The ‘way ahead’ in Afghanistan, and the US strategy of ‘thinking about war’: ‘just governance’, ‘civil-military campaign plans’, ‘security bubbles’

Abstract

The paper considers performativity as it applies to war and practices of violence in the context of the globalized post-cold war security environment when war gets increasingly theorized in terms of ‘adaptivity’ and ‘self-organization’. The key assumption here is the crisis of traditional paradigms governing the use of force in the West associated with an ‘instrumental’ understanding of war as a ‘tool’ at the service of state (the ‘Clausewitzean paradigm’). Viewed outside of the binding frameworks of instrumental-political rationality, war comes to be increasingly understood ‘productively’, as proactively ‘creating’ new political realities on the ground ‘out of itself’. It involves both the military-strategic framing and the discursive circumscription of conflict. Departing from the seminal Vivienne Jabri’s definition of war as a ‘matrix of global relations of power’ and building upon the notions of ‘adaptive campaigning’ (Grisogono, Ryan, 2007) and ‘productive war’ (Roennfeldt, 2011), the paper focuses on the US strategic handling of the conflict in Afghanistan under the Obama Administration – an open-ended low-intensity ‘war of choice’ unwillingly ‘adopted’ by the new administration. The paper concludes, in this regard, that devising of the so-called ‘Obama Strategy’ (2010) and its discursive framing (delineation of the campaign’s rationale, its macro-political objectives and means to achieve them, timelines, etc.) is a thoroughly ‘performatively’ exercise. With reference to Afghanistan, the paper identifies and explores three forms of such ‘performatives’ – performative of ‘state’, ‘territory’, and ‘political process’.

Introduction. Theorizing the use of armed force: ‘productive war’, ‘adaptive campaigning’, war as a ‘matrix of global relations of power’

This paper considers performativity as it applies to war and practices of violence in the context of the globalized post-cold war security environment characterized by new, emerging ‘global’ forms of governance, security landscape dominated by asymmetric threats and non-state actors, the ‘new’ forms and uses of war, etc. What will interest us here is how we understand war and organized violence in this context, and how these assumptions may become progressively renegotiated. The traditional paradigms governing the use of force in the West may be associated with an ‘instrumental’ understanding of war as a ‘tool’ at the service of state, within the so-called ‘Clausewitzean paradigm’ (the fundamental assumptions regarding the use of force: ‘instrumentality’ i.e. circumscription of war by political ‘rationality’; ‘agonistic’ nature of war – the assumption of an intelligent, agile, reacting and resisting opponent; hence war understood as ultimately a form of ‘coercion’; leading to a par excellence ‘kinetic’ and ‘destructive’ concept of
force, so that it may indeed ‘coerce’ an individual or a group to change their behaviour, etc.). We cannot think of war or armed force but in these terms (historically contingent and premised on the state-centric international relations taking shape since the dawn of modernity), as any alternative formats, tools or analytical frameworks had not been simply developed\(^1\). However, as some theorists remark\(^2\), it is exactly these assumptions that are now coming progressively in crisis, as we regularly witness ‘paradoxes’, ‘pathologies’, and other mutations of war, especially so in the post-cold war period. For as we can see, the ‘tool’ of war is more often applied (by the ‘West’) for purposes it cannot achieve, and for the essentially ‘a-political’ or ‘extra’-political\(^3\) ends – thus one may talk of broadening of spectrum of functions and tasks for the military institutions, beyond their traditional terms of reference\(^4\), in particular used increasingly for the purposes of ‘state-building’ (i.e. an army ‘building a state’ rather than ‘coercing’ its ‘enemy’).

Viewed outside of the binding frameworks of instrumental-political rationality, war gets increasingly theorized in terms of ‘adaptivity’ and ‘self-organization’, partly within the broader military-strategic discourse of ‘force transformation’ (developed by the US DoD in a series of publications throughout the 1990s-2000s) wherein the activity of military force is modelled on faring of ‘complex adaptive systems’ across ‘fitness landscapes’, an analogy borrowed from the corporate world. In this framework, violence itself is posited as a ‘force for transformation’, by


\(^4\) Thus the conflicts the West (with the US at the lead) was involved since the end of the Cold war (from humanitarian interventions and nation- and state-building in the Balkans to heavily militarized response to international jihadist terrorism and insurgencies) – the format and . application of force is persistently either clearly ineffective or at least ‘out of focus’ for their tasks; in Carsten Roennfeld’s formula, they are often ‘more distant from the dynamics they are meant to influence and from the people they are meant to serve’ (41). // Carsten F. Roennfeldt, *Productive War: A Re-Conceptualisation of War*. The Journal of Strategic Studies Vol.34, no.1 (2011), pp.39 - 62. Rupert Smith remarks in this regard that the problems of conceptualisation of the use of force start at the level of terminology: for the terms like ‘humanitarian operation’, ‘peace enforcement’, ‘peacekeeping’, ‘stabilization operation’ etc. refer more to the process or to description of an activity rather than of its outcome. Such a confusion of ‘method’ with ‘purpose’ would inevitably lead to the confusion of means and ends. // Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. Vintage (February 12, 2008).
essence, and ‘protean’, ‘resilient’ evolution and ‘adaptation’ by form. Thus e.g. the doctrine of ‘adaptive campaigning’ explicitly strategizes ‘evolution’ and experimental ‘transformative action’ in order to ‘place the Army on an evolutionary trajectory towards greater success in complex operations’\(^5\). Overall ‘agility’ and ‘flexibility’ of the force along the full spectrum of its operation (the ‘complex military operations with multiple interdependent objectives and high level of operational uncertainty’)\(^6\) envisage taking military action first ‘in order to stimulate reactions’ which would yield information, in other words, to ‘fight for, rather than with, information’\(^7\), the force being prepared ‘to continuously evolve their understanding and their approaches as they learn’\(^8\). It is in line with this broader ‘philosophy based on adaptation’ that war gets explicitly conceptualised and strategized as a ‘productive’ practice, proactively ‘creating’ new political realities on the ground ‘out of itself’, exemplified by Carsten Roennfeldt’s ‘productive war’\(^9\). The author re-conceptualizes ‘coercive’ war along the lines of ‘productiveness’ featuring ‘experimentality’, ‘transformative’ powers of war and anticipatory action aimed at changing the status quo (with reference to Foucauldian ‘positive power’ as ‘producing reality’ and influencing the ‘population’s behavior by ‘sanctioning’ rather than ‘coercing’\(^10\)).

