

Canadian
Forces
College

Collège
des
Forces
Canadiennes



THE FOREVER WAR: THE WICKED PROBLEM OF CONFLICT TERMINATION IN AFGHANISTAN

By Major Nicholas P. Barber

JCSP 47

Solo Flight

Disclaimer

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© 2021 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence.

PCEMI 47

Solo Flight

Avertissement

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© 2021 Sa Majesté la Reine du Chef du Canada, représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale..

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 – PCEMI 47
2020 – 2021

SOLO FLIGHT

**THE FOREVER WAR: THE WICKED PROBLEM OF
CONFLICT TERMINATION IN AFGHANISTAN**

By Major Nicholas P. Barber

“This paper was written by a candidate attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfillment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions, which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.”

« La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale. »

THE FOREVER WAR: THE WICKED PROBLEM OF CONFLICT TERMINATION IN AFGHANISTAN

INTRODUCTION

As the U.S. readies itself to withdraw its remaining forces from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021, there is far less certainty about the future of the country than one would expect after the nearly two decades of occupation and trillions of dollars spent there by U.S. and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces.

There were several strategic goals that the U.S. set out to achieve in Afghanistan. First, “coalition forces invaded Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 with the objective of toppling the Taliban government and defeating al-Qaeda.”¹ Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) began on 07 October 2001 and the Taliban were removed from power on 17 December 2001, but many were able to escape to Pakistan where they were able to continue the fight via insurgency operations.² The goal then shifted to “preventing the return of the Taliban, to control of Afghanistan, maintaining stability in Pakistan, and keeping up the pressure against al-Qaeda.”³ A second strategic goal was to create a more capable Afghan government based on Western values. At the NATO 60th anniversary summit in April 2009, “the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies agreed unanimously...to create a ‘stronger democratic state’ in Afghanistan.”⁴ Finally, a third strategic goal was to improve the overall human rights conditions within the country. In its 2010-2013 Strategic Plan and Action Plan, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) admitted that “despite existing commitments, strategies and

¹ United States, “Exploring Three Strategies For Afghanistan” (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), 9.

² Wikipedia. “United States invasion of Afghanistan,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_invasion_of_Afghanistan

³ United States, 7.

⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

policies developed to improve the human rights situation, many...continue suffer from extreme poverty, high unemployment, systemic discrimination and a lack of access to healthcare, schools and adequate housing.”⁵

Rather than setting terms for the unconditional surrender of the Taliban, the withdrawal agreement negotiated with the Trump administration states that the Taliban must “prevent Afghan territory under its control from being used by terrorist groups to launch attacks on the United States and its allies.”⁶ This amounts to little more than a potentially empty promise by the Taliban to cut its ties with Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. If the Taliban had been integrated into the Afghan state by this point, there may be more cause of optimism, but “that remains an unlikely prospect in the face of the Taliban’s dismissal of the government as an American puppet regime even as it views its leaders as traitors to the country.”⁷ Although Afghan officials are confident that its forces can maintain control, “U.S. officials say that unless the Afghan government and the Taliban reach a power-sharing deal, Al Qaeda is likely to reconstitute its ability to threaten U.S. targets outside Afghanistan in two to three years.”⁸ These statements clearly do not reflect the accomplishment of the West’s desired outcomes of a defeated Taliban, democratic governance, and improved human rights conditions.

Canadian doctrine defines conflict termination as “those specific conditions which, when met, will lead to a cessation of conflict activities. These conditions are represented by the strategic objectives (both military and political) which have been

⁵ AIHRC, “2010-2013 Strategic Plan and Action Plan,” 2010, 3.

⁶ Nabih Bulos and David S. Cloud, “US Troops Are Leaving Afghanistan, but Al Qaeda Remains,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-04-30/us-troops-are-leaving-afghanistan-but-al-qaeda-remains>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

identified as the desired end state.”⁹ Based on the fact that the U.S. has not achieved its desired end state, yet is seeking a peace deal with the Taliban, the mission in Afghanistan was not a successful one. The aim of this paper is to illustrate that the war in Afghanistan was a wicked problem that ultimately failed to be resolved due to the lack of required stakeholder engagement.

