Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare

Stephen Biddle

WHAT'S NEW?

AMERICA'S NOVEL USE of special operations forces (SOF), precision weapons, and indigenous allies has attracted widespread attention since its debut in Afghanistan, proving both influential and controversial. Many believe it was responsible for the Taliban's sudden collapse. They see the "Afghan model" as warfare's future and think it should become the new template for U.S. defense planning. Others, however, see Afghanistan as an anomaly—a non-repeatable product of local conditions. Both camps are wrong. The Afghan campaign does indeed offer important clues to the future of warfare, but not the ones most people think—because the war itself was not fought the way most people think.

Both sides in the debate assume that the Afghan campaign was waged at standoff ranges, with precision weapons annihilating enemies at a distance, before they could close with U.S. commandos or indigenous allies. For proponents of the Afghan model, this is what gives the model its broad utility: with SOF-guided bombs doing the real killing at a distance, even ragtag local militias will suffice as allies. All they have to do is screen U.S. commandos from occasional hostile survivors and occupy abandoned ground later on. America can thus defeat rogues at global distances with few U.S. casualties and little danger of appearing to be a conquering power. For Afghan model detractors, conversely, it is the apparent ability to annihilate from

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afar that makes the campaign seem so anomalous and a product of idiosyncratic local factors.

Yet the war was not purely a standoff affair. Contrary to popular belief, there was plenty of close combat in Afghanistan. Although they were initially taken by surprise, Taliban fighters quickly adapted to American methods and adopted countermeasures that allowed many of them to elude American surveillance and survive U.S. air strikes. These surviving, actively resisting Taliban had to be overcome by surprisingly traditional close-quarters fighting.

Interviews with a broad range of key American participants in the war, along with close analysis of available official documentation on the war effort and personal inspection of its battlefields, lead to the conclusion that the war as a whole was much more orthodox, and much less revolutionary, than most now believe.[1] Precision airpower was indeed necessary for turning a stalemated civil war into a Taliban collapse in a few weeks, but it was far from sufficient. Although much was truly new in Afghanistan, much was not, and since the continuities were at least as important to the outcome as were the novelties, the war's lessons for strategic and defense policy are different from what either camp in the current debate now asserts.

ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

THE AFGHAN CAMPAIGN began the night of October 7, 2001, with a program of air strikes aimed initially at destroying the Taliban's limited air defenses and communications infrastructure. Early air attacks produced few results, however, because the country had little fixed infrastructure to destroy. By October 15, SOF teams designated to make contact with the major Northern Alliance warlords had been inserted. A three-part campaign followed, divided roughly into a northern phase revolving around control of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, a southern phase centered on the city of Kandahar, and subsequent battles against Taliban and al Qaeda forces at Tora Bora and during Operation Anaconda in the Shah-i-Kot Valley.

[1]For complete documentation and a more detailed account of the campaign, see Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2002).

The fight for Mazar-i-Sharif began when Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, supported by American SOF, took the village of Bishqab on the banks of the Dar-ye Suf south of Mazar on October 21. This was followed by engagements at Cobaki, Chapchall, and Oimetan over the next few days as Dostum fought his way up the river valley. The key battle came when Dostum's troops overran hostile forces occupying old Soviet-built defensive positions at the hamlet of Bai Beche on November 5. Shortly thereafter, Gen. Muhammed Atta's forces and their accompanying SOF captured Ac'capruk on the Balkh River, and the door swung open for a rapid advance to Mazar, which fell to Atta and Dostum's troops on November 10. The fall of Mazar unhinged the Taliban position in northern Afghanistan. Kabul fell without a fight on November 13, and after a 12-day siege, a force of some 5,000 Taliban and al Qaeda survivors encircled in the city of Kunduz surrendered on November 26.

With the fall of Kabul and Kunduz, attention shifted to the Taliban's stronghold of Kandahar in the south. SOF teams and Hamid Karzai's allied Afghan forces advanced on the city from the north; Gul Agha Shirzai's allied Afghans and supporting SOF advanced from the south. After a series of battles, on the night of December 6 Mullah Muhammad Omar and the rest of the senior Taliban leadership fled the city and went into hiding, ending Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Allied forces, meanwhile, tracked a group of al Qaeda survivors thought to include Osama bin Laden to a series of redoubts in the White Mountains near Tora Bora. These redoubts were taken in a 16-day battle ending on December 17, but many al Qaeda defenders escaped death or capture and fled across the border into Pakistan.

