



Disjointed Ways, Disunified Means: Learning from America's Struggle to Build an Afghan Nation

Lewis G Irwin

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Remarkably ambitious in its audacity and scope, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) irregular warfare and "nation-building" mission in Afghanistan has struggled to meet its nonmilitary objectives by most tangible measures. Put directly, the alliance and its partners have fallen short of achieving the results needed to create a stable, secure, democratic, and self-sustaining Afghan nation, a particularly daunting proposition given Afghanistan's history and culture, the region's contemporary circumstances, and the fact that no such country has existed there before. Furthermore, given the central nature of U.S. contributions to this NATO mission, these shortfalls also serve as an indicator of a serious American problem as well. Specifically, inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in U.S. Government strategic planning processes and products, as well as fundamental flaws in U.S. Government structures and systems for coordinating and integrating the efforts of its various agencies, are largely responsible for this adverse and dangerous situation. As a rationally ordered expression of the ways and means to be applied in the protection of vital national security interests, strategy is supposed to represent a careful analysis and prioritization of the particular interests at stake. In turn, these interests are linked to feasible methods and the resources that are available for their protection, all placed within the context of competing global security demands and a serious consideration of risk. In the case of Afghanistan, however, U.S. Government strategic guidance has been disjointed-- or inconsistent and lacking coherence--while interagency efforts have been "disunified," with agency outputs too often fragmented, inadequate, or internally at odds with one another. As a result, U.S. strategic supervision of the Afghan operation has been muddled and shifting at best, even as our government's interagency processes and available agency capabilities have fallen far short of what is needed to carry out the complex and broad requirements of irregular warfare and "nation-building." Given the breadth, length, and expense of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan, these strategic and operational shortfalls also carry with them potentially dire consequences for U.S. national security interests around the globe, considering potential first- and second-order effects and other associated risks. U.S. Government disjointed ways, coupled with a corresponding disunity of means, represent the proximate cause of our struggles in Afghanistan, and these deficiencies must be addressed if this mission and other similar future endeavors are to succeed.

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