Research Brief

RAND PROJECT AIR FORCE

Building Partner Capacity Is the Key to a Successful Counterinsurgency Strategy

Key recommendations

- **Make counterinsurgency an institutional priority.**
- **Create organizations and processes to oversee Air Force counterinsurgency efforts.**
- **Develop and nurture counterinsurgency expertise throughout the Air Force.**
- **Create a wing-level organization for aviation advising.**
- **Enhance Air Force combat capabilities for counterinsurgency.**

With insurgency growing in importance as a national security problem, it is receiving new interest across the services, in the Department of Defense (DoD), and elsewhere in the U.S. government. Although ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq give particular immediacy to the problem, the challenge of insurgency extends well beyond these specific conflicts. It is important, therefore, that the U.S. Air Force consider how to meet the growing demand for air power in joint, combined, and interagency counterinsurgency operations and that other services' and DoD-wide reassessments of the subject take the potential roles of air power in counterinsurgency fully into account. In particular, airmen should take the lead in exploring how air power might work in combination with other military and civil instruments to help avert the development of an insurgency or perhaps to check a growing insurgency long enough to allow political and social initiatives, the heart of any successful counterinsurgency strategy, to take hold.

To help the Air Force prepare for future insurgency challenges, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) studied counterinsurgency principles, explored options for a U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, and assessed current and potential Air Force contributions to such a strategy. Researchers concluded the following:

- 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 insurgency as a training ground, to provide sanctuary, and to motivate a global audience.
- 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 or other global militant groups.
- Previous experience with insurgencies has demonstrated that they 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.
- A precautionary strategy that seeks to defeat the insurgency in its early stages is the most cost-effective approach, both in lives and dollars.
- 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.
- Because air power has much to contribute to countering insurgencies around the globe, advising, training, and equipping partner air forces will be a key component of U.S. counterinsurgency efforts.
- The U.S. Air Force needs a full-spectrum counterinsurgency capability. Although training, advising, and equipping efforts will be the Air Force'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.

The Air Force 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 treating counterinsurgency as a problem approaching the same importance 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, the Air Force should take the following steps:

- **Make counterinsurgency an institutional priority.** Without clear signals from senior leaders, the institutional Air Force 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.
- **Create organizations and processes to oversee Air Force counterinsurgency efforts.** The Air Force will need new organizations to develop and oversee counterinsurgency policy and concepts, to integrate efforts across the service, to coordinate with DoD and other agencies, and to execute counterinsurgency advisory and assistance missions.
- **Develop and nurture counterinsurgency expertise throughout the Air Force.** Counterinsurgency expertise does exist in the Air Force, but, outside of AFSOC, it is scattered and limited. Substantial counterinsurgency education should be a mandatory part of the curriculum 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.
- **Create a wing-level organization for aviation advising.** This is likely the single most important initiative the Air Force can take to enhance its own counterinsurgency capabilities. By creating a wing-level organization, the Air Force will be able to grow its advisory capacity to meet the demand; expand aviation assistance to include institutional and higher-level advising; develop new counterinsurgency 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.
- **Enhance Air Force combat capabilities for counterinsurgency.** Although only as a last resort, the Air Force does need the ability to conduct air operations in support of partner-nation forces and/or U.S. joint forces fighting insurgencies. The Air Force already has considerable 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. ■

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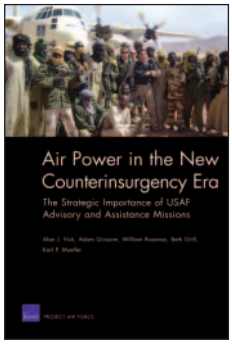

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