

TIME

U.S.



Battleland

Where military intelligence is not a contradiction in terms

AFGHANISTAN

Betting on the Come

By **MARK THOMPSON** | [@MarkThompson_DC](#) | April 19, 2012



JOHN THYS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta cites progress in the Afghan war along with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Wednesday in Brussels.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta declared Wednesday that “our strategy is right, our strategy is working, and if we stick to it, we can achieve the mission of establishing an Afghanistan that can secure and govern itself, and never again become a safe haven for terrorists to plan attacks on our country or any other country.”

By his side in Brussels, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton concurred. “As difficult a week as it has been in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan, the big picture is clear,” she said. “The transition is on track.”

Panetta summed it up as he arrived for the NATO session: “We’re at a pivotal point for the alliance as we build on the gains that have been made in Afghanistan.”

A *tipping* point is more like it.

(PHOTOS: [The Afghan Massacre](#))

War is equal parts wallet and will. Unfortunately the will is now falling faster than the wallet. Much of this course was set by President Obama’s decisions to triple U.S. forces inside Afghanistan his first year in office, before deciding to bring nearly all of them home by 2015. Time, more than money, rides shotgun alongside will.

Panetta detailed progress:

As I’ve said, 2011 was a real turning point. It was the first time in five years that we saw a drop in the number of enemy attacks. Over the past 12 weeks enemy attacks continued to decrease compared to the same period in 2011. The Taliban has been weakened, Afghan army operations are progressing, and the reality is that the transition to Afghan security and governance is continuing and progressing. We see other signs that we are seriously degrading the insurgency. By January 2011 600 Taliban had integrated into the society. This month that number topped 4,000.

A military tactician might look at the same data and conclude: the Taliban are keeping their heads down until we leave.

Panetta and Clinton, preparing for next month’s NATO summit in Chicago where the alliance’s future in Afghanistan will be firmed up, are plainly betting on the come:

– Plans to build a bigger Afghan army have been scrapped. In Brussels this week, NATO officials said Afghanistan’s security forces – including police – will crest at 352,000 this fall. But over the next five years, that number will fall to 228,000. There are two reasons for the shrinkage: Kabul and its allies can’t afford the bigger force, and they’re crossing their fingers that a negotiated settlement with the bulk of the Taliban will let them build down safely.

– The money needed to fund a smaller force is proving tough to find. U.S. leaders are seeking commitments from their NATO allies to kick in nearly \$1.5 billion annually to fund the Afghan military beyond 2014, on top of the \$2 billion annually Washington is likely to pay.

– The coordinated attacks inside the capital last weekend – despite their military insignificance – are troubling. “A government that cannot maintain a secure center of power, the capital, cannot survive,” former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst

John McCreary [asserts](#) flatly on his *NightWatch* blog. “It does not matter whether it falls to the Taliban or the Haqqanis. It will fall.”

(There are, as always, dissenting voices: “The failure of this insurgent assault bodes well for Afghanistan’s future—and runs counter to the doom-and-gloom in the U.S.,” military scholar Max Boot wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on Wednesday.)

– Corruption remains endemic, and is reflected in the burgeoning drug trade. The value of opium produced in Afghanistan [doubled](#) from 2010 to 2011. While the narcotics fund the Taliban, it also lines the pockets of much of the Afghan elite. The \$5 billion effort the U.S. led trying to eradicate poppy production has failed.

– The U.S. public is weary of the war, and the fact that 1,938 Americans have died there – increasingly at the hands of their alleged Afghan allies. “The American public’s patience for this war is over – it’s done,” retired Air Force general and one-time member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Ronald Fogleman recently told a Washington gathering. “It was a dream that you could take an area of the world that wasn’t a functioning country and turn it into a functioning country on the timelines required to satisfy the American public.”

– A tiny handful of American soldiers has gone rogue, murdering, urinating, and – once [again](#) – commemorating their desecration of enemy dead with their cameras. “The war in Afghanistan tragically feels like the movie *Groundhog Day*: reliving and retelling the same stories repeatedly, but with the situation worse than it was the previous time,” foreign-policy analyst Malou Innocent of the Cato Institute [notes](#) on *The National Interest* blog Wednesday. “The United States is perpetually stuck in a repetitive series of setbacks and scandals that damage the mission.”

[\(MORE: The Taliban Offensive: NATO and Afghan President Karzai Clash over Messaging\)](#)

Some allies are now saying publicly what U.S. officials have been saying only privately:

– Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard said Tuesday that her nation’s 1,500 troops are likely to be home a year earlier than expected – toward the end of 2013 instead of 2014. “The peoples of the world’s democracies,” she said, “are weary of this war.” Canada and the Netherlands have already withdrawn from combat or sped up their departure from Afghanistan.

– Afghan President Hamid Karzai has proven a poor partner for rebuilding his nation. “I am sorry to say that President Karzai has been an enormous disappointment,” former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer [said](#) Tuesday (he was the foreign minister in 2001, when Australia agreed to

send troops to Afghanistan). “But as it turns out he is a weak leader and he is also an exclusive leader; he doesn’t include enough people and enough tribes in what is essentially a very tribal sort of society,” he said. “I honestly don’t think he has helped the situation.”

– “We’re pulling our troops out for political reasons, not for military purposes,” John Cantwell, a recently-retired major general in the Australian military who commanded his nation’s troops there, [wrote](#) in *The Age*. “There is an unpleasant whiff of politics and self-interest in the strategy to withdraw American, Australian and other foreign combat troops from Afghanistan by 2014 or earlier.”

– Last month, the United Nations [reported](#) that Afghans topped the list of those seeking asylum in the world’s richest nations. Nearly 36,000 Afghans sought asylum in the world’s 44 industrialized countries, up 34% from the year before.

(PHOTOS: [A Long and Distant War: Photos from Afghanistan, 1988–2009](#))

Such fleeing and uncertainty has led to the collapse of real estate prices in parts of Kabul, and a sense of foreboding. Fox News asked General John Allen, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, about the pessimism on the street.

“Money is about courage,” Allen said. “And if you have the courage to invest money you want some predictability about what will come back to you in the end.”

The U.S. has had the courage to invest some \$500 billion in Afghanistan since it invaded on October 7, 2001. Unfortunately, predictability is one thing that half-trillion has not bought.