

A Worst Case Scenario? Assessing the Impact of a Complete ISAF Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Alec Worsnop

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Introduction

As the U.S. begins implementing an expected 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan, speculation abounds about what Afghanistan will look like if left in the hands of its national security forces (ANSF). Many analysts have argued that the Taliban will easily take control of their Pashtun homeland in southern Afghanistan. This result is attributed to the Taliban's provision of shadow governance, its support from Pakistan, its relative success versus ISAF forces in the south, and the general weakness of the Afghan government, both politically and militarily. Though this result may not be so straightforward, there is a significant question of what a conflict would look like following such an outcome. In short, would the Taliban be able to take the rest of the country, or would the ANSF be able to hold off an advance?

Though few have attempted this analysis, it is commonly asserted that such an outcome is not probable. A recent report entitled, "Military comeback a distant dream for Afghan Taliban," puts forward that "the Afghan army and security forces may still be deeply flawed, but their mere size would make it difficult for the Taliban to simply topple the government when NATO troops go."¹ However, taking into account the Taliban's tactics in the previous ten years as well as the course of the Taliban's offensive from 1995-1998, this conclusion does not seem so clear. Indeed, rather than being judged in terms of manpower, the potential course of battle post-U.S. withdrawal is better interpreted with respect to how the attributes of the Taliban and ANSF interact with the very low force-to-space ratios inherent in Afghan warfare. Such analysis does not paint a rosy picture for the territorial security of central and northern Afghanistan. As such, the analysis also tests how a limited U.S. aerial support role would influence the course of battle.

While a Taliban offensive to take the entire country is not the only possible course of conflict, investigating this contingency sheds light on other possible conflicts, such as a continued counterinsurgency campaign. Indeed, as the analysis emphasizes, the ANSF are no better positioned for such a fight. The paper proceeds as follows. First, I lay out the key country characteristics. Next, I describe how low force-to-space ratios influence defense and how those dynamics influenced the Taliban offensives in 1995-1998. Next, I discuss the force sizing and geographic distribution of the current actors. Then, I analyze a post-withdrawal fight for central and northern Afghanistan with and without U.S. aerial support in terms of the main factors which influence the impact of defending in low force-to-space environments. Finally, I conclude with policy implications about a potential U.S. role and the extent of operations which may be necessary to ensure different outcomes in-country, for example, attempting to maintain a presence in the south.

Afghanistan's Human and Physical Terrain

As evidenced by nearly thirty years of fighting, Afghanistan provides a complex geographic, ethnic, and military terrain. First, its population of 30.5 million is composed of complicated ethnic and tribal structure which has served to motivate and sustain conflict. The largest ethnic group is the Pashtuns, who represent around 42% of the population and are mainly based in southern

¹ Rob Taylor, "Military Comeback a Distant Dream for Afghan Taliban," *Reuters*, February 5, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/05/us-afghanistan-taliban-military-idUSTRE81404K20120205>.

Afghanistan, though they have a non-trivial presence in central and northern Afghanistan and have pockets in the west of the country (see Figure 1a). The Afghan Pashtun population has close ties with Pakistani Pashtuns across the 1,640 mile border. The second largest group are the Tajiks, representing 27% of the population. Located mostly in northeastern Afghanistan, with a major pocket in western Afghanistan, the Tajiks represented a central part of the Northern Alliance and held onto the non-Taliban territory in the late 1990s. The other major partner in the Northern Alliance was the Uzbeks, who represent 9% of the population but have had a relatively larger presence in military activities as illustrated by the reputation of General Rashid Dostum. The final major ethnic group is the Hazaras, the only Shi'ites in Afghanistan, who represent 9% of the population and are located in Central Afghanistan. Afghanistan's history has seen significant conflicts both between and within these groups.²

Importantly, the human and physical geography of Afghanistan mean that these population groups are not distributed in dense, or easily conquerable areas. While the overall population density of Afghanistan is quite low, about 46 people per square kilometer (versus 98 in Iraq, for example), even in the populated areas of Afghanistan, populations are quite spread out. Indeed, only 23% of the population is urbanized as agriculture continues to represent the main livelihood of the population.³ As can be seen in Figure 1b, this means that even leaving aside the chunks of unpopulated territory, there are large areas to control in the West, North, and East of the country.

This reality is compounded by a challenging geography including a number of major mountain passes, poor roads (only 24 percent of roads in Afghanistan are paved),⁴ and highly variable weather conditions—indeed, combat during the winter becomes quite difficult and has been historically limited. Such conditions have constrained non-aerial mobility, limiting logistical reach and the use of armed personnel carriers and mechanized equipment for the U.S., Soviets, and Mujahideen.⁵ For example, the only direct road connecting Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, runs perilously through the Hindu Kush Mountains and is often closed by avalanches or deliberate blockade. Similarly, the variable terrain significantly reduces visibility, often requiring the use of indirect fire and extended reconnaissance.⁶

² For example, see Fotini Christia, "The Closest of Enemies: Alliance Formation in the Afghan and Bosnian Civil Wars" (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2008); William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars: Second Edition (Twentieth-Century Wars*, Second ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³ CIA World Factbook, "Afghanistan", May 8, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

⁴ Jane's Defense & Security Intelligence & Analysis, *Afghanistan: An IHS Jane's Special Report*, October 7, 2011.

⁵ L. W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Tactics in Afghanistan* (National Defense University Press Publications, 1996); Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Edition Unstated. (Yale Nota Bene Books, 2001); Anthony Davis, "How the Taliban Became a Military Force," in *Fundamentalism Reborn*, ed. William Maley (New York University Press, 1998), 43–71; Michael Waltz, "Tanks, But No Tanks," *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/24/tanks_but_no_tanks.

⁶ Major Michael J. Wood, "82-mm Mortars: Working with Afghan National Army Mortar Teams," *Fires* (April 2010): 6–9.

Figure 1a: Ethnolinguistic Groups in Afghanistan

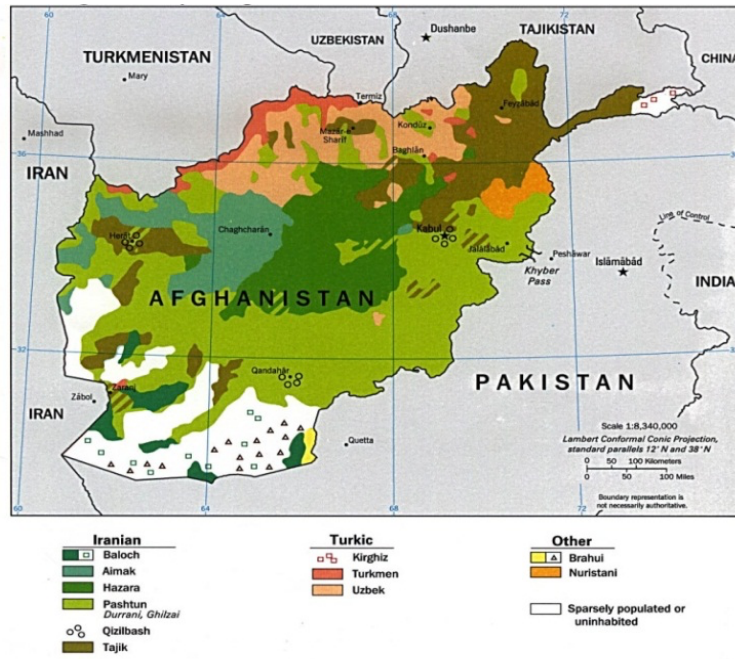
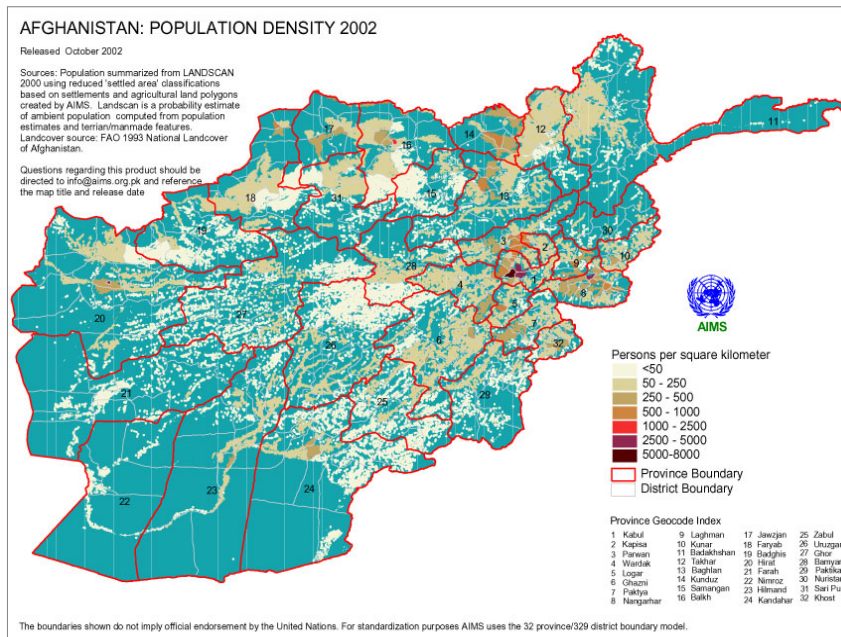


Figure 1b: Afghanistan Population Density



Defending at Low Force to Space Ratios and Warfare in Afghanistan

Based on the dispersed population groupings, force-to-space ratios in Afghanistan have often been quite low.⁷ These ratios have been low both in terms of depth, i.e. the number of soldiers or divisions per square kilometer, as well as in frontage, i.e. divisions or soldiers per km of front. For example, during the Taliban offensive on Herat in 1995, the Tajik forces had 0.21 soldiers per square kilometer, meaning each division was to hold about 28,000 square km. Similarly, the front was about 700km, making each division responsible for about 145km of frontage.⁸ These force-to-space ratios are not significantly different than most of the campaigns between 1995-1998 for either side (the Taliban probably had about 15,000-20,000 troops during the Herat offensive).⁹ As such, attacking forces at parity with defenders, or even substantially smaller, have been successful while common weapons and tactics are often not used so “commonly.” This section assesses the challenge of defending in such situations and then applies those lessons to the Taliban offensive from 1995-1998.

