Strategy Research Project

CHALLENGES WITH COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

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CHALLENGES WITH COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE IN AFGHANISTAN

That President Obama inherited a war in Afghanistan he did not want has been well documented by the media since his inauguration in January, 2009. In 2007, then Senator Obama openly opposed General David H. Petraeus during senatorial hearings examining the effectiveness of a counterinsurgency (COIN) based strategy in Iraq. Ironically, now President Obama is hoping that the same strategy led by the same general can once again snatch strategic victory from the jaws of defeat, this time in Afghanistan. Paradoxically, the military's adherence to the fundamental principles of COIN doctrine that ultimately produced success for the Bush Administration are the very principles that make Afghanistan unwinnable given the Obama's administration's insistence on beginning a responsible reduction of U.S. forces in July, 2011, and, as emphasized by Vice President Biden, concluding no later than 2014 come "hell or high water."[1]

This paper examines critical components of counterinsurgency doctrine that must be accomplished in order for the strategy to be successful, and concludes that the current application of such doctrine in Afghanistan is unlikely to achieve long term and sustainable success consistent with the President's stated strategic end state and timeline. Additionally, this paper recommends an alternative strategy emphasizing fusion among critical elements of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency doctrines. It asserts that such a strategy is not only more sustainable over time, but is also more suitable for achieving the current policy goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating Al Qaeda, and preventing the terrorist group from attacking the U.S. homeland.[2]

The Making of a Quagmire

Aimlessly adrift for nearly eight years, the war in Afghanistan was largely a side show to the war in Iraq in terms of national resources. Following the military invasion in October, 2001, and the ensuing initial military success combating Taliban and Al Qaeda forces throughout the country, the Bush administration woefully neglected to create a comprehensive strategy. As a result, the military campaign, though marked with pockets of tactical success, was not connected to any sort of larger, definable and realistic political end state. Describing the United States' misaligned strategy early in the Vietnam War, historian David Anderson wrote "ignorance and confidence bred an illusion of success that trapped Eisenhower in a frustrating and futile effort to define and defend U.S. interests."[3] The same could be said of America's earliest efforts in Afghanistan.

Within days of his inauguration in January 2009, President Obama was presented with a decision he was not prepared to make. General David McKiernan, Commanding General of International Security Assistance Forces, requested an additional 30,000 troops be committed to the under-resourced war effort in Afghanistan, a request that both General Petraeus, CENTCOM Commander, and Admiral Mullen, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, supported.[4] While troubling, the request was the impetus for the new President and his administration to begin examining the nation's vital interests in the region and the desired political end states.[5] Though the Obama administration debated elements of policy, it did not have a serious discussion on the proper alignment of military ways and means.[6]

Beginning in the late summer of 2009, the National Security Council initiated a series of intense internal reviews, played out for public consumption, designed to

develop a “whole-of-government” strategy capable of achieving yet-to-be determined security goals. As portrayed in the book, *Obama’s Wars,* by respected reporter Bob Woodward, much of the summer’s debate focused primarily on the size of various force packages. Similarly, Anthony Cordesman, a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, criticized the review’s lack of serious debate over more complex elements of strategy such as Afghan corruption, tribal and ethnic tensions and diversity, resource requirements and operational and strategic risk.[7] Cordesman describes the debate as one in search of bottom lines, and categorizes the resulting strategy as one that “…simply carries forward earlier plans to raise U.S. troop levels…” and lacking the clarity and detail necessary for a sustainable and effective strategy.[8]

The review process culminated on November 29, 2009, when the President’s National Security Advisor published the President’s final guidance and orders for Afghanistan and Pakistan.[9] Two days later, using the United States Military Academy as his backdrop, the President formally announced his decision to send an additional 30,000 military personnel to Afghanistan in order to target the insurgency, secure population centers, and train Afghan security forces, tasks he allocated 18 months to complete.[10] The same guidance later served as the basis for the National Security Strategy (NSS) published in May, 2010, which stated a strategic goal of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to prevent the terrorist group from being able to threaten the American people, their homeland, and their allies, and to deny Al Qaeda safe havens around the world. The way for achieving the ends, the NSS laid out, was the implementation of a counterinsurgency doctrine.[11]