This paper will first define wicked problems and explain the importance of stakeholder engagement to qualify conflict termination in Afghanistan as a wicked problem. It will then review Lt Col Cavaleri’s Nine Transition Themes to identify which stakeholders were/were not successfully engaged in the Afghan conflict. Finally, this paper will provide recommendations for how military personnel can identify those stakeholders needed to solve the next wicked problems and, hopefully, achieve better results in the future.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The concept of “wicked problems” was originally conceived by Horst Rittel and Marvin Webber in 1973. They noted that “the kinds of problems that planners deal with – societal problems – are inherently different from the problems that scientists and perhaps some classes of engineers deal with. Planning problems are inherently wicked.”¹⁰ Based on their work, problems can be divided into three categories: tame, complex, and wicked.

Before delving into the three types of problems, it is important to define the term “stakeholder” as it will be used throughout this paper. Stakeholders are at the core of

⁹ Canada, Department of National Defence. “Conflict Termination.” In B-GJ-005/FP-000, Canadian Forces Joint Publication 5.0, Change 2. Ottawa: Joint Doctrine Branch, 2008.

¹⁰ Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Foundations of the Planning Enterprise: Critical Essays in Planning Theory: Volume 1 4*, no. December 1969 (2017): 67–169, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315255101-12>.

“managing wicked problems and key to the successful implementation of change in public organizations...the greater the disagreement among stakeholders, the more wicked the problem.”¹¹ Depending on the situation, a stakeholder can be one of the people/groups that a problem-solver needs to consult with, or it can include the problem-solver personally. An example of this would be a major tasked with organizing the Army Run in Ottawa. Some of the stakeholders that they would need to meet with would include city planners to get various permits, police/fire/EMS for security and safety, and representatives from various charitable organizations and sponsors to raise funds. Additionally, since it is a military event, the CAF is a stakeholder and the Major is acting on behalf of the CAF, so the person trying to solve the problem is also a stakeholder. Getting stakeholders to agree to a course of action (COA) is relatively easy when they all stand to benefit from solving the problem, but it can be “extremely difficult to make any headway on an acceptable solution to the...problem if stakeholders cannot agree on what the problem is.”¹²

Tame problems are those where “the definition is fairly clear and agreed upon and the point at which they are solved is clear (but not necessarily simple to achieve) ...they can often be solved in the same way that similar problems have been solved elsewhere.”¹³ Examples of tame problems include things like solving math equations or changing a flat tire on a car: the problem is easily defined and there is a clear solution. In the military, many tame problems are solved through the use of drills and SOPs (Standard Operating

¹¹ Peter Steane, Yvon Dufour, and Donald Gates, “Assessing Impediments to NPM Change,” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 28, no. 2 (2015): 263–70, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-03-2014-0068>.

¹² *Ibid*, 265.

¹³ Val Morrison, “Wicked Problems and Public Policy,” *National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy* 1841, no. June (2013): 1–4.

Procedures) as they occur frequently and the same solution often works in similar situations.

Complex problems are those where “stakeholders agree on the nature of the problem, but not on solutions.”¹⁴ A military example would be the conduct of a combat team attack. The problem would very clearly be the enemy position that needs to be destroyed, but there are multiple ways to do it. The commander could conduct a frontal, flanking, or pincer attack, change the composition of the assault force and fire base, or choose between preparatory artillery fires on the position or the maintenance of surprise.

With wicked problems, however, stakeholders can neither agree on the nature of the problem nor the best solution to the problem. The “scientific (or evidence-based) method (define the problem – gather data – analyze data – propose and implement solution) is not the best way to approach them, and is likely to fail.”¹⁵ Ironically, the steps of the scientific method very closely mirror the stages of the Operational Planning Process (OPP) used by the CAF (Initiation – Orientation – COA Development – Plan Development – Plan Review) which hints that it is likely not the best process to use when attempting to solve a wicked problem. The difficulty that arises with wicked problems is that “to *describe* a wicked problem in sufficient detail, one has to develop an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable *solutions* ahead of time... Problem understanding and problem resolution are concomitant to each other.”¹⁶ Poverty is just one of many examples of wicked problems that exist. Education, health, family, talent, culture, geography and even blind luck all can play a role in one’s financial success. Each of these

¹⁴ Morrison, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

¹⁶ Rittel and Webber, 161.

factors, if they are the problem in a specific case, has multiple potential solutions. If you find a combination of solutions that works to solve one person's poverty issue, you then realize that there are millions of other people whose situation will require a completely different set of solutions. Just as poverty poses a wicked problem for politicians, sociologists, and economists, conflict termination, especially in counterinsurgencies, can be a wicked problem for military planners to solve.