Warfare with Low Force to Space Ratios.

Conventional wisdom indicates that low force-to-space ratios create wars of maneuver which are beneficial for the attacker as the defender cannot form clear fronts, cannot mass to meet on-coming attacks, and often lacks strategic depth to quickly re-enforce areas of potential breakthrough.¹⁰ For example, studies of conventional conflict during the Cold War estimated that force-to-space thresholds of 7-15km per division were necessary to avoid breakthrough.¹¹ Nonetheless, analysts have pointed out that such rules of thumb are often not sufficient to understanding the role of campaign level dynamics on outcomes. In this vein, Cohen critiques some of such Cold War assumptions, pointing out that offensive forces may cram into small areas to achieve densities negating broad rules such as one division per 7-15km.¹²

Similarly, a set of studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s sought to explicitly evaluate defense at low force-to-space ratios. Davis et al. expand on the conventional wisdom to observe that if attackers are not particularly mobile, low force-to-space ratios, either in terms of depth of defense or length of front are significantly less daunting. In this case, the defenders have time to move reserves and to limit breakthroughs even with poor reconnaissance or physical defenses.¹³ In less advantageous circumstances with an adept or mobile attacker, they provide a more complex

⁷ A. A. Jalali, “Afghanistan: The Anatomy of an Ongoing Conflict,” *Parameters* 31, no. 1 (2001): 85–98; Major General G.D. Bakshi, “End Game in Afghanistan: Military Lessons from the American Campaign,” *Indian Defence Review* 16, no. 4 (December 2001).

⁸ These calculations are based on a Jamiat force of 30,000—a high estimate—and division equivalents of about 6,000 troops. A. Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords of Afghanistan* (Columbia Univ Pr, 2009), 252.

⁹ Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force”; Rashid, *Taliban*.

¹⁰ Stephen D. Biddle et al., *Defense at Low Force Levels: The Effect of Force to Space Ratios on Conventional Combat Dynamics*, August 1991,

<http://stinet.dtic.mil/oai/oai?&verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA248025>.

¹¹ John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Soviets Can’t Win Quickly in Central Europe,” *International Security* 7, no. 1 (July 1, 1982): 3–39.

¹² Eliot A. Cohen, “Toward Better Net Assessment: Rethinking the European Conventional Balance,” *International Security* 13, no. 1 (July 1, 1988): 66–72.

¹³ Paul Davis et al., *Variables Affecting Central-Region Stability: The “Operational Minimum” and Other Issues at Low Force Levels*, RAND Note (RAND Corporation, September 1989), 22.

analysis which emphasizes that low force-to-space ratios *do* put more burden on defenders, but that such challenges are not irresolvable.

In particular, they argue that defenders should seek tailored forces supported by mobile light forces, both infantry and air with extensive use of Reconnaissance, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition (RISTA). Concomitantly, these tailored forces should be less reliant on heavy weaponry.¹⁴ Not only are such forces able to move quickly to prevent breakthroughs, but they are well-positioned to counterattack and similarly take advantage of the low force-to-space ratios of the original attacker. These tailored forces need to be supported by a large “theater reserve,” a flexible operational strategy, a highly responsive command-control system, and unity of command which can make quick theater-level decisions about what territory to cede and where to counterattack.¹⁵ In short, defenders are required to have adaptable force structures which can move quickly in a coordinated manner.

Building on the complexity introduced by Davis et al., Biddle et al. attempt to provide greater context by including the attacker and terrain in the analysis. They argue that three intervening variables provide significant traction in understanding the impact of low force-to-space ratios: the terrain, the weapons mix, and force employment. The analysis herein uses these variables as an heuristic for evaluating the capacity of the Afghan actors to cope with the challenges of low force-to-space ratios. Indeed, the importance of fully unpacking “rules of thumb” is heightened when assessing military actors which are not “first rate.” As other analysts have pointed out, when dealing with such less developed militaries, taking into account the operational capacity, cohesion, and unit skills of fighters is often critical to understanding outcomes beyond campaign level metrics such as force-to-force or force-to-space ratios.¹⁶

Biddle et al. measure force employment as five components: depth of defenses (distance from the initial line of contact to the rear defense line), concentration of battle (frontage of attack), the extent and operational flexibility of reserves, strategies and capacity to counterattack, and tempo of operations. While Biddle et al. assume a certain level of cohesion within the fighting force, this is not the case in Afghanistan. As such, to force employment, I add cohesion as a final measure. The weapons mix refers simply to the type and use of armaments while terrain refers to the barriers, man-made and natural, which can impede progress.

In terms of force employment, when attackers have a high tempo of attack, defenders must establish effective, coordinated, and quick moving reserves to enlarge the concentration of defenders at the front of attack and facilitate counterattacks. Nonetheless, these tasks can be eased or made more difficult by the distribution of weapons available to each side. When the defender has mobile and accurate artillery, close air support, or mobile heavy arms, they can limit the speed and breakthrough capacity of attackers by effectively covering a wider area of frontage. Importantly, at high speeds, artillery is often not effective for either the attacker or defender.¹⁷ Finally, terrain can ease the job of the defender by slowing the attackers speed or

¹⁴ Ibid., 28–29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ S.D. Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006): 161–176; Stephen Biddle, “Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us About the Future of Conflict,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (October 1, 1996): 139–179.

¹⁷ Biddle et al., *Defense at Low Force Levels*, 14.

limiting the potential frontage of attack.¹⁸ For example, if the attacker is confined to a tight channel of attack, they are forced to move more slowly and thus become more vulnerable to artillery and other heavy weaponry. Finally, each of these variables is impacted by the cohesion of the actors: when forces are not cohesive, they will not move in a coordinated manner to push back breakthroughs and often will be less willing to fight in numerically challenging situations, let alone counterattack under fire. In short, while low force-to-space ratios do not guarantee attacker success, the defender faces a relatively larger challenge than the attacker.

Applying These Principles to the 1995-1998 Taliban Offensive

In the Afghan case, the weapons mix has remained about equal between actors while the same territorial obstacles have played important roles. In terms of force employment, the depth of defense as well as the concentration of battle, have been fairly constant for actors as they have attempted to defend the same general areas with similar force sizes. This remains true today given the territorial foci of the ANSF. The major variations have come in tempo, the ability of actors to counterattack, and the movement and presence of reserves. These three variables were often influenced by a lack of cohesion both within specific forces and across alliances of forces.

Following the fall of the Rabbani regime in 1992, much of the fighting in Afghanistan stalemated, with few advances into undefended areas and static frontlines between the regions of the country.¹⁹ During this period, there was little cohesion within each of the factions and alliances between actors were not matched with military coordination. Further, the weapons mix leaned towards the use of armor and artillery directed at static targets. Given the Soviet presence in the 1980s and the continuing conflict in the early 1990s, each of the sides had access to significant weaponry including hundreds of tanks, significant artillery (D-30 howitzers, 122mm rockets, Stingers, and 82mm mortars), extensive small arms (AK-47, RPG-[2,7,16,18,22], Recoilless Rifles), and armed personnel carriers (BMP-1 and BMP-2). Though these resources were not distributed equally, few conflicts saw one side heavily out-gunned. This weapons mix meant slow advances in tanks and armored vehicles with the limited support of air power.²⁰ Further, forces were mostly local or provincially-based, rarely moving in support of region or nation-wide operations. The geographic and force distributions are in Figure 2.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of 1995, the Taliban started making significant progress. After failing to take Kabul in early 1995, they concentrated their forces to the West, taking Herat in September of 1995. In the next leg, they took Jalalabad and Kabul in August and September of the next year. And finally, moving from Kabul and Herat, they took much of the north in 1997, and finally Mazar-i-Sharif in July of 1998. While there were numerous alliances between the actors, only the whole, by late 1995 all of the non-Taliban actors in Figure 2 were allied against the Taliban. The progression of Taliban gains is displayed in Figure 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, 78–80; Christia, “The Closest of Enemies,” 80–90; Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, chap. 9.

²⁰ A. Davis, “The Battleground of Northern Afghanistan,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 6 (1994): 323–323.