Despite its best efforts, like the Eisenhower administration on the eve of America's intervention in Vietnam, Obama's national security team did not understand the environment it was about to enter, nor did it adequately question the strategic assumptions and strategy it was inheriting. Such errors were made exponentially worse by the President's belief he only had only two years of public support left for the war, and, therefore, needed to impose a politically driven timeline on the military.[12]

Failure to Frame the Environment

U.S. national security strategy is the alignment of ends, ways, and means in an effort to transform existing conditions into future conditions more conducive and beneficial to U.S. vital interests. Requisite to developing strategy is the necessity to understand the operational environment in which the strategy is to be applied. While the implementation of military doctrine is difficult at any level, counterinsurgency doctrine is perhaps the most challenging. Unlike the military's Airland Battle doctrine used during the Cold War and designed to systematically defeat large formations of Soviet mechanized forces conducting predictable and often time-driven operations, counterinsurgency doctrine is far more complex, offering none of the certainty associated with predictable and probable next moves of an identifiable enemy. Instead, the doctrine is riddled with complex paradoxes such as, "tactical success guarantees nothing" and "some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot."[13] Such counterintuitive statements are confusing to even the most experienced leaders and fighters. Most importantly, various geographic and human variables impact successful implementation of COIN doctrine more significantly than they impact other doctrine.

By focusing largely on the military means, specifically numbers of troops to be deployed, the various agencies of the NSC missed an opportunity to undertake a larger

review of the Afghanistan problem and generate their own perspective of the environment and the effects it would have on whatever strategy they ultimately selected. Framing the operational environment (OE), as it is referred to by military strategists, begins with a thorough analysis and understanding of the human and geographic terrain influences that make up the OE, and serves as the point from which the strategy ultimately begins.

Geographic terrain refers to the topographic layout of the earth's contours and natural-made features, such as mountains, ridges, valleys and bodies of water. Terrain also consists of man-made features, such as urban areas, roads, ports, and buildings. Understanding the effects of the terrain is critical at every level of war from tactical to strategic.

Human terrain, the concept of which is not new to the military, is a term that recently gained renewed interest and emphasis as a result of the Army's rewritten counterinsurgency manual in 2006, and refers to culture, religion, political parties, and social customs and characteristics that define a particular population. Human terrain's importance cannot be understated and is the reason why General Petraeus described it as decisive terrain in his commander's counterinsurgency guidance.[14] History is replete with the skeletons of defeated armies whose failure to appreciate and understand the influences that human and geographic terrain had on its military strategy ultimately led to their strategic defeat.

Failure to see the operational environment as it is, not as we want it to be, almost certainly dooms even the best planned and intentioned strategy. For example, in the early years of the Iraq war, it was not Al Qaeda's fighters, formidable as they may have

been, that frustrated the Coalition's strategic progress, but more the Coalition's lack of appreciation for the impact Iraqi human and geographic terrain had on its strategy. This lack of appreciation contributed in creating conditions favorable to the terrorists' recruiting effort, while at the same time alienating large portions of the population. These unintended outcomes fueled the country-wide violence and, in 2006-2007, pushed Iraq to the brink of a Coalition strategic defeat.

In Afghanistan, these influences are so much more extreme than in Iraq that their negative impact on a COIN strategy is greatly multiplied. The fact that the National Security Council never seriously analyzed or challenged assumptions regarding these variables and the obstacles they would impose on military strategy is inexcusable given the multitude of grave lessons experienced in the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Had it done so, perhaps other forms of strategy, like Vice President Biden's proposed counterterrorism plus ("CT plus"), would have been more seriously developed and considered rather than being hastily rejected by senior administration and military leaders.[15] But the omission of such analysis and the failure to properly understand the environment does explain why the Obama administration has failed to fully resource the military in order to achieve the components of COIN doctrine necessary for the overall accomplishment of national security goals, and why, given the short political timeline, the military is unlikely to be able to produce the long term and sustainable results envisioned by the President.

