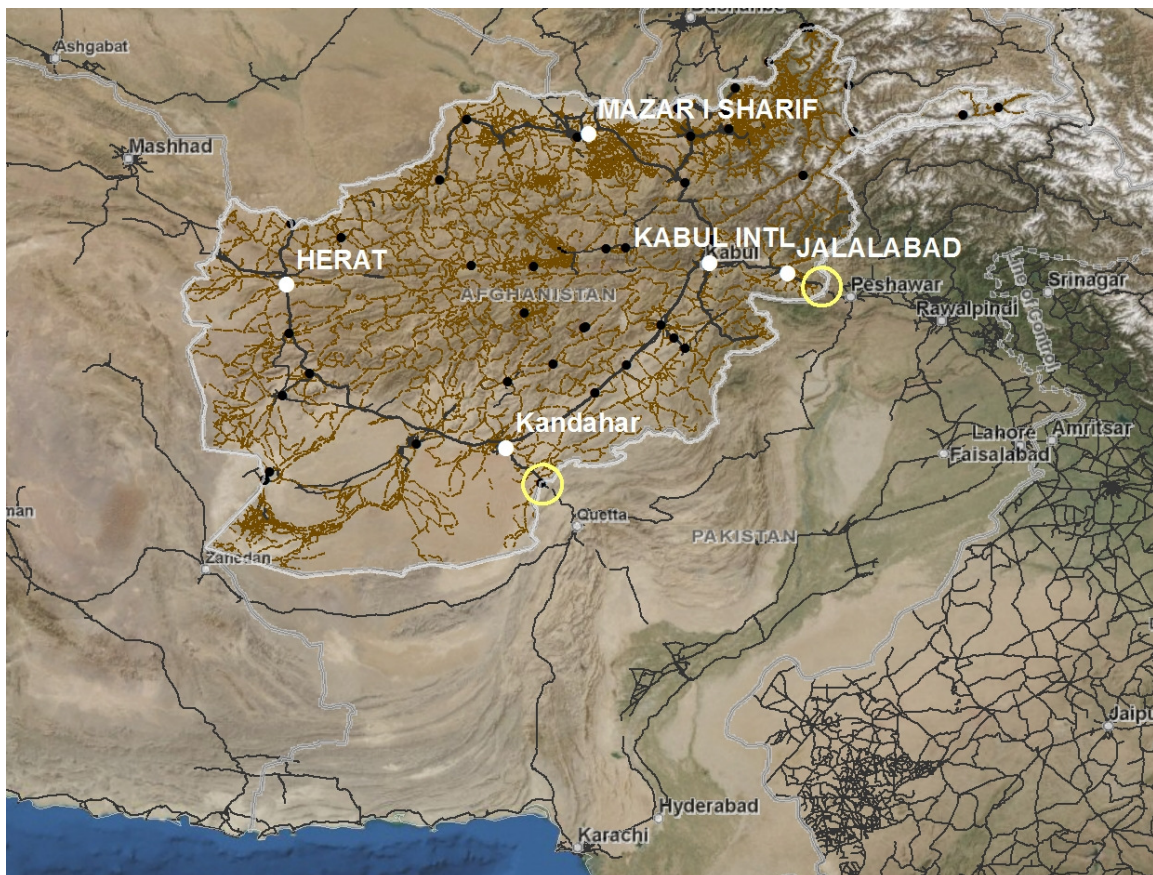




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The Afghanistan Reassessment: Geopolitical Dilemmas, Tactical Curiosities, and Strategic Consequences. By Leonard Hochberg, PhD. Posted October 15, 2009.

The US faces a terrible geopolitical dilemma in formulating a strategy for Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country with thousands of isolated villages and few routes of access. A quick glance at a map reveals two mountain passes allowing access into Afghanistan from Pakistan in the south: the Khojak Pass from Quetta to Kandahar and the fabled Khyber Pass from Peshawar to Jalalabad. The roads permitting the movement of logistics (weapons, munitions, food, etc.) into Afghanistan pass through Taliban-dominated Pashtun and other tribal areas in Pakistan. Repeated attacks on US convoys in Pakistan by Taliban insurgents as well as the bombing of a key bridge in the approach to the Khyber Pass reveal the “Achilles heal” in US strategy. The resupply of the troops in Afghanistan cannot be guaranteed. It is not surprising that Afghanistan is historically considered a grave yard of empires.