Figure 2: 1995 Force Distributions

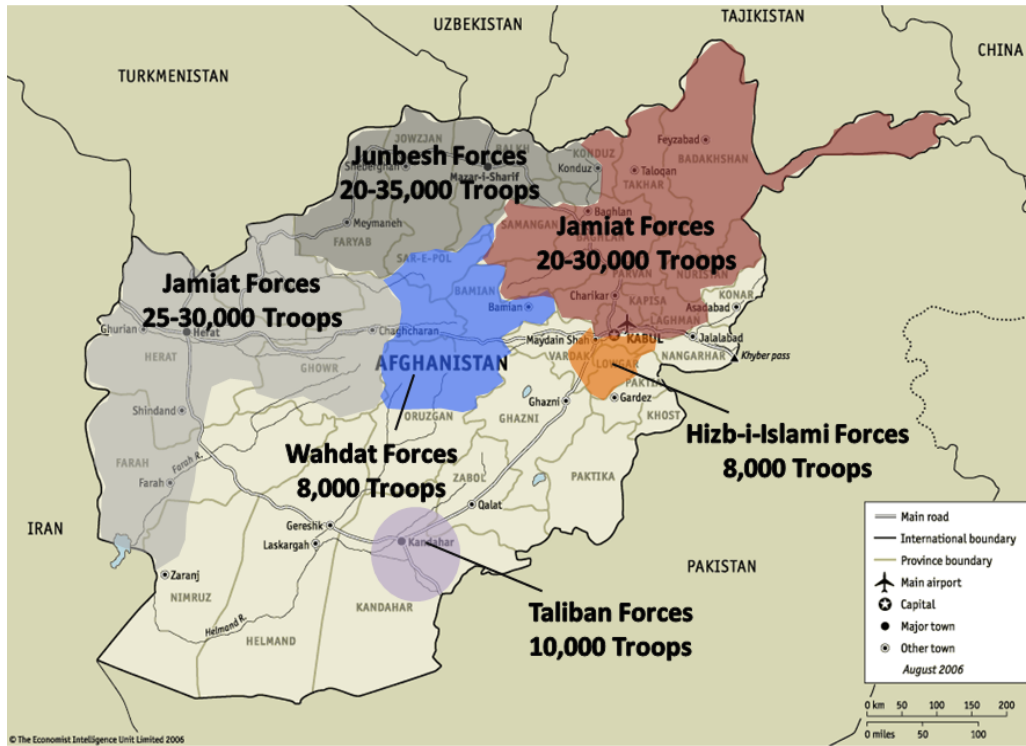
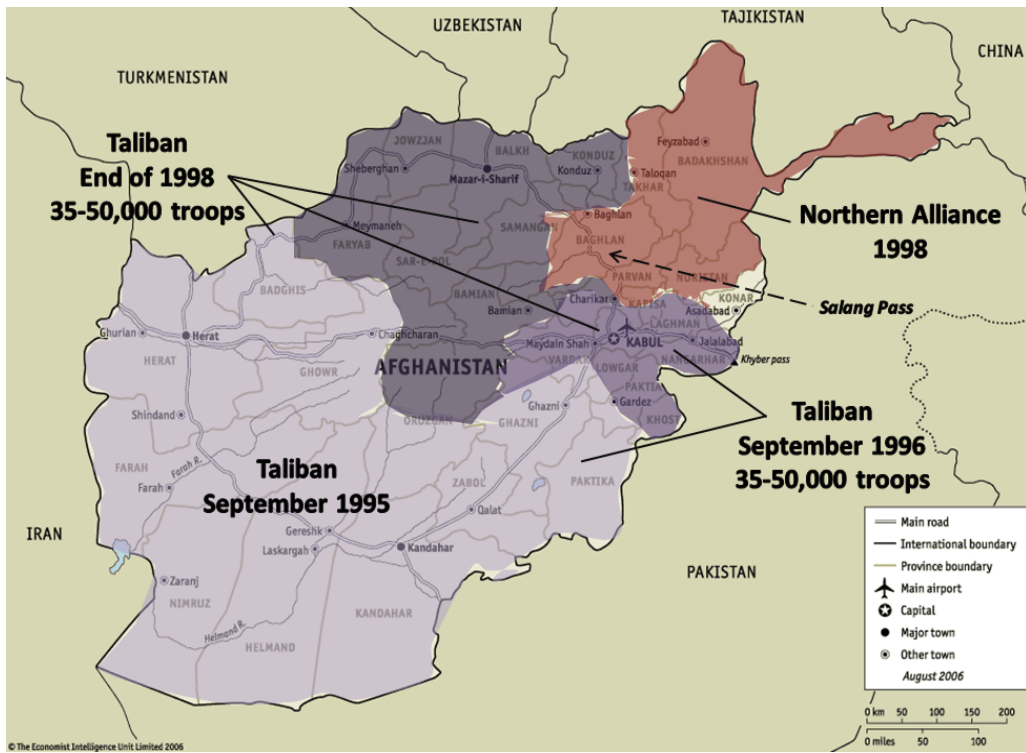


Figure 3: Taliban Gains 1995-1998



The Taliban were able to make this extensive progress after years of stalemate as a result of their force employment. The first major change introduced by the Taliban was the use of weaponized pick-up trucks (technicals). This allowed for highly mobile warfare in which Taliban “mobile columns” covered significantly more distance than previous attackers and could move across a far wider variety of terrain. These technicals, equipped with mounted machine guns as well as ZU-2 cannons and BM-21 rocket launchers, changed the game. As Davis notes, “these Blitzkrieg tactics proved strikingly successful and again it bears emphasizing, marked a sudden shift to mobile warfare that caught the government completely off balance.”²¹ Further, such speed in offensives shifted the relative importance of the weapons mix. High tempo attacks lessen the effectiveness of defensive artillery, reducing the defenders firepower.²² This effect was heightened in Afghanistan by the lack of training amongst artillery teams on both sides as well as fire coordination between units. As a result, the Taliban was able to move too quickly to be effectively targeted or suppressed defense artillery measures of dug-in forces.²³

By contrast, the Northern Alliance forces were rather immobile, preventing orderly and effective retreat in the West. Moreover, they were not positioned to transfer troops around theaters. For example, the largest troop movement of the war came when Herat was about to fall—a massive potential loss for the Tajik forces—and required a logistical *tour de force* to move 2,000 troops on a commercial airliner.²⁴

In addition, given the dispersion of the defending troops, the Taliban were often able to take significant chunks of territory in short periods of time, for example, taking six provinces in southwest and central Afghanistan in 10 days in 1995. Importantly, because of the low force-to-space ratios for all of the fighting forces, counterattacks were common. However, the Taliban often quickly responded to counterattacks, and because of their higher mobility were far-better poised to take advantage of overstretched forces. Moreover, after conquering areas, a central part of their strategy was buying-off or “winning” over local actors and leaving behind a small group of administrators to distribute justice and governance. This allowed them to prevent counterattacks as locals fought for them as they achieved far greater buy-in than most militant groups as the Taliban provided some governance stability in the face of warlordism.²⁵

The second major change in force employment was the cohesion of the Taliban, which represented a mostly unitary movement with a semblance of shared ideology versus the fragmented alliance of actors composing the Northern Alliance. The Taliban took significant casualties in each campaign; however, they kept on fighting and had a significantly easier time attracting new recruits from Pashtun areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan than other fighting forces.²⁶ Indeed, despite taking losses which were often predicted to represent the end of the movement in 1994 and 1995, they pushed on.²⁷ Finally, though often attributed to Pakistani support, the Taliban exhibited

²¹ Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force,” 62.

²² Biddle et al., *Defense at Low Force Levels*, 14.

²³ Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force”; Jalali, “Afghanistan.”

²⁴ Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force,” 59.

²⁵ Rashid, *Taliban*; Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force.”

²⁶ Rashid, *Taliban*, 53.

²⁷ Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force,” 59–60.

increasingly high levels of coordination in movement, keeping “company-sized” mobile units in sync during large-scale offensives.²⁸

However, it is worth noting the limits of the mobile strategy employed by the Taliban. First, when air power was available, the Taliban advances were often stymied. In this case, the air power was able to make up for the deficiencies of artillery and more effectively target the moving columns. For example, their first attempt to take Herat was pushed back by air power with up to 15-20 sorties per day.²⁹ However, with the creation of a small Taliban air force and support from Pakistan, the Taliban was often able to mitigate the impact of such air cover. Related, when defenders were dug-in, the Taliban had to use higher force-to-space ratios for their tactics to work. When defenders were better dug in with short interior lines (which was the case in Kabul), it took higher force proportions for the Taliban to break through. In the case of Kabul, this required mobile columns attacking from three axes. Finally, mountainous terrain clearly slowed Taliban forces. Illustratively, the one part of the country the Taliban did not take was the Tajik stronghold in the Panjshir valley. That area is protected by the Hindu Kush mountains and movement could be stopped by ambush or blockade at the critical Salang pass (see Figure 3). In an attempt to overtake Massoud following the high speed assault on Kabul, in one week, the Taliban were only able to advance 2km before being pushed back.³⁰

Force Structure of the Taliban and ANSF

This section presents the force structure of the Taliban and ANSF. This includes the geographic reach of each organization as well as their order of battle. Building on these factors, the next sections identifies how these structures would interact with each organization’s force employment and weapons mix following an ISAF withdrawal.

Afghan National Security Forces

Following the fall of the Taliban regime, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) sought to re-create the Afghan National Army (ANA) as well as establishing a national police force (ANP). This task represented the challenge of reigning in warlords in all parts of the country as well as creating an ethnically representative and cooperative force. Along with these efforts, ISAF has attempted multiple iterations of local policing programs meant to empower villages to enforce order and protect themselves against outside attack. The current, and seemingly final version of this force, are the Afghan Local Police (ALP). These elements combined represent the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). For the sake of this analysis, I will only focus on the portions of the ANSF in the West, East, and North. Though this supposition may or may not be feasible, it follows directly from the assumption that the Taliban would be able to quickly put aside ANSF opposition in southern Afghanistan. Further, as will become apparent below, the poor logistics capacity of the security forces combined with a significant lack of cohesion—in particular, a large ethnic imbalance in the officer corps—poorly position the ANSF to complete their mission in the South without significant external support.

²⁸ Ibid., 62; Gilles Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (C. Hurst & Co., 2005).

²⁹ Davis, “How the Taliban Became a Military Force.”

³⁰ A. Davis, “Afghanistan-past, Present and Future,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 8 (1996): 553.