Critical Components to Successful Counterinsurgency Operations

For a strategy based on COIN doctrine to be successful, it is absolutely critical that the counterinsurgent force be capable of protecting the population and of winning their hearts and minds.[16] More importantly, the force must be able to transfer those

functions to the host nation when it is capable. Given complex terrain and limited International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) troop strength, a Pakistani government unable or unwilling to secure its western border, an underdeveloped Afghanistan infrastructure and economy, and a corrupt central Afghan government, these fundamental and essential tasks cannot be accomplished at either the macro or micro levels in the time allocated by current policy.

Protecting the Population

In order to protect the population, the counterinsurgent force must be able to control key terrain, both natural and man-made, in and around major urban areas, as well as the border regions between neighboring countries; achieve increased levels of security (or at least the perception of increased security); and isolate the enemy. All of these actions aid in the defeat of the enemy's influence over the population, but require an inordinate amount of time.

Control Key Terrain. Unlike Iraq and its large urban clusters spread neatly across a relatively flat landscape, the topography of Afghanistan is complex and daunting. It presents significant risks to military operations, especially to those of the infantry and aviation branches on which so much of counterinsurgency operations at the tactical level depend. The seemingly endless ridges and peaks formed by the Hindu Kush mountains stretch skyward more than 10,000, feet isolating large portions of the country from one another.[17] Such topographic compartmentalization significantly hampers trade routes, renders impotent the synergistic effects of fragile "security bubbles", reduces the effects of military technology to track and detect the enemy, and gives rise to tribal loyalty and allegiance as a means of survival, at the expense of national identity or sense of greater good. In the east along the all-important border with Pakistan, the

control of which is critically important to U.S. strategic and tactical success, can be found some of the most treacherous, inhospitable, and unforgiving land in all of the world.[18] Though much of a counterinsurgency strategy relies on stemming the flow of enemy fighters, supplies, and money from entering Afghanistan, U.S. efforts to effectively control this “no-man’s” land have had limited measureable effect and have sadly resulted in some of the most deadly tactical defeats suffered by U.S. forces anywhere in the country with little or no strategic value to show for it.[19]

Compounding the complexity of controlling the physical terrain is the equally challenging task of controlling the numerous urban areas spread randomly across the country. ISAF Headquarters has identified 121 cities and towns whose control would provide a marked advantage over the enemy.[20] However, to protect the population in these areas requires a vast amount of time and troops to clear the enemy, hold against insurgent counter attacks, and build various aspects of the infrastructure, local security forces, and governance. As planning guidance provided in Field Manual 3.24, the ideal ratio between counterinsurgent forces (ISAF soldiers) and the population is between 20-25 counterinsurgents per 1000 residents.[21] While it is difficult to determine exactly how many Afghans live in the 121 urban areas marked as key terrain, based on a country wide population of approximately 29 million, of which these urban areas comprise a considerable portion, it would require approximately 725,000 counterinsurgent troops to properly secure the population–a number more than five times what is on the ground now. But even if the President wanted to increase the number of troops, the solution is self-defeating because Al Qaeda uses the very presence of *any* ISAF soldier in the country as motivation to continue its violent crusades.[22]

While areas such as Kandahar, Marja, and Mawa have been cautiously offered as examples of tactical success, military leaders often caveat the success with qualifiers such as “fragile” and “reversible” when describing the security environments. Furthermore, while U.S. leaders may view security in these areas as improving, a majority of the locals living in these cities do not.[23] Even if we pare down the number of urban areas and districts, it is improbable that the limited number of troops on the ground could influence, never mind control, all the key terrain necessary to protect the population until the time comes when Afghans are able to do it unilaterally.

