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Responding to Critics

by [Joshua Foust](#) on [9/13/2010](#) · [21 comments](#)

Well, that wasn't too surprising: some of the signatories to the Afghanistan Study Group Report, which I [critiqued fairly viciously](#), have responded by basically calling me a dumb asshole. Now, there's always a danger in these bloggy tits-for-tat, in that they often devolve very quickly into acute wrangling over minutiae, so let me state up front—I doubt anything will come from this, I will not waste my time bickering when everyone begins talking past one another, and I don't think anyone involved in the report is stupid, just that they didn't do their homework. That's an important distinction some don't often realize—there is a HUGE difference between criticizing one's ideas and one's person. Anyway.

Because I actually like him, I'm going to respond to [Bernard Finel](#) first. Bernard helpfully ordered his critiques, so I'll use those as signposts to structure what follows.

“1. Josh is, as usual, up in arms about the lack of “Afghanistan” experts associated with the report.” I think it's a fair criticism that I overreact to the lack of regional expertise involved in these sorts of reports. However, given the extent of factual errors—not just what I viewed as errors in conception but factually incorrect statements like claiming the Taliban is nothing but southern Pashtuns—I think the criticism about the lack of expertise in the group is a legitimate one to make. Since there is some confusion over this point, perhaps owing to Andrew Exum's [ebullient praise](#) of my critique, I don't think anyone should necessarily consult me—there is rich body of experts on Afghanistan with things like PhDs and decades of experience the country who would do quite nicely. I don't think it should have been composed entirely of regional experts, but maybe one or two to help everyone gets the basics right would have helped the report tremendously (and to parry an obvious rejoinder: no, writing a few articles or a book does not make one an expert anymore than my blog makes me an expert).

“1(a). A corollary to this point is that Josh misunderstands what the report is about.” No, I get that the report is primarily about Washington, trying to reframe our interests, and affect the policy discussion. The thing is, and none of the reactions to my criticism have addressed this yet, if you don't get your basics right, you're not going to get your strategy right (and calling it the “Afghanistan Study Group,” which is a pretty transparent sop to the Iraq Study Group, is misleading—the ISG was assembled by Congress, for one, and listed its contributors and collaborators. The ASG was assembled by some think tankers and a few academics and journalists). That I happen to agree with the general idea of changing U.S. involvement in the war is incidental and coincidental—lazy thinking is lazy thinking, and this report is full of it.

Much more importantly, Finel's critique of expertise is interesting: “I genuinely honor and respect the work

and sacrifice of the men and women who have served in Afghanistan, but to be blunt, they are too close to the issue, and their personal experiences rather than giving them any great insight into the issue clouds their judgments.” By this standard, the ASG’s director, Matthew Hoh, whose entire career at the moment is built on inflating his five months on a PRT in Afghanistan, is too close to the issue. It’s personal for him. If actual experts are disqualified by feeling strongly about the topic, then so is the ASG director.

“2. For instance, he is worked up over the fact that the report recommends a CT focus in Afghanistan relying on drones and SOF to keep any resurgent AQ presence off-balance.” This is my fault for not being entirely clear, but my point about Shahzad was not entirely serious. I meant it to demonstrate how flimsy the argument is that we can blame radicalization on any simple cause. I thought that was clear in how I said “so, the ASG will radicalize even more people,” but I guess it wasn’t. I was being sarcastic.