The ANA order of battle is in Figure 4. Four corps and one division cover the non-southern regions of the country. Within these corps, there is one mechanized brigade, the 3rd of the 201st. It is also the only unit with armored mobile strike vehicles (M113 and potentially M1117³¹). While each Brigade notionally has one battery armed with D-30 howitzers, as will be discussed below, the training and capacity of these artillery units is low. Finally, ANA infantry battalions are armed with M16s,³² M249 squad automatic machine guns, as well as heavier weapons such as 82mm mortars and SPG-9 recoilless rifles. Their primary transport vehicles are the Humvee (M1151), Navistar MV-7000 transport truck, and pick-up trucks. They are supported by meager air assets. Each of the Corps has 2-3 Mi-17 transport helicopters. The Kabul area (mainly the 111st Division), are supported by an additional 22 Mi-17 as well as 9 Mi-35 attack helicopters (which are reportedly inconsistent and poorly maintained).³³ These helicopters are complemented by 12 C-27 transport aircraft, of which 2-3 are reserved for Presidential movement. Despite plans to expand this transport fleet, there are major limitations in training and qualifying pilots as well as logistics and maintenance staff.³⁴

The ANP has three major branches, the uniformed police, border police, and civil order police. As of March 2012, the AUP had 80,275 officers, the ABP had 23,086, while the COP had 13,678. Beyond the national police, a recent initiative has sought to create community defense forces. These locally trained forces, often no more than 300 members per community, are meant to provide “bottom-up” defenses against insurgents and militants. There are not regional breakdowns for these forces. Since the civil order police are based in southern and eastern Afghanistan, I estimate that about half of the force may be based on the East. Attempting to deduce regional breakdowns from 2009 numbers for the AUP yields about 16,260 in the west and north, as well as a larger presence of about 21,600 in the East on top of 15,000 police in Kabul. Finally, I conservatively estimate that 70% of the ABP are based in the south and east, while 10% is in Herat and 10% in the north. Based on estimates of the currently approved districts for ALP, I estimate that there approximately 1,500 ALP in the West, 1,800 in the North, 3,360 in the East and 3,000 in the Southeast.³⁵ The police forces are equipped with light arms, mostly AK-47s, as well as grenade launchers.

³¹ Shipments on M1117s have just commenced, with 18 received. U.S. Army, “Afghan Troops Begin Training with Mobile Strike Force Vehicle”, May 3, 2012, <http://www.army.mil/article/79248/>.

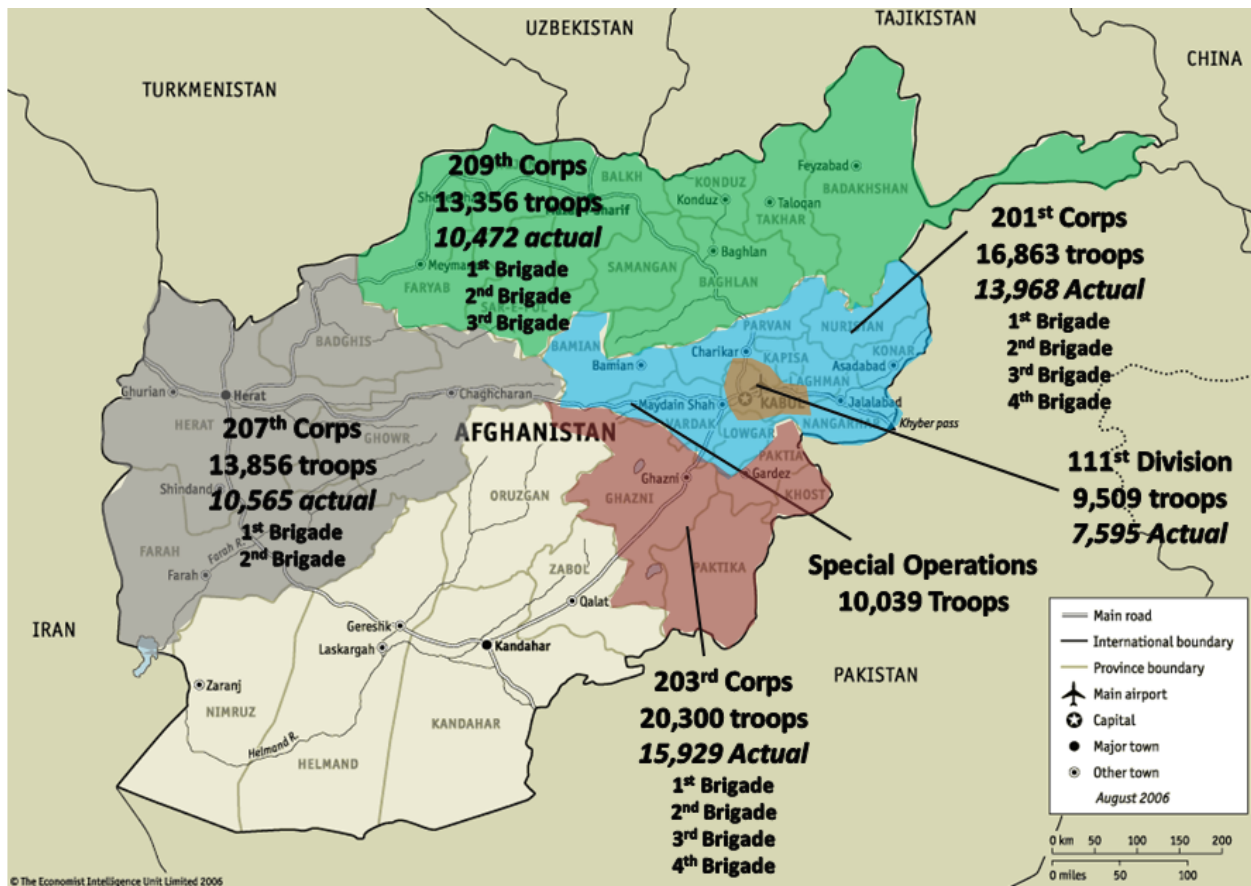
³² The U.S. has been transitioning the force from AK-47s since 2008. “Chapter 6: Asia,” *The Military Balance* 112, no. 1 (2012): 205–302.

³³ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2012, <http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2012-04-30qr.pdf>.

³⁴ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, April 2012, 26–28, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_27_12.pdf; David Axe, “Wobbly Afghan Forces Unready to Replace U.S. Military,” *AOL Defense*, July 12, 2011, <http://defense.aol.com/2011/07/12/wobbly-afghan-forces-unready-to-replace-u-s-military/>.

³⁵ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, 64.

Figure 4: ANA Order of Battle



Taliban

Despite their defeat in 2001, the Taliban have remained a strong fighting force. While they have fought a guerilla type-conflict against ISAF and the ANSF, they have achieved a great deal of territorial influence (as will be discussed below). Indeed, in April of 2012, they carried out coordinated operations in Kabul and three other cities, emphasizing a continued presence and at least some ability to evade ISAF and ANSF defenses.³⁶

Though estimates are difficult to come by, there is some consensus that the current Taliban fighting force ranges from around 25,000 to 40,000 with a 10-15,000 person “core.” Moreover, analysts have noted that the figures may be higher as ISAF has not changed their estimate since 2009.³⁷ Moreover, there is definitely a “flex factor” as the Taliban were able to expand from 25,000 to 40,000 soldiers with the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom.³⁸ In addition, they can count on support from the Haqqani network, which by many accounts, falls under the core Taliban leadership. These forces are estimated to be around 10,000. In addition, though the Taliban has often clashed with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s forces in the past, they are currently allied and he is estimated to have “thousands” of fighters.³⁹ Finally, though they have some divergences, the Pakistani Taliban has expressed clear commitment to their Afghan partners. They are thought to marshal around 25,000 troops. As Table 2 shows, the fighting force is most likely between 70 and 80,000.

Unlike in 1995, the current Taliban presence covers much of the country. This is displayed in Figure 5, which is derived from the key terrain districts and “districts” of interest within the latest ISAF categorization.⁴⁰ While the level of influence varies across the map, the overlaid insurgent attacks from January to September 2011 show a wide reach for the organization which is able to target the North, West, and East of the country beyond the concentration of attacks in the south. Indeed, in recent years, the Taliban has made significant progress into the east-central and northern areas of the country.⁴¹

³⁶ Jon Boone and Emma Graham Harrison, “Taliban Launches Largest Attack on Kabul in 11 Years,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2012.

³⁷ Gareth Porter, “Deferring to Petraeus, NIE Failed to Register Taliban Growth,” *Inter Press Service*, February 14, 2011, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54470>.

³⁸ Bakshi, “End Game in Afghanistan: Military Lessons from the American Campaign”; Rashid, *Taliban*, 220.

³⁹ Tim McGirk, “A Civil War Among Afghanistan’s Insurgents?,” *Time*, March 8, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1970474,00.html>.

⁴⁰ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, 57; Mark Checchia, *The Strengthening Northern Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Civil-Military Fusion Centre, August 2011), http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/6383~v~The_Strengthening_Northern_Insurgency_in_Afghanistan.pdf.

⁴¹ Gilles Dorransoro, *Afghanistan: The Impossible Transition*, Carnegie Papers (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2011); Gilles Dorransoro, *The Taliban’s Winning Strategy in Afghanistan* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009); Antonio Giustozzi and Chris Reuter, *The Insurgents of the Afghan North*, AAN Thematic Report (Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 5, 2011); Checchia, *The Strengthening Northern Insurgency in Afghanistan*; Anna Badkhen, “The Taliban Come to Mazar,” *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/03/the_taliban_come_to_mazar.

