

NOREF Report

The war for Afghanistan

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Executive summary

At its core, the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan is an attempt to establish a client regime supported by a military operation to pacify resistance. In May 2012 the Obama administration took a major step towards consolidating its war aims and signed the Enduring Partnership Agreement with President Karzai, which ensures a U.S. military presence for at least a decade after 2014. It is clear from this agreement, the previous memorandums on detention and night raids, and the continuing development of U.S. mega-bases in the country that 2014 is far from a “withdrawal” date.

Over more than a decade, the policies pursued by the U.S. in Afghanistan and

throughout Central Asia have drastically altered the region’s “political map”, facilitating unprecedented U.S. influence, securing a long-term military presence and producing the rudiments of a client regime at the heart of Asia – objectives that lie within the framework of U.S. policy doctrine and the historical record, although outside proclamations of concern for anti-U.S. terrorism, human rights or democracy. With the Obama administration committed to a military solution, the continuation of the conflict will have a disastrous impact on the Afghan population and risks further radicalising and destabilising the region.

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At its core, the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan is an attempt to establish a client regime supported by a military operation to pacify resistance. After overthrowing the Taliban in 2001, the Bush administration followed a conventional formula of U.S.-directed regime change and sought the “consolidation of control by friendly political forces and expansion of internal security operations”¹ – citing the recommendations of U.S. counter-insurgency manuals following the removal of a “hostile government”. U.S.-aligned warlords of the Northern Alliance were supported into government positions and a highly centralised political system was imposed on the country, giving enormous power to Washington’s hand-picked leader; subsequent international agreements and conferences attempted to provide legitimacy for the new political arrangement. Over a decade later the outcome is the predictable one: “Most of the former Northern Alliance and some mujahedin leaders are part of the neo-oligarchy that currently rules Afghanistan”, writes the director of the Kabul-based Afghanistan Analysts Network, Thomas Ruttig. “They control the key political and military as well as important economic positions.” Although some political divisions exist between a pro-Karzai coalition and an opposition, the neo-oligarchy remains “united by common interests: joint economic engagement, shared positions of power and” – crucially for the U.S. – “the will to maintain this status quo”.²

With friendly political forces in place, the “consolidation of control” has been less successful. The Taliban, pushed by President Obama’s 30,000 troop surge in 2010, have spread beyond their traditional base in the south and south-east, and security in 2011 was at its worst since the occupation began. Press reports noted in 2011 that the Taliban had “shadow governors” in all 34 provinces, up from 11 in 2005. Their continued ability to recruit goes beyond simple mercenary motivations or Pashtun allegiances and has its base in the growing polarisation between the urban and rural populations caused by the

occupation itself.³ According to a NATO report based on the interrogations of detainees, Afghan civilians “frequently prefer Taliban governance over [the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan], usually as a result of government corruption, ethnic bias and lack of connection with local religious and tribal leaders”.⁴ These findings should obviously be treated with some scepticism, but are corroborated by other sources. Meanwhile, attrition rates in the Afghan army and police hover near 30% and 20% a year, respectively, and, in the case of the former, there is evidence of collaboration with the Taliban. An extensive U.S./NATO propaganda campaign – with European Union and United Nations (UN) collusion – designed to maintain support for the war has not hidden the extent to which the occupying forces are struggling to suppress the armed insurgent groups.

The Afghan government, reliant on foreign support for its survival, has little authority outside of urban areas and is widely considered illegitimate, not least as a result of the 2010 parliamentary elections, which were marred by intimidation and fraud, but supported by the U.S. and UN, essentially giving international legitimation to a process that served to further entrench the control of those in power. Commentators are now drawing comparisons with the final stages of the Soviet-backed regime of Najibullah, but the comparison is misleading. While the Soviets abandoned their puppet and his government to their fate, the U.S. is determined to stay in Afghanistan and secure its more than decade-long investment.