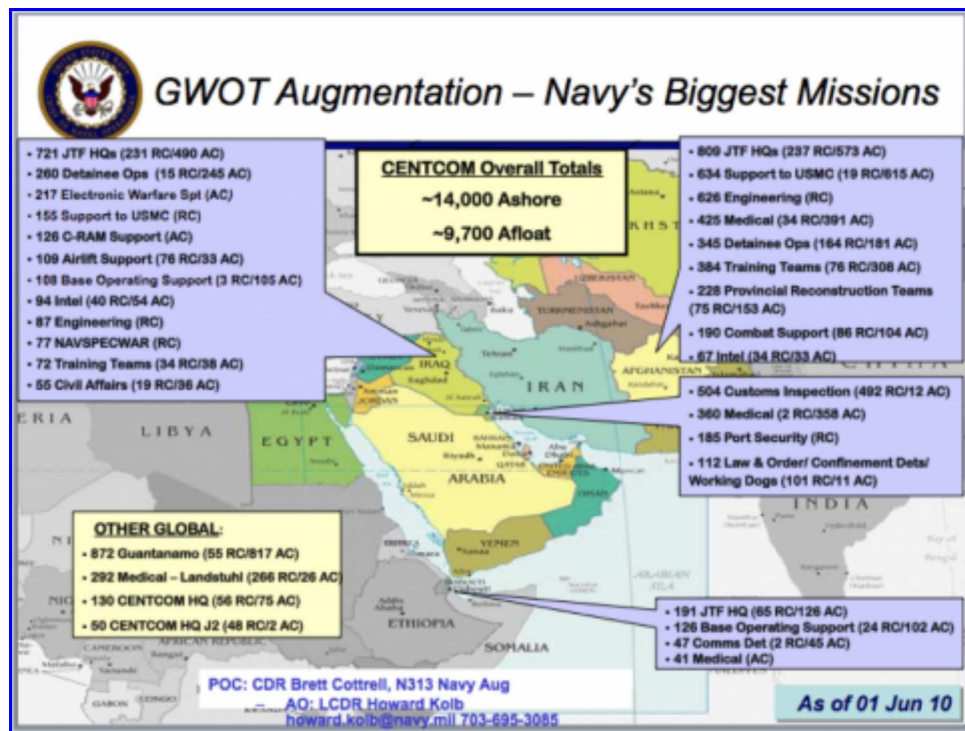
Bernard and I had a spirited discussion about this on Twitter, where he admitted the data to support the assertion that the mere presence of American troops in Afghanistan is a force for radicalization is “problematic,” and that none of the surveys on which he bases his belief about the effect of American troops have surveyed Afghans. His point, “Foreign military presence is always unpopular,” is a difficult one to square with the reality that quite often it’s not, and in my original post I made it a point to note that in Afghanistan, radicalization not only happens for a number of reasons, but quite often the presence of foreign troops can have a dampening effect on that radicalization.

This is another example why having expertise in the country you’re strategizing helps formulate an appropriate gauging of the phenomena in play, likely and known behaviors, and so on. The point about presence causing radicalization is posture based on assumption—not a data-driven argument.

“3. Josh is also upset about us dictating to the Afghan, particular in the report’s recommendation on “power sharing and political reconciliation.”” Yes, I am upset. The idea of decentralization & power sharing—which let me repeat, requires the dissolution of the constitution and the entirety of the Kabuli political establishment—is so unrealistic an expectation that it is silly. In practice, in the real world where few of the academics involved in this report actually deal with the squishy side of their theories, it is wholly, 100% unworkable.

“4. Josh makes a peculiar argument about force sizing.” Call it peculiar all you want. But I have no idea how they expect 30,000 troops to accomplish all the mission types they laid out. Here’s why: the current, American military requires at least 75% of its deployed force to participate in mission support. This includes transport, supply, analytic support, and facility security (the numbers are off a little bit in Afghanistan because of the high number of private contractors, but it’s silly to pretend that number doesn’t exist and I don’t know what the exact breakdown is). If you want a force size of 30,000, we can guesstimate that a good 25,000 of them will be involved in support operations—not directly accomplishing the mission. So that would leave about 5,000 troops to train the Afghan security forces, and maintain a sufficient counterstrike capability within the country, and prevent the Taliban from expanding its areas of influence, and run the assets and resources necessary to keep it all flowing, as I put it. I don’t see how you do that in an unstable country the size of Texas with fifteen active insurgent groups trying to kill you. If the ASG meant 30,000 troops out on patrol directly accomplishing their mission, which might be a realistic number for that many mission types, then they should have said they want a 125,000 troop commitment to the country.

This is also why, to get back to my point on expertise, that having some people with expertise on military operations would have been helpful in gauging an appropriate troop strength for their preferred strategy. As an example, here is a slide detailing an angle to deployment that few recognize or account for: the U.S. Navy:



They have over 23,000 sailors active in CENTCOM, supporting two land wars. Look at what they contribute to the war in Afghanistan: HQ staff (again: the military has *enormous* overhead costs!), Engineers (to do that ASG-approved development work!), doctors and nurses (a smaller force on patrol more is going to get hurt a lot!), training teams (for the training mission ASG wants to maintain!), and so on. All told, they are 3,000 of the servicemen deployed to Afghanistan right now, or about 10% of what the ASG thinks we need to reduce to (missing is a count of how many Navy SEAL teams are active, anywhere, for obvious reasons). I cannot stress enough how unrealistic the ASG's numbers are.