Figure 5: Taliban Influence Areas (Red) and Attacks January – September 2011 (Blue)

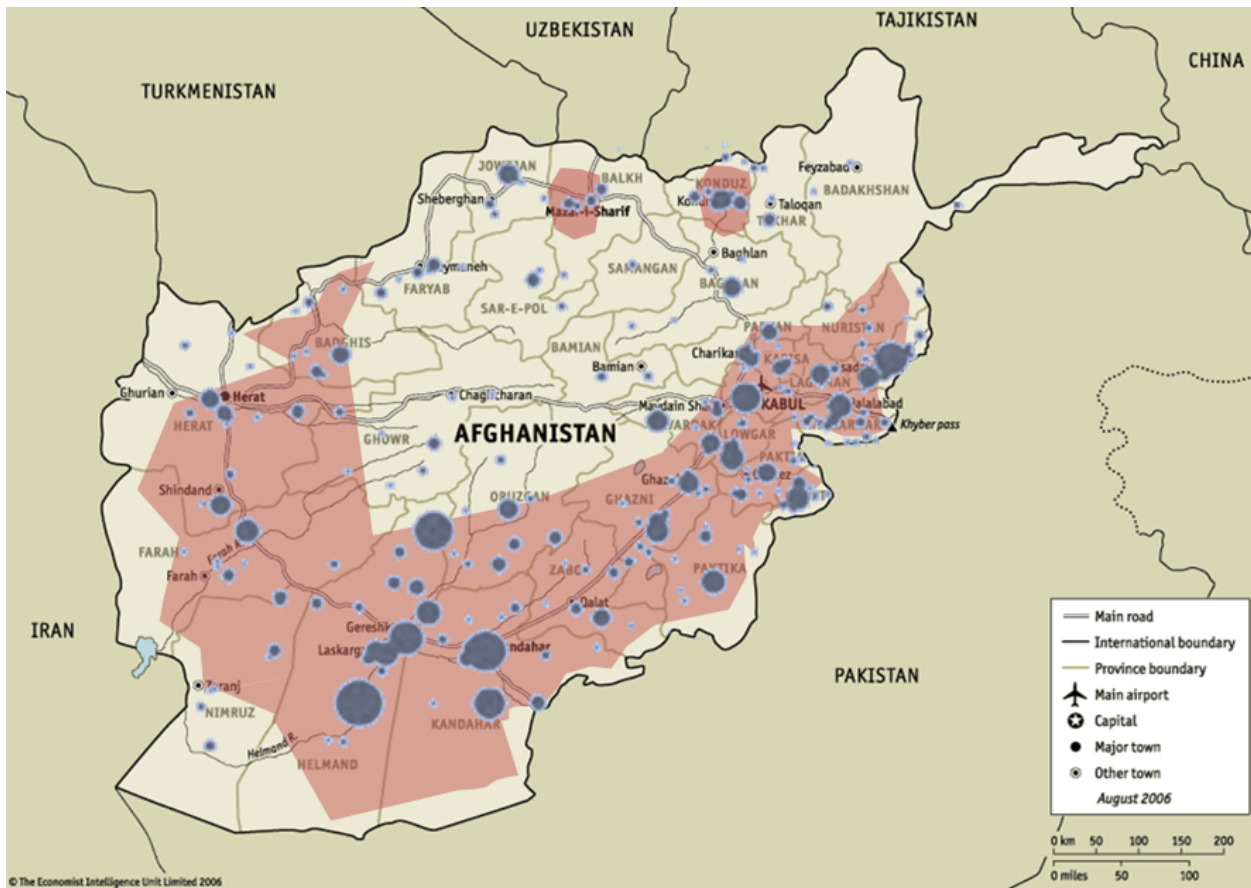


Table 2: Taliban and Allies Force Sizing

	Low Estimates	Suggested Strength	High Estimates
Taliban ⁴⁰	20,000	35-40,000	50,000
Haqqani Network ⁴¹	4,000	10,000	15,000
Hekmatyar ⁴²	500	5,000	7,000
Pakistani Taliban ⁴³	10,000	20-25,000	100,000
Total	34,500	70,000-80,000	172,000

Putting it Together: Two Scenarios for a post-2014 Fight

Scenario One: ISAF withdrawal and limited external non-military support

Though potential withdrawal plans put a U.S. force presence in 2014 at between 10 and 20,000 troops, this first scenario presents a situation in which the ISAF removes both air and ground support (which may well happen in the years after 2014).⁴² While this scenario may be extreme, it is a useful heuristic for understanding what support may be necessary in 2014 and beyond and what a potential ground war looks like with a complete withdrawal. Moreover, even with a small continued international support contingent, ground combat will more likely resemble the situation below.

Further, as discussed in the introduction, in this scenario, it is assumed that the Taliban will take control of much of southern Afghanistan as the ANSF either deteriorates or is beaten in battle. While this may not occur, if it does not, then there is probably a significantly lower risk to the Afghan central government than is currently assumed—though based on the conclusions of this analysis, there is a strong chance that the Taliban would be well-positioned for major victories in the south without an international presence. Thus, this potential “worst-case” scenario should help to calibrate the risk level faced currently and the need for greater or lesser continued international involvement.

The crux of this analysis is rooted in the discussion of the 1995-1998 offensive above. This offensive, and fighting in Afghanistan in general, was well-captured by the interaction of low force-to-space ratios and the attributes of the armed actors. Thus, the critical questions are as follows:

1. Do the same low force-to-space ratios apply in the theaters of conflict as they did in 1995 to 1998?
2. What are the force employment capabilities of each of the armed actors in terms of mobility, cohesion, and coordination?
3. What is the weapons mix of the current actors and how does this influence potential modes of force employment?
4. How will the current conflict interact with the territory of Afghanistan?

Force to Space Ratios

The analysis focuses on the expected force-to-space ratios in the three major areas of conflict, the East, West, and North. Assuming three separated fights is well-rooted in the capabilities of the ANSF. First, the current order of battle assigns specific geographic responsibility to each corps. Second, the ANSF lack the mobility to re-locate large troop contingents both within theater and across theaters. Third, assuming a Taliban victory in the south, the ANSF forces in the east and southeast will have to “stay” home to protect against offensives both from the south of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Finally, given the poor quality of governance and proliferation of armed non-state

⁴² CJ Radin, “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: The Plan for 2012, 2013, and 2014,” *Long War Journal*, March 18, 2012; Doyle McManus, “U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan Will Be a Long Process,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2011.

Table 3: Force-to-Space Ratios 1995 and 2014

		Population Coverage				Urban Coverage			
		Division /Km	Division /Km	Troops/ Sq Km	Troops/ Sq Km	Division /Km	Division /Km	Troops/ Sq Km	Troops/ Sq Km
		1995	2014	1995	2014	1995	2014	1995	2014
West	ANA	--	0.002	--	0.14	--	0.001	--	0.06
	Total	0.005	0.006	0.32	0.41	0.003	0.005	0.25	0.34
North	ANA	--	0.001	--	0.16	--	0.001	--	0.07
	Total	0.003	0.004	0.31	0.41	0.002	0.003	0.22	0.32
East	ANA	--	0.004	--	0.43	--	0.002	--	0.21
	Total	0.003	0.009	0.41	1.06	0.002	0.007	0.23	0.84
S.E.	ANA	--	0.003	--	0.52	--	0.001	--	0.22
	Total	0.001	0.005	0.20	0.90	0.000	0.003	0.05	0.60
Mean	ANA	--	0.003	--	0.31	--	0.001	--	0.14
	Total	0.003	0.006	0.31	0.70	0.002	0.005	0.13	0.53

actors—i.e. warlords—the ANA and ANP in each regional area will have to be present at least to some extent to maintain some government control.

As such, the force ratios for two potential options are below versus the force-to-space ratios held by the relevant actors in the 1995-1998 period. In the first option, ANSF forces focus on protecting large swaths of territory, attempting to maintain control of much of the Afghan population. Rather than counting uninhabited space, I only include territory with over 50 individuals per square kilometer. I show the area of space to be covered by the relevant regional Corps, as well as the length of border to be covered between that Corps and the potential front of a Taliban incursion (in the case of the East, this includes the Pakistani border). In the second option, the ANSF focuses on maintaining control of the major cities within their area of operation.⁴³ For this second assumption, I draw on Austin Long’s analysis of a potential counterterrorism option in which he holds that 10 kandaks, or about 6-8000 troops could hold an Afghan city. This assumption is probably quite low given previous experiences (for example Massoud had upwards of 25,000 troops in Kabul when pushed out in 1996) as well as analysis of defending urban sprawl.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, this conservative estimate is sufficient for the analysis. Given the force sizes in the west and north, it is only possible for them to devote six kandaks to one city, meaning that Shindand and Kunduz could not be fully manned.

The analysis is presented in Table 3 where a notional division is 10,000 soldiers for the sake of exposition.⁴⁵ As a quick note, the borders used to calculate the frontages are based on potential zones of attack for the Taliban. As such, the borders with the states north and west of Afghanistan are not included, nor are fronts which have been highly defensible in the past, such as the Salang pass and Panjshir valley. Further border areas with very little population, such as much of the border between Helmand and Farah, are not included. While these fronts are much broader than the areas covering the main roads, the Taliban have exhibited mobility well off the beaten path

⁴³ The cities in each region are as follows. North: Mazaar; West: Herat; East: Jalalabad, Kabul; Southeast: Ghazni, Gardez.

⁴⁴ Paul Bracken, “Urban Sprawl and NATO Defence,” *Survival* 18, no. 6 (1976): 254–260; Austin Long, “Small Is Beautiful: The Counterterrorism Option in Afghanistan,” *Orbis* 54, no. 2 (2010): 208.

⁴⁵ Front distances and square kilometers of operations space measured with Google Earth using population density data from FGGD, *Rural Population Density (persons Per Square Kilometre)*, 2007, <http://www.fao.org/geonetwork/srv/en/metadata.show?currTab=simple&id=14052>.

both in the past ten years and during the 1995-1996 period. However, even substantially reducing the front sizes to only be around major roadways would be asking divisions to hold well over 100km each.

There are three major points that come from this analysis. First, the low force-to-space ratios persist despite the larger ANA—indeed, the overall force size is not that much greater than it was in the mid-1990s. The one major potential difference occurs in the east and the southeast where the force-to-space ratios are nearly twice the size when including the ANP. This represents an attempt by ISAF and the ANSF to secure the key areas around the capital. However, as discussed above and in greater depth below, the ANP is not positioned to serve in a conventional, or even irregular, role, meaning that this ratio is probably misleading. They are corrupt, poorly trained, and meant for policing and counterinsurgent operations, not larger scale battle. Further, as Biddle et al. note, it is unclear what the threshold for “good enough” force-to-space ratios are, particularly in light of the other attributes of the ANSF to be presented.⁴⁶ Even given the relatively higher force-to-space ratios in the southeast and east, they are still quite small, particularly in terms of the front to be covered.