In March 2002, a second concentration of al Qaeda holdouts was finally identified in the Shah-i-Kot Valley east of Gardez. In Operation Anaconda, Western and allied Afghan forces descended on these al Qaeda defenders, killing many, dispersing the rest, and bringing to a close the major combat operations in the country to date.

PREY TO PRECISION

EARLY ON, the war went mostly the way Afghan model proponents assume. The new model took the Taliban by surprise, and their initial dispositions were poorly chosen for this kind of warfare.[2] They typically deployed on exposed ridgelines with little effort at camouflage or concealment. Their entrenchments were haphazard, lacking overhead cover for infantry positions or proper emplacements for combat vehicles. As a result, their positions could often be identified from extraordinary distances. And once located, their poor entrenchment and exposed movements made them easy prey for precision weapons.

[2] America's opponents were not a unitary or monolithic military. Their three main components—indigenous Afghan Taliban, foreign allies who fought for the Taliban regime, and the subset of these trained in al Qaeda's infamous camps—had very different military properties and combat performance, with al Qaeda proving most capable and Afghan Taliban least. Throughout this article, "Taliban" refers collectively to any hostile forces; "Afghan Taliban" refers to the indigenous Afghan component; "foreign Taliban" refers to all non-Afghan components; and "al Qaeda" refers exclusively to forces trained in bin Laden's camps and associated with his organization.

The result was slaughter. At Bishqab, for example, U.S. SOF pinpointed Taliban targets at ranges of more than eight kilometers. Skeptical Northern Alliance commanders peered through their binoculars at Taliban positions that had stymied them for years and were astounded to see the defenses suddenly vaporized by direct hits from 2,000-pound bombs. At Cobaki, Taliban observation posts were easily spotted at 1,500–2,000 meters and annihilated by precision bombing. At Zard Kammar, Taliban defenses were wiped out from more than a kilometer and a half away. At Ac'capruk, exposed Taliban combat vehicles and heavy weapons on hillsides west of the Balkh River were spotted from SOF observation posts on the Koh-i-Almortak ridgeline some four to five kilometers distant and were obliterated by American air strikes.

The Taliban were not the only ones surprised by these results. Some allied Afghans initially thought the lasers U.S. SOF used to designate bombing targets were actually death rays, since they apparently caused defenses to vanish whenever caught in their cross hairs. Both sides, however, learned fast. Within days of the first SOF-directed air strikes, American commandos were already reporting that Taliban vehicles in their sectors had been smeared with mud to camouflage them. By November 5, the Taliban were making aggressive use of overhead cover and concealment. In the fighting north of Kandahar and along Highway 4 south of the city in December, al Qaeda defenses were well camouflaged, dispersed, and making use of natural terrain for expedient cover. This pattern continued through Operation Anaconda in March, by which time al Qaeda forces were practicing systematic communications security, dispersal, camouflage discipline, use of cover and concealment, and exploitation of dummy fighting positions to draw fire and attention from their real positions. The Taliban did not just passively suffer under American attack; they adapted their methods to try to reduce their vulnerability. And as they did, the war changed character.

The Taliban did not just passively suffer under American attack; they adapted to reduce their vulnerability.

NOW YOU SEE THEM, NOW YOU DON'T

AMONG THE MORE important changes was the increasing difficulty U.S. forces experienced in finding targets for precision attack. At Bai Beche from November 2 through 5, for example, a mostly al Qaeda defensive force occupied an old, formerly Soviet system of deliberate entrenchments. With proper cover and concealment, the defenders were able to prevent American commandos from locating the entirety of their individual fighting positions, many of which could not be singled out for precision attack.