THE WICKEDNESS OF CONFLICT TERMINATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Rittel and Webber identified ten unique factors that determine whether or not a problem should be categorized as "wicked." Val Morrison, of the National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy, distilled these factors into six criteria in her article, "Wicked Problems and Public Policy." This section will demonstrate how conflict termination in Afghanistan qualified as a wicked problem using Morrison's criteria.

Wicked problems cannot be defined until a solution has been proposed

One of the key determinants of a wicked problem is the circular nature of the arguments that arise when trying to determine the cause of, or solution to, a problem. Rittel and Webber explained that "the process of formulating the problem and of conceiving a solution...are identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered."¹⁷ While that may sound complicated, Rory Stewart, director of the Carr Center on Human Rights Policy, summed it up neatly when he addressed the U.S. Committee on Foreign Relations. He explained that "you need to defeat the Taliban to build a state and you need to build a state to defeat the Taliban. There cannot be security without development, or development without

¹⁷ Rittel and Webber, 161.

security.”¹⁸ When the solution to a problem is also the cause of the problem, you have a wicked problem.

There is no precise stopping point for when a wicked problem is solved.

This concept refers to the fact that “even very complex problems have final solutions...with wicked problems, there is no such exact stopping point. In fact, attempts to resolve them usually end when resources have been exhausted.”¹⁹ The Taliban were always able to recruit new members and they were good at protecting their leaders. Building a democratic government from scratch and trying to eradicate human rights violations while fighting an insurgency all needed far more time and resources than the U.S. and NATO were willing to expend.

There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ solutions, only better or worse ones.

Unlike a math equation or problem in science, “wicked problems have no objectively correct solution which can always be applied. They are always partial and may often reflect the viewpoints of those attempting to solve them.”²⁰ Stopping Afghan National Police (ANP) from sexually assaulting young boys was the “right” thing to do by western standards, but it was an acceptable practice in their culture. Trying to impose our standards on the ANP risked alienating them as our ally, but not imposing our standards risked eroding support for the mission at home.

Each wicked problem is unique and specific to its context.

Wicked problems are drastically affected by any number of environmental factors, therefore, “it is almost always a mistake to assume that solutions applied elsewhere to a

¹⁸ United States, 26.

¹⁹ Morrison, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

wicked problem can be imported into another setting...context is always crucial.”²¹

Successful tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) used to combat the insurgents in Iraq did not translate to Afghanistan. The largely more rural and significantly poorer population of Afghanistan required a different solution set to combat the Taliban and gain the support of the local population than were needed to accomplish the same in Iraq.

Each attempt to resolve a wicked problem is unique and may affect an infinite set of related problems.

Attempted solutions to wicked problems often do not exhibit immediate results. Once a solution is implemented, it “will generate waves of consequences over an extended...period of time. Moreover, the next day’s consequences of the solution may yield utterly undesirable repercussions.”²² The destruction of poppy fields by western forces seemed like a good way to reduce funding to the Taliban via the drug trade. Unfortunately, farmers relied on the proceeds from those crops to feed their families, so it alienated those locals until ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) started paying farmers for the crops that they had destroyed.

Wicked problems are essentially unstable and resistant to policy solutions insofar as interventions involve multiple stakeholders.

Morrison explains that “one of the biggest challenges with wicked problems is the need to involve many actors, sometimes with wildly different viewpoints on the nature of both the solutions and the problem. Any fruitful attempt to tackle a wicked problem will of necessity be multi-sectoral.”²³ The U.S. Committee on Foreign Relations that met in

²¹ Morrison, 2.

²² Rittel and Webber, 163.

²³ Morrison, 2.