“5. No, the real problem is that some people — like Josh apparently — think that development and “governance mentoring” are effective policy instruments. They aren’t.” This is the most confusing point Bernard makes. I didn’t say development is an effective or appropriate policy instrument—the Afghanistan Study Group did (it’s point #4 of their “New Way Forward,” even though it’s just a continuation of the current way forward that assumes the problems in Afghanistan are economic, rather than social, cultural, political, religious, and historical). My response to the ASG report said, “We cannot get it right in a country and economy and region we understand—why should we expect to get it right in Afghanistan? Why should we have any expectations that we can be more effective there than we are here?”

So Bernard and I agree... that the Afghanistan Study Group is part of the problem because of its advocacy of forced, external economic development as an instrument of policy.

But that’s enough about Bernard. Much more hateful is CATO’s Justin Logan, who writes at the [National Interest](#):

Foust writes that the Group “did not contain anyone with expertise on Afghanistan or the military.” Does Foust really believe that Michael Desch, Pat Lang, Barry Posen, and Stephen Walt do not have expertise on the military? Have Juan Cole, Bernard Finel, Selig Harrison, Parag Khanna, Pat Lang, Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, Anatol Lieven (!), and Paul Pillar never “studied Afghanistan in any detail?” I’d humbly suggest Foust may want to revisit this claim.

That certainly deserves a response. I’ve addressed Lieven’s [curious relationship to expertise](#) before (by his standard, most of those names are not experts because they have not lived in rural Afghan villages for long

periods of time). Bernard Finel is open that his expertise is not on Afghanistan, but rather the military and strategic issues. Selig Harrison's supposed expertise is a [sick, sick joke](#). The Leveretts are known for their expertise on Iran, including negotiating Iran's cooperation against the Taliban in 2001... but I'm at a loss to find anything beyond a few blog posts at the Huffington Post that either have written directly about Afghanistan, and conditions inside the country. Parag Khanna has trouble developing his ideas so they, you know, [make sense](#).

I could go on, but this is silly. Writing a few articles here and there, or even writing a book does not make one an expert—if it did, then the ASG should have included someone like Bing West as the expert of all experts. Let's just be honest and admit the ASG was assembled because of the ideologies of the signatories, and not because of their specific skill sets and expertise and be done with it. Otherwise, Logan shouldn't have been included on this list, either.

What else does Justin say?

I am forced to conclude that neither Foust nor Exum understands what strategy is. It is not, *pace* Foust, induced by piling up mounds of granular operational and tactical detail and then seeing what one can shape out of the pile. Instead, those engaged in strategy must attempt to discern and state clearly the interests at stake (in this case those the United States has in Afghanistan or the region more broadly) and then to attempt to connect the complex chain of ends, ways, and means in order to explain how best to pursue those interests. I thought the report was fairly clear on the task force's views on America's interests and in proposing to bring America's exertions better into line with its interests. Thoughtful critiques would engage either on the grounds that the authors have misconstrued (a) America's interests, (b) how best to pursue them, or (c) both.

This is where we get into questions of reading comprehension (again, ahem). First off, I don't recognize his definition of strategy. In simple terms, a strategy is a plan of action meant to achieve a specific goal. The strategy put forth in the ASG report is the five points of their "New Way Forward," though, much like ISAF, ASG is kind of fuzzy about what their desired end state or goal really is. I think what Logan is referring to is a discussion of *interests*, though interests and even means to achieve them don't mean much without a desired end state in mind. Otherwise, you're left with just a different version of the current policy, which is indefinite small footprint drone strikes and counterterrorism activity, with the ASG-approved development projects to endanger government civilians and tie up soldiers from accomplishing the security portions of their mission.

Second off, I critiqued each and every pillar of that strategy in my post, including their discussion of national interests. Why Logan chooses to ignore that to emote about his rather unique idea of what "strategy" is something I'll leave to someone else.

But for the life of me I cannot find evidence that either Foust or Exum recognizes strategic thought. Both appear to believe that they are engaging in it by picking nits with various aspects of the report's analysis, but none of their critiques of the smaller claims does anything to knock down the report's conclusion: that America has limited interests in Afghanistan; that those interests are actually reasonably easy to achieve; and that our current efforts there are at best wasteful and at worst counterproductive.