Reference map of Afghanistan showing Khyber Pass and Khojak Pass (yellow circles), international airports (large white dots), regional airports (small black dots), major roads (grey lines), and minor roadways and paths (brown lines).

There is a reason why the US emphasizes littoral warfare. Air-supplied expeditionary warfare is extremely expensive. The US, however, is unambiguously the world's naval power. In practical terms this means that the US can bring military pressure to bear on countries with access to the sea through embargos and, if necessary, expeditionary wars launched overseas. Once the US projects force beyond the littorals of the world ocean, all sorts of complications – logistical, diplomatic, economic, and cultural, etc. – emerge.

The US recognizes that committing troops to a prolonged counter-insurgency campaign far from the world ocean's littoral creates logistical problems. Therefore the US has sought to open other routes into Afghanistan, ones that don't traverse the lands dominated by the Taliban and its supporters. One route depends on access to the Manas air force base built by the Soviet Union on territory now located in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyzstan rulers first offered the US access to this base (for refueling and provisioning) in 2001, at the outset of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Over the past several months, the Kyrgyzstani rulers first announced they were closing this base to the US and NATO and then reversed their position (in June 2009) when the US and its allies agreed to pay significantly more to Kyrgyzstan for access.

The Russians initially encouraged the Kyrgyzstanis to toss the US out but a couple of weeks later the Russians also agreed to allow US and NATO resupply along routes that traverse the territory of the Federation. What motivated the Russians to flip flop on this issue? The intentions of the Russians are not readily discerned. On the one hand, they clearly resent the influence exercised by the US in the southern republics of the former Soviet Union and want the United States gone from the so-called Russian "Near Abroad." On the other, the Russians prefer that the US spend its fortune and the lives of its soldiers to blunt the spread of Islamic radicalism from Afghanistan to these same areas.

Whatever the Russians intend, US policy makers must realize that as the supply chains shift to a more northerly route, a significant cost must be paid. As more provisions are diverted from the supply chains which traverse Pakistani territory, our wobbly Pakistani ally will, of necessity, have to survive without the economic benefits associated with the movement of these supplies. The loss of income to Pakistanis who facilitate these supply chains as well as the loss of revenue to the Pakistani state will further exacerbate conflicts within Pakistan and reduce the capacity of the US to influence events there. As the US and NATO grows more dependent on Russian and Kyrgyzstani routes for resupply, their demands for enhanced funding and political concessions will appear increasingly as extortion. In geopolitics, no stratagem may be implemented without costs, some foreseen but unintended, others unforeseen and unintended.

Unraveling the complicated intertwining of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan with diplomacy and logistics remains the fundamental dilemma for the US. The Bush administration addressed this dilemma by electing simply to *hold* its position in Afghanistan. I suspect that the Bush administration recognized that clearing out al

Qaeda by eliminating their Taliban host was tantamount to success in what was essentially an unwinnable situation. Although Afghanistan was conquered, and some inhabitants of the urban centers were liberated – particularly the women – Afghan traditionalists were antagonized by such efforts at modernization; the countryside remained generally unoccupied, hence not pacified; and efforts at liberal democratization – given the history and culture of Afghanistan – were, of necessity, unrealized. Because Afghanistan was peripheral to the centers of Islamic culture and learning, the Bush administration determined that an invasion into the heartland of the Middle East was required in order to demonstrate to the wider Muslim world that the US, and not al Qaeda, was the “strong horse” – to use the words of Osama Bin Laden.