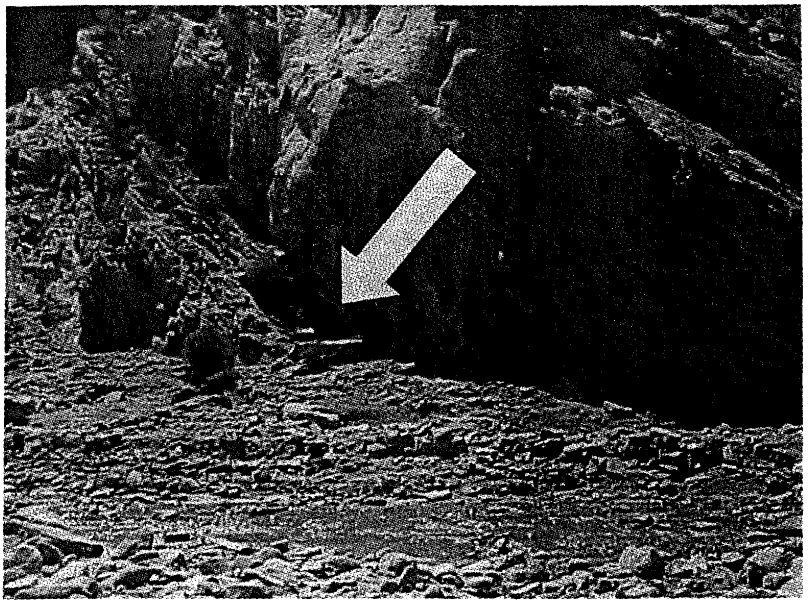
By the time of the December fighting along Highway 4, even less information was available. In fact, concealed al Qaeda defenses among a series of culverts and in burned-out vehicles along the roadside remained wholly undetected until their fire drove back an allied advance. An al Qaeda counterattack in the same sector using a system of wadis, or dry valleys, for cover approached undetected to within 100–200 meters of allied and American SOF positions along the highway before opening fire.

At the village of Sayed Slim Kalay north of Kandahar between December 2 and 4, concealed al Qaeda defenders likewise remained undetected until they fired on unsuspecting U.S. and allied attackers. An al Qaeda counterattack using local terrain for cover maneuvered into small-arms range of friendly defenders before being driven back.

During Operation Anaconda in March 2002, an intensive prebattle reconnaissance effort focused every available surveillance and target-acquisition system on a tiny, 100 square kilometer battlefield. Yet fewer than half of all the al Qaeda positions ultimately identified on this battlefield were discovered prior to ground contact. In fact, most fire received by U.S. forces during Anaconda came from initially unseen, unanticipated defenders.

How could such surprise be possible in an era of persistent reconnaissance drones, airborne radars, satellite surveillance, thermal imaging, and hypersensitive electronic eavesdropping equipment? The answer is that the earth's surface remains an extremely complex environment with an abundance of natural and manmade cover available for those militaries capable of exploiting it.

The photograph on the next page from Objective Ginger on the Anaconda battlefield illustrates this problem. Only the arrow reveals an



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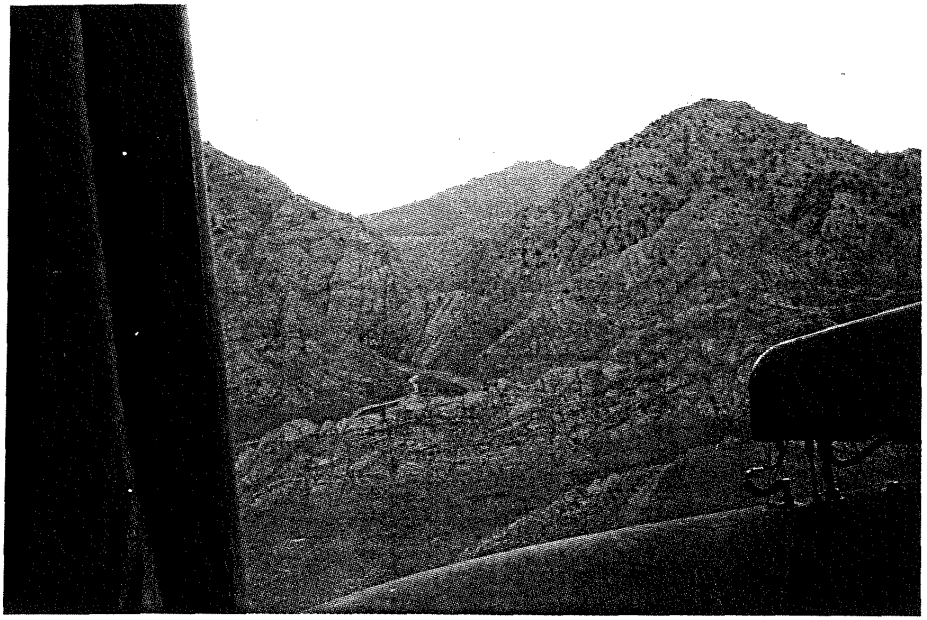
Al Qaeda defender's position, Objective Ginger, Shah-i-Kot Valley