Good grief, Justin, again with the strawmen. Perhaps an argument from analogy might work. We have two men, each with an equivalent set of skills and abilities, but only one of them will be tasked with educating an entire generation of children in how to view the world. They are each told to answer a simple question, and justify that answer. They are each asked, "what color is the sky?" Each answers, "the sky is blue." But here is where things go sideways. The first man says "the sky is blue because God decided the sky should be blue," while the second says "the sky is blue because of [Rayleigh scattering](#)." Both can easily be correct—for all we know, God decided to create Rayleigh scattering so we'd get pretty blue skies. But answering God, when

asked a question of science, implies a certain type of mindset, and certain way of interpreting the physical reality in front of you; answering a question of science with a scientific answer presents a wholly different type of mindset, and a wholly different way of interpreting the physical reality in front of you.

Logan's complaint, that I point out, relentlessly, the complete and utter negligence of fact in the ASG Report is the equivalent of saying the sky is blue because God wants it to be blue. Such an answer is, technically, correct, but the reasons for that answer are simply not rational, or fact-based, or even appropriate for someone meant to teach children science. In journalistic terms, Logan is responding by basically saying that the ASG Report is [false but accurate](#), a policy that is maybe correct in its end state, but who really cares why or how we arrived at that decision because really, fuck it (*strategy!*).

The end result, despite Logan's pretensions to seriousness, are neither serious nor interesting. If a Senator says we need to reduce the deficit because deficits make the demons in his head yell so loud he stays up and night and gets tired, we wouldn't say "well his facts and support are all wrong, but his conclusion is right so let's listen to him." We would either laugh, or, more likely, politely ignore him in the future.

Logan should know better than to complain about being shown to be wrong on a matter this important. He doesn't. I'm glad I had never heard of him before (even if Nathan [has](#)), and I don't think I'll be paying much attention to him in the future.

{ 21 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }



[1 Abu Guerrilla](#) 9/13/2010 at 8:54 pm

This has been really fun to follow – but the fun ends when I remember that we (the US) is still hopelessly stuck in The Stan. Perhaps we can forward this conversation—and critique—to the White House? They could use this kind of frankness.

[Reply](#)



[2 Hameed](#) 9/13/2010 at 10:17 pm

You reckon the whitehouse is interested in “frankness”?

[Reply](#)



[3 Stephen Pampinella](#) 9/13/2010 at 9:00 pm

“This is another example why having expertise in the country you're strategizing helps formulate an appropriate gauging of the phenomena in play, likely and known behaviors, and so on. The point about presence causing radicalization is posture based on assumption—not a data-driven argument.”

Great point, and weird to think how this is treated like established law that has no variation in its frequency. Reality is more complicated.

[Reply](#)



[4 Sean Kay](#) 9/13/2010 at 9:44 pm

As a member of the report, I'd like to point out that so much of your arguments, which might well have validity in the tactical circumstances of Afghanistan fail to really understand the report. And no, it is not about the "debate in Washington". It is about American grand strategy, and strategic interests. If I were an "expert" in Afghanistan (though I guess my several decades of knowledge on NATO is irrelevant here), then I could likely come up with 100 ways and detailed recommendations on how to fix Afghanistan and the decades and troops and so on. My own personal assessment is that even if all that is true, it has very minimal bearing on vital American national security interests. That is the central issue made in this report, which critique in no way addresses. And, I also think that by your standard one can only have a view of American interests in Afghanistan if they have lived among the rural people there? Maybe that's true, but the group here is a top line list of experts in American national security, and that is what we are focused on and trying to get the country to focus on.

[Reply](#)



[5 Joshua Foust](#) 9/13/2010 at 9:49 pm

Really, I don't mean this personally, but what is with ASG authors and reading comprehension? The bit about living in a rural village is ANATOL LIEVEN'S standard for "expertise":

I've addressed Lieven's curious relationship to expertise before (by his standard, most of those names are not experts because they have not lived in rural Afghan villages for long periods of time).

And in my original post, I said I thought the ASG "Misrepresents vital American interests in the region" and that it undersells the stability of Afghanistan itself as a vital interest.

This is all there—much of it in bold. What's hard with actually reading what I wrote?

[Reply](#)



[6 PETULANT SAGE](#) 9/14/2010 at 12:04 am

All stop — Finel, did I miss something? Are you a fucking policymaker?

