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US moves toward Afghan guerrilla war

By Brian M Downing
7/10/2011

The United States is beginning an interesting new dimension to the 10-year-old war in Afghanistan. Counter-insurgency efforts will be complemented by an expanded unconventional warfare campaign in many insurgent-controlled areas. This change in approach may have a considerable impact on the stalemate and hasten meaningful negotiations.

The US is training scores of special forces teams to infiltrate into and operate in areas that the Taliban and other insurgent forces have gained control of in the past few years. Such operations have been in effect for a few years now, but the program is enjoying greater support. Many recently retired special forces personnel are being asked to return to active duty - a sign that the program is significant and growing.

The teams will be inserted into insurgent-dominated districts, chiefly in the south and east, and charged with conducting reconnaissance, interdicting the movement of men and materiel, directing air strikes, killing political and military leaders, and otherwise wreaking havoc in the insurgents' base areas.

The teams will likely be accompanied by Pashtun scouts from the particular districts who will provide knowledge of the terrain, mountain trails, hiding places, and local notables - friendly or not. Some of these scouts will be defectors whose loyalties will have been thoroughly looked into, though suspicions will remain. This aspect of the effort parallels the Chieu Hoi program of the Vietnam War, which placed Vietcong defectors with US troops conducting operations in tough areas.

It is hoped that the scouts, in conjunction with special forces teams, may in some districts be able to form local guerrilla bands to further weaken Taliban control - an insurgency within an insurgency. Even when the Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan (1996-2001), there were regions that resisted them and even formed insurgent bands to fight them. Today, many local tribes dislike the Taliban but acquiesce to them owing to intimidation or to the perception of their inevitable ascendancy. The identities of such tribes are reasonably known in Kabul and will be likely areas of concentration.

Efforts to build anti-Taliban insurgencies will draw from 1990s programs that lured mujahideen fighters to the government side after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from certain provinces. The Afghan social group (*qawm*) was useful in attracting defectors as one member on the government side used social ties to attract other members of his *qawm*.

The program seeks to further reduce the insurgents' momentum, throw their logistics and base areas into disarray, force them to withdraw prime troops from contested districts, and in time, bring the insurgents to a negotiated settlement.

Across the Durand Line?

Special forces teams might be used in cross-border operations into Pakistan, especially into the North Waziristan tribal area where the Haqqani network, al-Qaeda and kindred groups enjoy safe havens. Another prospective area would be in the northern part of Pakistan's Balochistan province, which is another insurgent base area and only 150 kilometers from the reasonably secure towns of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah.

United States special forces personnel have trained Pakistani militias along the frontier and so already have knowledge of the terrain and the troops operating there. Furthermore, the US has built its own intelligence network inside Pakistan, which has been successful in targeting leaders of the Haqqani network and most notably in finding and killing Osama bin Laden.

This intelligence network greatly irritated the Pakistani army and Inter-Services Intelligence service (ISI), and cross-border operations by US special forces will only increase the irritation. The US must be prepared for this. Only a few months ago, a cross-border incident led to a crisis in US-Pakistani relations, the constriction of US/International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) supply convoys, and eventually to an apology from General David Petraeus, then the US's top man in Afghanistan.

Since then, however, events have put the Pakistani army and ISI on the back foot. The discovery of Bin Laden living comfortably near an army base, increased revelations of ties with various militant groups, and most recently suspected complicity in the murder of Syed Saleem Shahzad, Asia Times Online's Pakistan bureau chief, have cast a harsh light on a darker part of Pakistan.

Many countries are looking on Pakistan as a rogue state - and a failing one. Nonetheless, stepped-up cross border activity may bring not only increased tension between the US and Pakistan, but also firefights between their troops.

Prospects

Guerrilla operations and the smaller troop levels they require will allow the US to rely less heavily on supply routes winding through Pakistan - a country whose military is now deemed unreliable. A lighter logistical load can be increasingly borne by northern routes from Russia - a country whose commitment to containing Islamist militancy is now deemed quite reliable.

The US has already reduced its reliance on Pakistan for logistics. A year ago, the preponderance of US/ISAF supplies came through Pakistan, but today only 40% do so, and that number is slated to dwindle to 25% by the end of 2011. Pakistan is becoming less important to the US.

Special forces operations will reduce the need for massive firepower, which has long been a source of irritation in the Afghan people and a recruitment attraction for insurgent groups. Heavy fire power will be confined to extracting a beleaguered team or on identifying a sizable insurgent force.

Guerrilla warfare could well allow the US to increase its effectiveness against the insurgents while at the same time reducing its troops levels and expenditures. Both will be welcome in the increasingly restive US public. Unconventional warfare might even intrigue the public, which retains considerable attraction for imaginative forms of war, resonant as they are with romantic figures such as T E Lawrence and less illustrious green berets of the Vietnam War.

President Barack Obama's reduction of troop levels will almost certainly require consolidation into a number of enclaves in the south and east where counter-insurgency operations have met with success and some Pashtun tribes remain hostile to the Taliban. This will in effect cede more territory to the insurgents, but paradoxically this will have advantages. The more territory ceded to insurgent groups, the more territory they must defend from US guerrilla forces.

Many observers will wonder why such unconventional warfare hasn't already been more widely put into effect. After all, the Taliban have controlled large parts of the south and east for a few years now and the US has long had a number of troops capable of such ops. Indeed, one of the principal missions of the green berets during the cold war was to organize insurgencies behind Soviet lines in the event Western Europe were to fall to the the Red army.

Unfortunately, bureaucratic inertia and doctrinal commitment to conventional warfare won out, until recently. Many might even wonder if such operations would have been a more effective response to the September 11, 2001, attacks than overthrowing the Taliban and occupying a country so fragmented and fractious. But wisdom comes only late in the day.