al Qaeda defenders' location; without it there would be no visible sign of a combat position even from the nearly point-blank range at which this photograph was taken. Overhanging rock in turn conceals troops from overhead surveillance systems. In principle one might hope to observe resupply movement or al Qaeda patrols into or out of such positions, or to overhear radio communications from their occupants. Al Qaeda fighters wearing the flowing robes of local herdsmen and traveling in small parties among the mountains, however, are nearly impossible to distinguish at a distance from the noncombatants who tend goats or travel through such areas routinely. And defenders able to operate under radio silence by communicating using runners, landlines, or other nonbroadcast means can reduce signal intercepts to a level that makes identifying specific fighting positions very difficult. Against such targets, it is far from clear that any surveillance technology coming anytime soon will ensure reliable targeting from standoff distances.

Nor are such positions rare or atypical of Afghan terrain more generally. The photo on the next page shows a broader sample of the Shah-i-Kot battlefield on which Anaconda was fought, including Objective Ginger. Almost any of the dozens of shadows, crevices, or folds



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Objective Ginger, the Shah-i-Kot Valley, seen from the air

in the earth scattered across this landscape could house positions like that shown on the preceding page.

This problem is not unique to Afghanistan. Militarily exploitable cover is commonplace in almost any likely theater of war. For targets who observe radio silence, as al Qaeda now does, foliage degrades all existing sensor technologies; urban areas provide overhead cover, create background clutter, and make it difficult to distinguish military targets from innocent civilians. And both foliage and urban cover are widely available. More than 26 percent of Somalia's land area is wooded or urban, as is more than 20 percent of Sudan's, 34 percent of Georgia's, and 46 percent of that in the Philippines. In most countries, the central geostrategic objectives are urban areas. Even where the bulk of the national land area is open desert (as in Iraq), the cities are both the key terrain and an ample source of cover (Baghdad alone covers more than 300 square kilometers). The natural complexity of such surfaces offers any opponent with the necessary skills, training, and adaptability a multitude of opportunities to thwart even modern remote surveillance systems. Against such opponents, remote surveillance will still detect some targets, and remote sensors remain crucial assets, but the only sure means to identify targets is direct ground

contact. A ground force whose advance threatens objectives that the enemy cannot sacrifice and thus must defend compels the enemy to give away its locations by firing on its attackers. Skilled attackers can eventually locate any defensive position by observing the source of the fire directed at them—and this, in fact, is how the majority of the al Qaeda positions discovered during Operation Anaconda were found.

DIE ANOTHER DAY

JUST AS ENEMY TARGETS became harder to find once the Taliban adapted to the new model, the ones that were found also became tougher to kill. At Bai Beche, although the entrenched defenders could not all be located individually, American commandos knew the defensive system's extent and thus called for heavy bombing across the entire position for more than two days. Yet even after this extensive effort, enough defenders survived to thwart the initial attack.

At the Qala-e-Gangi fortress west of Mazar-i-Sharif, an uprising by Taliban prisoners was driven underground by fire from Western and allied Afghan troops on the parapets surrounding the bullpen area where the prisoners had been held. The renegades were quickly isolated in a handful of small underground chambers whose locations and perimeter were well known. These hideouts were then pounded by allied airpower: entire ammunition payloads of multiple AC-130 Spectre gunships and no fewer than seven 2,000-pound satellite-guided bombs were expended against this tiny area. Yet the defenders survived and continued to resist; they succumbed only to the medieval technology of flooding the chambers with cold water.

Even fantastic volumes of firepower alone cannot annihilate defenses outright.

During Operation Anaconda, well-prepared al Qaeda positions survived repeated aerial attack by U.S. precision munitions. On Objective Ginger on March 4, for example, American troops inadvertently disembarked from their assault helicopters almost on top of an unseen al Qaeda position; after being pinned down for much of the day, they were extracted that night. They then spent much of the next ten days fighting their way back toward the Ginger hilltop from more

secure landing zones well to the north. In the meantime, American aircraft pounded the hill. Yet in spite of more than a week of sustained heavy bombing, al Qaeda positions on Ginger survived to fire on U.S. infantry when the latter finally reached and overran the objective. One dug-in al Qaeda command post was found surrounded by no fewer than five 2,000-pound bomb craters. Still, its garrison survived and resisted until overrun.