Since when did you determine what is or is not in the best interest of the US? Who made you Deputy Assistant National Security Adviser for Egotism and Public Engagement?

Don't answer that.

[Reply](#)



[7 PETULANT SAGE](#) 9/14/2010 at 12:17 am

Tangentially, who made Sean Kay the Principal Deputy Assistant National Security Adviser for Egotism and Public Engagement?

And since when did NATO “experience” translate into anything even remotely relevant vis a vis...anything?

What’s next, are you going to advocate “the way forward” is to don blue helmets? Please. The Mondale campaign called, they want their foreign policy team back.

[Reply](#)



8 Caleb Kavon 9/14/2010 at 6:51 am

Several comments...

A. There is no North South Split with Pashtun Communities. King Ahmad Rahman and King Zahir Shah encouraged/forced the migration of literally hundreds of Pashtun communities to North, particularly Kunduz, Baglan, and Takhar, and Balkh thus there are no real splits anymore between contiguous Pashtun areas. In fact you can find the same sub tribes in Nangarhar and Kandahar as you can find in Takhar and Kunduz. The ASG plan is impossible in reality. Not to mention Tajik communities in Zabul and Ghazni and elsewhere. Of course, Kuchi Communities run the length of the country.

B. The Northern Alliance itself was never monolithic nor Anti Pashtun. One the major commanders was Haji Abdul Quadeer(RIP), who is recognized this month during Martyrs Week along with Shaheed Massoud. There was a wide range of Pashtun forces and leadership involved as well a Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara. It was always an umbrella group fighting for unification against the Taliban and not splitist in nature. The Paty of the Northern Alliance was called the United Front for it included all regional groups and a patriotic Mujaheddin based Anti Taliban leadership.

C. Any of this partition talk is never going to be tolerated nor accepted by any Afghan and will spark even more anti Foreign sentiment. If anything there is a unifying spin in Afghan history. Dr. Abdullah is half Pashtun and half Tajik and as the main opposition leader speaks for a united Afghanistan. Rabbani and Jamiat nor Dostum and Junbesh, nor Mohaqeq and Wahdat have never advocated nor supported a national split. The opposition to the Taliban is not based on ethnic considerations, they are against the radical nature of the Taliban not Pashtuns.

D. Both during the conflict of the 1990s and post Taliban period the stuggle has been to UNITE the country. Region differences do exist, and factions will fight, but they fight always for Kabul and the leadership of Afghanistan.

E. As has been mentioned, the Islamic Insurgency is in no way shape or form Pastun limited and aspires to a wider regional calling.

F. The only recognized partition is on the Durand line, and even this has never been officially recognized. There is a greater chance over the next fifty years of Pakistan breaking up rather than Afghanistan.

[Reply](#)



9 Boris Sizemore 9/14/2010 at 7:30 am

To reiterate what Caleb was saying....it all goes back to Massoud, who is celebrated this week as a Martyr.

“The Taliban repeatedly offered Massoud a position of power to make him stop his resistance. Massoud declined for he did not fight for the sake of power. He explained in one interview: “The Taliban say: “Come and accept the post of prime minister and be with us”, and they would keep the highest office in the country, the presidentship. But for what price?! The difference between us concerns mainly our way of thinking about the very principles of the society and the state. We can not accept their conditions of compromise, or else we would have to give up the principles of modern democracy. We are fundamentally against the system called “the Emirate of Afghanistan”. I would like to return to the question of the emirate in a moment. In fact it is Pakistan that is responsible for deepening the crack between the ethnic groups in Afghanistan. It is again the old method of “divide and rule”. Pakistanis want to make sure that this country will not have any sovereign power for a long time.”[9] Massoud, instead, wanted to convince the Taliban to join a political process which would have ensured the holding of democratic elections in a foreseeable future.[9] His proposals for peace can be seen here: Proposal for Peace, promoted by Commander Massoud.”

Partition or ethnic division as advocated by ASG is an anathema to all patriotic Afghans as it would be to Americans in the same circumstances. Both Karzai and Haji Quadeer Pashtuns acceded to the same principles which stand today in the form of the current government.

