AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TALIBAN INSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN

Colin P. Clarke

This paper offers an assessment of the current situation in Afghanistan through the lens of the Taliban insurgency. As the ISAF presence decreases, the onus will shift to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to secure the country and continue the fight against the insurgents still battling the Afghan government. Moreover, because it is a key regional actor, the actions of Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) will be critical to the endgame of the conflict and future direction of Afghanistan.

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Introduction

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The Taliban is far from a monolithic entity. Indeed, there are many differences to be cognizant of – Afghan versus Pakistani Taliban, ‘old’ Taliban versus ‘neo-Taliban’, and stark divisions within the Taliban itself, between Durrani and Ghilzai Pashtuns. Throughout this chapter, I use the terms Taliban, Afghan Taliban, ‘neo-Taliban’, and Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) to refer to the same group, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar. Exactly what type of insurgency the Taliban is waging in Afghanistan in 2014 is still a matter of debate. While some would term the conflict an example of a ‘local-global’ insurgency, because of the Taliban’s links to al-Qaida (which is now acknowledged to be quite limited, at least within Afghanistan proper), others, like Peter Dahl Thruelsen, would argue that the Taliban is a localized insurgency with a local objective. Perhaps the most accurate characterization would be a ‘local-regional’ insurgency encompassing various parts of South Asia.

The Taliban’s approach is a mixture of rural-urban insurgency, depending on which regional command of the country is being analyzed. Overall, the insurgency is rural, protracted, and funded through rents acquired from illicit economies. Its approach, or fighting strategy, has alternatively been described as asymmetric, ‘Fourth Generation’, Maoist, and that of the ‘war of the flea’. While there are certainly elements of each of these fighting styles apparent in the Taliban’s approach, the most accurate characterization is probably closest to Maoism. In the opening stages of the conflict, insurgents infiltrated the population and gained control over key areas before moving on to consolidate base areas, organize guerilla war, and create rudimentary political structures.

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Before the Taliban escalated its activities between late 2005 and 2007, its fighters relied mainly on AK-47 assault rifles, RPG-7 rocket launchers, BM-1 field rockets, machine guns, suicide bombers, and improvised explosive devices. The fighting is asymmetric and the Taliban function primarily as a guerrilla army, relying on sniping and ambushes. At times, the Taliban has relied on human wave attacks, specifically in the south and east of Afghanistan. This kind of ‘open warfare’ is rare and is mostly used to counter the effectiveness of Coalition air strikes.

Operating Logic

Taliban insurgents who fight against US and ISAF troops in 2014 are motivated by a different set of factors than the group of young madrassa students that initially comprised the movement in the mid-1990s. Then, the Taliban was primarily motivated by the desire to establish an ideal Islamic state governed by sharia law. After all, the Taliban’s ranks were made up of young Afghans who grew up in the refugee camps of Pakistan, displaced from the fighting of the Soviet-Afghan War. Today, the Taliban fight first and foremost to expel foreign troops from Afghan soil. Following a dozen years of fighting against Coalition forces, the Taliban has been seriously degraded. Estimates put the number of insurgents somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000, of which approximately 15,000 insurgents are full-time fighters.

American airpower, ISAF counterinsurgency warfare, and special operations night-raids have damaged the organization and caused it to disperse throughout Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. However, this is the same group that claims membership in the mujahedin that drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan in the late 1980s. Despite suffering major losses, elements of the insurgency remain confident that if its fighters are able to muddle along, the Taliban can survive until US troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan. This could potentially set the stage for a return to violence and yet another Afghan civil war.

The majority of the Taliban’s military operations are conducted by insurgents operating within their home provinces. Still, the influence of groups like the Haqqani Network and links to both al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, indicate that as the conflict continues, the Afghan Taliban could be influenced by actors with more regional and even global ambitions. Thomas Ruttig believes that

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4 Ibid., p.147.
5 Ibid., p.156.
the current U.S. strategy of degrading the Taliban to force it to the negotiating table is having unintended effects. The most serious of these is contributing to the rise of younger, more radical Taliban commanders who are filling the ranks of the ‘neo-Taliban’, an iteration of the insurgency with a more ‘jihadist internationalist’ worldview9.

