

Challenging Convention: An Alternative Policy for CENTCOM AOR

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between current US foreign policy and military strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the economic, tactical and cultural ramifications of that policy. Specific attention is paid to the idea that large-scale traditional troop deployments are inefficient and unsustainable and should be replaced by smaller, more mobile teams comprised of intelligence operatives, civil affairs and Special Operations troops. The Several source articles are taken into account, including the US Department of Defense 2009 fiscal report and several intelligence agency reports are taken into account.

An Alternative Policy for CENTCOM AOR

Have we learned nothing from Vietnam? US policy makers continue to rely on an antiquated model of foreign policy and military tactics that treat the most strategically important theatres in the war against terrorism, such as the Central Command Area of Operations (CENTCOM), as if it were a Cold War battlefield. The Obama administration is on the verge of maintaining the status quo by dedicating up to 40,000 more troops to Afghanistan in the erroneous belief that more traditional forces will be able pacify a region that has historically been contested by guerilla forces connected to the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other extremist organizations. In order to defeat a vocal and dangerous minority of religious extremists based in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere throughout the world, the old tactics must be abandoned and new policies need to be implemented. To reverse the detrimental effects of the current policy, America must discontinue its reliance on large scale deployment of traditional troops and place more emphasis on utilizing small, highly mobile teams of Special Operations troops backed by intelligence professionals, psychological operations and civil affairs detachments.

The tactics currently being used in CENTCOM are not working. US policy-makers and tacticians are relying on old war-fighting doctrine designed to halt a Soviet invasion of Europe instead of addressing an urban insurgency. By attempting to use the ancient tactic of using combat forces to attack the enemies' supply channels and support infrastructure, US policy-makers demonstrate their inexperience in dealing with counterinsurgency operations. In counterinsurgency operations there are no traditional support infrastructure for combat troops to attack, and

insurgents instead rely on the local populace for support (Gartner, 2009). Since it is morally reprehensible and tactically inefficient to destroy an insurgencies' "tail" (the local population), an astute tactician should seek an alternative policy that differs from conventional doctrine by fielding "agile, well-informed, culturally astute leaders" and employing "nation-builders as well as warriors" (Petraeus, 2007).

The Council on Foreign Relations recently released its findings, which indicate that the Taliban is experiencing a major resurgence in Afghanistan as a result of failed US policy (Bruno, 2009). Kenneth Katzman, a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs for the Congressional Research Service, said in July 2008, "intolerance for a sustained U.S. troop presence is translating into a little more permissiveness in some areas for the Taliban. That is a worrisome trend" (Bruno, 2009). Increased levels of conventional troops play right into the overall strategy of extremists who can use tactical blunders and civilian casualties as a major recruiting tool. One only needs to look at the Iraq Study Group Report or the current resurgence of the Taliban in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan to realize that the current strategy of conventional deployment on search and destroy missions is not tactically effective, economically sustainable or culturally attuned.

The recently published US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual addresses the idea that current tactics being used are not appropriate for the conflict. In the preface, Lieutenant General John Nagl points out that the application of large-scale conventional forces to what is inherently a localized, small scale conflict is the wrong approach. Nagl specifically notes that counterinsurgency is a relatively new concept to US forces and US policy-makers initially reacted inappropriately to the new threat by applying outdated war fighting doctrine to the new conflict (Nagl, 2006). The bottom line is obvious: policy must change before the US loses its vital interests in CENTCOM.

There is a viable alternative that is economically sustainable, tactically advantageous and also reduces the US "cultural footprint" on foreign soil (which has been a major recruiting point among most major insurgent groups). Small teams of intelligence agents and civil affairs professionals receive more specialized training that is far better suited for counterinsurgency than their combat arms counterparts. The plan to shift focus to smaller, nontraditional teams provides several benefits to the United States: the most obvious benefit being the economic advantage. It must be conceded that small teams of well-equipped, highly educated and trained troops are more expensive to field when compared to the average infantry unit, but the smaller overall numbers would lessen the overall drain

on the US Treasury. The current level of defense spending has reached critical mass and is unsustainable based on our current GDP: The US Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (comptroller) reported that the 2009 Department of Defense budget was designating 66 billion dollars for operations in Afghanistan (Department of Defense, 2009). This allocation could be significantly reduced if the US were to fund smaller, more versatile forces instead of traditional deployments.

Of the billions of dollars approved for contingency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, only 1.8 billion was approved for military intelligence. Another 3 billion was allotted for "non-DoD classified operations." This grand total of 4.8 billion for DoD intelligence operations only represents 7% of the current defense budget (Department of Defense, 2009). In spite of the higher costs for individual operators, the overall budget can be greatly decreased if these operatives were utilized as "force multipliers" whose presence on the battlefield can create and maintain a force larger than its own numbers. This is done through recruitment of indigenous forces, the use of technology and information, airpower and intelligence collection that effectively increases a unit's power projection ability far beyond its small size. The United States Army defines this concept in Field Manual 3-24 (The Army/Marines Counterinsurgency Field Manual, hereafter referred to as COIN) describing the role of government agents who disburse funds and training to local programs as a way of recruiting and maintaining an indigenous information network (FM 3-24, 121). By placing more emphasis on small units, such as the Military Transition Teams (MITT) who currently train and equip the Afghan National Army and regional police forces, the US military powerhouse could reduce its overall budget to a fraction of its current operating costs. By using intelligence units, Special Forces and civil affairs soldiers in place of infantry units, the United States would be better able to direct funding where it is truly needed: rebuilding and training the Afghan National Army and providing critical civil services to the citizens of Afghanistan.