This does not mean that precision firepower is not extremely lethal, or that even well dug in al Qaeda defenders did not suffer heavy losses from precision engagements. But the evidence does indicate that a combination of cover and concealment can allow defenders, though battered, to survive modern firepower in sufficient numbers to mount serious resistance.

Nor was Afghanistan the first time that properly prepared defenses have survived massive firepower, precise or otherwise. French defenses at Verdun in 1916 endured a two-day German artillery barrage equal to about 1,200 tons of explosives—in nuclear parlance more than a kiloton, or more explosive power than the W48 tactical nuclear warhead—yet enough of the entrenched defenders survived this maelstrom to halt the German assault. In 1917, German defenses at Messines absorbed more than a kiloton of explosive power per mile of frontage but were still able to halt the ensuing British offensive. German positions in the village of Cassino on March 15, 1944, were struck by 300 tons of bombs in a single day but defeated the associated Allied infantry advance. On July 18, 1944, more than 4,500 Allied aircraft, three corps' worth of artillery, and naval gunfire from two Royal Navy cruisers and the monitor *Roberts* deposited more than 8,700 tons of explosives—more than 8 kilotons of firepower—on just seven kilometers of German frontage in less than three hours in Operation Goodwood. Yet the entrenched Germans halted the subsequent British armored advance, destroying more than one-third of all the British armor on the continent in the process.

Firepower on such scales is tremendously destructive, and each of these defenders suffered heavily under the barrages. But these examples show that even fantastic volumes of firepower alone cannot annihilate defenses outright. Today's precision allows crushing firepower to be delivered using vastly fewer platforms, but to expect precision

to accomplish what literally nuclear-scale fires have failed to attain in the past is to ask too much of new technology. Although the village of Cassino was struck by far less accurate weapons than were aimed at the al Qaeda defenders of Objective Ginger, this tiny Italian hamlet was still hit with the equivalent of more than three hundred 2,000-pound satellite-guided bombs. Such devastating force was more than enough to reduce every building in the village to rubble—but not enough to exterminate its defenders. The problem at Verdun, Messines, or Cassino or in Operation Goodwood was not an inability to turn defenses into crater fields or reduce specific buildings to rubble due to lack of precision. The problem was and remains that resolute defenders can survive even within crater fields and rubble piles to mount serious resistance. In the past, firepower has been critical, but against resolute, well-prepared defenders, it has rarely been sufficient; taken together, Bai Beche, Qala-e-Gangi, and Operation Anaconda suggest that it is not now, either.

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

As enemy forces adapted, their decreasing vulnerability to standoff attack meant an increasing burden of close combat. Little of this fighting represented guerrilla warfare. At least through Anaconda in March, the Taliban sought to take and hold ground in very orthodox ways: they tried to defend key geographic objectives, not harass their enemies with hit-and-run tactics. These defenses, however, were sufficiently covered and concealed to allow important fractions of them to survive American air attack. The resulting ground combat was neither trivial nor wholly one-sided: many battles were close calls, with either initial reverses, serious casualties, or both.

At Bai Beche on November 5, for example, the dug-in al Qaeda defenders refused to withdraw after more than two days of heavy American bombing. To dislodge them, Northern Alliance troops were ordered to charge the position. Their first attempt was driven back. On observing this reverse, the attached American SOF began calling in renewed air strikes in anticipation of a second assault. In the process, however, an SOF warning order to the Northern Alliance cavalry to prepare for another push was mistaken by the cavalry as a

command to launch the assault, with the result that the cavalry began its attack much sooner than intended. The surprised Americans watched the Afghan cavalry break cover and begin its advance just as a series of laser-guided bombs had been released from American aircraft in response to the SOF calls for air support. The SOF commander reported that he was convinced they had just caused a friendly fire incident: the bomb release and the cavalry advance were way too close together for official doctrinal limits, and the air strike would never have been ordered if the SOF had known that the cavalry was just then jumping off for the second assault. As it happened, the bombs landed only seconds before the cavalry arrived. In fact, the cavalry galloped through the enormous cloud of smoke and dust that was still hanging in the air after the explosions, emerging behind the enemy defenses before the garrison even knew what was happening. The defenders, seeing Northern Alliance cavalry to their rear, abandoned their positions in an attempt to avoid encirclement.

