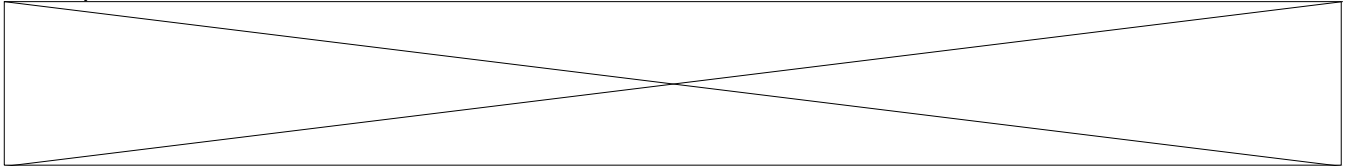


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Matthew Hoh

Director of the Afghanistan Study Group

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The Case for a New Way Forward in Afghanistan

I wanted to respond to critiques registered by Andrew Exum and Joshua Foust to the report issued by the Afghanistan Study Group last Wednesday (view video of the launch event at CSPAN).

My colleagues on the Afghanistan Study Group, Bernard Finel, a senior fellow at the American Security Project and formerly an associate professor at the National War College and Justin Logan of the CATO Institute have already posted replies to Andrew and Joshua's critiques.

Among other things, both Bernard and Justin lay out quite clearly why it is always important to review a critique side by side with the original document.

However, before I respond to Andrew and Joshua's critiques, specifically the excerpts posted by Andrew Sullivan, I would first point to Sunday's *New York Times*, here and here, to get an idea how the conflict in Afghanistan has worsened (more combat, more support for the Taliban, less support for the Karzai government) over the last five years in order to understand why the Afghanistan Study Group concluded that our current strategy in Afghanistan is failing, even as we have expanded NATO presence from less than 30,000 in 2005 to nearly 150,000 today.

Two of the more glaring examples of this failure are:

- Last month's monthly record high for August for American combat dead of 55 might not have been the all time monthly record for American combat dead (that inglorious title is held by the month previous), but it was *the 32nd month of the last 37* to see monthly records on an

annual basis. That negative trend is consistent across the board, whether it be for improvised explosive device attacks, suicide attacks, assassinations, civilian casualties, etc.

- In Afghanistan's parliamentary elections this coming Saturday, 350 *less* polling centers will open than last year. That's with roughly 30,000 more US troops in the country than there were at this time last year. For the latest expectation that this year's elections will be as stolen as they were last year, despite young Americans dying for democracy abroad, see the *Guardian*.

And for additional metrics, I would point readers to iCasualties.org and Rethink Afghanistan to see in detail the military and civilian casualty trends that have continually worsened over time.

To understand how the current strategy is not just failing, but is counterproductive, I would point readers to yesterday's *Wall Street Journal*, as well as Gareth Porter's *Inter Press Service* article from three days ago.

Both articles clearly show that the increased US, NATO and Afghan military presence, has not engendered support among the rural southern Pashtun population, in spite of the counter insurgency (COIN) theories that state they should. In the most recent data available, southern Pashtuns accounted for less than 2% of Afghan Army recruits (southern Pashtuns making up the bulk of the insurgency that are killing US troops), while the Afghan population, again, despite a five fold increase in US and NATO troops over a five year period and clearly in contradiction to COIN theory, only reported 1% of the improvised explosive devices found or detonated in June. Both of these indicators, support for government forces and a population willing to cooperate with the government, are extremely important indicators of support for the insurgency.

The fact that these indicators are near zero demonstrates not just an enormous reluctance of support for the Karzai government, but of popular support for the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Which leads to one last metric regarding the counter productive nature of our current strategy before I turn to the points made by Andrew Exum and Joshua Foust as highlighted by Andrew Sullivan (and thanks to Andrew Sullivan for helping to advance a debate sorely missed over the last several years). In February 2005, Lieutenant General David Barno, commander of US forces in Afghanistan, stated there were only 2000 Taliban in Afghanistan and predicted that movement's near total collapse by 2006 .

Four year's later the Taliban's estimated strength was 25,000.

Again, remember that NATO troop strength grew every year over that period and the argument that we weren't doing COIN until recently, well General Barno thought we were doing it as early as February 2004.

So back to the critiques and the idea, as Joshua Foust states, that an alternative strategy to our current strategy in Afghanistan will be just as destabilizing and unsustainable. This I just discuss agree with, because the current strategy is so obviously flawed and counter-productive and is proven by the negative metrics trending upon negative metrics over the past five years (and these metrics trend negatively not just for our military efforts, but for our political and development efforts as well).

We recognize, like the US government, that support for the Taliban occurs due to local issues, foreign occupation and resentment towards a corrupt and unrepresentative government, as opposed to supporting a trans-national terrorist cause with ties to al-Qaeda.

So, the Afghanistan Study Group's first recommendation is to prioritize the expansion of the political process and reconciliation. This is similar to many of the measures undertaken in Iraq in 2007-8 that contributed to that nation's stabilization by addressing legitimate political grievances held by the Sunni insurgency, which splintered that insurgency and decreased violence. Our current

policy in Afghanistan does not emphasize such measures nor do the reintegration efforts currently in place appear to be working.

Further, nothing in our proposal or statements among our members suggest, as Joshua does, that the Afghanistan Study Group proposes "reducing [Afghanistan] into a Special Forces and drone targeting range", which seems to imply we advocate simply abandoning Afghanistan and adopting a free fire drone policy. We don't. We suggest a force sized to "help train Afghan security forces, prevent massive human rights atrocities, resist an expansion of Taliban control beyond the Pashtun south and engage in robust counter-terrorism operations as needed." As an aside, several members, myself included, believe the expansion of drone strikes in western Pakistan, and the over the horizon cruise missile and drone strikes in Yemen and Somalia, to be themselves potentially counter-productive.

Finally, with respect to Joshua's claims that a significant US military and intelligence presence is required to assist a counter-terrorism campaign, I must assume he recommends deploying tens of thousands of US forces to Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen where we are conducting counterterrorism campaigns now, as well as reversing the drawdown of US forces in Iraq since the Department of State last month reported al-Qaeda's strength in Iraq to be between 1000-2000 members, which should be contrasted with CIA Director Leon Panetta's estimate of only 50-100 al-Qaeda in Afghanistan last June.

(This last point is something that needs to be debated on a more macro level than our policy in Afghanistan: how do we develop not just an effective counter-terrorism strategy, but also a consistent worldwide counter-terrorism strategy.)

This column, and the critique it responds to, discuss much more the operational and tactical involvement of the United States in Afghanistan than I would like. Unfortunately, those aspects seem to drive our policy and strategy rather than the other way around; producing a policy and a strategy that does not hew to our interests, make us safer or deliver benefits in accordance with our expenditures in lives and dollars.

The goal of the Afghanistan Study Group is to foster debate regarding America's purpose in Afghanistan, particularly what our vital interests there are, and to develop a path forward to produce a strategy commensurate with those vital interests.

I very much encourage others to participate in this debate

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