In this context, analyzing the developments and mutations in the uses of war and our understanding of it, Vivienne Jabri comes up with the concept of war as the ‘matrix of global relations of power’\(^11\). As a result of dismantling of territorial boundaries and relocation of governance ‘elsewhere’ beyond sovereign territorial nation state, the very sphere of ‘international’ tends towards an unspecified and largely unfocused ‘global’ remit as a ‘distinct arena of politics’ which needs to be systematically ‘performatively’ reconstituted, ‘re-enacted’ and brought into focus, at each instance anew. It is against this background that war steps in as the only ‘productive’ or ‘constitutive’ force of these transformations, bringing about a ‘framing function’ – constitutive of ‘enemy’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘victim’ (and ‘how much’ is tolerated or not), ‘identity’, politico-strategic agenda of a conflict (state-building? human rights protection? upholding ‘international legitimacy’? etc.), thus allocating responsibility, guilt, and degree of ‘exposure to risk’, assigning priorities and values, redrawing divisions and boundaries, and underwriting identities. Seen in this light, war provides the only exclusive and most ‘comprehensive’ frame of reference that gives a material form, tangible expression and analytical framing to this (relocated) ‘global sovereign subjectivity’, which makes it a ‘matrix’ of global relations of power\(^12\).

---

7 Ibid., p.2.
8 Ibid.
10 To consider just one example, one may think of the ‘hearts-and-minds’ mantra of counterinsurgency warfare. Taken in earnest, it would presume a creative ‘making’ (performing?) such hearts and minds that would e.g. view positively the actions of counter-insurgents, proactive ‘shaping’ of the desired affectivities, etc. Inasmuch as there is clear ‘utopianism’ involved, one traditionally understands winning the ‘hearts and minds’ which are an ‘already there’, ‘pre-existing’ fact of life.
12 Jabri remarks in this regard: ‘How a conflict is described, the associations of concepts and statements drawn upon, the locations wherein utterances relating to specific conflicts are articulated, how certain discourses come to
**Why the ‘Obama Strategy’ is a good example?**

The present paper focuses on the US strategic handling of the conflict in Afghanistan under the Obama Administration – an open-ended low-intensity war of choice ‘adopted’, volens nolens, by the new administration from its predecessors in 2008 (now entering its 3rd year and one year ahead of the planned withdrawal in 2014) – characterized by the principle ambiguity of specifically ‘political’ agenda in the first place (what exactly the war is about – occupation and control over territory? security? state- & institution-building?; and what the interveners are hoping to achieve?) leading to inherent ‘fluctuations’ and ‘chronic instability’ in definitions of objectives, continuous ‘shifting’ and renegotiation of priorities, redefinition of missions and targets (ambiguity about the nature of enemy, political rationale, targets, order of priorities, role ascribed to coalition forces, criteria of ‘success’, exit strategy etc.) – which thus all amounts to an a-teleic, open-ended, ‘evolving’ and (posed as) ‘transformative’ armed struggle without a clear ‘end-state’, witnessed in practice.

The case of this more than a decade-long protracted and open-ended (counter)insurgency may be interesting as a showcase of the difficulties and dilemmas the strongest military of the world (tailored for fighting symmetric conventional enemies with superior crushing ‘kinetic’ power) faces when confronting a weaker asymmetric opponent, in particular (our key focus here) of difficulties in formulating the key politico-strategic agenda and thus tailoring the role and mission for the armed force. It largely stems from the dilemmas of a broader kind – those of how to ‘frame the conflict’ cognitively (conceptually, analytically) in specifically political terms, in order to come up with a coherent strategy vis-à-vis it – in the conditions of absence of clear references and benchmarks – an open-ended and allegedly ‘transformative’ -‘adaptable’- armed struggle deployed ‘in vacuum’.

It leads, in turn, to a broader question behind it, the one of epistemic assumptions and foundations of knowledge (‘thinking about war’) as well as the general stance vis-à-vis this new type of violence – i.e. how to conceptualize it when it is understood in terms of ‘adaptability’, ‘a-instrumentality’ and ‘transformation’, i.e. outside and beyond the classical military-strategic circumscription of violence in terms of political ‘rationality’ and ultimate reference to ‘state’ (raison d’etat)? In this regard, how can one adapt, transform, and accommodate one’s thinking about war? What analytical frameworks have to be devised and deployed in order to frame this kind of conflict, what new sets of concepts and analytic tools have to be developed to that end?

The Obama Strategy regarding Afghanistan may be seen as a ‘tabula rasa’ in this respect – a laboratory ‘test-tube’ case of the Administration’s stance vis-à-vis war ‘left on its own’ to follow its intrinsic ‘dynamic’, as well as a ‘test-tube’ case of the new concepts, analytical frameworks, terms of reference, cognitive tools and ‘vocabularies’ for ‘thinking about war’ when war is understood (and sought to be explicitly strategized) in ‘transformative’ and ‘adaptive’ terms. It involves both the military-strategic framing and the discursive circumscription of the

---

*be naturalized and taken for granted, are all related to practices taking place in contingent social and political relations wherein inscriptions of grievance, legitimacy, accountability, the capacity to have voice are already subject to matrices of regulation and control [e.g. war]. In this sense descriptive practice becomes politically significant, for any such practice is imbued with relations of power” (Jabri, Op.cit., p.40).*