[Reply](#)



[10 Justin Logan](#) 9/14/2010 at 7:42 am

Dear Joshua:

Since you described me or my post as “hateful” I just wanted to say that I do not “hate” you, Andrew Exum, your blogs, or anything or anyone else involved in this exchange. I think you are mostly wrong about the Afghanistan Study Group report. You think that I am wrong. All of that is fine, but none of it should be—or is, on my end—about hate.

Cheers,
Justin

[Reply](#)



[11 Joshua Foust](#) 9/14/2010 at 8:00 am

I seriously need to rethink how I do sarcasm on the Internets. I didn’t mean hateful like Rush Limbaugh hates black people, I meant hateful like Christian Siriano hates trannies. If that makes sense. It probably doesn’t.

[Reply](#)



[12 Sean Kay](#) 9/14/2010 at 7:54 am

My point is, simply, that the tone of your critique seems to stem from an assumption that no Afghan or regional experts were included in this – that isn’t the case. And while perhaps I misread your post, your tone certainly does sound like the group of people here literally have no idea what they are talking about or even a premise to make assessments about a war our country is fighting. It take it well that this

is not your point and I appreciate that – but the tone of your posts on this certainly would lead one to that conclusion.

That all said, I highly value the discussion, and appreciate it. All of this debate needs to be kept on its analytical toes. In the end, though, to me anyway, the ASG is a report less about the intricate details of Afghanistan, and is about American grand strategy and national security priorities. That is the starting point, once we are clear on that, the tactical detail is then followed at the military/operational level.

So, keep it going, I highly value your perspective and inputs. And, I always enjoy reading your blog.

SK

[Reply](#)



[13 Joshua Foust](#) 9/14/2010 at 7:58 am

Sean,

That's cool. And seriously, I'm all about discussing American interests and national security priorities. But my internet-friend Christian Bleuer [articulated something](#) this morning I've been dancing around that gets at why I find this report so shocking and worthy of anger:

But what really bothers me is that I agree with most of the report's conclusions. Why does this bother me? Because the Afghanistan Study Group has undermined "the cause" (if I may over-dramatically call it that) with their feeble attempt. They have taken away attention that would be better focused elsewhere – to people of similar mind who actually have the tools to do what the Afghanistan Study Group has attempted and failed to do. They are like the person who gets on TV or stands up in the crowd and speaks for a cause you believe in – but who totally screws up the opportunity by voicing mostly gibberish to support their viewpoint.

That's what all of this criticism is getting at. To describe American interests in Afghanistan, you have to understand Afghanistan itself, at least in a general, 10,000 foot level. Otherwise, you're asserting interests into a vacuum – which is kind of a pointless exercise. But that's precisely what happened here. The ASG got Afghanistan so shockingly wrong that I don't see how we can reasonably base a strategy on it—even though I think we agree with the overall strategic intent.

[Reply](#)



[14 Aaron Ellis](#) 9/14/2010 at 8:08 am

The talk of "grand strategy" et al from ASG sympathisers is kind of what is really annoying me about the debate now. Josh pointed out in his original post that they haven't even taken the grand strategy or military strategy seriously. They have a goal (get out of Afghanistan), a lot of uninformed prejudices ("war is bad", "foreign troops cause hate", "poverty causes terrorism"), try not to be painted as heartless by tacking on more missions like "protecting women", "solving Afghan economy" but don't relate those goals to means or what the time frame is. Even on the grounds of "shucks, guys, we're trying to do strategy", the report is absolute wank.

[Reply](#)

[15 Donald Anderson](#) 9/14/2010 at 8:06 am

ASG ask for an ethnic division on one hand, and on the other asks for greater regional involvement and development.

All the Regional players, China, India, the Stans, and Russia call for a UNITED NEUTRAL Afghanistan. None of the Regional interested nations would support the Bantuization of the country.

When we talk about future benefits of cooperation with Afghanistan we talk about mining for resources. How would a divided Afghanistan work?

The Chinese would by copper in Logar from one country and then oil and and bauxite from another, and the silver from another?

ASG report is also impractical from the very regional aspect they claim to trumpet as a way out. Everyone supports a united neutral country in the future. ASG solutions are not well though on all counts.

[Reply](#)

[16 Donald Anderson](#) 9/14/2010 at 8:30 am

The regional perspective in the report is way off.

China and Russia and India for all practical purposes are supporting the US effort. They know, an American defeat via withdrawal or division can only lead to more problems for them with their Islamic problems. Recent terror attacks in Xin Jiang, Tajikstan, and Dagestan point to these dangers to all of them. Overflight and Manas are examples of Russian cooperation, China and India have been very generous with Aid to the Karzai government.