However, even assuming that the East and Southeast are better protected, this indicates that like in 1995, a Taliban offensive may be successful in the West with similar force numbers to those used in 1995. If so, such a movement with around 15,000 troops would leave the Taliban with significant additional resources in the south, as well as to keep pressure on frontlines to the southeast and east. Building on such a victory in the west, a move on the north would then allow movement from the south, west and north on the eastern regions. At such a time, it is feasible that additional fronts from Pakistan may be opened which would place additional pressure on the defenders in those areas.

The second finding from Table 3 is that, as the second scenario uncovers, a decision to mass sufficient forces to protect the major cities in each theater will severely limit the ANSF’s ability to hold any continuous defensive front to prevent the Taliban from taking much of the population—as noted above, only 23% of the Afghan population is located in cities. Indeed, this scenario would cut in half the number of troops/km sq outside of the cities. Given the current Taliban tactics of taking territory when unopposed by ISAF or ANSF forces and then building administrations to “hold” the territory and use it for a new base of attacks, this would be a potentially ruinous option. It was under such circumstances that the Taliban were able to capture Kabul in 1996 by attacking from three axes, overwhelming Massoud’s defense. In addition, this option would drastically reduce the already small capacity to mass defenses on frontlines between each theater as well as with Pakistan. Given the poor mobility within the current force structure, those urban defenders would not be able to move with any speed to reinforce potential breakthroughs.

Third, the force numbers presented in Table 3 are quite optimistic for the ANSF. As with any military, the ANA is not all “tooth.” Upwards of 3,000 soldiers in each Corps serve in logistics roles, or “tail,” reducing the actual combat reach of each Corps presented in Table 3 by 20-30%. Next, as noted above, attrition is at nearly 25% for the ANA annually, meaning any major drop-off in recruitment would quickly reduce the force extensively—particularly if attrition picked up following an ISAF withdrawal given lower potential for pay and protection. The same danger

⁴⁶ Biddle et al., *Defense at Low Force Levels*, 17–18.

applies to continued low retention of soldiers after the three year service period. And, finally, there are already plans to cut the ANSF by up to 100,000 members after 2014 in recognition that the costs of the police and army drastically exceed the entire revenue stream of the Afghan government.⁴⁷ By contrast, while the Taliban could probably mobilize no more than 10-15,000 troops for initial fights in the West or North, there is every indication that these force sizes could swell with new recruits and re-enforcements from Pakistan, including the Pakistani Taliban.

Force Employment

As described above, defending with a low force-to-space ratio, particularly when the attacker is highly mobile, requires a set of coordinated systems to quickly reinforce breakthroughs and counterattack to slow momentum. The ANSF does not represent such a force: (1) it lacks the training to operate as a responsive mobile force; (2) it lacks air support and logistics capacities needed to cover broad areas; and (3) it lacks cohesion and internal coordination. First, they often do not go through live-fire training at any level, let alone in a manner to prepare for battalion or brigade sized movements.⁴⁸ Illustratively, Afghan artillery is not effective both because of the speed of the Taliban troop movements, but also because of a lack of training and effectiveness amongst ANA combat support units. As an artilleryman in the 82nd Airborne observed of the ANA upon returning from deployment, “there is no standard call-for-fire, crew drill or even a standard word for azimuth of fire. Without these standards, the ANA artillery cannot learn to support any maneuver unit in contact with the enemy quickly without confusion — which could lead to fratricide.”⁴⁹

Moreover, the ANSF has been trained as a counterinsurgent force and is not prepared to confront mobile warfare across an extended front. Indeed, there are significant force structures issues which inhibit the strategic redeployment of forces today, a reality illustrated by the lack of rotation of frontline units and logistical ineptitude which prevents force-planning.⁵⁰ Currently, much of the force is at forward operating bases or combat outposts.⁵¹ Without ISAF air support, these combat outposts are difficult if not impossible to re-supply routinely let alone during a fight. Related, they lack reconnaissance capabilities to identify attacking forces with any lead time.⁵² Further, as ISAF soldiers observe when returning to ANA outposts after ISAF withdrawal, the ANA have a poor sense of position defense, both establishing weak physical defenses and poor fire support

⁴⁷ Abbas Daiyar, “Downsizing Afghan National Security Forces,” *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, April 30, 2012, http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics?post_id=4128; “Q&A: Foreign Forces in Afghanistan,” *BBC*, May 17, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11371138>; Joe Gromelski, “Are Afghan Security Forces up to the Post-2014 Job?,” *Stars and Stripes*, May 15, 2012, <http://www.stripes.com/news/are-afghan-security-forces-up-to-the-post-2014-job-1.177284>.

⁴⁸ CPT Brandon Anderson, “Training to Transition: ANA Marksmanship and Live Fire Training,” *Small Wars Journal* (August 12, 2011): 1.

⁴⁹ MAJ Daryl Fullerton, “ANA Artillery: Training the Trainer,” *Fires* (June 2009): 21.

⁵⁰ *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army*, Asia Report (International Crisis Group, May 12, 2010), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/190-a-force-in-fragments-reconstituting-the-afghan-national-army.aspx>.

⁵¹ Tom A. Peter, “Afghan Army’s Next Hurdle: Logistics,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 3, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/1003/Afghan-Army-s-next-hurdle-logistics>; Axe, “Wobbly Afghan Forces Unready to Replace U.S. Military”; *A Force in Fragments*, 22.

⁵² Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*.

Table 4: ANA Unit Assessments

ANA UNIT ASSESSMENTS: QUARTERLY CHANGE																		
Rating	111th Division		201st Corps		203rd Corps		205th Corps		207th Corps		209th Corps		215th Corps		Commando		HSSB	
	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012	Dec 2011	Feb 2012
Independent with Advisors	0	1	0	2	1	1	3	7	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	1	1
Effective with Advisors	9	19	15	19	12	16	17	18	5	13	9	13	11	21	5	0	2	3
Effective with Partners	1	4	11	10	25	29	19	18	8	11	8	9	14	10	3	0	0	0
Developing with Partners	1	1	2	3	2	3	2	1	2	6	1	3	4	1	5	0	0	0
Established	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Not Assessed	9	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Total Units Assessed	11	25	28	34	40	49	41	45	16	30	20	29	30	33	13	0	3	4

Notes: Rating categories are explained on page 63. HSSB = Headquarters Security and Support Brigade (ministry-level unit).

Sources: ISAF/JC, responses to SIGAR data call, 3/30/2012 and 1/3/2012.

positioning.⁵³ Even today, defenses around Kabul are not well-established and the systems to prevent infiltrators including intelligence and early detection are quite poor, as evidenced by the most recent attacks on Kabul in April 2012 as well as incidents during the past year.⁵⁴ Beyond the ANA, the ANP is garrisoned in particular towns and districts and is not positioned for movement or massed conventional defenses.

The ANSF has not exhibited high levels of tactical proficiency nor independence from international forces. For example, the most recent Department of Defense report on progress in Afghanistan indicates that fewer than three ANA battalions are “independent with advisors.” The full findings are in Table 4. In short, across all of the Corps, Afghan soldiers have shown poor capacity to fight Taliban both in defense and in planning offensive operations. Moreover, recent reports have put this U.S. military metric under heavy scrutiny, arguing that dependence on partners is significantly higher than reported.⁵⁵ Indeed, the DoD acknowledges that ratings are no longer verified by a special evaluation unit: “after January 31, 2012, the requirement for outside validation for newly reported ‘Independent with Advisors’ units was eliminated, which has resulted in the recent increase in ‘Independent with Advisors’ units.”⁵⁶

These figures are supported by the pace of current operations. First, in a number of locations across the country, most publicly Kunar and Nuristan, when ISAF forces withdraw, the Taliban is

⁵³ Anna Mulrine, “Will US Exit Strategy Work in Afghanistan? Brutal Valley Emerges as Test,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 31, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2011/0831/Will-US-exit-strategy-work-in-Afghanistan-Brutal-valley-emerges-as-test>.

⁵⁴ Fabrizio Foschini, “Striking at Kabul, Now and Then,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, January 1, 2012, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2446>. As Foschini notes, “nowadays, Kabul features a less ‘centralised’ defensive set up. There are checkpoints where the major communication axes enter the city, of course, but at an inner level, the only pervasive security arrangement is the so-called Ring of Steel, a series of police positions deployed to scrutinize vehicles accessing central areas of the city.”

⁵⁵ Kate Clark, *Death of an Uruzgan Journalist: Command Errors and Collateral Damage* (Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 2012); Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, “Truth, Lies, and Afghanistan,” *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2012), <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2012/02/8904030>; Heidi Vogt, “NATO Misleads with ‘Afghan-led’ Label: Report,” *Associated Press*, April 25, 2012, <http://www.armytimes.com/news/2012/04/ap-nato-misleads-afghan-led-label-report-042512/>.

⁵⁶ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, 37.

often able to re-capture significant territory.⁵⁷ This is matched by vignettes of poor ANA performance including failure to engage the enemy, running from combat, and not following procedures meant to reduce vulnerability.⁵⁸ Similarly, ALP units are often unable to turn back insurgent attacks without support from U.S. Special Operators.⁵⁹

Moving past the ANSF's limited training to conduct defensive operations, the current weapons mix further constrains the defense and maneuver capabilities of the defenders. First, ANA vehicles are not armored, and those that are, for example tanks and BMP-1's, are vulnerable to Taliban heavy arms such as RPG-7s. Though this reality affects both sides—the insurgents have virtually no armor remaining—a related problem is far more daunting for the ANSF. The threat of IEDs means that mobility is dangerous. Indeed, current insurgent IED employment often targets ANSF vehicles with IEDs.⁶⁰ For this reason, a number of main roads, for example the Kabul-Jalalabad highway, as well as many secondary roads in districts are “off-limits” for ground movement. This weapons capability is significantly enhanced by the broad Taliban presence in the country as IEDs can be planted without force concentration by the Taliban. Obviously, this situation would be made worse in the “urban protection” scenario where the Taliban would have significant space to operate, holding many peripheral villages and towns and thus having access to main roads. As Rashid observes with regards to Massoud's forces in Kabul during 1995, they “could hold the line around Kabul...[but] could not extend it and carry out offensives to push the Taliban further south.”⁶¹ However, the price to pay for such a lack of control was the Taliban's capture of much of the population and territory needed to stage larger attacks on the then government forces. Similar trends have been exhibited today when Taliban use areas vacated by Coalition troops to build power bases and safe zones.

