

Framing the Game: Objections to Bapat's Game-Theoretic Modeling of the Afghan Surge

A review of Navin A. Bapat's article, A Game Theoretic Analysis of the Afghan Surge (Foreign Policy Analysis 6, 2010, 217-236).

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Abstract: *In a recently published article in the prestigious journal Foreign Policy Analysis, Navin A. Bapat uses a rationalist approach to explain key bargaining processes related to the Afghanistan conflict, concluding that “the Afghan mission may continue for political reasons until it is impossible to sustain militarily.” The article captures the essence of the strategic situation in Afghanistan: the losing dynamic involved. This brief commentary in response is an attempt to shed light on where the tenets of Bapat’s game-theoretic model may be erroneous, even while the model does produce conclusions that appear valid overall.*

There is not much to take issue with as to the ultimate conclusion of Navin A. Bapat’s article, *A Game Theoretic Analysis of the Afghan Surge* (Foreign Policy Analysis 6, 2010, 217-236). Afghanistan will indeed matter for the long run as one of the key geographical sources of a national security threat for the United States and even to a number of other NATO countries. Jihadist groups can gain useful safe haven there to organize, plan and train for attacks on

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these countries, while simultaneously they can also continue propaganda and recruitment efforts directed at Muslim populations worldwide.

The assumptions that Karzai's legitimacy and general hold on Afghanistan are diminishing with the status quo, or that the Taliban are gaining strength would also be hard to challenge. Audience costs can indeed be imposed on the Obama administration should it seriously consider drawing down U.S. troop numbers to critically low levels post-2011; although it may be important to note that for the moment such audience costs cannot with similar confidence be anticipated in the cases of important allies such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada or Germany. Finally, the author's references to a moral hazard with regards to Karzai's government may resonate especially well with the mainstream Western discourse of late which tends to consider moral hazard in a much wider sense when it comes to the current Afghan leadership and the government institutions it ought to control.

At the same time, it is welcome to see a Rational Actor Model and bargaining theory applied to strategically interpret the Afghan conflict, given the abundance of sources willing to explain away the actual complexities of it with Orientalizing references to tribes, Pashtunwali, irrational irreconcilability, and neopatrimonial kleptocracy. Navin A. Bapat's article comes as welcome relief in this respect, with some important caveats. These points of criticism are to be discussed in the following section.

Re-framing on three plus one counts

The fundamentally correct theses and the appealing features of the approach notwithstanding, on several counts the article's thesis rests on flawed premises that undermine the game-theoretic modeling of the policy dilemmas involved, no matter how consistent the

argumentation was, and no matter that it does seem to offer workable conclusions. The most fundamental objections can be summed up in three points regarding the basic assumptions of the model, with one more added regarding the overall rationalizing approach.

Firstly, the variable C_T , that is, the costs of fighting for the Taliban, discussed in the article as an important unknown, is partly borne by O: the Obama administration itself. This is no conspiracy or grand deception on the part of O, it is merely a matter of unwanted fact, inherited from B, that is, the Bush administration which could not do much about this, either. Over a long period, consecutive U.S. administrations provided lavish support to the Pakistani military. Post-2001, some of this assistance was granted nominally to compensate Pakistan for costs it had to suffer in the war on terrorism, but also, in reality, to pay for access to the Afghan theatre where operations would not be possible without Pakistani acquiescence – the only alternative being a war on nuclear-armed Pakistan, or radically different, trustful relations with Iran and/or Russia. Relying on conservative assessments of Pakistan's dual role in the armed conflict in Afghanistan, regarding which evidence exists in various forms,² one needs to consider at least the possibility that elements within the Pakistan Army, and its intelligence service, ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), derail some of the funds provided by the U.S., and thus pay, for example, for the millions of rounds of small arms ammunition fired by insurgents in Afghanistan every year. This self-evidently pertains to the tenets of Bapat's model. P's (Pakistan's) and its elements' (P_1 and P_2 's) payoffs ought to be conceptualized, and O's unintended assistance to P_2 ought to alter the model and some of the perceived-