4
conflict, which will be our primary focus here. We will consider the policy statements, metaphors, and discursive formulae used in the context of the ‘strategic debate’ on the ‘way forward in Afghanistan’, inasmuch as they are symptomatic of the broader analytic frameworks the conflict is couched in. In this regard, the paper suggests that devising of the so-called ‘Obama Strategy’ (2010) and its discursive framing (delineation of the campaign’s rationale, its macro-political objectives and means to achieve them, timelines, role of the military, etc.) is a thoroughly ‘performative’ exercise. With reference to Afghanistan, the paper will identify and explore three forms and dimensions of ‘performativity’ – performative of ‘state’, ‘territory’, and ‘political process’. The macro’-horizon for this enquiry will be the broader military-strategic and security-related ‘ensemble’ (bringing together cognitive tools, unsaid assumptions of ‘knowledge’, discourses and specific practices) – the veritable technico-cognitive apparatus (if we assume that war indeed tends towards the ‘matrix of global power relations’) in operation, deployed vis-à-vis this, a-telic, open-ended politically and militarily ‘unqualified’ (yet pursued) campaign. How it happens will be seen in what follows.

*****

Deploying an ‘analytical framework’: ‘just governance’, ‘civil-military campaign plans’, ‘security bubbles’

We will primarily focus on the beginning of Obama’s presidency when the strategy for Afghanistan has been devised, to follow the formulation of the US stance vis-à-vis the insurgency and its conceptual ‘framing’. Looking at the initial period when the Strategy has been gradually taking shape allows to follow this ‘framing’ like in a ‘test-tube’. What will interest us primarily is how the US were defining the (political) agenda of the conflict they were embarking on and the role the military force was assigned to this end (including how did they envisage the ‘end-state’), as well as the conceptual apparatuses were deployed as a result.

Our main evidence in this regard will be drawn from a series of extensive interviews given by the US General David Petraeus shortly after his appointment Commander of the Coalition Forces in Afghanistan in June 2010. Immediately after taking up the office, the General issued a number of ‘programmatic’ statements to set the ‘macro’-agenda with regard to Afghanistan. These texts may be interesting and telling because, while addressing the classical theoretical problem of correlation of ‘civil’/political and ‘military’ components in counterinsurgency, they provide an insight on conceptualization of violent action ‘in principle’ when it is explicitly conceived as ‘adaptive’ and open-ended, in terms of the place accorded to war, of its terms of reference, of what it, in principle, may (and may not) achieve, etc.

To start with, the ‘grand-strategic’ agenda and ‘macro’-objectives in Afghanistan are defined explicitly along the lines of ‘state-building’ – ‘an Afghanistan that can secure and govern itself’\(^\text{13}\), with the main corollaries – ‘just governance’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘economic development’ alongside with ‘self-sufficiency’ of the local government enjoying the ‘support in the eyes of people’. These are seen as the key criteria of success: ‘And then, of course, there is just governance, period. That’s all part of the development of governance that achieves legitimacy in the eyes of the people’ (DR), comprising as its components ‘local governance,

economic development, improvements in basic services, essentially in governance that earns legitimacy in the eyes of the people, and therefore their support’ (DR).

It is to be achieved through a gradual ‘transition’, or ‘transition process’, towards ‘Afghanistan that governs itself’ (characteristically, this time Americans do not talk explicitly of a ‘transition to democracy’ – the General is using an ideologically ‘neutral’ formula) – configured as a staged ‘enveloping’ movement14 expanding over the country to gradually engulf its whole territory – this process ‘[…] starts at the district, in most cases. There will be some provinces but most of it’s going to start at the district. […] in the tough areas, it will probably be district-level. In the more autonomous areas, it can be province-level’ (DR). At that, the US and allies’ commitment to this task is supposed to be long-term – Petraeus talks of a ‘sustained, substantial commitment’15.

How is the nature and the role of the US military ‘tool’ understood here – what role is envisaged for the armed force in this agenda, and what methods to fulfill it? Anticipating a criticism in the ‘Clausewitzean’ vein16 (i.e. the danger of substitution of the essentially political agenda of conflict with the ‘military’ one)17, Petraeus pays particular attention to the issue of correlation of military and political (civil) components. Describing the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan in terms of a joint ‘comprehensive civil-military campaign plans’, he stresses the importance of the political element which has to be clearly pronounced and ‘counter-balance’ the military one (‘you cannot kill or capture your way out of a substantial insurgency. Clearly, politics are a huge part of that’, DR). The General is particularly careful to stress the complementarity of military and civil activities as parts of the same spectrum:

*Military action, while absolutely critical, vital, is not sufficient in and of itself, either. It establishes the security foundation on which all else is build, but without complementary activities, in local governance, in economic development, in improvements in basic services, essentially in governance that earns legitimacy in the eyes of the people, and therefore their support, without those components as well, of course, you aren’t capitalising on what the forces fought so hard to achieve in many cases*18.

The military are thus in charge of the provision of ‘security’ as the ‘bottom line’ of their agenda in Afghanistan – the foundation for the castle of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘governance, development, reconstruction’ to build upon. It may be seen as a typical example of the broader ‘security first’ approach as envisaged by classical counterinsurgency theory19. It is, however, a

14 Cf., for example, the US Quadrennial Defense Review, 2006 formula of the ‘ongoing war’ (‘evolving’, ‘transformative’) which will be ‘fading down as more and more regions of the world will get free’ // US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 6 February 2006, p.vi

15 Financial Times Interview Transcript, General David Petraeus. February 7, 2011. //www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2e77d09e-32f4-11e0-9a61-001444eabdc0.html#axzz1HvFgglKD (henceforth FT).