The successful US invasion of Iraq was essentially a blitzkrieg launched at Baghdad. The military victory provided the Bush administration in 2003 with a central military base in the Middle East from which it was possible to issue credible threats of force in support of our diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East. Indeed, our fickle “ally” in Saudi Arabia and our adversaries and enemies in Syria and Iran wondered if the US intended to launch follow-on wars of regime change. With Iraq conquered and the Ba’athist regime deposed, the polarization of the Middle Eastern regimes into those that stood with or against international terrorism and al Qaeda occurred. This polarization and escalation of conflict in the Middle East, which was one self-proclaimed goal of the Bush administration, was extremely risky. In order to avoid Saddam Hussein’s fate, other rulers the Middle East hunted terrorists down (the Saudis), gave up their nuclear program (the Libyans), or tossed off their soil foreign state-sponsors of terrorism (such as the Lebanese did to the Syrians). Conquer Iraq, implement regime change, polarize the Middle East by threatening regime change elsewhere, induce or frighten other regimes to capture or kill terrorists in their midst – this multi bank shot was the Bush administration overall strategy for dealing with international terrorism. Nor should it be forgotten, that the Bush administration strategy also threatened the Iranian regime, as if it were a walnut placed in a nut cracker, with a two-front war launched by troops stationed in Afghanistan and Iran

Once again, the consequences of the Bush strategy in Iraq ran the gamut of consequences foreseen and intended, and unforeseen and unintended. The Saudi regime suddenly discovered that it was in their self-interest to hunt down the members of al Qaeda in their midst. The Syrians permitted would-be insurgents to cross their borders into Iraq in order to take up arms against the US occupation forces. Al Qaeda secured a foothold in Iraq and launched an insurgency against US troops and terrorist attacks against civilian Sunni collaborators and members of the Shiite community. The Iranians allegedly terminated in 2003 (according to the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate) the development of nuclear weapons, though current reports suggest that their initial fear was apparently short lived once it became clear that they could instigate and exacerbate inter-ethnic conflict in Iraq between the Sunnis and Shiite Arab communities and their respective militias, thereby tying US troops down with nation-building and counter-insurgency operations in Iraq. Finally, some in the Arabic Middle

East blamed Osama bin Laden for having attacked the United States, thereby instigating a Koranic sin of *fitna*, the introduction of social disorder and civil war into an Islamic community. The reaction to the Iraq invasion was mixed.

This commitment of troops to the Iraqi campaign also made a certain amount of sense given the fact that Iraq was far more developed than Afghanistan. If a US policy maker had to choose Iraq or Afghanistan for a grand experiment in democratization and nation building, the more advanced of the two countries was the obvious choice. Education, agriculture, transport, bureaucracy, health care, the urban hierarchy in Afghanistan were and are extremely *primitive*; society in Afghanistan appears to be far more fragmented than in Iraq; and, unlike Iraq which has enormous proven and potential supplies of oil and natural gas, the state in Afghanistan was and is much weaker; and the Afghanistan economy lacks a legal export that potentially enriches the society and provides revenues to the state. Nation-building will take longer in Afghanistan; it will be more expensive along every conceivable dimension than in Iraq.

Nation building in Afghanistan cannot ignore the economy. Because of the absence of ready and cheap waterborne transport to the sea, Afghanistan's geography also constrains its economic development. Afghanistan's exports must bear the cost of overland transport over long distances and over mountainous terrain. Afghanistan is not a market as the West understands such economies. There may be many local markets organized through villages but the values associated with a developed national market economy do not exist even in a rudimentary form throughout most of the country. Given a society dominated by war lords and narco-terrorists, is it any wonder why poppies and marijuana – two agricultural cash crops able to bear the cost of overland transport – are widely grown? So, if the United States seeks "victory" in Afghanistan, it must help Afghan farmers identify an agricultural export for which there is sufficient world-wide demand but one that does not have the addictive qualities of heroin, which is produced from Afghan-grown poppies. If such a crop could be identified and exported first and foremost to the US, then US policy makers will have aligned the interests of the Afghan agriculturalists with the economic demand of US consumers. Since close commercial ties often spill over into political relationships, such an outcome may eventually enable US forces on the ground to secure actionable intelligence from local allies. Then again, US goals may simply be unattainable given the structural constraints on development in Afghanistan.

The current reassessment of Afghan realities and US rhetoric contributes to the emergence of an extremely volatile situation in Afghanistan. Indeed, the US-Afghan-Taliban relationship is at a tipping point. Muslim populations (including the tribal one in Afghanistan) are notorious for picking winners on the basis of *expectations* of who will win. This is not a matter of ideology but simply of wanting to be on the winning side. *Expediency* is the order of the day among the Afghans. While the Obama administration dithers in its commitment to fight effectively the President's "war of necessity" in Afghanistan, the Taliban gains influence and our allies in Afghanistan grow

disheartened. Reports that the US is reassessing its recent decision to engage in a full blown counter insurgency in favor of a scaled down counter-terrorist strategy or even withdrawal from Afghanistan, as some among the Democratic leadership in Congress have suggested in advance of the 2010 election, prompt those who are on the fence in Afghanistan to also reassess their position.