An enduring partnership

In May 2012 the Obama administration took a major step towards consolidating its war aims by signing the Enduring Partnership Agreement with President Karzai (the Afghan parliament was entirely excluded from the negotiations), which ensures a U.S. military presence for at least a

1 U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Concepts for US Army Counter-insurgency Activities*, 1961, cited in M. McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: US Guerilla Warfare, Counter-insurgency and Counter-terrorism, 1940-1990*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1992, p 221.

2 T. Ruttig, “Flash to the past: power play before the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga”, Afghan Analysts Network, April 27th 2012, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2716>.

3 A. Giustozzi & N. Ibrahimi, “Thirty years of conflict: drivers of anti-government mobilisation in Afghanistan, 1978-2011”, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, January 2012, <http://www.areas.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/1203E-Drivers%20of%20Conflict%20IP%202012.pdf>.

4 J. Borger, “Taliban believe they will take over from US and Nato in Afghanistan – report”, *The Guardian*, February 1st 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/01/taliban-afghanistan-leaked-report-pakistan>.

decade after 2014 and is in line with comments made a decade earlier by then-U.S. assistant secretary of state Elizabeth Jones, who predicted, “when the Afghan conflict is over we will not leave Central Asia. We have long-term plans and interests in this region”.⁵

According to the text of the agreement, which is largely devoid of detail, leaving specifics regarding troop and funding levels for a “technical agreement” to be signed before the end of 2014, U.S. forces will support “stability” and prevent “interference” in Afghan affairs. Washington’s ability to combat “interference” – a barely veiled reference to any challenge to the regime – will be substantial. Reports suggest that a force of about 20,000 troops will remain in the country after 2014 together with possibly more than 20,000 military contractors to continue operations and train and advise the Afghan National Security Forces (these are conservative estimates). The number of U.S. Special Forces personnel looks set to increase from current levels, while the *Washington Post* reported recently that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) will maintain “a large clandestine presence”. U.S. officials quoted in this report say the agency will use local paramilitary assets to “[keep] the Taliban off balance, [protect] the government in Kabul and [preserve] access to Afghan airstrips that enable armed CIA drones to hunt al-Qaeda remnants in Pakistan”. According to an official, the number of paramilitaries – funded and trained by the CIA – will be increased to compensate for the reduction in conventional troops.⁶

While it dismantles smaller operating outposts, the U.S. is upgrading the facilities and capabilities of a number of bases in the country. The megabases at Bagram and Kandahar are undergoing extensive upgrades: a military prison, a major Special Operations Forces complex and an operations centre for tactical fighter jets are being installed at the former; a high-tech drone control facility is being constructed in the latter. Further development is also under way in Helmand and around Herat on the border with Iran. Along

with the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, which holds 17,000 personnel, the fortress-like embassy in Kabul will become one of the largest in the world.

The transfer of sovereignty

In an exercise of its national sovereignty, Iraq rejected similar demands for permanent military bases – as well as preferential treatment for investors and impunity for U.S. forces – and expelled the U.S. military. “The political circumstances in Afghanistan are more favorable”, observes former U.S. envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad. “Unlike Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his top officials, Karzai and most other Afghan leaders understand that the Afghan government will need to depend on U.S. military assistance for at least another decade.”⁷

Learning a lesson from its experience in Iraq, the Obama administration separated the more controversial issues into individual agreements. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the “transfer of sovereignty” over detention facilities was signed in March, while in April another MoU ostensibly gave Afghan forces control of night raid operations. In reality, the text of the MoU on detention reveals that the transfer of sovereignty is largely fictitious, as the U.S. will maintain veto power over Afghan detainee policy and authority over new detainees for their first six months in prison; it also only covers current facilities, leaving out the new \$36 million prison under construction at Bagram. Likewise, Washington’s concessions regarding night raids are mainly symbolic. The text of the MoU makes clear that U.S. Special Forces will continue to operate autonomously, only ceding control to Afghan forces when they choose to inform them of a forthcoming operation.