Basically all the parties are hoping for an American success with exception of Iran and Pakistan each for their own reasons. But even Iran is hesitant because of the anti shia tendency of the Islamic groups.

The Kabul Conference was a clear example of overall international support for our efforts. They want this to be a success, the alternative is frightening to all. Partition is not an option to anyone but the ASG group and Pakistan. This is very clear.

[Reply](#)

[17 Joshua Foust](#) 9/13/2010 at 8:47 pm

On the force sizing issue, how? 30K in Afghanistan would result in about 5k troops able to do anything off-base. That is not enough for a nation-wide effort to constrain the Taliban, train Afghan forces, and run a drones program. Not even close.

[Reply](#)[18 Joshua Foust](#) 9/13/2010 at 9:55 pm

Umm, according to the ASG, the purpose of the troops is to train the Afghan security forces, prevent further Taliban incursion into non-Taliban areas, and maintain a drone and counterstrike capability. If you think that can be maintained with a total force structure of 30,000... then I'd love to live in your world.

I like your dig that we should only protect non-Pashtun areas. I addressed this before: pretending the insurgency is only Pashtuns is a **vicious lie**, one that ignores the significant numbers of Tajiks and Uzbeks involved in the insurgency. You really need to be honest that you're implicitly advocating punishing an entire ethnic group for the behaviors of the people who compromise a majority of the insurgency. Should we ignore all Uzbek areas because the IMU is ascendant in the North? Should we ignore Herat because the insurgency there is run by a Tajik?

This gets back, once again, at my point about understanding the country you're trying to strategize. One of the main pillars of the ASG "strategy" is an ethnic idea of the war, and a bizarre conception of both the Taliban and of Pashtuns as monolithic, unified political entities. The reality is, for all intents and purposes, the opposite of that.

Basing all these other ideas on such a fundamental error of fact is at the heart of why I'm so angry at this report and by the people who earnestly insist they don't need to get everything right so long as they scream "withdraw" as loudly as they can.

[Reply](#)[19 Joshua Foust](#) 9/13/2010 at 10:00 pm

[Yes, I have.](#) You're assuming a great deal... again.

[Reply](#)[20 Nemesis](#) 9/13/2010 at 10:38 pm

Bernard, i would love to hear exactly in what context and circumstances that 30K is enough to do anything substantial in Afghanistan. I was there when we had a small footprint and we couldn't contain the Taliban/Haqqani/HIG ANYWHERE in Afghanistan. As to drones, sure they can be operated from CONUS or anywhere else in the world, but HUMINT/Tactical SIGINT gets us the context/precision we need to conduct those strikes. Reducing our footprint will make it more difficult to ascertain ground truth reality. Honsetly, I agree with Josh and even the premise of the report, we need to change our policy in Afghanistan and perhaps even withdraw. However, this report is amateur at best. I've passed it along to many of my friends with real Astan experience and not a single one of them can read this without laughing incredulously that this report was put forward as a reasonable strategic alternative to our current AfPak committment

[Reply](#)



[21 Rogue Adventurer](#) 9/13/2010 at 11:42 pm

Militarily, I would say that the ASG's report is very weak. It's all very well to speak of strategy but, as Nemesis points out, 30k (total) troops is a laughable figure.

I'm actually still a little unclear on whether the ASG authors were referring to total or operational troop numbers, but from the discussion that has followed on blogs and Twitter, it would seem that they are referring to a total contingent. As Josh points out, there is a conspicuous absence on figures for Naval personnel, or indeed, any personnel not actually in Afghanistan. There appears to be an attitude in the report that suggests that troops outside of Afghanistan 'don't count' in working out America's military commitment to the theatre. Militarily – particularly in terms of OPTEMPO and asset availability – and economically, that is a dangerous mindset.

To be fair, I think Bernard makes a reasonable point in regards to the ASG report's position on the Pashtun areas. Whilst I don't agree with their conclusions, they seem to be cognisant of the criticism the US would receive for doing so. In the long view, I would think "abandoning the Pashtun areas to insurgents" constitutes a strategic error.

Foust's most salient point, however, is his last (above). The report may have found some common ground with a lot of observers when it speaks about its conclusions – what's dramatically concerning is the process that its authors underwent to reach that conclusion.

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