Funding the Insurgency

How an insurgent group finances itself has a major impact on the motivation of its members, overall group morale, political legitimacy, and the trajectory of the conflict. Unlike groups that are strictly considered ‘narco-terrorists’, the Taliban does not rely solely upon narcotics as a means of funding its insurgent activities in Afghanistan and indeed maintains diverse sources of financing, coupled with a robust support network that offers both active and passive support10. Part of the Taliban’s war chest is derived from a multibillion dollar trade in goods smuggled from Dubai to Pakistan11. According to Peters, by 2010, the Taliban had become involved in no fewer than 36 cross-border smuggling operations12. Besides taxing narcotics traffickers and smuggling, the Taliban also runs protection rackets, commits extortion, and is engaged in kidnapping for ransom (KFR) throughout Afghanistan. In 2007, Taliban insurgents met with members of the Haqqani Network and the TTP to discuss how to negotiate an agreement on dividing the ransom proceeds raised from the return of hostages13.

External State Support

Throughout history, insurgents that have enjoyed relatively unfettered access to safe haven, either internal or external, have fared more successfully than those insurgents without such access14.

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10 There are wide ranging estimates on exactly how much the Taliban receives each year from the drug trade. According to the UNODC, in 2009, the Taliban made between $140 and $170 million USD just in taxing opium farmers (who made $440 million from the trade) and Afghan drug traffickers (who made $2.2 billion). UNODC, The Global Afghan Opium Trade: A Threat Assessment (Vienna: UNODC, 2012), p. 22
12 G. PETERS, Crime and Insurgency in the Tribal Areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Harmony Program, 2010) p. 24, www.ctc.usma.edu
13 Ibid., pp. 46-47.
14 In a 2013 RAND Corporation Delphi exercise, respondents consistently cited the COIN forces’ inability to prevent cross-border smuggling of weapons, narcotics, and fighters as one of the factors most likely to contribute to a potential victory for the
Besides the popular support enjoyed by Taliban insurgents in their Pakistani sanctuary, fighters have been able to plot, recruit, proselytize, fundraise, and communicate with each other. Obviously, the most valuable aspect of the Taliban’s Pakistani sanctuary is that it allows the insurgents to evade ISAF counterinsurgency operations. The border stretches for 2,450 km and is almost impossible for Coalition troops to patrol. At the height of the Taliban’s comeback in 2007, the border provinces between Afghanistan and Pakistan were designated as either “extreme risk/hostile” or “high risk/hostile” environments.

The worst kept secret throughout the insurgency has been the Afghan Taliban’s Pakistani safe haven, both in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as well as in major cities like Karachi, Quetta, and Lahore. In more recent years, the Taliban also has enjoyed sanctuary in parts of Iran. Pakistan remains the preferred locale, however, as it is geographically proximate to southern and eastern Afghanistan and is home to approximately twenty-five million Pashtuns, twice as many as live in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the rugged terrain of the AFGAK border region make it ideally suited for avoiding detection.

This challenge is compounded by a less capable and altogether unwilling Pakistani military, which deployed its paramilitary Frontier Corps and regular army elements from the 12th Corps to the FATA in 2004. Pakistan’s FATA have been a generous safe haven to al-Qaeda as well. Between 2004 and 2011, of the 32 ‘serious’ terrorist plots against the West, more than half (53 per cent), had operational or training links to established jihadist groups in Pakistan.

Taliban. The other main factor deemed absent by the panel of experts was a clear demonstration (and improvement) of commitment and motivation on the part of the Afghan government and Afghan security forces. See C. PAUL et al., Counterinsurgency Scorecard: Afghanistan in Early 2013 Relative to the Insurgencies of the Past 30 Years, Santa Monica, Calif., RAND Corp., 2013. Also see C. PAUL et al., Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency, Santa Monica, Calif., RAND Corp., 2010, and Christopher Paul et al., Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corp., 2013.

The Taliban has maintained a sanctuary in Pakistan since being chased over the border by U.S. Special Forces on horseback in November 2001. In 2003 and 2004, the ISI operated training camps for Afghan Taliban insurgents in Pakistan, just north of Quetta. U.S. drone strikes have limited the ability of insurgents in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and FATA to operate freely. This is true not only of the Afghan Taliban, but also of the TTP. The issue of Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan has been perhaps the most vexing obstacle facing ISAF in Afghanistan. In what should probably qualify as somewhat of an understatement, former US Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair conceded that the safe haven in Pakistan “is an important Taliban strength”. In addition to safe haven provided by Pakistan, the Taliban has also bolstered its support on the western front by strengthening its ties to the mullahs in Tehran in the past few years.