The only restriction on future U.S. operations mentioned in the Partnership Agreement is that Afghanistan must not be used as a base to attack other countries, but it seems unlikely that this is for anything other than public consumption. Left unmentioned in the text is whether operations against non-state actors, such as Taliban forces across the border in Pakistan, would be considered

5 S. Ptichkin & A. Chichkin, “Russia ‘encircled’ by US, NATO when Afghan operation over”, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, January 22nd 2002.

6 G. Miller, “CIA digs in as America withdraws from Iraq, Afghanistan”, *Washington Post*, February 8th 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-digs-in-as-americans-withdraw-from-iraq-afghanistan/2012/02/07/gIQAfNJTxxQ_story.html.

7 Z. Khalilzad, “Some good news from Afghanistan”, *Foreign-Policy.com*, April 23rd 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/23/some_good_news_from_afghanistan.

an attack on another country. Soon after the agreement was signed the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, made clear that the agreement would not restrict the ability of U.S. forces to respond militarily to attacks and even threats from the territory of another state.

President Obama hailed the agreement as a sign of a U.S. withdrawal and an end to the war – a line followed almost unanimously by the media. The deceptive claims of “withdrawal” and “transfer of sovereignty”, combined with the delay in an agreement that determines the extent of future U.S. involvement, serve a political purpose, allowing Obama to claim he is ending the war while postponing a commitment on the actual number of troops to remain in Afghanistan, which will contradict this position, until after the 2012 election.

A year earlier, International Security Assistance Force second-in-command General James Bucknall gave a more honest and accurate assessment of December 2014 as not a campaign end date, but a waypoint, after which U.S. forces would switch to an advisory role and Afghan forces would take primary responsibility for front-line activities, moving the U.S. a step closer to the objective of overseas counter-insurgency wars: to hand over operations to local forces.

Afghanistan’s significance

The decision to maintain a long-term military presence may have ended the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and other armed groups. The regional Shanghai Co-operation Organisation expressed its opposition, as have Russia and neighbouring Iran, now encircled by U.S. military installations (the drone that crashed inside Iran in 2011 while on a CIA reconnaissance mission was launched from Shindand Airbase in Afghanistan). Members of Afghanistan’s peace movement condemned the move, warning that it would increase the terrorist threat to U.S. and Afghan citizens while providing the Taliban with a reason to continue the war. Polls suggest that U.S. citizens, with the majority now against the war, also opposed the new pact.

Justifying the agreement, and echoing the primary

rationale given for the war, a U.S. embassy spokesperson said the forces were required as part of an effort to defeat al-Qaeda. Informed analysts rightly expressed incredulity at the statement. The official explanation, which has little credibility on pragmatic grounds, is scarcely believable in the context of Washington’s continuation and expansion of policies that knowingly increase the terrorist threat to the U.S. home population. By the U.S. government’s own admission, a genuine effort to confront terrorism would mean addressing the core grievances that create and foment anti-U.S. hatred. According to a report of a 2004 Defense Science Board Task Force, which was chaired by Donald Rumsfeld, these are “one sided support” for Israel, support for repressive dictators and regimes in the Middle East, and the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.⁸

Rhetoric aside, a U.S. government report released just before the September 11th 2001 attacks gives an indication of the “long-term interests” referred to earlier by Elizabeth Jones: “Afghanistan’s significance from an energy standpoint stems from its geographical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from central Asia to the Arabian Sea.”⁹ A force in Afghanistan able to provide “stability” and facilitate “trade routes and pipelines that would break Iran’s monopoly” in Central Asia has been a long-term U.S. objective.¹⁰ If completed, the U.S.-backed TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline, protected by 12,000 Afghan security personnel, will mean that U.S. investment has been somewhat successful in securing such an outcome.

