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I Said Oh, Oh, Domino




By Carl Prine Tuesday, June 14th, 2011 1:06 pm
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Yesterday, the libertarian DC think tank CATO published “[Dominoes on the Durand Line?](#) Overcoming Strategic Myths in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

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I'll wait for you. I have a day job. Numbers to crunch, people to interview. Meetings.

Always damned meetings.

You're back!

The “Dominoes” essay you just finished was written by two professors – Joshua Rovner, who teaches strategy and policy at the U.S. Naval War College, and Austin Long from Columbia University.

We've been talking on Line of Departure a lot lately about “[strategy](#),” the way states or guerrilla organizations link military might and other aspects of their power to achieve realistic policy goals during a war.

Congress has been talking, too. Lawmakers want [to debate the high cost of continuing state-building efforts in Afghanistan](#) after nearly a decade of war and the recent slaying by our SEALs of Osama bin Laden.

Rovner and Long believe that U.S. strategic goals in Operation Enduring Freedom no longer matter as much as they did in 2001: Keeping parts of Afghanistan clear of al Qaeda and the various Taliban militias, stabilizing a Pakistan armed with nuclear weapons, and doing all that without spending too much blood and treasure.

At its core, “Dominoes on the Durand Line” takes aim at several beloved theories currently cradled by the U.S. military and foreign policy establishment, but the most important is the notion that we must turn the Hamid Karzai regime into a legitimate government in the eyes of people currently in rebellion.

Our original goals for occupying Afghanistan – defeating al Qaeda – have become entwined with building from scratch a functioning market economy and democracy in the Hindu Kush, something we haven't exactly achieved yet.

Rovner and Long argue that the U.S. doesn't need to keep pouring money and manpower into the vast, cankered maw of the corrupt Karzai kleptocracy. To satisfy our nation's interests there, we don't even need a central Afghan government that controls all or most of its vast territory.

U.S. airpower and other tools of our kit could work when allied with the Afghan security forces and affiliated tribal militias to block the Taliban from straying into their ethnic homelands, they say.

The authors also contend that U.S. statebuilding efforts to the left of the Durand Line continue to have no tangible effect on stabilizing the Pakistan, much less preventing terrorists from acquiring Islamabad's growing nuclear arsenal.

They conclude that less is more: Reduced U.S. expectations and expenditures in Afghanistan not only will save hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade and many lives, but we can withdraw most of our troops by the end of 2012.

Welcome back, guys. Look, no [beret](#)!

Yeah, I guess you have to fight another decade-long war before the brass will get rid of the reflective belts.

Damned reflective belts.

I guess while the points the essay makes are self-explanatory, the history of its publication continues to intrigue me.

I say this because the rough draft I received from defense intellectuals in March says “Forthcoming in Joint Force Quarterly, No. 61 (April 2011)” on the essay’s title page.

And yet there’s a slightly different version on Cato’s website! Hmmmmmmm... As the Saturday Night Live jingle goes, “[What up with that?](#)”

Insiders told me it’s because [JFQ](#) — a publication of National Defense University, the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff— refused to print it.

I put in a call and sent an email to JFQ to find out more about why Cato ended up publishing the essay and not them, but they haven’t gotten back to me. Rovner and Austin shrugged off my question, which also is their right.

But I would be remiss if I didn’t put this issue into some context, even if no one else wants to talk about it.

While JFQ should function as a marketplace of ideas, exposing America’s military officers and defense intellectuals to controversial topics of vital importance to our democracy, questions about censorship have dogged the joint for more than a year.

In early 2010, elements within the U.S. military allegedly sought to suppress a highly readable — and, as it turns out, highly accurate — assessment of Afghanistan operations as [revealed in an interview](#) between retired U.S. Army Gen. Volney F. Warner and a former intelligence analyst cloaked as “C.”

At the insistence of U.S. Central Command, then under Gen. David Petraeus, JFQ’s editor had to publish not one but TWO rejoinders by critics of “C” and his thoughts — U.S. Army Col. [Chris Kolenda](#) and retired LTC [John Nagl](#), a well-known COIN guru.

I’ll be blunt: Unlike Warner’s interview those pieces haven’t stood the very brief test of time. But at least Warner’s challenging interview with “C” published, right?

When JFQ gets back to me, I promise that I’ll feature their perspective.

Until then, I emailed both Long in Kabul and Rovner in Newport because I think that their piece deserves a wider audience, most especially amongst an informed gathering of past and present military members.

I’ve known [Dr. Long](#) from afar in two capacities: As an analyst tasked to Multinational Force Iraq and from his work for RAND, where he penned two essential institutional histories about the think tank’s role during the Cold War, my favorite being the volume on its counterinsurgency research.

I haven’t always agreed with him, but I greatly respect him and his colleague, [Joshua Rovner](#).

Rovner is a really cool guy who often challenges my assumptions, especially on intelligence issues. I hope to get him alone for an extended Prine of Departure interview in the future to yap about small wars.

Prine of Departure: OK, so why didn’t it publish in JFQ?

Austin Long: Aloha from Kabul.

Thanks for writing on the piece. I would go with what JFQ tells you. Josh and I are just happy it is out, Cato is promoting it, and it has generated interest from folks, including you . (...).

Prine of Departure: Since April, a number of events have transpired in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The slaying of Osama bin Laden by U.S. Navy SEALs, word that representatives of the Taliban militias had met with Kabul officials to discuss possible peace terms (and the opening of a Taliban political office in Turkey) and ongoing attacks in Pakistan against naval personnel (Apr. 26 and Apr. 28, buses; the PNS Mehran assault on May 22) and intelligence targets (May 25, Peshawar).