Given the adversarial situation in which the Obama administration must make decisions, Americans must remember that all “planning” for political and armed conflict requires a profound appreciation of contingencies arising from the ability of erstwhile allies, neutrals and enemies to learn from their mistakes and engage in cunning counter maneuvers.

Whatever is decided in Washington must be decided *now*, not in two or three months. General Stanley McChrystal’s leaked memorandum outlining his request for 40,000 more troops, another troop surge reminiscent of the Bush military surge in Iraq, has been proposed to counter the spread of Taliban military attacks in the Afghanistan north and west. These areas through which the logistics coming into Afghanistan from the Russian “Near Abroad” must pass were not particularly well disposed to the Taliban until recently. The US also seeks to demonstrate through surging troops into Afghanistan that it desires to enhance security in Afghanistan over the long run and that it is prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve its goal. If the surge is not done now, it may be done later but at increasing cost in US and NATO lives and fortune.

One further indication of how dicey the situation in Afghanistan has now become is the recent attack on a remote US base in the Kamdesh district of Nuristan province, northeast of Kabul. Eight US soldiers were killed. Newspaper accounts allege this was the deadliest attack on US forces in over a year. Apparently several hundred insurgents stormed the base in a day long battle but were ultimately forced to retreat after suffering heavy casualties. Superior fire power provided by artillery, fixed-wing air support, and helicopter gunships was decisive.

There is one curiosity associated with this battle. While the Taliban currently have access to automatic rifles, rocket propelled grenades, and increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs), there is no indication from press reports that the insurgents are armed with either shoulder launched anti-tank or Stinger-style anti-aircraft missiles. Why? Why haven’t our geopolitical adversaries in the region (Russia, China, the intelligence services in Pakistan, etc.) provided such weapons? After all, the Russians, for instance, have an age-old motive to supply these weapons to the Taliban – namely, revenge. Remember the US provided anti-Soviet insurgents, the *mujahedeen*, with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in the 1980s in order to negate the advantage in fire power the Soviet troops had when they occupied Afghanistan.

What considerations would currently constrain the Russians, for instance, from providing anti-aircraft weapons to the Taliban and reversing the tables on the US?

Could it be that our regional adversaries want our protracted involvement in Afghanistan? As the US and NATO military footprint in Afghanistan grows, adversarial powers may seek to pin down our troops by providing more sophisticated weapons to the Taliban, thereby leading in the future to calls in Washington for yet more troops to stabilize and reverse a “new” dangerous situation. Perhaps such weapons will be provided in the future. Such a possibility cannot be discounted.

Furthermore, the Russians have never been particularly bashful in thwarting the realization of US interests in the Middle East. The Russians have recently been accused of playing the role of a “spoiler” in Iran. It has recently been reported in the British press that the Israeli Prime Minister secretly visited Moscow not long ago in order to present his counterparts with evidence of Russian nuclear scientists providing technical know-how to the Iranians for the building of nuclear weapons. While no one outside of the relevant intelligence services can know for certain if the Russian scientists are independent actors who merely traveled to Iran in search of work or directly represent the Russian regime, what seems clear – if these reports are true – is the Russians are prepared to facilitate the development of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability despite the fact of a declared and current Iranian intention to destroy Israel. The Russians may have undertaken to supply technical know-how to the Iranians in response to Israeli involvement in arming and training the Georgian military – another country in Russia’s self proclaimed “Near Abroad.” Or the Russian initiative may be in response to US actions, which are perceived as damaging Russian national security though instigating and facilitating the velvet revolutions in places like the Ukraine.

Whatever the initial Russian intentions in providing Iran with help in developing these weapons may have been, their intentions may not long correspond to what the Iranians threaten or how they actually use these weapons over time. The “half-life” of the utility of advanced weapons is inherently much longer than the “half-life” of the politics that prompt their sale from one country to another or the transfer of technical know-how in their construction. After all, Iran and Russia are also competitors for influence in Central Asia, i.e. areas in the “Near Abroad” over which Russia desires ascendancy.