A similar strategic battle is under way to ensure Caspian energy flowing westward to Europe is controlled by the U.S. and not Russia. The U.S. relationship with Georgia, a land bridge from the Caspian area to Europe, is instructive. In 2003 the U.S. began an enormous military assistance programme to the Georgian government, including training in counter-insurgency and

8 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, September 2004, <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dsb/commun.pdf>.

9 A. Rowell, “Route to riches”, *The Guardian*, October 24th 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2001/oct/24/warinafghanistan2001.afghanistan>.

10 B. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002.

funds for a military battalion to protect the U.S.-supported BTC pipeline (Baku-Teblisi-Ceyhan). The military assistance was, Washington claimed, required as part of the so-called “war on terror” to combat an al-Qaeda contingent in the country. Soon after, the lack of al-Qaeda presence in Georgia was exposed and U.S. officials, unable to provide evidence of al-Qaeda in the country, conceded that the actual objectives pre-dated September 11th 2001. The U.S. ambassador to the country, Richard Miles, stated that the military assistance programme’s “primary purpose” was to “modernize the Georgian army”, adding, “it does have a back-up role ... with regards to pipeline security”.¹¹

U.S. objectives in Central Asia

As well as supporting the rule of the political group Washington has designated to govern the country, the military presence in Afghanistan will allow for the exercise of U.S. power and influence across Asia, making Afghanistan an important hub for regional operations, particularly as the focus shifts to East Asia – where the U.S. is currently refurbishing old bases last used during the war in Vietnam. The mega-base installations will move Washington closer to “full spectrum dominance” in the same way that bases in Colombia, ostensibly used to combat illicit drug production, provide “an opportunity for conducting full spectrum operations throughout South America”, according to U.S. Air Force documents.¹²

U.S. policy in the wider region gives an indication of the strategic objectives of which Afghanistan is only one aspect. In October 2001, soon after the initial bombing, agreements signed by the Bush administration with the energy-rich Caspian states bordering Afghanistan facilitated an unprecedented level of U.S. involvement in the region. Justified as part of the “war on terror” operations in Afghanistan, the agreements were designed to increase economic liberalisation and improve the investment climate for foreign capital, goals that form part of Washington’s wider objective in these states, “based as it is

around the transnationalisation and integration of local political economies into the wider global economy and the parallel militarisation of state-society relations to bolster pro-US elites”.¹³

The Obama administration has significantly increased financial assistance to the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia to support these aims, with devastating consequences for opposition political groups and civil society, which are by now practically non-existent across the region. Furthermore, armed movements have proliferated amid the growing inequality, political marginalisation and dire economic conditions faced by large sectors of the population.

Militarisation and the Afghan neo-oligarchy

In terms of Afghanistan, the similarities provide ominous portents for the country’s future. Economic restructuring was built into the Afghan Compact (the 2006 international conference in London), which committed the Afghan government to liberalisation measures, including the divestment of state-owned enterprises, to be implemented by the end of 2009. By 2011 this process was under way, with important sectors of the state-owned Afghan economy being handed over to private industry, mirroring similar U.S.-backed reforms in Iraq. As elsewhere, these developments, of which the Afghan people are almost entirely unaware, will increase the concentration of economic power within elite groups.

The Afghan neo-oligarchy, committed to the status quo from which it benefits enormously, is a powerful obstacle to any progressive political forces, even those seeking mild reform or basic standards of justice. In June, after an opposition party organised a protest calling for accountability for those who have committed war crimes against the population, it was quickly suspended by the government. The decision was only later overturned following a public outcry. The lack of political space has been a key driver of the insurgency and armed groups, which are able to exploit grievances over the presence of foreign

¹¹ See D. Stokes & S. Raphael, *Global Energy Security and American Hegemony*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

¹² U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Military Construction Program: Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Estimates*, May 2009, <http://www.justf.org/files/primarydocs/091104pal.pdf>.

¹³ Stokes & Raphael, *Global Energy Security and American Hegemony*, 2010.

troops and the corrupt Afghan government and may come to represent the only forces capable of effecting political change.