17 Daniel Moran, op.cit., p.104.


19 ‘Success in this country is an Afghanistan that can secure and govern itself, and doing that obviously requires security for the population, neutralising the insurgent population by a variety of ways’ (DR).
very particular (and only seemingly ‘neutral’) understanding of ‘security’ at play here. The signature of the US COIN strategy (particularly with reference to Afghanistan) is the concept of ‘security bubble’ – again, one of the cornerstones of classical counterinsurgency, often referred to interchangeably as ‘oil spot’- or ‘ink blot’-vision of security (initially developed by Marshal Hubert Lyautey, the classical theorist of the French colonial warfare\(^{20}\)). At that we may see that ‘security bubbles’ are understood in purely material, ‘measurable’ and ‘quantifiable’ terms – they may be ‘expanded’, ‘pushed further’, ‘solidified’, ‘linked up’ over the territory of Afghanistan (‘over time we want to expand these oil spots and eventually link them up’), sometimes featuring in the context of the most precise topographical references and geographical coordinates (‘extend the security bubble, particularly down along Route 1’). The language of its description is characteristic:

[...]What we want to do, literally, all around the country, is expand the security bubble in Helmand Province, connect a few more of these dots that represent locations where we have security (ABC).

*****

**What is performed: ‘territory’**

This leads us further to the next point. For as we can see, the conceptual and discursive framing of the US mission in Afghanistan is emphasized as principally ‘neutral’ but in fact it is consistently underpinned by a very specific and coherent grid of references and meanings - indeed the Foucauldian ‘grid of intelligibility’- making up the lens through which the conflict in Afghanistan is (either subliminally or explicitly) seen and framed. Having a closer look would thus offer a glimpse on a ‘default mode’ of the underlying military-strategic security-related cognitive apparatus (the Foucauldian security ‘dispositif’) in operation.

We may notice that while accorded a center-stage and understood in remarkably neutral and ‘technocratic’ terms, without reference to ‘politics’ or ideology that feeds the insurgency, the concept of ‘security’ is consistently conceptualized in specific – ‘spatial’ and ‘territorial’ terms. The ‘material’ correlate of security, thus, is physical territoriality (as if the ‘quintessence’ of what security means; freed from ideology, security ‘equals’ territory). Thus for example (in one of the seminal formulas clarifying the concept of ‘security bubble’), it is understood as material, almost ‘arithmetically’ measurable and ‘quantifiable’ matter – as if it could be translated into fixed measurable ‘quantities’ (precise ‘number’ of inhabitants, territorial ‘miles’, etc.) featuring a ‘headcount’ of the population or measuring across the political -territorial- map with a ruler:

...[I]n deed the Kabul – ink spot or oil spot to use counterinsurgency parlance – has continued to expand. And that the security of one sixth of the population, of course, being right here. The security for five million people, five million Afghans has again continued to solidify and to expand (ABC).

Insurgency proper, the primary focus of the military effort, is conceptualized through a similar prism of material ‘territoriality’ (for which the ultimate reference is ‘geography’) in order to make sense of the conflict on the whole and the role of military force in it, specifically. Thus e.g. the objective of counterinsurgency is defined as to prevent the insurgents (specifically the

\(^{20}\) One of the later ‘descendants’ and variations on the topic is the conspicuous American ‘Strategic Hamlets’ initiative in South Vietnam during the war in Vietnam.
Taliban and the Haqqani network) to ‘re-establish the sanctuaries, safe havens, areas of influence and so on. And that’s what we are now having to combat. And that’s the momentum that we are now seeking to reverse. And then – to take them away from them’ (ABC).

A correlate of this vision of ‘territory’ is a particular ‘abstract’ and ‘hollow’ (external, ‘formal’) vision of ‘human terrain’ of insurgency. When describing the ‘end-state’ for Afghanistan, the General is using the term ‘legitimacy’ (alongside with ‘good governance’) more often than any other. To the US view, then, the main problem and challenge in Afghanistan is in the first place that of putting in place a ‘legal’ (‘neutral’, ‘formal’) framework for governance. The key stress here is perhaps on the word ‘formal’ for it is primarily through this ‘formal’ lens that all other aspects of counterinsurgency are assessed. We may notice, for example, that such key pillars of counterinsurgency doctrine as ‘low-level armed presence’, ‘population’-centricity, winning of ‘hearts and minds’ etc.\(^\text{21}\) are described in remarkably ‘distantiated’ terms – without specifics, as if seen ‘from a distance’, ‘bird’s eye-view’-style, as hollow ‘containers’ of a number of functions and missions. The objective of winning the ‘hearts and minds’, for example (the cornerstone of classical counterinsurgency doctrine), may contrast with the clearly espoused imperative for ‘low-profile’ involvement and general distantiation from any internal matters, rivalries and contestations, stressing repeatedly the need for speedy handing of the task to local authorities\(^\text{22}\). Similarly, the task of winning over the support of ‘population’ (another key term in the COIN vocabulary) is (sought to be) fully consigned to the local government and features in the US military-strategic vocabulary only in connection with ‘quantifiable’ physical terrain: thus ‘population-centric security operations’ (the formula believed to account for success in the Iraqi counterinsurgency) are understood in terms of territorial extension - ‘clearing, holding, and building’, as if a material arithmetic ‘summation’ of the ‘cleared’ areas as one moves along the map\(^\text{23}\).

This ‘geographico-territorial’ frame of reference becomes thus the first, ready-at-hand candidate for an underlying ‘analytical framework’ in an effort to ‘make sense’ of the use of armed force when it is understood in ‘non-instrumental’ and ‘open-ended’ terms (especially telling in the light of war as a ‘matrix of power relations’ thesis). This vision presumes that the conflict may be effectively understood in terms of ‘abstract’ territoriality of which the most comprehensive model could be perhaps a ‘political map’ of Afghanistan – which, in an (analytic) effort to ‘set the agenda’ of insurgency, is configured (‘performed’) so as to ‘pass for’ its ‘focal point’ or ‘driving force’ (seeking to present the conflict as being ultimately about this – physical ‘security’, contestation of areas ‘not fully controlled yet’, the outreach of ‘legitimacy’ and control of the central authorities, etc.).


\(^{22}\) *It is a central element to any host nation effort to, again, win the people over to their side. Because, remember, this is not about us winning Afghan hearts and minds, this is about Afghan government officials and institutions winning Afghan hearts and minds*’ (DR).