Given this complex situation, the Obama administration faces difficult strategic choices in Afghanistan. A counter-terrorism war strategy in Afghanistan reduces the military footprint – a logistical advantage - there while putting the US Special Forces remaining in theater at risk of being overwhelmed by the resurgent Taliban. On the other hand, increasing the number of troops to fight a counter-insurgency campaign exacerbates the geopolitical and logistical dilemmas outlined above, but offers the possible advantage of buying time in order to stabilize Afghanistan until the central regime has sufficient military capacity to assume responsibility for its own fate.

Even if the Obama administration elects to increase the number of troops for the purpose of fighting a counter-insurgency war, who in Afghanistan possessing knowledge of US domestic politics will believe that the Democrats will exercise the patience needed

to stay the course? Obviously, there is now a widespread belief that the Democratic Party base, in particular, is war weary, eager to concentrate on domestic policy initiatives, and flirting with the prospect of leaving Afghanistan no matter what the consequences for those who personally collaborated with the US and NATO. Should the US be forced to withdraw or should our actions be *interpreted* as tantamount to a withdrawal from Afghanistan, consequences for US national security will surely follow.

In short, both actions and perceptions have consequences in the midst of adversarial relations. If the Obama administration dithers while the Afghans choose to support the insurgents, the US may have to concede Kabul to the Taliban – not in six months as some pundits warn but perhaps over the course of several campaigning seasons. Obviously, the reestablishment of al Qaeda terrorist bases and subsequent planning and launching of terror attacks from those bases become real possibilities. In addition, the credibility of the US will take another hit, this all-too-soon after the withdrawal of the promised anti-missile capabilities promised to Poland and the Czech Republic. Going forward, potential allies will calculate the capability and the *determination* of the US to follow through on its international commitments – despite setbacks, adversity, and domestic opposition.

What needs to be done? President Obama needs to provide the US population with an assessment of our current strategic dilemmas. He needs to state unambiguously that – given the constraints of international law and the current rules of engagement – this will be a long and difficult war, longer, costlier, and more difficult than the counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq. Furthermore, he needs to state that the US must deny Taliban and al Qaeda the prospect of base areas if we are to forestall another attack like 9/11. Al Qaeda has already outsourced the training of Western European Muslims to the Taliban who are located in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Therefore, why wouldn't the Taliban permit al Qaeda to reestablish safe havens in Afghanistan should it return to power? The President needs to state that the US requires sufficient troops in the Afghan theater to pressure the Pakistani regime to curb the pretensions of the Taliban in the tribal areas along the Pakistani border.

Unless the number of troops required for the surge is sufficient to establish a measure of security in strategically located villages and in the cities which are the geographic "command posts" of the central regime, the Taliban will use its base areas in Pakistan to project force across the border into Afghanistan with relative impunity, thereby continuing to spread terror and mayhem into the urban centers of Afghanistan. Yet the number and the length of time US troops remain in theater must be limited by the dangers associated with an occupation or the constraints of logistics. Selecting the right number of troops, tasking them for counter-insurgency, nation-building or counter-terrorism, sequencing those tasks in time and differentiating those tasks through space requires the finest available military skills.

President Obama should therefore restate his trust in the officer that he recommended for command in Afghanistan: General McChrystal, who reportedly has a comprehensive appreciation of these issues. Given his much vaunted rhetorical skills, the President should provide a context for his decisions by giving the American public an explanation for our current international challenges. This should be based in a realistic appreciation of why conflicts occur and how they sometimes have to be resolved militarily, rather than through one-sided concessions that are often tantamount to appeasement.

Does anyone expect President Obama to make such a statement? Does anyone expect a Democrat Party President to antagonize his party's base and then turn to the national security hawks in Republican Party for support? What price would Republicans exact for their support? In all probability the Republicans would demand a statement that the fundamental interests of US national security are at stake and that securing these interests requires the government jettison domestic "reforms" in favor of spending limited resources on addressing threats such as those arising out of the Afghanistan situation. Such a demand, in the context of the sorry state of the US economy, would remind one and all that our government is not able to provide both guns and butter. Because Americans have not been called upon to make sacrifices in the name of national security for several generations, this honest public reappraisal of our situation is not likely. President Bush did not do it, nor in all likelihood will President Obama, who would risk the Democratic majority in the House in 2010 and his own reelection bid in 2012.

