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Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

Seth G. Jones

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

Following the initial success of U.S. and Afghan forces in overthrowing the Taliban regime in 2001, an increasingly violent insurgency began to develop. A mixed group of insurgents comprised of the Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, foreign fighters, local tribes, and criminal organizations began a sustained effort to overthrow the Afghan government. U.S. and coalition efforts in Afghanistan offer a useful opportunity to assess what works—and what does not—in counterinsurgency warfare. This study examines the beginning of the insurgency in Afghanistan and asks three major questions. First, what was the nature of the insurgency? Second, what factors have contributed to the rise of insurgencies more broadly and to the insurgency in Afghanistan in particular? Third, what capabilities should the U.S. military consider developing to improve its ability to wage effective counterinsurgency operations?

The core argument of this study is that the United States should focus its resources on developing capabilities that help improve the capacity of the *indigenous government* and its security forces to wage counterinsurgency warfare. It has not always done this well. The analysis of 90 insurgencies since 1945 in Chapter Two indicates that three variables are correlated with the success (and failure) of counterinsurgency efforts:

- capability of indigenous security forces, especially police
- local governance
- external support for insurgents, including sanctuary.

The U.S. military—along with other U.S. and coalition partners—is more likely to be successful in counterinsurgency warfare the more capable and legitimate the indigenous security forces are (especially the police), the better the capacity of the local government is, and the less external support to insurgents there is. The indigenous government and its forces have a greater chance of gaining, in Max Weber’s words, a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”¹ In many cases, a significant direct intervention by U.S. military forces may undermine popular support and legitimacy. The United States is also unlikely to remain for the duration of most insurgencies: This study’s assessment of 90 insurgencies indicates that it takes an average of 14 years to defeat insurgents once an insurgency develops.

In the Afghan insurgency, the competence—and, in some areas, incompetence—of the indigenous government and its security forces have been critical factors. This analysis suggests that success in Afghanistan hinges on three factors.

First is the ability of the United States and other international actors to help build competent and legitimate Afghan security forces, especially police, which was not accomplished during the early stages of the counterinsurgency. Repeated trips to the regional police training centers in Afghanistan, as well as interviews with police in the field, indicated that the Afghan National Police were corrupt, incompetent, underresourced, and often loyal to local commanders rather than to the central government. Indeed, the Afghan police received little attention and were a low priority in the early stages of the counterinsurgency. This was a mistake. The police are the primary arm of the government in a counterinsurgency because of their presence in local villages and districts. The U.S. military made significant changes in the police training program beginning in 2005 and 2006, but persistence is the key to police reform. Based on the low quality of Afghan police when the Taliban was overthrown in 2001, police reform in Afghanistan will take at least a decade.

¹ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 78.

Second, the United States and other international actors need to improve the quality of local governance, especially in rural areas of Afghanistan. Field research in the east and south showed that development and reconstruction did not reach most rural areas because of the deteriorating security environment. Even the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which were specifically designed to assist in development and reconstruction projects, operated in pockets in the east and south because of security concerns. NGOs and state agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Canadian International Development Agency, were also not involved in reconstruction and development in many areas of the south and east. The irony in this situation is that rural areas, which were most at risk from the Taliban and where unhappiness with the slow pace of change was greatest among the population, received little assistance. The counterinsurgency in Afghanistan will be won or lost in the local communities of rural Afghanistan, not in urban centers such as Kabul. This means the counterinsurgency must find ways to reach these communities despite security concerns.

Third, the United States and other international actors need to eliminate the insurgents' support base in Pakistan. The failure to do so will cripple long-term efforts to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan. Every successful insurgency in Afghanistan since 1979 enjoyed a sanctuary in Pakistan and assistance from individuals within the Pakistan government, such as the Frontier Corps and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI).

The Taliban and other insurgent groups enjoyed a sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Balochistan Province. The Taliban regularly shipped arms, ammunition, and supplies into Afghanistan from Pakistan. Many suicide bombers came from Afghan refugee camps located in Pakistan, and improvised explosive device components were often smuggled across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and assembled at safe houses in such provinces as Kandahar. The Taliban used roads such as Highway 4 in Kandahar Province to transport fighters and supplies between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And the leadership structure of most insurgent groups (e.g., the Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, and al Qaeda) was based in

Pakistan. There is some indication that individuals within the Pakistan government—for example, within the Frontier Corps and the ISI—were involved in assisting insurgent groups. Solving this problem will require a difficult political and diplomatic feat: convincing the government of Pakistan to undermine the sanctuary on its soil.

This effort became more challenging with the rise of an insurgency in Pakistan by a range of militant groups, members of which assassinated Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto and conducted brazen attacks against the Pakistan army, ISI, and officials from other government agencies. Militants from Pakistan's border areas were also linked to a range of international terrorist attacks and plots, such as the July 2005 attacks on London's mass transit system, the foiled 2006 plot against transatlantic commercial aircraft flights, foiled plots in 2007 in Germany and Denmark, and the 2008 arrests of terrorist suspects in Spain. These developments indicated that the insurgency in Afghanistan had spread to neighboring Pakistan and required a regional solution.

Most policymakers—including those in the United States—repeatedly ignore or underestimate the importance of locals in counterinsurgency operations. Counterinsurgency requires not only the capability of the United States to conduct unconventional war, but, most importantly, the ability to shape the capacity of the indigenous government and its security forces. U.S. military and civilian efforts should focus on leveraging indigenous capabilities and building capacity. In some areas, such as air strikes and air mobility, this may be difficult. The recommendations in Chapter Seven cover eight functional areas: police, border security, ground combat, air strike and air mobility, intelligence, command and control, information operations, and civil-military affairs. In some of these areas, such as civil affairs, the U.S. military should not be the lead agency and will need to coordinate closely with other states, international organizations, and NGOs. Indeed, the success of any counterinsurgency campaign over the long run ultimately requires a combination of military, political, economic, and other efforts.