² See classified U.S. military reports concerning this leaked by Wikileaks; a report by Matt Waldman for the Crisis States Research Centre presenting results of interviews with Taliban and other insurgent commanders in Afghanistan (Waldman, 2010); scholarly and other extensive works (academic studies, books) establishing the ISI-insurgent link with confidence: Gregory 2007, Hussain, 2008; Rashid, 2009; Zahab and Roy 2004; everyday news reports such as, only for instance, ANI 2008 or Mazzetti and Schmitt 2009; or pieces of investigative journalism such as Moreau and Hirsh, 2007.

probability functions it is built on. In fact, writing in an earlier piece Bapat does appreciate the enormously important impact Pakistan's behavior has on the strategic situation (Bapat 2009).

Secondly, and this concerns perceived probability functions of T: B and O, that is, the Bush and the Obama administrations, continuously and anti-strategically misrepresented T's probability of winning. Foreign policy behavior (FPB) is ultimately different from intended foreign policy (FP), and any such FPB/FP discrepancy can be interpreted as an important signal by adversaries. When T's insurgency began to strengthen post-2001, the response of the U.S. and other countries involved in Afghanistan was not trying to wipe it out, as Bapat contends. Resources for this were never sufficiently available. Only a creeping commitment was made, with gradually increasing troop numbers, that lagged behind developments in the insurgency's spread and the evolution of its tactics. In the end, the U.S./Western response to T's growing challenge amounted to no more than reactive efforts to contain it. Furthermore, the Iraq war drew away important resources from Afghanistan even as T's challenge was already on. U.S. financing for military operations in Afghanistan fell back in absolute terms twice post-2001 (see Belasco 2010:3 for data). First in 2003, because of the invasion of Iraq, and then in 2006, because of the deterioration of the situation there. Meanwhile, as late as in the autumn of 2005, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the Pentagon's leadership were seriously and openly considering drawing down U.S. troop numbers in Afghanistan (Schmitt 2005). FPB/FP discrepancy also played a role from the part of other members of the ISAF coalition. In spite of the generally voiced grandiose statements about Afghanistan's future, including the Afghanistan Compact of early 2006 which committed the international community to "promoting" security in all of Afghanistan by end-2010 (AC 2006:6), even the major contributors of troops and assistance such as the Netherlands and Canada were constantly indicating a desire to withdraw their troops in a few years' time. As originally conceived, the formal termination of their non-training-related military commitments was

expected by August 2008 and February 2009, respectively, and with no likely substitutes other than the U.S. to fill in for them, this signaled fundamental weakness to T. No wonder that then-military-commander of T, Mullah Dadullah, saw the southern Afghan provinces of Helmand, Uruzgan, and Kandahar, taken over by ISAF in its Stage-3 expansion in August 2006, as the gateway through which his “mujahedeen” should victoriously march to take Afghanistan (Al-Jazeera 2007). Finally, O’s announcement of the surge in late 2009, after much spectacular hesitation, came with the caveat that this surge will end and even be reversed in the foreseeable future. The U.S. military’s informally leaked need of 80,000 additional troops (Lakes 2009) was never seriously put on the agenda in the White House, and President Obama even set the end-date of the surged troop presence to earlier than the Pentagon wished (Baker 2009). Since then, the end dates of the Netherlands’, Canada’s and the United Kingdom’s involvement came to be more clearly determined as well (the Netherland’s withdrawal began in August 2010, and is slated to be completed by December). This is not lost on T, or on P_2 for that matter.