September of 2009 consisted of twenty-one members and they were presented three distinct strategies for how to proceed in Afghanistan.²⁴ ISAF consisted of forty member states, all of which had their own political/military leadership goals and caveats. Finally, the tribal nature of Afghanistan meant that each region had its own tribal leadership with various wants/needs and not all of them were aligned with the desires of the government in Kabul. If OGDs (Other Government Departments) and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) are added to the mix, there were clearly multiple stakeholders that required engagement in Afghanistan before any meaningful policy changes could be implemented.

As illustrated above, each of Morrison's six criteria for wicked problems have been met, therefore, conflict termination in Afghanistan qualifies as a wicked problem.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Lt Col David Cavaleri "a retired Armor [officer]...produced a study that examines nine critical factors that should be addressed in stabilization planning and execution."²⁵ The occupation of Japan by U.S. forces after its surrender in 1945 is used as a case study to highlight the methods that worked in a successful conflict termination. This paper will focus only on those factors which identify the stakeholders that could have been better engaged in Afghanistan.

²⁴ United States, 2.

²⁵ David P Cavaleri, "Easier Said than Done : Making the Transition between Combat Operations and Stability Operations," *Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper*, no. 7 (2005): vi, 95 p., <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip056/2005001079.html>.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy refers to the state of being that “arises from voluntary obedience to a leader, a tradition, or a legal code.”²⁶

The primary means that the U.S. used to establish legitimacy in Japan was to allow Emperor Hirohito to remain its leader even though the American people wanted him executed for war crimes.²⁷ Respected as a god-like figure by the Japanese people, the Emperor’s support granted legitimacy to the occupation force, SCAP’s²⁸ reform policies, and the subsequent democratic government that was created. MacArthur also did a very good job of ensuring that programs involving constitutional reform, education revisions, and humanitarian assistance were credited to the new Japanese Government to further bolster its legitimacy.²⁹

Unfortunately, this level of legitimacy was not afforded the Afghan government. In 2009, Hamid Karzai’s government was “widely seen as corrupt, inept, inefficient, and en route to losing the support of its population.”³⁰ This likely had much to do with the fact that the government did not have representation from all of the country’s tribal groups, and the occupying forces, NGOs and OGDs were often the face of security and humanitarian efforts in the early years. The Afghan government also did not have representation from the Taliban. The Taliban is a “heterogeneous collection of factions that have very different interests, very different motivations, very different component parts and ways of working.”³¹ There may have been opportunities to negotiate with the

²⁶ Cavaleri, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁸ Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers – Gen Douglas MacArthur

²⁹ Cavaleri, 63.

³⁰ United States, 19.

³¹ *Ibid*, 41.

less extreme factions of the Taliban and bring them into the Karzai government. While it may not have been popular back in America, Taliban involvement in the government likely would have increased its legitimacy with the people, much as Emperor Hirohito did in Japan.

The host nation government and converted enemy factions are key stakeholders to consider when trying to bolster legitimacy in a counterinsurgency operation.

Security/Unity of Effort

Security refers to the idea that “stability operations forces have an inherent responsibility under the provisions of the Law of Land Warfare to plan for and provide a secure environment for the host-nation population and all others legitimately residing there.”³² Unity of effort captures the idea that “no stability operation can succeed unless it draws on multi-level commitment and support.”³³

MacArthur originally planned to have 685,000 troops as the occupying force in Japan, but quickly reduced that number to about 360,000 once it realized Japan’s relatively benign environment. It is also important to note that MacArthur had full control of the soldiers under his command (315,000 U.S. and 45,000 U.K.).³⁴

The high-water mark for U.S. troops in Afghanistan was about 100,000 in 2010 and 2011, but ISAF only had about 30,000 troops in theatre from 2006-2010.³⁵ Considering that Japan is only about two-thirds the size of Afghanistan, and the Japanese were not a belligerent force, the U.S. and its allies realistically needed to deploy

³² Cavaleri, 13.

³³ *Ibid*, 14.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 64.

³⁵ Andrew Rafferty, “The War in Afghanistan: By the Numbers,” *NBC News*, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/war-afghanistan-numbers-n794626>.

somewhere between 400,000 and 800,000 troops to provide a similar level of security in Afghanistan as was deployed in Japan. ISAF was also a coalition of 40 nations, each of which had its own national caveats. This complicated the chain of command and often reduced the effectiveness of operations.