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The result was an important victory—in fact, the victory that turned the tide in the north. But the battle involved serious close combat (cavalry overrunning prepared, actively resisting defenses), and the outcome was a very close call. The assault profited from an extremely tight integration of movement with suppressive fire—far tighter even than either the cavalry or its supporting SOF would ever have dared arrange deliberately. Luck thus played an important role in the outcome. The Northern Alliance might well have carried the position eventually, even without the good fortune of an extraordinary integration of fire and movement. This battle was clearly crucial, and the cavalry would presumably have redoubled its efforts if the second attempt had failed. Still, the outcome involved an important element of serendipity.

Nor was Bai Beche unique in demanding hard fighting at close quarters. As noted above, al Qaeda counterattackers came within small-arms range of U.S. and allied forces before being driven back at Sayed Slim Kalay and at Highway 4. At Kunduz in late November, al Qaeda counterattackers penetrated allied positions deeply enough to compel supporting American SOF teams to withdraw at least three

times to avoid being overrun. During Operation Anaconda, allied forces associated with Gen. Mohammed Zia and supported by American SOF were assigned to drive al Qaeda defenders from the "Tri-cities" area (the villages of Shirkankeyl, Babakuhl, and Marzak); they were instead pinned down under hostile fire from prepared defenses on the surrounding mountainsides and eventually withdrew after they proved unable to advance. Only after the al Qaeda defenders pulled back under joint, multinational attack by allied airpower, Western infantry, and multinational SOF were Zia's troops able to enter the Tri-cities and adjoining ridgelines. Then at Tora Bora, massive American bombing proved insufficient to compensate for allied Afghan unwillingness to close with dug-in al Qaeda defenders in the cave complexes of the White Mountains. This ground force hesitancy probably allowed bin Laden and his lieutenants to escape into neighboring Pakistan.

Among these examples, the fighting along Highway 4 in December is particularly instructive. The American-allied Afghans here were divided between two factions. The first, commanded by Haji Gul Alai, were very capable troops by Afghan standards. They used terrain for cover and concealment, maintained good intervals between elements in the advance, moved by alternate bounds, exploited suppressive fire to cover moving elements' exposure, and were able to exploit the effects of American air strikes by coordinating their movement with the bombing, unlike many other Afghan factions. The second faction, by contrast, was much less skilled: the attached SOF commander characterized it as "an armed mob—just villagers given weapons." These troops' tactics consisted of exposed, bunched-up movement in the open, with no attempt to use terrain to reduce their exposure, and little ability to employ supporting or suppressive fire. At the Arghestan Bridge on December 5, this second faction launched an assault on a dug-in al Qaeda position south of the Kandahar airport. Driven back repeatedly, it proved unable to take the position, in spite of U.S. air support. Only after these troops were withdrawn and Haji Gul Alai's forces took over the assault the following day could the al Qaeda positions be taken.

Of course, the alliance ultimately prevailed militarily and succeeded in driving the Taliban from power. Precision American airpower was

undoubtedly a precondition for this victory—together with its SOF spotters, it turned a stalemated civil war into a dramatic battlefield victory for America and its allies. Although precision bombing was necessary, however, it was not sufficient. It could annihilate poorly prepared fighting positions, and it could inflict heavy losses on even well-disposed defenses. But it could not destroy the entirety of properly prepared positions by itself. And unless such positions are all but annihilated, even a handful of surviving, actively resisting defenders with modern automatic weapons can slaughter unsophisticated indigenous allies whose idea of tactics is to walk forward bunched up in the open. To overcome skilled, resolute defenders who have adopted the standard countermeasures to high-firepower air strikes still requires close combat by friendly ground forces whose own skills enable them to use local cover and their own suppressive fire to advance against hostile survivors with modern weapons.

By and large, America's main Afghan allies in this war either enjoyed such fundamental skills or profited from accidentally tight coordination of their movement and American firepower (as at Bai Beche), or both. The anti-Taliban fighters were not always the motley assortment of militiamen they are sometimes said to have been. Enough of them were capable of modern military tactics to allow them to exploit the great potential of precision airpower when it is integrated with ground maneuver.