\(^{23}\) The approach that is espoused in the texts making up the US armed forces’ official counterinsurgency doctrine; see, for example, the text of the *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* 3-24, 2006.//www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf
There is a strong element of ‘performativity’ implicated in these operations. Vis-à-vis the ‘shifting’, ‘evolving’, open-ended protracted involvement un-bound by any political reference, performativity and its correlates become the primary (cognitive) instrument for operationalization of violence. Performativity refers here to enactment and bringing about of ‘non-existent’ realities on the (allegedly) ‘empty’ terrain – where ‘there was nothing previously’ to use the Foucauldian formula (i.e. it has to be assumed as being ‘empty’ - ‘hollow’- par excellence in order to allow for the performative operation to take place). It refers to either putting in place non-existent realities or to principally re-articulating the connections between the existent ones in order to fit them into the opted-for narrative (in this case, ‘territorial-geographical’ framing of insurgency) – which in turn (‘performatively’) procures a ‘matrix’ for cognitive orientation in the ‘terrain’ of conflict, by providing answers to questions like: What is going on? What the violent struggle is about? How can we define our objective in this struggle? What has to be done to this end? etc.

In our instance of performing ‘territory’, we witness that as if to compensate for the fundamental ideological ‘vacuity’ and absence of the proper political ‘substratum’ in the (counter)insurgency narrative (or ‘strategic narrative’ to use Lawrence Freedman’s term24), one begins by sticking to the purely ‘physical’ - ‘material’- understanding of (in our case) ‘security’ of a (fixed, measurable) number of inhabitants located on a (fixed, measurable) territory. I.e. by saying ‘security’, the US comes up a very particular understanding of ‘security’ – as an ‘abstract’, ‘impersonal’, ‘quantifiable’, ‘territorial’ given, which becomes a primary indicator and pledge of ‘legitimacy’, indeed synonymous to it (as contrasted to other possible dimensions of legitimacy, e.g. ‘ideational’ ones). Out of many, it is only a one, specific (and by no means ‘technical’ and ‘neutral’) meaning that becomes articulated, at the expense of others. From this ‘voluntaristic’ moment of decision and choice, tantamount to ‘proclamation’ or ‘declaration’ (this meaning of ‘security’ is opted for against the alternative ones), the next step (and that is the very core of ‘performativity’ and the essence of its ‘strategization’ implicated here) is to behave ‘as if’ Afghanistan ‘already were’ a ‘centrally (if insufficiently) controlled’ and effectively functioning ‘self-contained sovereign state’ enclosed within its borders, which (in a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ move) may ‘indeed’ be adequately described as an arithmetic ‘sum of its parts’.

This ‘self-proclamatory’ and self-generative performative deployment of an analytical framework to ‘endow the conflict with meaning’ gives rise to the whole cluster of other attendant meanings-cum-performatives, from the immediate tactical solutions to grand-strategic conceptualization of conflict with the most far-reaching military-political implications. To start with, after conceptualizing ‘security’ as described above, one can conceptualise ‘insurgency’ to be fought in a very specific manner – as if unfolding in a ‘flat’, homogenous, qualitatively undifferentiated terrain, of which a monochromic fragment of space on a ‘political map’ would be an adequate and readily available model25:

Again, much more so than Iraq, Afghanistan truly is village by village, valley by valley insurgency. [...] Each time we have to take an area away from the Taliban, that’s what

24 The concept discussed by Lawrence Freedman, for example, in: The Transformation of Strategic Affairs, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: Routledge, 2006).
25 Another of the General’s formulas is telling here: ‘This is a place where you cannot aggregate. You have to walk around the map’ (FT).
happens [the level of violence goes up], and in some cases that can be protracted... [...] But in the central Helmand River Valley, without question, the six central districts are very different [...]. Now they are connected to the Kandahar security bubble – Zhari, Panjwai, Arghandab, pushing up into Shah Wali Kot [...]. And Task Force Helmand has linked these security bubbles up with an operation in Maiwand District. There is a hardening of the defenses against infiltration at the Chaman border crossing... (FT).

Similarly, the defeat of such an ‘insurgency’ (the macro-objective of the military intervention) becomes configured in terms of an ‘arithmetical summation’ and aggregation of geographical regions to be ‘cleared’, ‘extended’, ‘owned’ as if something tangible and quantifiable, of which it may be ‘more’ or ‘less’ (‘[...] they’ve lost some very important areas - Zhari, Panjwai, Arghandab, parts of Kandahar City, various districts in Helmand. [...] They are reasonably well-resourced, though they have lost some of their sources of resourcing too as they have lost control of different areas’; FT).

It also allows to configure the ‘format’ of the use of military force (par excellence ‘contained’ and ‘limited’) in terms of arrangement and dismantling of material, impenetrable ‘barriers’ with a primary reference to ‘territory’ and (abstract, empty) ‘space’ (see, for instance, conceptualization of ‘cordon and control based military operations’ in the US post-Iraq COIN doctrine, of which the objective is ‘to deny the physical access of insurgents to the locals’).

In this context, the very idea of ‘security bubble’, the centerpiece of the revised American approach to fighting insurgency in Afghanistan, is seminal and symptomatic of this kind of performative ‘framing’. Not only is the ‘bubble’ something material, ‘territorial’ (extended and extendable) and ‘quantifiable’ – unintendedly but symptomatically, it also connotes ‘hollowness’, ‘emptiness’ or ‘vacuity’ mentioned above: a ‘bubble’ as something ‘self-contained’, ‘enclosed’ in itself, suspended ‘in vacuum’ – a priori isolated from environment and not ‘mixing’ with it. In a similar vein (a symptomatic coincidence…), another term to describe ‘security’ is ‘oil spot’ (one is likely to associate it with an oil spot on water surface) connoting an image of two liquids which, while physically contiguous, never mix and remain ‘self-contained’ - yet another image of ‘vacuity’ or two+ ‘containers’ coming in contact.