Control Regional Borders. Of greater strategic concern is the unwillingness of the Pakistani government, despite billions of U.S. dollars in aid, to secure its shared border with Afghanistan, as evident by the fact that more than 80 percent of its ground forces are deployed along its eastern border with India.[24] Also of concern is its repeated refusal to allow U.S. forces to operate inside Pakistan.[25] While it is true that Pakistan has increased its intelligence sharing with the U.S. in support of its Predator drone programs, it does so only in support of those terrorists who challenge Islamabad’s authority.[26] Until the U.S., with Pakistan’s assistance, is able to stem Al Qaeda’s free-flow of weapons, money, and supplies into and out of Afghanistan, a condition that does not appear likely, efforts to secure the population at any level will not be successful.

To date, the border, more than 1,500 miles long, remains lawless, violent and ridiculously porous, a fact that Coalition Forces, despite ongoing efforts, are unable to positively affect. Inability to secure the border or meaningfully reduce the flow of foreign fighters and money between the two countries serves as a concrete example of the

formidable obstacles challenging the Coalition Forces in “operationalizing” strategic level policy.

Isolate the Enemy. AQ is a ruthless terrorist organization that has killed thousands worldwide. Outside of its small and perverse following, the group is mostly shunned by mainstream Muslims. Despite major efforts, it is unable to inspire the Muslim world to rally around its call.[27] Unlike a classic insurgent organization, AQ provides neither a political vision attractive to the masses nor a realistic alternative form of government representative of the people.[28] In AQ’s case, it is not the legitimate grievances of the people that give them purpose; it is their desire to fight the spread and influence of Western culture and ideas. Adherents to such ideology cannot be swayed through diplomacy or negotiated with through statecraft. Efforts to do so will only be exploited by the organization as examples of continuing U.S. attempts at dominating the Muslim world, and will give twisted adherents more reasons for continued Jihad.[29] How best to defeat Al Qaeda is the heart of the strategy debate–directly, through the lethal targeting of its leaders, or indirectly, by reducing its support base in the form of the Taliban.

While repulsive to most non-Afghan Muslims, the moderate Taliban is still widely tolerated by most Afghans. In a recent Washington Post article, nearly three quarters of Afghans believe the Karzai government should pursue negotiations with the Taliban, and almost two thirds are willing to allow Taliban leaders to hold political positions.[30] Like the insurgency in Iraq, it is difficult to accurately ascertain the numbers of radical Taliban or their motivations for supporting AQ, but it is reasonable to believe that a majority of the Taliban who do support AQ do so only to a degree that benefits

themselves or their local communities in the form of improved services, security, and infrastructure. Initiating an under-resourced counterinsurgency to confront a small number of radical Taliban, supporting an even smaller number of foreign Al Qaeda fighters, runs the tremendous risk of worsening the fragile security and social conditions, not improving them.

Winning the Hearts and Minds

Even in the best of circumstances, winning the hearts and minds, an overused and ambiguously defined concept, the idea of which is indispensible to the success of COIN, is extremely difficult for the counterinsurgent force to achieve. Saddled with the heavy burden of having to produce lasting tangible improvements that the majority of the population deem necessary and important for the restoration of security and normality, the counterinsurgent force often targets various socio-economic sectors such as healthcare, education, infrastructure and critical utilities as visual signs that progress is being made. Equally important, these projects are essential to the counterinsurgent force in laying the foundation of trust, commitment, and lasting partnership with the people. However, unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has no mature foundation--be it economy, infrastructure, governance or other–from which to build, and a COIN-centric strategy that cannot produce tangible improvements is ultimately doomed to fail.

