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Foreign Policy

Faking "Success" in Afghanistan

By Robert Haddick

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This Week at War: The Forgone Conclusion in Kandahar.

What the four-stars are reading -- a weekly column from Small Wars Journal.

Can't we already write the December Afghanistan strategy review?

The "battle" for Kandahar is now underway. But don't call it a battle, says Gen. Stanley McChrystal, think of it as a "process." According to a recent gloomy assessment by the Washington Post's Karen DeYoung, administration officials view the Kandahar operation as the "go for broke" culminating effort of the war. McChrystal will commit 10,000 U.S. soldiers and 80 percent of USAID's budget for Afghanistan to the Kandahar offensive. In DeYoung's words, "The bet is that the Kandahar operation, backed by thousands of U.S. troops and billions of dollars, will break the mystique and morale of the insurgents, turn the tide of the war and validate the administration's Afghanistan strategy. There is no Plan B."

Are Barack Obama and McChrystal really gambling on achieving a clear and convincing victory in Kandahar? The battle against the Taliban insurgents is a battle for perceptions. And there are numerous audiences whose perceptions the administration and McChrystal must alter. These audiences include Kandahar's leaders and population, the U.S. public, and the rest of the world, which will render its judgment about U.S. strength and effectiveness.

How do U.S. officials define success in Kandahar? According to DeYoung, the definition is vague, relying on "atmospherics reporting," public opinion polling, and levels of street commerce. When defining success, U.S. officials are in a logical trap; they must keep their definitions secret in order to prevent the Taliban from targeting the measurements. But without stating their goals in advance, they will have a difficult time convincing the various audiences that they are achieving them.

According to DeYoung's article, the Kandahar operation will be the centerpiece of the Obama administration's December strategy review. That review will presumably result in a decision confirming the plan to begin a withdrawal the following summer.

Given that the administration is hiding the definition of success, Obama has repeated the July 2011 withdrawal pledge, and the U.S. 2012 electoral calendar will by then be in motion, couldn't the White House staff just write the December strategy review now?

The one factor that actually remains unknown is how the Taliban will respond to the Kandahar offensive. The low-risk option for the Taliban is simply to withdraw to their sanctuaries and wait for two years before returning to restore their position. They've done this before and will be in a position to do so again. Alternatively, some Taliban commanders may argue for greater resistance now in order to defend their prestige, which could be a valuable asset later.

Most likely, the picture this winter will be murky, with some signs of pacification mixed in with occasional Taliban raids and acts of terror, specifically designed for media coverage. But the December "atmospherics" forecast for Kandahar is already in -- and it reads "success!"

The new War Plan Orange

War Plan Orange was the U.S. government's secret contingency plan -- first contemplated around 1906, and then regularly revised during the 1920s and 1930s -- for a war against Japan. Japan had been a British ally during World War I and until the middle of the 1930s had had little if any friction with the United States. But even as the United States retreated from the global stage after 1920 and followed a foreign policy based on arms control and neutrality, planners in the Navy and War Departments still found it necessary to prepare for foreseeable possibilities. War Plan Orange was one result of this process. On December 7, 1941, the plan popped out of a file cabinet and into the real world.

On May 18, a team of analysts from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) -- an influential Washington defense think tank -- released AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept. This report is the new War Plan Orange; it describes a concept and requirements for a United States naval, air, and space campaign against China for control of the western Pacific Ocean.

The report's four authors, all former military planners inside the Office of the Secretary of Defense, are blunt with their conclusions. They discuss the rapid growth in China's ability to conduct military operations as far away as Guam and New Guinea. The authors assert that if current trends continue without a more imaginative U.S. response, China will be able to make it prohibitively costly for U.S. military forces to operate in the western Pacific. Should China's "unprovoked and unwarranted military buildup" achieve this result, the authors conclude vital U.S. political and economic interests will be at risk. The purpose of their report, they explain, is to present a path that will "minimize Beijing's incentives to achieve its geopolitical ambitions through aggression or, more likely, coercion."

A long list of China analysts will dispute the notion that China's leadership aims to battle the United States for political and military control of the western Pacific. The authors respond by reminding readers "that since intentions can change overnight -- especially in authoritarian regimes -- one must focus on the military capabilities of other states."

The authors conclude that Pentagon and congressional planners have been lulled into complacency regarding naval, air, and space warfare. Because the U.S. military's naval, air, and space assets haven't been challenged in decades, planners and acquisition officials are behaving as if they believe this will continue to be the case. Thus their inclination is to simply replace old short-range fighter jets with new short-range fighter jets, old Navy destroyers with new destroyers, and so on, without bothering to reassess the strategic picture or to question their long-standing assumptions.

For the CSBA analysts, these are grievous errors. They argue that the Pentagon doesn't need more money, it just needs to break old habits and to acquire a new mix of capabilities to address the looming problem in the Pacific. In addition, they explain how integrating Navy and Air Force training and operations will be key to a successful response.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of the CSBA report is its open discussion of war against China. Just like the original War Plan Orange, AirSea Battle contemplates a multi-phase campaign, beginning with Chinese missile attacks on U.S. and Japanese bases and space systems and ending with a large-scale U.S. counterattack on Chinese sensors, land-based missiles batteries, and naval forces. The old War Plan Orange shows there is a pedigree for such contemplation. And that hypothetical thoughts sometimes become reality.