At the level of the grand military-strategic narrative offered by Petraeus’s interviews, such a conceptualization implies that the whole insurgency in Afghanistan is seen as limited to its physical territory, with little reference to, or meaningful discussion of, e.g. the neighboring Pakistan which (though asked about) is described by Petraeus only in passing and only inasmuch as it fights insurgency ‘on its side’. A substantial discussion of the role of the ‘Pakistani factor’ in the internal Afghani matters seems to be either missing from sight or perfomatively ‘excluded’ or ‘bracketed’ as a task ‘too large’ for the American military to handle. The same goes for any kind of a broader ‘global’ context which exceeds the territorial borders of Afghanistan: thus, e.g., Al-Qaeda, though asked about, is mentioned by the General only in the very marginal context of ‘training camps’ and ‘sanctuaries’ in Afghani territory. ‘Vacuated’ and isolated from the rest of the world, Afghanistan becomes performed as a neutral ‘container’ of governance physically ‘sealed’ within its borders, a suspended vacuous ‘bubble’ to be filled with ‘security’, ‘economic development’ and ‘legitimacy’.

What is performed: ‘state’

The aforementioned assumptions -unsaid, unquestioned, and operating as a ‘default mode’- build upon and in turn lead to another layer of unsaid assumptions (and thus alternatives ‘excluded’) having to do with a very specific vision of what a ‘state’ is, becoming a vision that (either matching reality or not) is getting ‘proactively’ performed. The persistent reference to ‘territoriality’ underpins a particular vision of ‘state’ – a sovereign, centralized territorial nation-state, the reference point and the ‘condition of possibility’ of any thinking about ‘strategy’ (in the West).\(^{27}\) It is this vision that is taken as a ‘universal’ analytic frame of reference that seeks to impose a ‘focus’ upon everything that happens in Afghanistan.

In line with this vision, one indeed has to start with -physical, ‘geographical’, ‘arithmetical’- ‘territory’ (secure it first, proceed to other phases of state-building further) – for that at least had been the trajectory of formation of sovereign territorial states in the Western Europe since 16-17\(^{th}\) centuries. Another component of success of COIN, following from here, is identified with ‘legitimacy’ understood primarily as an improvement of administration and public services summarized by the concept of ‘just governance’. The roots of this assumption, again, may be traced back to the dawn of the Modern age when a powerful association of ‘legitimacy’ of a sovereign with ‘good governance’ had taken shape (the process chronicled by Foucault) laying the cornerstone of the Western political philosophy (epitomized in the concept of ‘social contract’). At that, ‘legitimacy’, within this framework, is understood in ‘formally-legal’ (‘contractual’) and rationalist (‘technocratic’) terms, implicating an ultimately ‘materialist’ view of social justice – a thread running through the whole subsequent narrative of ‘progress’ of the Enlightenment culminating in the idea of the Communist utopia.\(^{28}\)

This characteristically ‘Western’ understanding of state as a ‘sovereign’ ‘territorial’ entity with its correlate of material, ‘quantifiable’ and ‘measurable’ (sub)divisible space (‘a bounded container of sovereignty’ according to Stuart Elden’s formula)\(^ {29}\), builds upon the ‘abstract’ Cartesian coordinates (its ‘condition of possibility’) which only allows to conceive of physical space as a ‘grid’.\(^ {30}\) In this vision, sovereignty itself becomes ‘material’, ‘measurable’ and ‘quantifiable’, something which may be ‘subtracted’ or ‘added in’. It is complimented by a corresponding ‘technical’ understanding of population as an ‘arithmetic’ sum of individuals filling up this ‘bounded container’ in ‘abstract’, impersonal, measurable and quantifiable units\(^ {31}\), qualitatively undifferentiated vis-à-vis Law (hence, ‘legitimacy’), and epitomized in the classical

\(^{27}\) Chronicled, for example, in the classical work: Charles Tilly (ed.), The Formation of National States in Western Europe. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975. The broader reference here is to discussion of this issue by Michel Foucault in multiple works.  


\(^{30}\) Which is by no means ‘universal’. Thus in Islam, to start with, space is believed ‘indivisible’, the vision reinforced by the fact that historically the traditional Western ‘state’ has always been rather an ‘artificial’ construct in the Middle East.  

\(^{31}\) Cf. Foucault’s discussion of ‘physicalism’.  

11
formula of representative democracy - ‘one person, one vote’ - with no ‘qualitative’ difference implied e.g. between ‘man’/‘woman’, ‘old man’/‘young man’, members of different ethnic or religious communities, clans, etc.

The discussed concept of insurgency and (the US version of) COIN is fundamentally and ‘unquestionably’ underpinned by this ‘quantitative’ vision of legitimacy and justice, an ‘arithmetic’ understanding of population, and material, quantifiable, divisible and ultimately ‘abstract’ vision of state as a ‘sealed box of sovereignty’ – a bounded fragment of space on the political map. Thus insurgency, competition for ‘legitimacy’ and better ‘social justice’ in the eyes of the ‘population’, is seen as a struggle to control the state through controlling its ‘territory’ and inscribing the enclaves of ‘authority’ on it – with the distant echoes of the Mao-style wars of ‘national liberation’ of the mid-20th century (in Michael Fitzsimmons’ formula, the US COIN doctrine amounts to ‘Mao minus Marx’). It makes the struggle against insurgency a task of ‘clearing’, ‘holding’ and otherwise gaining control over territory and allows to channel this task, away from ‘politics’, into purely ‘territorial’ terms. Thus the conflict in Afghanistan is distinctively performed as being prima facie a conflict ‘about territory’. In this model, e.g. the revolt (prototyped on a peasant uprising) is seen as caused by feelings of relative deprivation (exclusively in ‘material’ terms), while economic development (ultimately provision of ‘services’) equates to political stability. As Stephen Biddle comments on this discrepancy in perspectives,

> The current struggle is not a Maoist ‘people’s war’ of national liberation; it is a communal civil war with very different dynamics [...]. Economic aid or reconstruction assistance cannot fix the problem: would Sunnis really get over their fear of Shiite domination if only the sewers were fixed and the electricity kept working?

