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Air Power in the New Counterinsurgency Era
The Strategic Importance of USAF Advisory and Assistance Missions

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Cover image of CT team: Combat Aviation Advisors from the 6th SOS and regular army soldiers from Chad in front of a Chad Air Force C-130.

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Summary

Often treated by Americans as an exceptional form of warfare, insurgency is anything but. Spanning the globe, centuries, and societies, insurgency is quite common. The United States itself was founded by insurgents—British colonists who rebelled against the abuses and neglect of British rule. At the end of the 19th century, the United States fought Filipino insurgents in its newly won territory. During the 20th century, U.S. forces fought insurgents in Nicaragua; Haiti; the Dominican Republic; the Philippines (again); Vietnam; and most recently, Afghanistan and Iraq. It has provided support to counterinsurgent forces in many more locations and support to insurgents in a few (most notably Nicaragua and Afghanistan).

This monograph seeks to help USAF prepare for future insurgency challenges by describing current trends, presenting an overview of key counterinsurgency principles, exploring counterinsurgency grand strategy options for the United States, proposing a new precautionary approach to counterinsurgency, and assessing current and potential USAF contributions.

Key Findings

- The primary insurgent threat to the United States today stems from regional rebels and global terrorists who share a common ideology. These ties allow global terrorists to use a local insur-

1 Throughout this report we use insurgent and rebel interchangeably.
gency as a training ground, to provide sanctuary, and to motivate a global audience (pp. 3–4).

- Today the only terrorist group with both the capability and desire to conduct attacks against U.S. interests at home and abroad is al Qaeda (pp. 24, 55).
- The U.S. counterinsurgency priority, therefore, should be the insurgencies motivated by radical Islam and global jihad. These are the ones most likely to find common cause with al Qaeda (p. 58).
- Previous experience with insurgencies has demonstrated that insurgencies are rarely defeated by outside powers. Rather, the best role for outsiders is an indirect one: training, advising, and equipping the local nation, which must win the war politically and militarily (pp. 4–5).
- A precautionary strategy that seeks to defeat the insurgency in its early stages is the most cost-effective approach, potentially avoiding huge costs in lives and dollars (pp. 82–93).
- Because insurgencies are fundamentally driven by social, political, and economic issues, nonmilitary aid will often be most important, especially in the early phases of a rebellion. Support to the host nation’s police, security, and intelligence organizations is especially critical and should precede or occur in parallel with military assistance. When they are necessary, military actions must be carefully designed to support the overall political strategy. In past insurgencies, ill-considered actions by the government’s military and security forces often increased insurgent determination and popular support for the rebels. The United States and leaders of partner nations must take care lest the military dynamic overtake the political (pp. 37–41, 45–47).
- Because air power has much to contribute to counterinsurgencies around the globe, advising, training, and equipping partner air forces will be a key component of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts (pp. 109–114).
- USAF needs a full-spectrum counterinsurgency capability. Although training, advising, and equipping efforts will be USAF’s most common role in counterinsurgency, some situations may
require U.S. combat air power to team with indigenous or coalition ground forces or to participate in joint and interagency U.S. counterinsurgency operations (pp. 146–147).

Recommendations for USAF

USAF possesses a broad range of capabilities, in both its special and general-purpose forces, that can make significant contributions to fighting insurgents. Bringing these capabilities to bear on the counterinsurgency problem will require that counterinsurgency be treated as a problem as important as conventional warfighting, even though the manpower, dollars, and force structure devoted to it will likely never need to be as large as those devoted to major combat operations. To enhance its contribution to counterinsurgency, USAF should take the following steps:

• **Make counterinsurgency an institutional priority.** Without clear signals from senior USAF leaders, the institutional USAF will continue to treat counterinsurgency either as something that only the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) does or as a lesser included case that requires no special preparation. Major speeches, vision statements, personnel policy changes, and new programs will be necessary to overcome this perception (p. 133).

• **Create organizations and processes to oversee USAF counterinsurgency efforts.** The USAF will need new organizations to develop and oversee counterinsurgency policy and concepts, to integrate efforts across the USAF, to coordinate with DoD and other agencies, and to execute counterinsurgency advisory and assistance missions (pp. 133, 135).

• **Develop and nurture counterinsurgency expertise throughout USAF.** Counterinsurgency expertise does exist in USAF, but, outside of AFSOC, it is scattered and limited. Substantial counterinsurgency education should be a mandatory part of the cur-
riculum in the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps, at the
Air Force Academy, and in all phases of Air Force Professional
Military Education from Squadron Officer School to the Air War
College. Opportunities for more in-depth training and education
will need to be developed, as will appropriate career paths for
counterinsurgency specialists (pp. 135–136).

- **Create a wing-level organization for aviation advising.** This
  is likely the single most important initiative USAF can take to
  enhance its own counterinsurgency capabilities. By creating
  a wing-level organization, USAF will be able to grow its advis-
  ory capacity to meet the demand; expand aviation assistance to
  include institutional and higher-level advising; develop new coun-
  terinsurgency concepts and technologies for partner air forces;
  supervise an embedded advisor program; and offer sufficiently
  diverse opportunities to attract and retain the very best officers,
  noncommissioned officers, and civilian personnel (pp. 136–143).

- **Enhance USAF combat capabilities for counterinsurgency.**
  Although only as a last resort, USAF does need the ability to
  conduct air operations in support of partner-nation forces and/or
  U.S. joint forces fighting insurgencies. USAF already has con-
  siderable relevant capabilities, and its modernization programs
  will enhance them further. Beyond that, specific technologies
  (e.g., foliage-penetrating sensors) and, most important, a deeper
  understanding of the insurgent phenomenon will increase the
effectiveness of air power in future counterinsurgency operations
(pp. 146–147).