Indeed, Taliban fighters have already started implementing some of the tactics that they would use in a post-withdrawal conventional fight. This has been illustrated by multiple campaigns to re-take village and district centers after ISAF withdrawal. Unlike their campaigns in the mid-1990s, the Taliban have far greater logistics networks given their presence throughout much of the country. Indeed, to get supplies past ISAF forces and deep into Afghanistan, they have had to

⁵⁷ Bill Roggio, “Northeastern Afghan District Falls After Taliban Assault,” *Long War Journal*, March 29, 2011, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/03/northeastern_afghan.php; Thomas Ruttig, “Withdrawal in 2014? Myths and Realities,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 4, 2012; Rod Nordland and Sangar Rahimi, “Taliban Seize District Near Afghanistan's Pech Valley,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2011, sec. World / Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/world/asia/30afghanistan.html>; Julius Cavendish, “Return of the Taliban: Rebel-held District Is Sign of Things to Come,” *The Independent*, May 31, 2011, sec. Asia, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/return-of-the-taliban-rebelheld-district-is-sign-of-things-to-come-2291079.html>.

⁵⁸ Jeff Schogol, “Afghan Soldiers Ran, Hid During Deadly '09 Battle at COP Keating,” *Stars and Stripes*, n.d., <http://www.stripes.com/afghan-soldiers-ran-hid-during-deadly-09-battle-at-cop-keating-1.146305>; Thomas Johnson, “Déjà Vu: Afghanistan Prepares for Another Withdrawal,” *Jane's Intelligence Review* 23, no. 10 (2011): 8–13; Bill Ardolino, “US Troops Weather Rockets, Recoilless Rifles, and Grenades in Sabari,” *Long War Journal*, August 19, 2011.

⁵⁹ Amir Shah, “Afghan Police: Taliban Overruns Remote District,” *Associated Press*, March 29, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/mar/29/afghan-police-taliban-overruns-remote-district/>; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Afghanistan Trip Report V: The Afghan Local Police: “It's Local, So It Must Be Good” - Or Is It?*, Foreign Policy Trip Reports (Brookings, May 9, 2012).

⁶⁰ Jane's Defense & Security Intelligence & Analysis, *Afghanistan: An IHS Jane's Special Report*, 18–19.

⁶¹ Rashid, *Taliban*, 48.

develop strong lines of communication which will obviously operate with greater ease when less challenged by ISAF reconnaissance resources.

Further, unlike ANSF forces, Taliban have already been operating independently and will only gain greater tactical freedom without foreign forces on the ground. Moreover, unlike ANSF forces, Taliban limit the danger of counterattack by holding territory through the provision of governance and justice, allowing for a smaller force presence to hold territories while troops deploy further. Further, they have shown the capacity to get reinforcements from Pakistan and around the country, ensuring that their numbers do not dwindle.

Finally, cohesion is far higher amongst the Taliban than the ANSF as introduced earlier. This manifests in the battle in a few ways. First, given the need for strong resistance against concentrated breakthroughs, cohesion is needed to raise the “breaking point” of defending troops. As evidence earlier suggested, this has been a consistent problem for ANSF forces who at least some of the time shy away from battle. Second, many of ANA, ALP, and ANP units have made tacit agreements with the Taliban in much of the country, underscoring a lack of resolve to “fight.”⁶² Indeed, one of the main tactics the Taliban used in the 1995-1998 period was cutting deals with potential opposition fighters. Finally, given the infiltration of Taliban within the ranks of the ANA and ANP, there is good reason to expect a lack of cohesion.

Nonetheless, there may be unequal distributions of skill and cohesion across the Taliban as new recruits or Pakistani Taliban may fall within different command chains. Many analysts have identified potential fault lines within the organization and predicted decreases in unity. However, this has not been borne out by dynamics on the ground as the Quetta Shura maintains central in the movement and limits the financial and territorial opportunities for sub-leaders to take greater control.

One potential “game-changer” for the ANSF is the Special Forces command with around 10,000 who are said to have far higher proficiency, cohesion, and logistical support—though they remain dependent on ISAF for air support and mission planning.⁶³ Currently, I have predicted that these troops will be used in the east and southeast theater. While they may tip the balance in key areas, 10,000 troops are not sufficient to hold territory across much of the country, for example the West and North. Moreover, there are relevant comparisons to 1996. At that time, Massoud’s Central Corps of 15,000 was depicted as highly trained and reliable with the capacity to effectively employ fire support for maneuver.⁶⁴ These forces had some air support, but were still insufficient to prevent Taliban mobile columns from taking Kabul. Indeed, they suffered a major loss at Sarobi on the pathway to Kabul after a three-axis attack.⁶⁵

A second potential difference is the support of Pakistan to the Taliban. As noted above, Pakistan’s support was critical in the 1995-1998 period—though the Taliban grew increasingly independent as the campaign progressed. However, there is significant evidence that Pakistan remains heavily involved in Afghanistan today and would actually have an incentive to push the Pakistani Taliban

⁶² International Security Assistance Force, *The State of the Taliban*, January 6, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/world/asia/23atwar-taliban-report-docviewer.html>.

⁶³ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*.

⁶⁴ A. Davis, “Afghanistan’s Taliban,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 7 (1995): 317.

⁶⁵ Davis, “Afghanistan-past, Present and Future,” 551.

to fight in Afghanistan rather than Pakistan.⁶⁶ In addition, many of the crufts moving from Pakistan to Afghanistan today are not pressed by the Pakistani government, but instead move through mosque networks. Finally, though the Taliban has received some ISI support during the previous ten years, many of their operations have been funded locally. This is apparent from some sentiment of concern from ISI that the Taliban is more independent now than it was before.⁶⁷

Summing Up Scenario One

In short, many of the same dynamics which persisted from 1995-1998 remain. Low force-to-space ratios are combined with defensive forces that lack the ability to coordinate responses to breakthroughs, let alone counterattack and hold new territory. They do not have significantly improved weaponry and remain highly vulnerable to Taliban targeting of their vehicles and assets. These dangers are heightened by a faulty logistics system which is unable to transport supplies and ammunition across the country without ISAF support.

Nonetheless, the ANSF does have some more cohesive units such as the Special Forces command and quick response battalions in each of the Corps. These troops, particularly those around the capital, may be far better positioned defenders than some of those in the 1995-1996 period. In addition, following the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989, the communist government held onto control of the capital for nearly two years, relying on the vestiges of the then Afghan army left behind by the Soviets—though rather than facing a united front, the government faced a highly fragmented resistance. As such, given this analysis, the Taliban may be less able to take control of the east and southeast regions than they were and instead be help within parts of the north and west. Even so, this would represent a great deal of the Afghan population. The next scenario underscores how the continued provision of air assets—and the concomitant ground forces they require—may alter the outcome.

Scenario Two: ISAF Air Support Continues

As evidenced by the current operations in Afghanistan as well as Biddle et al. and Davis et al.'s analysis, air power can play a major role in mitigating the challenges of defending with low force-to-space ratios. Air power, including aerial reconnaissance, logistical support, and close air support, significantly expands the reach of defenders. They can observe where attackers may try to breakthrough, effectively target mobile forces, and move troops around to re-enforce. Close air support alone played a central role in allowing the Northern Alliance to push back the Taliban at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). As Williams writes of Dostum's experience with U.S. Special Operators and the air power they commanded, "Time and again, Dostum and his American allies were pinned down and appeared to be close to being overrun when US fighter

⁶⁶ International Security Assistance Force, *The State of the Taliban*.

⁶⁷ Rod Nordland and Alissa J. Rubin, "NATO Plays Down Optimistic Views of Taliban Captives," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2012.

Table 4: OEF Close Air Support Sorties 2008-2011

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM/International Security Assistance Force																	
Afghanistan	Close Air Support				Weapons Releases												
	Sorties		Sorties w/Weapons		Less Activity  More Activity												
	Year	Sorties	Year	Sorties w/Weapons	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2008	20,359	2008	1800	2008	324	337	410	257	446	985	759	657	367	339	212	122	5,215
2009	27,815	2009	1733	2009	163	203	364	465	456	442	384	445	254	541	238	208	4,163
2010	33,679	2010	1816	2010	157	154	175	197	300	457	325	415	740	1,043	866	272	5,101
2011	33,539	2011	1675	2011	387	299	274	287	369	554	652	481	534	616	310	133	4,896

bombers roared overhead and rained bombs down on the Taliban.”⁶⁸ Indeed, during November of 2001, U.S. forces maintained a sortie rate of nearly 120 per day.⁶⁹

Similarly, as many of the soldiers quoted herein have pointed out, air support has played a crucial role in crushing Taliban attacks and providing actionable reconnaissance and intelligence. Indeed, in some areas, it is argued the Taliban have moved entirely to motorcycle as pick-up trucks were too vulnerable to air assault.⁷⁰ Table 5 shows the sortie rate of just close air support missions from 2008 to 2011. In addition, during 2011 alone, nearly 80 million tons of cargo was dropped from U.S. mobility aircraft.⁷¹ These figures are matched by a significant use of reconnaissance platforms and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) which provide occasional fire support—up to 85 such missions are run daily.⁷²

However, these procedures require significant logistical support. While 30 percent of sorties are flown from aircraft carriers,⁷³ many sorties are flown in country or at least require ground support for maintenance and re-fueling. This requires further support from logistical aircraft and land routes from the north of Afghanistan and through Pakistan.⁷⁴ In particular, the Manas airfield in Kyrgyzstan plays a major role as a jumping off point for the distribution of troops and supplies throughout the Afghan theater.⁷⁵ The main airbases utilized in country are Kandahar Airfield and Bagram Airbase just north of Kabul. Finally, kinetic close air support operations require coordination with air controllers on the ground who have to identify and transfer targets to air

⁶⁸ Brian Glyn Williams, “General Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: New Light on the Role of Northern Alliance Warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 4 (December 2010): 625.