Though written about Iraq, a similar vision, at least inasmuch as it is grounded on the same model of ‘sovereign territorial state’ and ‘contractual’ understanding of justice, is fully in place in the current conceptualizations of the ‘way forward’ in Afghanistan. What may be observed here is a certain ‘blindness’ (either deliberate or unintended) to the properly ‘political’ underpinnings of the insurgency, involving those dealing with ‘identities’ (ethnic, religious, tribal etc.). It leads us to the following section inquiring on how is ‘politics’ understood and performed, and what place is it accorded in this model?

*****

What is ‘performed’: ‘politics’

A particular vision of ‘territory’ and the ensuing representation of ‘state’ lead, in turn, to a particular understanding of ‘politics’ – the next layer of ‘performed’ realities. The stark division of terms of reference into the ‘military’ and the ‘political’ ones (implicated in the US strategic vision) builds on the assumption that the hostilities end (cf. the ‘active combat phase’ end in Iraq), the ‘political process’ automatically steps in, an vice versa. It refers to one of the most

34 Michael Vlahos, A ‘Post-Hostilities’ Moment In: Rethinking the Principles of War. Anthony D.McIvor (ed.). Annapolis, Maryland (Naval Institute Press) 2005. // In his article, Michael Vlahos traces the genealogy of this very
deep-rooted analytic tenets regarding our conceptualization of violence. This, for example, had been the key military-strategic underpinning of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003: ‘isolation’ of a distinctive ‘active combat phase’, an utmost priority (dealt with by kinetic and decisive NCW-based ‘precision firepower’), and rather vague ‘post-hostilities’- a secondary, auxiliary task of ‘managing the mess of a society whose former way of life has been suddenly uprooted’\textsuperscript{35} with ‘politics’ to be tackled chronologically ‘afterwards’ and ‘separately’ – as a clearly ‘autonomous’ agenda\textsuperscript{36} unrelated to the military terms of reference\textsuperscript{37}.

In Afghanistan, the Americans tend to proceed from a similar assumption that the whole phenomenon of ‘war’ may be accurately configured as a juncture of two distinct ‘military’ and ‘political’ components, and ‘politics’ may be thought of as something ‘separate’ from ‘fighting’. Where the facts resist, this distinction becomes ‘performed’. While acknowledging the fundamental complementarity of ‘civil’ and ‘military’ components of the COIN, as General Petraeus does, it is an in-depth involvement into Afghani internal ‘politics’ that the Americans are most keen to avoid – actively ‘performing’ the division between the Afghani ‘politics’ - something ‘out there’ for the central authorities to tackle - and the ‘military force’ (the US and the coalition troops) as mere ‘tools’ and ‘technical’ facilitators to this task.

While it is easy to see that this approach is inherently controversial (to start with, the intervening forces, by their very entering and presence in the occupied country would already become a part of its ‘political process’\textsuperscript{38} making it logically impossible to consider their presence

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item Michael Vlahos, Op.cit. In Vlahos’ words, the American invasion was less liberation than ‘creative destruction’ (!) even at the very beginning.
\item The ‘active combat’ stage in Iraq (as in Afghanistan) has proven indecisive because it was ‘insufficient to secure victory’, i.e. achieve a properly political solution to the issue. The insurgency had steeped in to continue on the ‘political’ side of the matter and negotiate ‘the boundaries for new political relationships’ (Ibid., p.351). Seen from this perspective (which clearly was not, and arguably still is not, acceptable for the US military as not part of their ‘analytical frameworks’ to conceptualise violence), we may say that in fact was this ‘political process’ that the US had made an ‘entry’ to with their ‘active combat phase’\textsuperscript{21} - paradoxically, what was expected to be an ‘end’ of the ‘proper war’ (active combat) was just the ‘beginning’ of the ‘political process’ (‘But even at its shrillest, it will still be just an entry. It is what comes after that will count for everything’).
\item It may be further argued that even is that is the case, the situation continues to evolve further (war is an entry in the political process, not a sign of its end), and the rationale for the continued violence may not necessarily be the same set of questions which has set it off Jan Armstrong makes in this regard a comment along the lines suggested by Vlahos. He writes: ‘The political context for decision-makers changes once war has begun. Politics does not stop[...], but war changes the decisions to be made and it raises the stakes involved. This means that once war is initiated, the decision on how to conduct the war and the decision to end the fighting is not necessarily dependent on the decision to start the war’ (214). In this context, the author highlights the shifting, protean, Clausewitzean ‘chameleon’-like nature of war that keeps continually evolving and where while starting with one set of assumptions, one may end with some completely different one.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
separately from an alleged ‘ideal type’-politics ‘out there’\textsuperscript{39}), ‘performativity’ comes into play when the military are deliberately seeking to frame their task as ‘limited’ and markedly military-technical (‘technocratic’) – with the ensuing acting ‘as if’ Afghanistan were indeed a sovereign ‘territorial’ state with a central authority effectively in charge of its internal ‘political process’ of clearly distinct from military presence (its mere ‘facilitator’). Such a ‘performative’ enactment of the Afghan internal ‘politics’ would allow, inter alia, the Coalition forces to get a better ‘analytic grip’ on their mission and define it in more or less ‘tangible’ terms. As a result, such ‘politics’ becomes localized ‘elsewhere’ and ‘beyond’, as if abstractly suspended ‘in vacuum’ – in a stark contrast with the state of ‘things on the ground’ in societies like Afghanistan or Iraq with their numerous divisions along tribal, ethnic, religious etc. fracture lines.

