

Improving U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations

Lessons Learned from Afghanistan

In 2001, the United States engineered a rapid overthrow of the Taliban regime in response to the September 11 attacks. But this victory was quickly followed by the emergence of a violent insurgency, with the Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, foreign fighters, local tribes, and criminal organizations seeking to overthrow the new Afghan government. Al Qaeda, which had been pushed out of Afghanistan, established a sanctuary in Pakistan, where it began to plan attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and across the globe.

The outcome of the insurgency in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan is of intrinsic importance to the United States. Pointing to the growing list of terrorist attacks and foiled plots in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, and Spain, U.S. intelligence agencies have identified terrorist plots stemming from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region as perhaps the single most important threat to U.S. security. NATO's reputation is also at stake over its first ever involvement in ground combat, and its credibility would be severely tarnished if it failed to stabilize Afghanistan.

In an effort to better understand the insurgency and its causes, the RAND Corporation conducted an exhaustive set of primary source interviews in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, the United States, and Europe (including multiple visits to Afghanistan from 2004 to 2008); reviewed relevant government documents; and examined the literature on 90 insurgencies since 1945 to identify factors that can be correlated with success and failure.

What Variables Are Key to Counterinsurgency Success or Failure?

Based on the examination of 90 insurgencies since World War II, RAND found two major

Abstract

U.S. and coalition efforts in Afghanistan offer a useful opportunity to learn about what does and what does not work in counterinsurgency warfare. Within the context of an assessment of counterinsurgency operations since 1945, the study identifies challenges with local governance and with external support as key issues in the current counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan and presents some initial steps to address those challenges, as well as offers some overarching guidance to policymakers.

factors linked with the success (and failure) of past counterinsurgency efforts: (1) the degree of local support for the government and (2) external support for insurgents, including sanctuary.

The study found that governments with high levels of popular support prevailed in two-thirds of all completed insurgencies, but they won less than a third of the insurgencies when they had medium or low levels of support. In addition, insurgent groups that enjoyed support from external states won more than 50 percent of the time, those with support from nonstate actors and diaspora groups won just over 30 percent of the time, and those with no external support won only 17 percent of the time. Moreover, sanctuary in neighboring states was particularly important for insurgent groups.

These findings have significant implications for U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. They suggest that declining support for the government and outside support for insurgents have directly contributed to the deteriorating security environment.

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What Are the Key Challenges in Afghanistan and What Can Be Done to Begin Addressing Them?

First, governance challenges have plagued the counterinsurgency effort. Polls show that the lack of roads, electricity, and water are key concerns of the population, particularly in rural areas. Also, the majority of Afghans say corruption is a serious problem, and nearly two-thirds say it is increasing. In particular, the government profits from the drug trade in the region. In addition, the Afghan National Police is frequently viewed as corrupt, incompetent, and often loyal to warlords. Finally, there is virtually no viable criminal justice system, which further undermines confidence in the central government and cripples legal and institutional mechanisms for prosecuting insurgents and criminals.

Second, insurgent groups have successfully established a sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan. They have acquired external support and assistance from the global jihadist network, including groups with a strong foothold in Pakistan, such as al Qaeda. They have also acquired support from some individuals in the Pakistan government, as well as local tribes, criminal organizations, and militias in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This assistance enables Afghan insurgent groups to adapt their tactics, techniques, and procedures—to become, in effect, learning organizations.

In addition, there has been too little international support to the government, partly because the initial U.S. approach involved maintaining a light military footprint. Thus, there are too few U.S. and Afghan government forces to fill the security vacuum, and there is too little assistance

to rebuild a country decimated by more than two decades of war. The lack of trained and legitimate Afghan military and police forces created a challenge in targeting Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, and al Qaeda insurgents in the early stages of the insurgency. Nor were there sufficient forces to secure Afghanistan's borders.

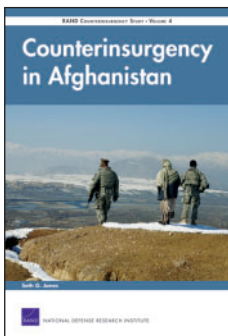
Given the challenges posed by governance and outside support, the study identified some initial key steps to counter insurgent support, which are highlighted in the table.

Overarching Implications

Most assessments of counterinsurgency operations mistakenly focus on how to improve the capabilities of outside forces to directly defeat insurgents. This approach assumes the recipe for a successful counterinsurgency is adapting the U.S. military's capabilities so it can win the support of the local population and defeat insurgents. The problem with this approach is that it ignores or underestimates the most critical actor in a counterinsurgency campaign: the indigenous government and its security forces.

Successful counterinsurgency operations require not only the capability of the United States to conduct unconventional war, but, most important, the ability to shape the capacity of the indigenous government and its security forces. This is all the more critical because research shows that it takes an average of 14 years to defeat insurgent groups once an insurgency develops. Ultimately, it is the indigenous government and its security forces that will have to win the insurgency over the long run. ■

Area	Some Initial Key Steps
Improving governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prosecute corrupt government officials and mid- and high-level drug traffickers; the failure to do so is eroding popular support for the government. Continue building Afghan security forces, especially increasing police mentors in the field. Focus on strategic reconstruction projects, such as Kaiaki Dam for electricity, which can provide key services to rural areas. Ensure secure and successful 2009 democratic elections.
Increasing support to government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the number of U.S./NATO forces by at least 28,000. Refocus U.S./NATO resources on southern Afghanistan.
Decreasing support to insurgents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase pressure on Pakistan to counter the Taliban and end government support for militants. Establish a regional dialogue with Pakistan, India, Iran, and Russia (reviving the 2001 Bonn approach) toward stabilizing Afghanistan.



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