Let no one misunderstand the implications of this analysis: the available strategic choices vis-à-vis Afghanistan are repugnant. Actually they are not that good. The best that can be hoped for in the short run is to deny the Taliban a victory. This may result in a protracted stalemate in an Asian land war with counterinsurgency operations being carried out in some regions of the country and counter-terrorism operations in other parts. Eventually, in some rural areas, occupation may produce pacification. Perhaps those pacified areas will expand. Meanwhile, despite the strenuous objections of traditionalists, women in the cities may be "liberated" and their educational opportunities enhanced; and, who knows, maybe a more effective government will emerge in Afghanistan.

But what does "effective" governance mean in the context of Afghanistan? I'm not sure I know. Does anyone? Recently, US and international observers of the 2009 election have accused supporters of the Hamid Karzai government of widespread electoral fraud. Perhaps this should have been expected given similar accusations in the 2004 election. Perhaps, over time, this regime will become more effective in hiding such corrupt practices. Perhaps, after having been trained by US and NATO experts, the Afghanistan military and police will be numerous and strong enough to guarantee that the war lords whose loyalties are bought remain bought off. But whatever the outcome of state-building in Afghanistan, the realization of democracy will probably remain attenuated.

Many Americans believe in the universal efficacy and legitimacy of liberal representative democracy; however, such institutional arrangements emerged in the US as the result of exceptional historical struggles and cultural circumstances. Although the “struggle for democracy” lends legitimacy to US armed conflicts, a serious dilemma arises whenever the populace of an occupied nation elects a government that rejects our policy preferences. For instance, the Hamid Karzai government, after its election in 2004, spurned a US proposal to eradicate poppy production through an areal spraying of chemical herbicides. In so far as warlords and insurgents have financially benefited from the cultivation of poppies and sale of heroin, such demonstrations of political autonomy by the Karzai government cannot be entirely welcome to the US commander and ambassador in Afghanistan. Americans want desperately to believe that our “gift” of democracy will result in displays of gratitude; such pious hopes are destined for disappointment.

In brief, US policy makers may realize that, over the short run, the stated US goals of occupation, liberation, pacification, democratization and modernization in Afghanistan may be incompatible. Nevertheless, strategic choices will have to be made; less than desirable consequences contemplated. Over the long run, the structural (i.e., geopolitical) constraints on development may reveal that the most that can be obtained is a militarily secure Afghanistan that has sufficient resources and governmental capacity to deny the Taliban and al Qaeda control over base areas from which the latter might once again plot terrorist attacks against the US.

In coming weeks or months it should be fascinating to see how the Obama administration reassesses its own counter-insurgency strategy in the Afghanistan “war of necessity.” As President Obama delays endorsing a troop surge in Afghanistan, US adversaries in Iran are taking the measure of his administration. Intelligence reports now suggest that the Iranians have hidden from UN’s IAEA a substantial effort to develop nuclear weapons in an enrichment site near Qom. Many knowledgeable observers now argue that the Iranians are much closer to building a nuclear weapon than was recently believed. How will the US influence the Iranian regime to abandon its alleged nuclear program? Will the Iranians respond to toothless deadlines and threats? Will diplomacy work?

Regrettably, diplomacy, in the absence of a credible threat of military force, is mere words. Since the recent announcement that President Obama will receive and accept this year’s Nobel Peace Prize, many pundits now entertain doubts that his administration would countenance the use of the military to threaten Iran. Perhaps they are right. However, if Iran is to be forced to reveal and dismantle its nuclear weapons program, maintaining and increasing the troop strength respectively in Iraq and Afghanistan is crucial. This is probably a forlorn hope given the current Afghanistan strategic reassessment. But, if the US is to secure a favorable outcome in Iran over a reasonable period of time, US troop movements to forward positions along the Iraq-Iran and Afghan-Iran borders would be indicated. Should such a scenario unfold, the US

populace may come to realize a peculiar irony: the Bush administration's prosecution of a "war of choice" in Iraq provided the Obama administration with the military strength necessary to threaten war in order to secure peace.