But not all of America's allies in this war were up to the job. Although the typical combat units on each side were about equally matched (as the stalled pre-intervention battle lines implied), the quality of troops on both sides in Afghanistan was actually quite uneven—and this diversity offers a couple of valuable opportunities to observe instances of unequally skilled forces in combat. In such unequal fights as the first day at Arghestan Bridge and the assault on the Tri-cities during Anaconda, the results suggest that where indigenous allies are outdone tactically, American airpower and SOF support alone may not be enough to turn the tide. In Afghanistan, the Northern and Southern Alliances, eventually combined with the American and Canadian troops that fought during Anaconda, together provided significant ground forces that ultimately shouldered an essential load of old-fashioned close combat against surviving, actively resisting opponents. Even with twenty-

first-century firepower, without this essential close-combat capability the outcome in Afghanistan could easily have been very different.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

SO WHAT DOES this analysis tell us about the future of warfare? The answer is that Afghanistan, at least, suggests a future much more like the past than most now believe. Precision firepower did not simply annihilate well-prepared opponents at standoff range in Afghanistan. To overcome skilled, resolute opposition required both precision firepower and skilled ground maneuver; neither alone was sufficient.

But this is hardly news. Since at least 1918, all great-power militaries have understood the importance of combining fire and maneuver. The synergy between these elements lies at the heart of all successful twentieth-century tactical systems; it is hardly a product of twenty-first-century technology.

Of course, this is not to suggest that nothing has changed since 1918. In particular, fire support's form has changed dramatically since then—and the increases in firepower's range, precision, and round-for-round lethality have obviously been dramatic in recent years. The increasing lethality of standoff precision engagement has made the combination of fire and movement much more powerful where both elements are present. Tight integration of laser-guided bombs with skilled ground maneuver is far more effective today than was cooperation between 77 mm field guns and German *Stosstruppen* in 1918. This important development has greatly increased America's real military power relative to that of any plausible foe.

But what new technology has not done is allow militaries to succeed using either fire or maneuver alone. The maneuver elements in Afghanistan were not always American, but success turned on the proficiency of forces, whether Western or Afghan, in executing a demanding system of integrated fire and maneuver—much as it has for the past 90 years. This underlying continuity is at least as significant for the future of warfare as the accompanying extraordinary technological change in the form that firepower has taken.

In short, Afghanistan was neither a revolution nor a fluke. The Afghan model will not always work as it did in Afghanistan because

the United States will not always enjoy allies who match up so well against their enemies. But where they do, the model should be roughly as lethal as it was in Afghanistan. The model is thus at once oversold by its proponents and undersold by its detractors. It can work under some important preconditions, but those preconditions will not always be met. In Iraq, for example, the lack of a credible, trained opposition bodes ill for an Afghan-style campaign without major American ground forces.

Even more broadly, we should be wary of suggestions that precision weapons have so revolutionized warfare that either the American military or American foreign policy can now be radically restructured. Some now argue that the revolutionary potential of precision weapons, teamed with SOF and indigenous allies, can underwrite a neoimperial American foreign policy in which the Afghan model enables cheap but effective military intervention on a potentially global scale. Others would redesign the military to shift it away from expensive, labor-intensive close combat capability and toward reliance on standoff precision engagement, with corresponding deep cuts in conventional ground forces. Interpretations of the Afghan campaign as a triumph of new technology that made conquerors of a ragtag militia fuel such proposals and reinforce the general perception of military revolution, with the concomitant need for transformational responses from American policymakers. Yet the war's actual conduct offers little support for such claims. An American military dependent on standoff precision would fare well where its allies were up to the job, but it would fail badly elsewhere. In a world of diverse military organizations and few certainties about where or when the United States may need to fight, such a restructuring would be very risky. And since the Afghan model will sometimes allow interventions at little cost in American lives, but sometimes not, a neoimperial foreign policy requires, among other things, a willingness to accept real costs in critical theaters.

What the Afghan war ultimately shows is that even today, continuity in the nature of war is at least as important as change. To ignore the continuity and focus exclusively on the change risks serious error and fundamental misunderstanding of this war's true meaning for the future—which is neither as transformational nor as idiosyncratic as many have asserted.