*****

**Conclusion: Framing the war & ‘resistance of the material’**

There are many other ‘performativities’ involved: with a ‘performat ive’ stance with regard to war, one has to further perform ‘legitimacy’, ‘population’ (who are ‘the people’?), ‘justice’, ‘representation’ etc. – all of them stemming from, though, the same root of the (performed) conceptualization of ‘state’. In all instances, we can see that the conflict is conceptually framed (‘branded’) as if it were ‘indeed’ about (contestation and enactment of) the ‘liberal model’ of state-building\textsuperscript{40} (and hence making it ‘indeed’ a territorial’ struggle over establishment of ‘good governance’, with resistance to it framed as ‘resistance to liberal model of governance’, etc.\textsuperscript{41}). In this light, the interveners’ task becomes tantamount to putting in place, and where needed ‘performing’, a sequence of the external attributes of ‘liberal-democratic success’, in either consonance with the ‘dynamics on the ground they are supposed to serve’ (according to Roennfeld’s expression) or in divergence from it.

\textsuperscript{39} It thus has to be taken up ‘in earnest’ and enacted, if needed proactively – ironically, to do exactly what is suggested by the ‘productive’ understanding of war.

\textsuperscript{40} Just one example may be illustrative of the point. In *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in Its Century*, with reference to foreign interveners involved in counter-insurgency, David Lake claims that the ‘liberal model’ of state-building is not without alternatives. Lake comes up with a ‘relational’ model of legitimacy centered around the (more or less veiled) ‘bargaining’ between the ruler and the ruled. In this context, legitimacy is conditioned by the creation of order: the one who establishes ‘order’, and as quickly as possible, becomes ‘legitimate’, giving rise to the coherent state institutions and practices (including centralized means of coercion, collection of taxes, etc.). Bargaining by the parties and the consensus which they either manage or fail to reach (in failed states, fail) would be primarily about the (contested) political ‘order’, and specifically about the nature of state (Jan Angstrom contends, in this regard, that the parties usually strive for a ‘Leviathan’-type of power, while Hobbes himself, by the way, exemplifies this ‘relational’ understanding of legitimacy and state power).

\textsuperscript{41} A possible counter-argument would be: Does it not happen in every war or conflict to an extent (i.e. a deliberate positing of conflict of being ‘essentially about this’ and trying to ‘performatively’ fit reality in this mental/conceptual framework while suppressing or artificially ignoring everything that contradicts it)? A tentative answer might two-fold: a) self-referentially, in an ‘adaptive’, ‘open-ended’ engagement where one has to ‘fight for, rather than with, information’ and proactively construct the very meaning of war (i.e. renegotiate the agenda of war at every successive episode), ‘performativity’, ‘simulation’ and ‘manipulation’ if it comes assumes quite a different (central) role and comes indeed to a centre-stage in setting the agenda for war (and not some issue related with reference to the state-centric world order, as it could have been case before, e.g. as notoriously theorized by Clausewitz) instead of being a merely ‘by-product’ of the ‘great power’ or ‘Realpolitik’ story; and, hence, b) the difference is also due to the fact that this state of affairs is not only passively ‘accounted for’ but is explicitly strategized, one may suggest in quite a new development.

---

14
We may thus witness that the conflict, including the nature of insurgency and by extension the strategic-operational ‘way forward’ in it, is conceptualized on the basis of the existent analytical frameworks (‘territoriality’ and ‘sovereignty’ as the intrinsic correlates of the essentially ‘state-centric’ world order, premised on ‘formally-legal’ conception of statehood, legitimacy and justice, ‘arithmetic’ conception of population etc.). Instead of opening up (as declared) the new ‘open-ended’, ‘adaptive’ and ‘transformative’ dimensions to conflict with the military institution ‘co-evolving’ with it, one proceeds rather by a performative re-enactment of an already long-established realities, either fitting the conditions on the ground or not. A number of apparent inconsistencies in articulating the politico-strategic ‘way forward’ (commitment to long-term ‘state-building’ alongside with the explicit reluctance of an in-depth ‘involvement’ and an eye on the speedy ‘withdrawal’, to name one) suggest that the ‘strategic vision’ with regard to Afghani insurgency is apparently ‘eclectic’, marked by a ‘chronic instability’ of discourse\textsuperscript{42}, fraught with a number of purely ‘logical’ controversies and dilemmas.

We may also see how, in the broader context of crisis of traditional ways and frameworks to make sense of the use of armed force, war tends to extend its terms of reference and expand onto the ‘contiguous’ areas, becoming the ‘matrix of understanding’ (sense-making) inasmuch as it becomes the ‘matrix’ of (global) relations of power. In our case we saw how it becomes constitutive of ‘statehood’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘politics’, etc., explaining them self-referentially, with reference ‘from within itself’, and thus inevitably ‘performatively’. We have observed how it applied to Afghanistan, where the presence of the armed international intervening force amidst the ‘internal’ tensions, rivalries and hostilities, activates a particular system of ‘concepts’ with a view to understand and ‘frame’ the conflict (allowing, as the bottom-line, to answer the basic questions like ‘what is going on?’, ‘what the war/campaign is about?’, etc.). These assumptions (activating some visions while excluding others) are assumed to be ‘default’ and thus pass unquestioned, paving the way for constructing the conflict respectively and behaving ‘as if’ that were indeed the case, thus having to continuously ‘perform’ or enact this vision, especially as the ‘material resists’ it. It ultimately illustrates, perhaps from an unexpected angle, the famous Foucault’s dictum on politics as the ‘continuation of war by other means’\textsuperscript{43} in the state of modernity, in particular as it is constitutive of ‘state’, governance and the attendant practices, the (primary) site of deployment of governmental micro-techniques and dispositifs of security. In this regard, the case of ‘framing’ the war (‘what is going on?’) in Afghanistan may be a good example of not only cognitive and ‘analytic’ consequences of this state of affairs but equally of its practical implications, inasmuch as any particular framing of conflict, ‘enemy’, ‘danger’ and strategic ‘way forward’ results (at times \textit{volens nobles}) in very practical choices and policies on the part of those very had formulate them.

\textbf{******}

\textsuperscript{42} As described with reference to Iraq. Discussed, for example, in: Barbara Delcourt, \textit{Pre-emptive Action in Iraq: Muddling Sovereignty and Intervention?} Global Society, Vol. 20, No. 1, January, 2006.