Thirdly, pertaining to the end-games Bapat considers, power is already shared with “T”. But here one has to be much more precise. If T is interpreted as all of the Islamist insurgent factions operating in Afghanistan, it includes many more than just the Taliban. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hisb-i-Islami and Jalaluddin Haqqani’s group come to mind as prime fellow-travelers of the Taliban movement. While nominally they look to Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, as *amir-ul-momineen* (leader of the faithful) for the entire insurgency, their relations run much deeper directly with Pakistan, for which it is a long-running aspiration to turn the Taliban into a loyal strategic proxy west of the Durand Line.³ To come to any agreement with the broader T, separate-track negotiations with these groups are not avoidable. Thinking past 2011: for Karzai’s survival such negotiations are not avoidable,

³ A goal in which it did not succeed prior to 2001, hard as it tried to.

either. And talks have already occurred. Meanwhile Islamists,⁴ as well as even Hisb-i-Islami-affiliated ministers, were present in Hamed Karzai's cabinet post-2004, and in the Afghan parliament as elected members in the Wolesi Jirga (lower house), or as appointed members of the Meshrano Jirga (upper house). Karzai regularly appointed Hisb-i-Islami-affiliated provincial governors to the head of northern provinces over the years, seeking to counterbalance the strength and influence of various elements of the late Northern Alliance there (Foschini 2010). The most controversial are Karzai's unconfirmed talks with the Haqqani faction. Given this group's especially deep ties to al-Qaida, not so much O in general, but the U.S. military rather, and COMISAF General Petraeus in particular, voiced major discomfort with the idea of talks with the Haqqanis, let alone with the idea of any openly presented power-sharing or amnesty agreement with them down the road. For just this reason, the U.S. military and Gen. Petraeus voiced support for including the Haqqani group on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations (Dawn 2010). The example illustrates how it is not at all clear, as Bapat posits already in the abstract of his article, that "Karzai recognizes that negotiation will allow the Obama Administration to exit the conflict." This is something O cannot comfortably recognize. Meanwhile, Karzai is increasingly involved in an intense web of regional (and even further-reaching) diplomacy, an aim of which may be to make a negotiated outcome acceptable and sustainable for him.

Finally, the one overall downside regarding the choice of a Rational Actor Model is that its unitary-actor assumption is misleading in important ways. Not only is this relevant with regards to T, or P, or, for that matter, to Karzai and his current circle of allies, but most

⁴ Take for example Abu Rasoul Sayyaf, the former commander of the Ittihad guerrilla faction in the war against the Soviets (the Soviet Union and its Afghan Communist allies). Sayyaf is an influential member of the Meshrano Jirga post-2005, whereas earlier he was the Afghan commander whose men guided Osama bin Laden on his first visit to Afghanistan (Franzen 2009). The Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines is using his name out of respect for his achievements as a commander.

importantly it fails to account for important aspects of U.S. decision-making. With intense debates within the Obama administration, a Congress wary about corruption in Afghanistan and the therefore questionable utility of U.S. assistance to the Karzai government, federal agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) single-mindedly pursuing their organizational prerogatives on the ground, regardless of the strategic context, all at a time when the possible incompatibility of various coalition efforts (counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, counternarcotics most notably) raises serious concerns, concepts as old as Allison's Organizational Process Paradigm, or the Bureaucratic Politics Paradigm (1969), come to mind as self-evidently useful and even inevitably required tools for understanding the policies pursued and the outcomes attained in Afghanistan.

Why the conclusions hold

These points of criticism may be relevant even with the understanding that the parsimony of Bapat's model in his hereby discussed article could (although it does not) serve to reflect not reality as such, but its representation in between the earlobes, in President Obama's mind. As the *New York Times* reported about Obama's decision to surge troop levels before pulling down troop numbers: "some of the most intensive discussion focused on the country where Mr. Obama could send no troops — Pakistan" (Baker 2009). This shows that the objections concerning Pakistan's role above ought to have their impact on the equations considered.

That the model still produces conclusions that seem valid is because the above reservations do not fundamentally alter the losing dynamic captured by it. A U.S. administration unable to integrate its own efforts in furtherance of an only nominally existing comprehensive approach; a Taliban growing on U.S. involvement as a perverse outcome of

policies pursued physically through Pakistan; and an Afghan government that may try to secure its survival by itself courting Islamists more than before; these all work to reinforce such a dynamic. Bapat's claim elsewhere (2009), that the U.S. "is boxed in" in Afghanistan, is *therefore* valid.

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