Prior to the arrival of Coalition Forces, the international community generally considered Afghanistan a failing state. Eight years and $336 billion U.S. dollars later, little progress has been made to reverse the trend.[31] According to the 2010 Failed States Index, every category by which the non-profit organization Fund the Peace uses to measure the health of a country has steadily worsened over the last four years, making Afghanistan the world's #6 failed state.[32] Economic indicators show that 36

percent of the country's inhabitants live below the poverty level; unemployment is widespread at 35 percent; and illiteracy is estimated at 72 percent.[33] Such figures provide little hope for the more than 12 million citizens under the age of 15 who cannot assist in supporting their family and who are prime recruiting targets for extremists and terrorist groups willing and able to pay their lackeys the money they need to live.[34] The same can be said of the lucrative networks of illegal drug cartels and their production of the world's supply of opium and heroin, which makes up an estimated 60 percent of the national economy.[35]

Social indicators show a diverse ethnic composition of more than seven different major ethnic groups, speaking more than 30 languages with tribal and religious loyalties, not with a common national identity.[36] The country also has one of the highest mortality rates in the world, caused mostly by a pandemic of infectious diseases, and augmented by a steady increase in civilian deaths caused by Taliban or Coalition forces.[37] In 2009, civilian deaths caused by war rose 14 percent from 2008 and were on pace during the first half of 2010 to eclipse the high of 2009.[38] Additionally, the war's violence is blamed for causing more than 240,000 people to become displaced, mostly from southern and eastern Afghanistan.[39] Worse, most of the few educated and competent professional workers have fled the country taking its intellectual power with them.[40] Critical infrastructure such as water treatment plants and electrical grids are either non-existent or dilapidated beyond repair. This contributes greatly to the social problems and tensions.

Politically, Transparency International, a non-governmental agency that studies corruption, ranks Afghanistan as the world's third most corrupt government in 2010 due

to its inability or unwillingness to retain control of the state, combat ongoing violence, or provide protection of basic human rights.[41]

The assumption by the NSC that the international community, despite a limited "surge" of military and civilian resources in both numbers and projected duration, can improve conditions on any of the above fronts in an 18 month period is dangerously flawed and is the Achilles Heel of any counterinsurgency success. While it is possible to show signs of improving security in specific areas at the tactical level, strategic level security will not be realized as long as critical services, key infrastructure, wide-spread corruption, and pandemics grip the country, spreading instability and dire conditions for survival.

Financial Costs

Because of the long time required for COIN operations to produce positive results, such operations tend to be very expensive endeavors. One estimate published by the Congressional Research Service reported that Department of Defense (DOD) spending in Afghanistan grew 63 percent between FY 2009 and 2010, from $3.5 to $5.7 billion, bringing the total amount of money spent on the U.S. COIN strategy to over $336 billion thus far.[42] Furthermore, the costs continue to rise. In the first month of 2011, the senior U.S. commander in charge of training Afghan security forces announced his command will spend $20 billion in 2010 and 2011 training, equipping and supplying Afghan forces.[43] That amount is more than the total that was spent on training Iraqi security forces during 2002-2009.[44]

Even this huge sum might soon be inadequate. In an effort to facilitate the training of the Afghan security forces so ISAF soldiers can begin withdrawing, U.S, Afghan, and NATO officials are readying a proposal that would boost the number of

trained security forces from its current goal of 305,000 in October, 2012, to 378,000 at a proposed increase of 17 percent over the $11.6 billion already requested for by the Obama administration in the 2011 Defense Budget.[45] Added to a national deficit of well over $13 trillion and national unemployment above 9 percent, it is highly unlikely that the United States can sustain this level of financial commitment to a strategy over the long run without cutting domestic spending to such sacred social programs as Medicare and Social Security, raising taxes, or cutting defense spending for modernization, training and readiness.

