Bernard that while I've been critical of the ASG report I did also say that it would be helpful if ASG folks "flesh (ed) out the complexities of what a real Plan B strategy for Afghanistan looks like." (And the notion that we should ignore the all too evident flaws in this report simply because we share basic aims seems non-conducive to smart foreign policy analysis).

Indeed, this is where much of the criticism from the report comes from - a frustration that after ten months of work the ASG has come with a report that offers a series of non-actionable, unrealistic recommendations that will be of little assistance to policymakers. Maybe ASG can be effective going forward (and I hope they will be) but frankly I can't help but wonder what they have been doing for the past year.

Yet both Finel and Logan; as well as to a lesser extent Steve Clemons have sort of tried to change the debate - arguing instead that the report is important not for it's recommendations, but because it demonstrates the failure of current US strategy and will spark a debate about Afghanistan policy.

But I guess I don't really understand who these folks think they are preaching to. You could swing a cat in Washington DC and outside the president's office at CNAS and perhaps the upper echelons of the Pentagon you're going to have a pretty hard time hitting anyone who thinks that the current strategy in Afghanistan is working. Among Afghan analysts the sense of gloom is even more pervasive. This sense that the mission has gone off the rails is also reflected in US public opinion polling.

In short, the notion that seems to underpin the ASG effort - that it was critical to change the frames of debate about Afghan policy seems a bit like closing the barn door after the horse has vacated the premises. Who exactly do they think they need to convince - and will the people they need to convince be influenced by this product?

I might not be as plugged in as Steve Clemons or other signatories but I find it bizarre that its supporters are patting themselves on the back for making arguments that some of us were making a year ago - and to which much of the policy community has largely come to share. And let's face it; in the places where support for the current policy still exists, like the military and even elements of the Administration, does anyone believe that these recommendations will resonate at all? They make for target practice from war supporters who will correctly note that the ASG signatories have failed to wrestle with the complexities of Afghan and regional politics and have failed to offer a coherent strategy for protecting and advancing US interests in the region.

What IS needed is not more reminders that things aren't working or more debates about US grand strategy, or the tangential nature of Afghanistan to larger US interests or even the flaws in the US approach to fighting terrorism.

What is desperately needed is an alternative to the current policy. [Clemons argues](#) that he "want (ed) to break through is the 'paralysis option' of people who are so well rooted in this issue that they see all the reasons to pull out and yet see all the reasons we can't."

No doubt that paralysis exists and its dangerously pervasive among Afghan analysts; but this is exactly why the ASG could have been so important - because it wasn't composed predominately of Afghan experts or even those tied to the current military strategy it could examine and float alternative proposals that push the policy envelope.

Yet, ASG has basically punted on crafting serious, well thought-out alternatives.

Of course, signatories would argue otherwise. But for many of the reasons that Josh Foust pointed out the other day and I argued here at DA the lack of specificity in the report's recommendations, the lack of rigor in gaming out the consequences of the strategies recommended (like departing the South) or even a basic understanding of political realities in Afghanistan demonstrates a frustrating lack of seriousness - and even apparent disinterest in the efficacy of recommendations proffered.

Again, I'm sympathetic about what the ASG is trying to achieve with this report - and I share their view that it's imperative to change the US military political and military strategy. But more than ever, it is incumbent on the DC policy community to do more than point fingers, but offer constructive suggestions for an actual "new way forward." Considering the intellectual resources and money spent on this endeavor it's small wonder that even those of us who oppose the current mission are disappointed.

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