As in the Caspian states, the militarisation of state-society relations has been a central aspect of U.S./NATO operations. The Afghan army and police have received half of all international aid, accounted for the largest item in the U.S. defence budget in 2011 (over \$11 billion), and are set to receive some \$4 billion a year from international donors to ensure the Afghan state's authority. Both forces have been found to commit egregious human rights abuses against the population, as does the Afghan intelligence service, created and funded by the CIA and responsible for detention facilities where torture is systematically used.¹⁴ The paramilitary Afghan Local Police – state-sponsored U.S. Special Forces-trained militia operating in rural areas – were also found to engage in serious abuses, including killings, rape and land grabs. These are ominous analogues to the activities of similar U.S. armed and trained civilian militia during the first “war on terror” in Central America.

While the Afghan political system is frequently referred to as a “centralised democracy”, in reality the constitution does not provide for meaningful democratic governance and has created one of the world's most centralised states with enormous power wielded by the executive. Well aware that decentralisation would mean the dilution of control for the occupier, the U.S. has opposed any reforms to this system. A recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies highlighted the flaws in the political arrangement imposed on the population, reflecting that although it is unsuitable for a decentralised society like Afghanistan, “perhaps this centralized system could work in a large authoritarian state”.¹⁵

State of decline

Now in its 11th year, the war is essentially a conflict between a group of repressive neo-oligarchs backed by the U.S. and aligned with its interests, and a repressive, fundamentalist, armed opposition, with Afghans, particularly poor rural people, trapped in the middle. Barring a drastic shift in U.S. policy, Afghanistan faces a continuing low-level civil war. As John A. Nagl, professor at the United States Naval Academy and contributor to the *Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual* pointed out recently, this would not be a loss for Washington, which has continued the war on the understanding that the Taliban are not likely to be defeated militarily, as insurgent groups rarely are;¹⁶ a classified CIA report in 2011 acknowledged the war is trending to stalemate.¹⁷ One former CIA officer quoted by the *Washington Post* even argues that losing the countryside would not be too big a problem, as long as the U.S. holds the population centres and mega-bases.¹⁸

According to recent reports, U.S. military operations after 2014, beyond advising and training, will involve launching attacks into the countryside from fortified bases and urban areas, although indications are that this may be supplemented by 4,000 Special Forces personnel engaged in “village stability operations” working in rural villages alongside the Afghan Local Police; Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, accused of massacring 17 Afghan villagers in March 2012, was a member of one such team. As conventional troop numbers fall, so the slack will be taken up by the CIA, Special Forces and paramilitary assets – methods of warfare that are more clandestine and hence less accountable. Special Forces night raids, and air and drone strikes are set to continue, operations that Refugees International found “are destroying homes, crops, and basic

14 Oxfam, “No time to lose: promoting the accountability of the Afghan National Security Forces”, May 10th 2011, <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/publications/promoting-the-accountability-of-the-afghan-national-security-forces/no-time-to-lose>; UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Treatment of conflict-related detainees in Afghan custody”, October 2011, http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/Documents/October10_%202011_UNAMA_Detention_Full-Report_ENG.pdf.

15 R.D. Lamb, “Political governance and strategy in Afghanistan”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2012, http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/documents/CSIS_PoliticalGovernanceandStrategyinAfgh.pdf.

16 J.A. Nagl, “The age of unsatisfying wars”, *New York Times*, June 7th 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/07/opinion/the-age-of-unsatisfying-wars.html?ref=afghanistanwar>.

17 A. Gearan, “Joe Biden memo warned Obama on flawed war plans”, *Boston Globe*, June 26th 2012, <http://bostonglobe.com/news/world/2012/06/25/biden-leaked-memo-told-obama-war-plan-flawed/6TIERLqsKiytXBK0G2hJVN/story.html>.