In a January 27, 2011, interview, Secretary of Defense Gates blasted Congress for not passing a 2011 Defense Budget though already four months into the fiscal year. Calling the failure to do so a national security concern, Gates highlighted a shortfall of more than $23 billion between the proposed defense budget and the budget allocated under the current continuing resolution.[46] After an elevated operations tempo (OPTEMPO) for the past 10 years, the Army and Marines are finally in a position to resume training for a full spectrum of operations but may not have the money to do so.[47] With a questionable return on investment, the American people are justified in asking what has all the money "bought" them.

According to Dr. Patrick Cronin, leading security strategist for the Center of a New American Security, unlike America's costly intervention in World War II where the United States eventually emerged stronger, "…there are few imaginable scenarios that leave the U.S. in a better global position at the conclusion of Afghanistan…."[48] In fact, the contrary might be true if we continue to inflict irreparable damage to our economy

and to our Armed Forces. It is time for the President to align his means and ways and to change strategy in Afghanistan.

Alternative Strategy

The growing reliance on asymmetric attacks and irregular warfare tactics by a rapidly expanding alliance of Al Qaeda affiliates presents significant threats to U.S. global interests and is the cornerstone of Al Qaeda's strategy of attrition against the West. According to U.S. and Pakistani intelligence sources, Al Qaeda's new chief of international operations, Saif al-Adel, is focused on increasing the number of "small-but-often" attacks designed to hurt the West more than larger, more spectacular attacks, and intended to persuade public opinion that the war against terror is unwinnable.[49] Additionally, smaller more frequent attacks support the terrorist group's larger strategy of attrition by tempting the United States to over-respond, either militarily or financially, and needlessly overextend its finite resources, as is the case in Afghanistan.

In contrast to the current strategy requiring a comprehensive commitment to the Afghanistan people and their government not only to secure the population but also to conduct nation building, a counterterrorism strategy promises neither. Nor is there a need for territorial control.[50] It also frees the counterterrorist force from the many time consuming and costly activities incurred when working "by, with, and through" the host nation military and governmental apparatus. In fact, counterterrorism (CT) is an ideal strategy for areas like Afghanistan that lack effective central control and the capacity for self policing.[51] Instead, CT doctrine aims to render regional areas inhospitable to terrorists by sustained lethal targeting of their leaders and support groups, often using specially trained units to conduct covert actions aided by sophisticated intelligence collection assets and deadly aerial platforms.[52] A CT strategy was what noted British

historian John Keegan was advocating in late September 2001, when, based on nearly two millennium of outsider attempts to conquer Afghanistan, he advised the U.S. to "get in there fast, kill faster, and get out faster yet."[53]

Compared to COIN, CT requires fewer boots on the ground, is financially cheaper, and is more sustainable over time. Vice President Biden originally raised the concept of such a strategy during the administration's 2009 strategy review though the JCS Chairman quickly dismissed the idea.[54] As reported in *Obama's War*s, the CT option envisioned by the JCS staff consisted of approximately 20,000 Special Forces soldiers–10,000 used to hunt AQ at an operational pace that the enemy could not match and another 10,000 to conduct traditional foreign internal defense missions with Afghan security forces.[55] Biden had good reason to believe such a specialized force could better achieve the desired end state of disrupting and dismantling AQ due to the increased success rate of such lethal operations–more than 80 percent–during the spring and summer of 2009.[56]

Another proposed CT course of action suggests that a force disposition of 15,000, down more than 85,000 from current strength, could achieve the President's vision of disrupting Al Qaeda throughout Afghanistan. As proposed by Austin Long, an assistant professor at Columbia University's School of International Public Affairs, such a force would occupy airfields at Bagram, Kandahar, and Jalabad and would consist of U.S special operation forces, augmented by like units from other countries, such as Britain and Canada, to conduct intelligence- driven "kill or capture" missions.[57] Such specialized operations were conducted routinely in Iraq, often against targets with little hope of negotiation or compromise, and are credited with killing and capturing hundreds

of high value Al Qaeda targets leading to the eventual implosion of the terrorist organization. If recent reports are an indicator as to how such a CT strategy would succeed in Afghanistan, then the outlook is favorable. A report provided to General Petreaus in October 2010, showed that 90 percent of the operational success has come from 5 percent of the force–specifically special mission units.[58] The sad corollary is that the remaining 10 percent has come from the 100,000 man COIN-centric force.

