

Nov 04, 2016 by [Tori Horton](#)

## Considering the “Girl Effect” in Strategic Military Operations <sup>[1]</sup>

Throughout the week Washington and the media have been buzzing about the relationship between President Obama and General McChrystal. McChrystal, who is leading the United States and United Nation efforts in Afghanistan, recently proposed a shift in strategy that involves more engagement within the region along with more U.S. troops to fulfill this mission. According to the *New York Times*, “The strategy General McChrystal has promoted is based on the one unveiled by Mr. Obama in March, concentrating on protecting the Afghan population, training Afghan security forces and building economic opportunity and better governance”. Without visiting or personally knowing the countries of Afghanistan or Pakistan, it is difficult to assess what smart strategy should be. However, it is impossible to see how the military will succeed in this strategy without fundamentally changing the way the United States is viewed in these areas and in effect, engaging in public diplomacy.

Over the summer I have been especially struck by a handful of reports documenting the Taliban in the Pashtun region from GlobalPost Executive Editor Charles Sennott who has been reporting on the Afghanistan and Pakistan region since 1995. Sennott has recently put together [a special report on the Taliban](#).


In an *NPR Fresh Air* report he explains that one of the problems the U.S. military is having while trying to establish relationships of trust with local Afghan leaders is the U.S. staying power. Referencing an earlier interview with a former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst, Owen Sears, [Sennott explains](#) that the Taliban understand if they can convince the local village leaders they will outlast the US military and are therefore the better side with which to align, they will maintain their stronghold. Sennott explains they are “making the message more convincing through a climate of fear, through burning girl’s schools, through going after anyone who cooperates with the U.S. military or coalition.”

So, how can the military make the argument that they deserve faith and trust, and that the United States will continue to support and defend those who help them, even when the military presence is gone? Furthermore is there a role for the common U.S. citizen to play in support of stabilizing the region and building relationships?

Greg Mortenson, founder of the [Central Asian Institute](#) and co-author of [Three Cups of Tea](#) is an extreme, yet powerful example of the potential impact citizen involvement can make. His goal has been to “promote and support community-based education, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.” He came to this goal after living in the region and determining that increasing the number of literate women in this region was one of the most influential ways to improve the standard of living.

Recently, Hillary Clinton spoke on Oprah about [supporting girls as a national security issue](#). She said, “Those who stand against us, stand against the rights of women, so we do have to

integrate this into our national security... We have to invest in girls and women around the world." Dialogue even among elites is changing to include the education and protection of women as one of the pressing issues in the 21st century.

I specifically target girls as a way to connect cultures and positively influence stability in the region based on positive research from the Girl Effect that systematically makes the case why improving the lives of girls significantly improves society. According to a report  the war torn areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan have some of the highest female illiteracy rates in the world. An astounding half of the girls do not have opportunities to attend school or become educated. Additionally, educating girls will have long-term effects as they mature to become mothers raising both boys and girls and pass the gift of education along with their new-found worldview along.

Based on the idea that the United States values and supports educated women and that this value is shared by Muslims as stated in the Qur'an, while opposed by the Taliban, I conclude with three questions:

- 1) What is the U.S. strategy to continue to support the education of girls despite bullying from the Taliban?
  - 2) Could this effort have a significant impact on stabilizing the region and diminishing extremist Taliban control?
  - 3) And is there an opportunity for U.S. citizens to participate through donations and partnerships?
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