⁶⁹ Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America’s Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Rand Publishing, 2005), 127.

⁷⁰ Afghan Hound, “Easy Riders, Raging Buffaloes,” *Foto8*, February 4, 2010, <http://www.foto8.com/new/online/blog/1114-easy-riders-raging-buffaloes>.

⁷¹ Air Mobility Command Public Affairs, “Airdrops Could Play Key Role in Eventual Afghanistan Transition”, April 18, 2012, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123298387>.

⁷² Noah Schachtman, “Flying Spy Surge: Surveillance Missions Over Afghanistan Quadruple,” *Wired*, October 19, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/10/flying-spy-surge/>.

⁷³ Jonathan Greenert, “Sailing into the 21st Century: Operating Forward, Strengthening Partnerships,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 65 (Quarter 2012): 72; *Statement of the Honorable Sean J. Stackley, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Vice Admiral Kevin Miccoy, Commander, Naval Sea Systems, and Captain William Galinis, Supervisor of Shipbuilding*, 2011, 1.

⁷⁴ Those the land routes through Pakistan are on and off again.

⁷⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Kyrgyzstan Wants Military Role to End at U.S. Base,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2012, sec. World / Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/14/world/asia/panetta-meets-with-military-officials-in-kyrgyzstan.html>.

assets. As noted above, the ANSF does not have the capacity for either of these legs of the air support mission.

One heuristic for understanding a SOF and air mission to prevent a Taliban conventional assault on the west, north and southeast comes from comparing it with potential counterterrorism mission. Presenting such a counterterrorism option for strikes in southern and eastern Afghanistan, Austin Long calls for three Army Special Forces battalions. This represents about 54 Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams and would thus provide about one team for every three ANA battalions—this about matches the ratios used in OEF where around 12 ODAs supported between 15,000 and 30,000 Northern Alliance troops. These ODAs would be supported by eight aviation squadrons, a headquarters battalion, and an additional brigade to serve as a quick reaction team. These forces would be necessary to protect the airfields being used, back-up embedded special operators, and extract injured team members or damaged equipment. Close air support would be provided by two squadrons of fighter bombers (F-15E and A-10). Thus, the total force size would be around 13,000.⁷⁶

However, with a loss of Kandahar and a position in southern Afghanistan as well as a heightened focus on northern and western Afghanistan, these needs would be significantly altered. First, since the special forces MH-47, MH-60, and MH-60L (a gunship), have a combat radius of around 300km,⁷⁷ they would not be able to serve much of northern and western Afghanistan from Bagram air base (indeed, it is nearly 600km from Bagram to Herat). As such, it would probably be necessary to establish secure airfields at Kunduz (from which the Germans are operating now) and Herat (which has a limited ISAF presence). Establishing “to spec” air bases by building new defenses and building new runways and emergency systems is not a trivial matter. Still, given the “net” removal of Kandahar, this would only require adding one more base to be covered from Long’s plan (Long calls for a presence at Bagram, Kandahar and Jalalabad).

Next, the logistical reach post-2014 will likely be limited as Kyrgyzstan has said it will close the Manas airfield after 2014.⁷⁸ While the U.S. has said it can fly over the North Pole through Russia, this pathway may also be removed after 2014 and is significantly more expensive and logistically demanding. Moreover, the U.S. does not have significant supply lines to western Afghanistan given a low operational tempo there. Ramped up operations in that part of the country may also provoke Iranian involvement.

Finally, air support against a conventional movement of forces will probably have to be significantly larger than the two squadrons proposed by Long. For example, up to 500 aircraft were in use during the early months of Enduring Freedom as U.S. air power was used against conventional-like groups of Taliban fighters.⁷⁹ This increased tempo is also apparent in Table 4 as ISAF has had to employ significant numbers of sorties in close air support throughout the country. This role would probably only be enhanced in a supportive role given the poor fighting quality of the ANA and their general inability to use artillery. Such additional support could be provided by aircraft carriers which currently launch about 130 sorties per week and did most of

⁷⁶ Long, “Small Is Beautiful.”

⁷⁷ *Jane’s All the World’s Aircraft* (Jane’s Information Group, 2011); Long, “Small Is Beautiful,” 204.

⁷⁸ Bumiller, “Kyrgyzstan Wants Military Role to End at U.S. Base.”

⁷⁹ Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror*, chap. 3.

the heavy lifting during the early stages of Enduring Freedom.⁸⁰ Similarly, continued UAV sortie rates will probably have to continue to provide reconnaissance for the significantly large territories in the west, north, and east—this mission will be even more important given the reduced troop coverage across these areas when ISAF draws down.

Nonetheless, while this situation may prevent a Taliban movement towards conventional offensives, it would be likely to push them to continue a guerilla-type conflict. If this is the case, the prospects still are not ideal for the Afghan central government. In the current campaign, as noted above, the Taliban are adept at taking districts when ISAF withdraws from them, despite continued air support. Further, simply given the reduced troop presence from around 130,000 foreign troops to 10-20,000 the force-to-population ratios will be drastically reduced providing more open territory for Taliban movement. Finally, one of the key legs of a counterinsurgency campaign, the provision of governance and political stability, will be a major challenge for Afghanistan. Indeed, DoD and SIGAR reports emphasize that the perhaps the largest deficiency for the Afghan government is their inability to provide services beyond major urban centers combined with pervasive corruption and ineptitude.⁸¹ By contrast, this is one of the Taliban's key strengths.

As such, while air support may prevent a Taliban offensive to take much of the country, it will not slow their current creep into much of Afghanistan's territory. Moreover, this effort would have to be substantial with a large continued commitment of special operators and air support within country and from aircraft carriers. In addition, with a reduced U.S. troop presence, the opportunity for "sensational" Taliban attacks against special operators such as the downing of a Navy Seal Helicopter in August 2011 or the spectacles in Kabul in the past couple of months will rise. Such attacks will put pressure on U.S. decision makers to cut back support further and thus endanger a long-term commitment.

Conclusion

As ISAF contemplates the shape of its withdrawal, there is a significant need to realistically evaluate the capacity of the Afghan forces, as well as the aims that ISAF has in the country. This analysis indicates that without sustained international support, there is a non-trivial chance that the Taliban will indeed be poised to take much of the country in a more conventional than irregular manner. Capitalizing on the advantages to the attacker in a low force-to-space battlefield, the Taliban may be poised to overrun the ANSF which has poor force employment and a mostly ineffective weapons mix. Moreover, even with ISAF support, the ANSF is not well-poised to conduct an effective counterinsurgency campaign and is likely to cede significant territory to the Taliban. This reality combined with a potential ISAF drawdown of special operations support after a "debacle," would leave the Taliban well-positioned to take on the conventional mission described herein.

⁸⁰ Mass Communication Special 1st Class Steve Smith, "Enterprise, CVW-1 Support Operation Enduring Freedom," *United States Navy*, May 6, 2012, http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=67002.

⁸¹ Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*.

As such, if ISAF is committed to preventing a drastically enlarged area of Taliban area of influence, this analysis would call for a concerted decision to hold southern Afghanistan. This may require significant additional resources and may not be feasible with a counterterrorism mission. On the other hand, if small pockets of influence are all that is needed, it seems feasible that intense use of airpower could protect well-defended special forces positions in southern Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the resources needed to hold territory beyond such small pockets are probably infeasible.

The other major variables not significantly touched upon in this analysis are the role of outside actors such as Pakistan and Iran. While Iran has provided some support to the Taliban, this support is reported to have eased lately. Given the sectarian differences between them as well as the Taliban's treatment of the Afghan Shi'ite population in the mid-1990s, this relationship is likely to further sour should the Taliban take significant territory—particularly territory close to Iran in western Afghanistan. As such, Iran may play a non-trivial role in potentially intervening to oppose a Taliban takeover. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have also expressed concern at a destabilized Afghanistan and may attempt to support the ANA.⁸² It is worth noting that such external support came in spades during the mid-1990s but often worked to further fragment the fighters as they argued over the provision of said resources.

The other major wildcard comes with Pakistan. Though they have continued to support the Taliban, there is different fear within the government that an unstable Afghanistan could potentially backfire. Nonetheless, given their behavior in the past 30 years, it seems likely that they will continue to support the Taliban to try to gain some influence in Afghanistan given their poor relations with the current government and many of the non-Pashtun actors in the country.⁸³ Further, a conflict in Afghanistan may provide a safety-valve for some of the militants now targeting the Pakistani government. Finally, as noted above, there is also some indication that the Taliban is able to operate more independently now, perhaps reducing the overall importance of Pakistan—this reality is definitely heightened by the poor quality of the ANSF.

⁸² Rick Gladstone, "Kyrgyzstan Sees Instability After Afghan Withdrawal," *The New York Times*, November 23, 2011, sec. World / Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/24/world/asia/kyrgyzstan-sees-instability-after-afghan-withdrawal.html>; Matthew Stein, "Uzbekistan's View of Security in Afghanistan After 2014," *Military Review* (June 2012).

⁸³ "Hamid Karzai Confronts Pakistan Leadership," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2012.

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