The Corrosive Effects of Corruption

Further complicating the COIN force effort in Afghanistan is that the Afghan government has been widely accused of corruption and ineptitude, compounding an already difficult kinetic mission for ISAF. Taliban recruitment efforts are bolstered by continuing corruption, which has extended from the highest reaches of the Afghan government all the way down to provincial, district, and village officials and security forces. By exploiting the narratives of oppression, occupation, and corruption, the Taliban appeal to both theological justifications and nationalist sentiments at the same time. Taliban propaganda routinely points out ISAF and Afghan government shortcomings. Among the most frequent themes is the rampant corruption of the government. Mullah Omar’s biannual essays emphasize corruption and injustice while attempting to convince the Afghan population that Taliban rule is a better alternative to the past decade of graft and criminality of the ‘Kabul mafia’.

22 D.C. BLAIR, “Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community”, Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2 February 2010.
After ISAF: Preparing for the Withdrawal of the US & NATO

Of all possible outcomes in Afghanistan, the most important to the United States is that Afghanistan never again becomes a country hospitable for transnational terrorists. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, the US is mainly concerned that whatever follows its exit from Afghanistan, al-Qaida or groups of its ilk will not be able to use the country as a place to plot, plan, and set in motion attacks against the West. Much of this depends on the state of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida as well as groups of its ilk.

By now, the story of how the Taliban provided sanctuary to bin Laden and al-Qaida before September 11th, and refused to ‘hand him over’, following the attacks is well-known. Throughout the late 1990s and leading up to 9/11, al-Qaida ran a parallel state alongside the Taliban and even conducted its own foreign policy independent from Omar’s organization. While al-Qaida has since developed relationships with groups in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Mali, and even Nigeria, “in none of these other places is there a partnership between the local governments and al-Qaida such as existed between that organization and the Taliban regime prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001”.

What is less clear is the current state of the relationship and what form that relationship would take in a future Afghan government that includes Taliban members within its ranks. As Strick van Linschoten and Kuen note in their study of these two groups, “The issue of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida is not as big a potential stumbling block among old-generation Taliban as common wisdom holds. For circumstantial reasons, beginning in 2007 the Taliban has taken considerable care in their public statements to implicitly distance themselves from al-Qaida, while offering clear indications of their disaffection with the foreign militants in private.” Within the Taliban, al-Qaida’s numbers are small, its leverage has decreased, and its influence on decision-making is likely minimal, especially after the death of bin Laden.

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28 For a thorough discussion of historical efforts to negotiate settlements in insurgencies, with specific recommendations toward negotiating a settlement in Afghanistan, see C.P. CLARKE – C. PAUL, *From Stalemate to Settlement: Lessons for Afghanistan from Historical Insurgencies That Have Been Resolved Through Negotiation*, Santa Monica, Calif., RAND Corp., 2014.
Laden. Shinn and Dobbins quote a former Taliban minister who told them, “Our ties with Al Qaeda will end with a negotiated peace accord. Our alliance with Al Qaeda is a fighting alliance, a convenience of war.”

Even if ISAF is able to further marginalize al-Qaida, the continuing ability of the Taliban to use Pakistan as sanctuary provides it with a clear advantage should the insurgency’s goal be to ‘wait out’ the United States before returning to Afghanistan after an American withdrawal and retake the country by force. At the end of the day, there is little the United States can do militarily to force the Pakistanis to eliminate this safe haven. After all, Pakistan is an ‘ally’ with six times the population of Iraq, in addition to a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Of all the important developments in Afghanistan over the past decade, none will be more telling than the phases immediately following the withdrawal of US, NATO, and ISAF troops from Afghanistan. Then, and only then, will the international community have a hint at what the future may hold. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), to include the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) will be left with the difficult task of providing security throughout the country, likely with the assistance of a small footprint of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) and other counterterrorist capabilities, including intelligence community assets and a parsimonious conventional forces presence.

If the Taliban fails to make significant gains in the first fighting season post-ISAF withdrawal, but perceives that lack of progress as due to residual coalition forces (or airpower), they might perceive stalemate as being temporary and externally imposed. In turn, the insurgents would likely prefer to wait for further reductions in coalition support before launching further offensives. To get on the path to a negotiated settlement, the Taliban must feel like they are stalemated by the durable and sustainable forces of the government of Afghanistan.