The second point of contention with the current operating strategy and impending "troop surge" is the tactical viability of such a mission. Many supporters of the Iraq troop surge indicate incorrectly that such a surge would be viable in Afghanistan as well. It is important to remember the vast cultural and geographical differences between the two theatres of conflict. Although both are located in CENTCOM, the differences outweigh the similarities. Afghanistan remains far more isolated from the rest of the world than Iraq ever has been. Because of the austere, mountainous terrain, the government of Afghanistan remains highly decentralized. This decentralization of social structure is reflected in the economic institutions,

cultural norms and laws epitomized by a tribal mentality that reigns supreme in the mountain villages.

The best way to combat the decentralized nature of the current threat is to form small teams that are highly adept at integrating themselves into the local population. By shifting strategic policy away from using infantry "line units" and focusing more responsibility on trained HUMINT collectors who establish relationships with indigenous forces, the United States demonstrates disinterest in any imperial holdings in the area. In environments such as Afghanistan, small units on foot or in light vehicles are the only way to truly reach out to the local population.

By establishing close ties with local Afghan leadership (as is the primary mission of Special Operations troops), the United States would undercut the insurgent's ability to recruit while simultaneously projecting its own power in the region. Fotini Christia, the Assistant Professor of Political Science at MIT, and Michael Semple, a regional specialist, note in their article "Flipping the Taliban" that Taliban warlords have institutionalized the idea of changing allegiances to align themselves with the victor. Ethnic leadership of traditionally marginalized ethnic groups, such as the Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks, might be willing to consider a temporary alliance with US forces (instead of the Taliban) providing the right conditions were presented. Small teams of trained professionals are much better suited for navigating their way into the mujahedeen ranks and building rapport with these invaluable potential allies (Christia and Semple, 2009).

By taking into account the decentralization nature of Afghanistan (compared to Iraq's highly structured domination by the secular socialist Ba'ath Party) U.S. foreign policymakers must also cease to treat the two environments as one. A symbolic split in the areas of operations to CENTCOM West and CENTCOM East would not only provide a visible symbol of the delineation between the different theatres but also allow regional commanders more autonomy to address their respective situations. It is unlikely that 40,000 conventional troops will be successful in reaching out to regional tribal communities and integrating local fighters into the war against extremists in Afghanistan (while in Iraq it seems the Surge Policy in conjunction with the Anbar Awakening has been met with astounding success). 40,000 more troops would add an immense burden to already overstretched supply channels that must be delivered by air from Kuwait. More troops would decrease the ability for commanders to react quickly and flexibly to highly mobile, Taliban guerilla incursions into contested territory. The only benefit that can be claimed by a troop influx is the increased stability and security of the large operating bases in Kabul and Kandahar. If the only goal is to reinforce pre-established "green zones" and attempt to wait

out the war, the United States will be defeated in Afghanistan in the grand tradition of the Mongols, the British and the Soviets.

US intelligence analysis indicates that the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan was a direct result of the inflexibility and immobility that occurred due to their over-reliance on conventional forces. Despite the Red Army's historical resilience and emphasis on rapid motorstrelkovy (mechanized infantry), declassified Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) documents, such as "Afghan Resistance" (1982), show a causal relationship between the Soviet's inability to adapt to the environment and their withdrawal. Instead of using the KGB and GRU to integrate with the population and extract information to pass onto the SPETNAZ, the Soviet Union retaliated against insurgent attacks with helicopter gunship attacks and fixed-wing bombing runs. The same document indicates that the unwillingness of the Soviets to reach out to the local population resulted in the Soviet's inability to break the stalemate.

The United States can only reach out to the civilian population by minimizing what many indigenous people see as a foreign cultural footprint. As noted earlier, the United States does not have to sacrifice its power projection ability to reach out; it only needs to restructure how it projects that power. It must be conceded that some conventional troops will be necessary to provide the security conditions necessary for intelligence agents and Special Forces operatives to integrate with the local populations. It is also clear that the elite units are better suited for cultural outreach: they are required to take foreign language and cultural courses as part of their regular military training. Some of these classes, such as the ones taught at the US Army's Defense Language Institute, increase the non-traditional troops' cultural sensitivity and prepare them for asymmetrical warfare far better than the three months of infantry tactics training provided to "line troops." Often these line troops are young (18 to 21 years old) and inexperienced soldiers and Marines who maintain highly aggressive posture while receiving little formal training about the local culture. By fielding fewer but better educated and culturally attuned troops, the US can decrease the negative impact it has on the countries in which it operates, with the further benefit of detracting from the opposition's ability to recruit their own young, impressionable men into the insurgency on the basis of the cultural transgressions committed by untrained troops.

Challenging conventional tactics is not a new concept. Over a dozen bipartisan members of the House of Representatives recently sent President Obama an appeal to re-think the surge strategy in Afghanistan (Nichols, 2009). By abandoning conventional thinking and creating small teams of professionals, we can better react to

the asymmetric warfare being waged by insurgents and support Afghanistan's fledgling democratic government. US intelligence professionals and Special Operations troops are better trained and equipped than their conventional counterparts to assist local forces in subduing the Taliban.

It is time to give the "poor bloody infantry" a much-needed break and turn responsibility of counterinsurgency over to the troops best trained and prepared for this type of conflict. While traditional forces are still necessary to provide security for both support troops as well as the local population, it is time that we adjusted the "tooth to tail" ratio to a level that is better suited for counterinsurgency operations. Once Afghanistan is fully stabilized and security responsibility has been turned over to local forces, US security policy and troop ratios will need to be re-evaluated to remain current and able to adapt quickly to the next conflict with Al Qaeda, as a new one is bound to appear.

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