How did these events change the paper originally slated for April's publication?

Austin Long: The death of UBL honestly doesn't affect the piece much.

It does clearly support the point that the U.S. can unilaterally collect intelligence for CT with essentially no ground forces. But the death of UBL does not mean AQ has gone away.

I still see no evidence that TB, particularly senior leadership, has any interest in real negotiations. They are currently assassinating [GIRoA](#) at a furious pace, including senior General [Daoud Daoud](#) in the north and the [Kandahar chief of police](#) in the south.

Even if the TB does want to negotiate it is not clear that absorbing TB into the political process is acceptable to various Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara. Certainly the assassination of Daoud has infuriated many Tajiks.

Or that it is acceptable to Pakistan.

Prine of Departure: Given [questions raised recently](#) about the ability of Islamabad to protect its nuclear stores and the highly targeted and successful attacks against these assets, how convinced are you that Pakistan isn't becoming more vulnerable to military attacks against its atomic network?

Joshua Rovner: The fact that militants have attacked Pakistani military bases does not mean that terrorists are closer to going nuclear.

If our real fear is that al Qaeda gets its hands on nuclear weapons, then militants must do much more than send in the suicide bombers. A simple attack can be done with a handful of personnel, but an operation to steal nuclear material requires massing personnel and organizing a rapid and coordinated exit, as the goal is to actually escape with the material intact.

This requires having sufficient personnel to overcome base security, safely remove fissile material, and then flee before additional Pakistani forces can respond. Again, militants have shown they are willing to undertake suicide missions at Pakistani facilities but they have not shown the kind of sophistication needed to wrest control of nuclear weapons.

We shouldn't fear bank robbers who die at the scene and never get away with any cash.

Austin Long: Attacks have been ongoing in Pakistan— there is nothing new in that. The question is, 'Does the U.S. presence keep a lid on those attacks?'

Again, I have seen no evidence that they do.

Prine of Departure: I fail to fully understand how the US shall avoid becoming "mired in the bloody business of Afghanistan's political evolution."

It seems to me that any US forces could become [tripwires](#) if they're stationed in Afghanistan or accompanying Afghan security forces into combat, even after our largest formations depart.

Explain why I'm wrong.

Austin Long: I am not sure what you mean by “tripwires.”

We will still continue to support the Afghan government but it will be a primarily Afghan show. A tripwire to me means that U.S. forces would inexorably draw in more troops to support them.

(Carl’s Note: That’s [EXACTLY what I mean](#))

Yet that is not how we ended up with our current force level — it was a decision to commit heavily to state-building that led to our current posture. We argue against that heavy commitment – let the Afghan state do the heavy lifting (or not) on state building while we focus on [CT](#) and support to [ANSE](#), two things we are actually pretty good at.

Prine of Departure: I’m not comfortable with the dichotomy of “COIN versus CT.”

It seems inherently limiting. What you term the “counterterrorism option” remains quite expensive and dependent both on large numbers of troops and technicians but also lines of communications through territories that likely would be held by Taliban if we quit the current COIN efforts.

I suspect that the 10,000 — 15,000 personnel, with civilians and special units affixed, would be closer to 20,000 or 25,000.

While cheaper, it still ain’t cheap and probably would become semi-permanent. How are 25,000 soldiers, airmen, contractors and federal officials rotating year after year after year in a bloodier version of Bosnia attractive to the American taxpayer?

Austin Long: I discuss the force laydown in detail in the Orbis piece “[Small is Beautiful](#),” which we cite.

On the logs piece, it turns out there is a thing called the [Northern Distribution Network](#) which runs from Russia through the Tajik and Uzbek areas least likely to be TB dominated. It supplies a big chunk of current logs – if force levels drop it can provide more and more of the total until virtually all supplies come that way, or via air.

Log pressure simply drops massively with an 80 to 90 percent (reduction in force). We will still have to hold the main routes from Kabul to Kandahar and Jalalabad but the combination of ANSF and private security (Afghan) can do this with minimal U.S. support.

We are not offering the American taxpayer Nirvana. The only way to zero out costs is to take our ball and come home and we do need some presence in the country, as we discuss. So instead we offer a less costly way to manage a problem that is at present not solvable.

Yet by reducing cost the effort becomes more sustainable and a more sustainable effort may make the problem solvable in the future.

Put another way — if you are Pakistan and/or the TB and are convinced America is leaving in three years why negotiate? Hang tough, reduce your op-tempo and wait us out.

If you think at least American drones, gunships, helicopters, CIA and SOF are going to stay at least another decade then your calculus may change. Yet even if it does not the U.S. still has achieved its core security interest at a much lower cost in blood and treasure.

Joshua Rovner: Austin covers the long-term issue vis-à-vis the Taliban, but this also begs the question about long-term strategy in the war against al Qaeda.

I think this is a peculiar war which is probably destined for a peculiar endgame.

Most wars are [Clausewitzian exercises](#) in coercion, where the goal is to compel the enemy to do your will. The war on al Qaeda, however, is a rare example of a brute force war.

The goal isn't about convincing the enemy to change his behavior, because the enemy in this case is implacable. Instead, the goal is to diminish the threat of terrorism by killing al Qaeda's most important personnel and destroying its capabilities.

We've done a fine job of that – al Qaeda today is a hollow shell of what it was in the 1990s. But AQ is still around, and there will always be some risk that sufficiently committed terrorists will be able to target civilians.

The question today is how much risk we're willing to live with.

Tags: [Afghanistan](#), [Austin Long](#), [CATO](#), [Joshua Rovner](#), [Pakistan](#), [Strategy](#)

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