If security and unity of effort are to be achieved, the politicians and military leadership of coalition nations are important stakeholders that need to be convinced to send necessary number of troops and reduce the number of caveats that impact cohesion.

Commitment

Commitment refers to the “long-term commitment of a variety of resources...planners must factor levels of international, national, regional, and military commitment into stability operations planning and execution efforts.”³⁶

Besides the obvious requirement to commit resources such as money, troops and equipment, Gen MacArthur displayed incredible commitment by holding the position of SCAP for six years (1945-1951) after commanding the Southwest Pacific from 1939-1945. It was also not lost on the Japanese that the U.S. “committed one of its most prestigious military commanders to see the occupation through successfully (a man with exceptional cultural and regional familiarity, a strategic thinker and planner show talents could have been applied in any number of postwar venues.”³⁷ The importance of having a general of MacArthur’s talents who understood Japanese culture and religion was a tremendous boon to the stability operations in Japan.

In stark contrast to MacArthur’s six years as SCAP, ISAF was commanded by sixteen different generals between January 2002 and December 2014. While each of those

³⁶ Cavaleri, 14.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 66.

generals were undoubtedly talented in their own rights, it is unlikely that they had a unifying vision that was pursued by each in succession. It would be extremely frustrating for the Afghan government and military leaders to have to rebuild new relationships with the incoming commander every 6-12 months, especially if it also resulted in changed objectives and projects.

While it may not be feasible to have a single general in charge of a mission for six years today, the necessity for them to build on the work of their predecessors makes them a key stakeholder in achieving conflict termination. Solving a wicked problem becomes infinitely harder when subsequent leadership changes the definition of the problem and/or solution.

CONCLUSION

This paper first explained the importance of stakeholder engagement and defined tame, complex and wicked problems. It then used Val Morrison's six criteria for wicked problems to demonstrate how conflict termination in Afghanistan qualified as a wicked problem. Finally, this paper reviewed five of Lt Col Cavaleri's Nine Transition Themes and provided examples of successful stakeholder engagement during stability operations in Japan. It also identified how similar stakeholders were less optimally engaged in Afghanistan and offered suggestions to improve for the next missions that will require complex conflict termination plans.

It is important that the reader understand that conflict termination in Afghanistan was a wicked problem. There was no blueprint to guide ISAF commanders through this counterinsurgency and many people worked extremely hard and sacrificed much to achieve the best outcome possible. Those who lost friends and loved ones may feel anger or betrayal as they watch the U.S. government make concessions in the peace agreement

with the Taliban. It may help to put things in perspective if they can look at the example of Gen MacArthur. Even though he had just finished five year of intense fighting with the Japanese, which resulted in more than 100,000 U.S. soldiers killed and over 250,000 wounded, he found a way to work with Emperor Hirohito to rebuild the Japanese homeland. Perhaps reconciliation with the Taliban is exactly what is needed to achieve a long-lasting peace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AIHRC. “2010-2013 Strategic Plan and Action Plan,” 2010.

Bulos, Nabih, and David S. Cloud. “US Troops Are Leaving Afghanistan, but Al Qaeda Remains.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2021.
<https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-04-30/us-troops-are-leaving-afghanistan-but-al-qaeda-remains>.

Canada. “Canadian Forces Joint Publication 5.0.” Ottawa: Joint Doctrine Branch, 2008.

Cavaleri, David P. “Easier Said than Done : Making the Transition between Combat Operations and Stability Operations.” *Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper*, no. 7 (2005): vi, 95 p. <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip056/2005001079.html>.

Morrison, Val. “Wicked Problems and Public Policy.” *National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy* 1841, no. June (2013): 1–4.

Rafferty, Andrew. “The War in Afghanistan: By the Numbers.” *NBC News*, 2017.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/war-afghanistan-numbers-n794626>.

Rittel, Horst W.J., and Melvin M. Webber. “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” *Foundations of the Planning Enterprise: Critical Essays in Planning Theory: Volume 1* 4, no. December 1969 (2017): 67–169.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315255101-12>.

Steane, Peter, Yvon Dufour, and Donald Gates. “Assessing Impediments to NPM Change.” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 28, no. 2 (2015): 263–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-03-2014-0068>.

United States, “Exploring Three Strategies For Afghanistan.” U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010.