18 G. Miller, “CIA digs in as America withdraws from Iraq, Afghanistan”, *Washington Post*, February 8th 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-digs-in-as-americans-withdraw-from-iraq-afghanistan/2012/02/07/gIQAfNJtXQ_story.html.

infrastructure, traumatizing civilians, and displacing tens of thousands of people”.¹⁹

The accompanying paramilitarisation of rural areas – a low-cost means of pacifying the population, again with a long history in U.S. counter-insurgency wars – reduces the options for civilians not wanting to support either the government or the insurgents. For the rural poor, this means a choice between subservience to the government or facing attacks and being displaced. Many internal refugees are being forced into urban centres – where the control of the client regime is more established – to struggle for survival in large slums. According to a joint report by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, conflict and insecurity displaced 185,632 Afghans in 2011, a 45% increase compared to the previous year. A total of 87,000 Afghans were displaced in the first four months of 2012, a 17% increase on the same period in 2011 and a 60% increase on 2010. The total number of internally displaced persons is now around half a million – “a largely hidden but horrific humanitarian and human rights crisis”, in the words of Amnesty International²⁰ – lagging behind the worldwide leader and other primary area of U.S.-supported counter-insurgency operations, Colombia.

International assistance and spending have been skewed towards the “security sector”, while funds for reconstruction and aid have benefited a small section of society and brazenly supported military objectives. A UN report points out that the prioritisation of military or political objectives “geared to meet short term objectives that have little to do with the safety and best interests of impoverished Afghans” have in many areas undermined basic human rights and exacerbated poverty.²¹ As international involvement is reduced and pretexts no longer need to be maintained, aid is dropping off. CARE reports that it has more than halved its staff numbers and closed its two

biggest programmes. Advocacy co-ordinator Jennifer Rowell was quoted as saying: “The conflict is getting worse. It will continue to get worse. The country is in a state of slow decline.”²²

With the conflict set to continue – and possibly intensify – the risks are severe, and not just for Afghans. As the fighting spreads across the border, it is destabilising and radicalising Pakistan, with the likelihood of “a geopolitical catastrophe for the United States – and the world – which would dwarf anything that could possibly occur in Afghanistan”.²³

The new political map

On September 30th 2001, a week before the bombing began, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote a memo to President Bush arguing that a new regime in Kabul should be the goal of the attacks – not a publicly stated aim at the time – adding: “If the war does not significantly change the world’s political map, the U.S. will not achieve its aim.”²⁴ The policies pursued by the U.S. in Afghanistan and throughout Central Asia, widely denounced as failing or counterproductive for their inability to create democracy or prevent terror, have drastically altered the “political map”, facilitating unprecedented U.S. influence in the region, producing the rudiments of a client regime at the heart of Asia and securing a long-term U.S. military presence. These objectives lie within the framework of U.S. policy doctrine and the historical record, although outside claims of concern for anti-U.S. terrorism, human rights and democracy.

19 Refugees International, “US strategy increasing instability and displacement in Afghanistan”, June 22nd 2011, <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/press-room/press-release/us-strategy-increasing-instability-and-displacement-afghanistan>.

20 Amnesty International, “Afghans fleeing war find misery in urban slums”, February 23rd 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/afghans-fleeing-war-find-misery-urban-slums-2012-02-23>.

21 OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), “The human rights dimension of poverty in Afghanistan”, Kabul, March 30th 2010, <http://reliefweb.int/node/349883>.

22 M. Rosenberg & G. Bowley, “Security fears lead groups to rethink work in Afghanistan”, *New York Times*, March 10th 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/world/asia/afghan-anger-and-security-changes-imperil-aid-groups.html?pagewanted=1&partner=rss&mc=rss>.

23 A. Lieven, “A mutiny grows in the Punjab”, *The National Interest*, February 23rd 2011, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/mutiny-grows-punjab-4889?page=1>.

24 D. Rumsfeld, “Memorandum for the president”, top secret (declassified), September 30th 2001, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc13.pdf>.

Further reading

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