In the Presidential-directed review of the Afghanistan/Pakistan strategy released by the administration in December 2010, subtle validation of CT's success became apparent. In the report, much of the optimism and measurable progress of the past year's efforts were linked to the progress made in disrupting and weakening Al Qaeda's leadership and abilities in Pakistan—the epicenter of the terrorist group's operations.[59] Not so surprising, it is in these areas that the majority of the lethal drone strikes, roughly 200 since 2008 killing approximately 1,300 militants, and increased covert actions have occurred, absent any sizeable ISAF force.[60] Contrast that to the review's vague and less-than inspiring strategic assessment of the progress being made in Afghanistan where phrases such as "fragile" and "reversible security" dampen any optimism that real and transferable progress has been made.[61]

With a smaller force comes a smaller price tag. Based on Department of Defense records, between FY 2005-2009 the average annual per troop cost was $525,000.[62] Reducing the current troop strength from 100,000 to the 13,000 proposed above translates into an annual savings of approximately $456 billion. Such a savings makes CT a more viable and sustainable long term strategy necessary in this war against Al

Qaeda, and flexible and adaptive enough to be effective on a variety of future battlefields.

While attractive, the CT approach is not perfect and comes with as many detractors as a COIN-based strategy does. CT, for example, does not address the friction of operating covertly in another sovereign nation's borders. It does not address or attempt to fix poor socio-economic factors that often breed instability and fragile security, nor does it create western style democracies around the world. However, while idealistic, the amount of resources and national treasure spent to obtain these ends is rarely commensurate with the final outcome. Given the challenges of nation building in Afghanistan, it seems logical that CT is as viable a strategy as COIN in achieving our political end state, but at a much reduced cost.

Conclusion

Strategy is the alignment of means and ways to achieve the desired political ends. In Afghanistan, the desired end state is the disruption and ultimate defeat of Al Qaeda in order to prevent the group from conducting future attacks against the United States. Though largely successful in Iraq, COIN strategy is unlikely to prevail in Afghanistan given the politically driven timeline in which military troops are expected to be withdrawn and the enormous cost required to sustain critical counterinsurgency activities. The strategy is straining the U.S. Armed Forces and the American coffers and has yet to show enough progress to justify the costs, as measured in dollars or lives. Worse, the strategy plays directly into the hands of an inferior enemy who, unable to defeat the U.S. directly, is attempting to defeat it indirectly through an attrition of American will and resources. Each time the U.S. engages Al Qaeda and its affiliates with a default COIN-centric strategy, it risks its military becoming overextended and its

national bank account becoming further depleted. It is also likely that, despite the United States' best efforts to the contrary, it unintentionally enflames large portions of the moderate Muslim world that views its "assistance" as intrusive, and gives extremists added legitimacy for Jihad.

A counterterrorism strategy is the best alternative to that of COIN. CT is a more flexible, adaptable and sustainable strategy especially well-suited for combating terrorist networks. CT uses intelligence, gathered from multiple and often covert means, to systematically dissect targeted organizations into groups of subordinate networks, each of which performs a critical function necessary to the overall success and survival of the organization. Once these sub networks are identified and isolated, the U.S. can more efficiently apply its various elements of national power, be it through diplomatic, economic, or military means, to more precisely target and ultimately disrupt and defeat the larger terrorist organization. Precision targeting significantly reduces the inefficient over-application of resources commonly associated with counterinsurgency strategy. A strategy based on counterterrorism doctrine not only mitigates many of the unintentional consequences of COIN, but, in the case of Afghanistan, better aligns the nation's means and ways to the Obama administration's desired policy objectives.

Endnotes

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