Cellphones in the Hindu Kush

Bruce Hoffman & Seth G. Jones

THE LAWLESS border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan has become America's most acute foreign-policy challenge. Virtually every major al-Qaeda attack or plot of the past four years has emanated from the region. Islamic militants threaten not only the nascent democratization and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, but the very stability and future cohesion of nuclear-armed Pakistan.

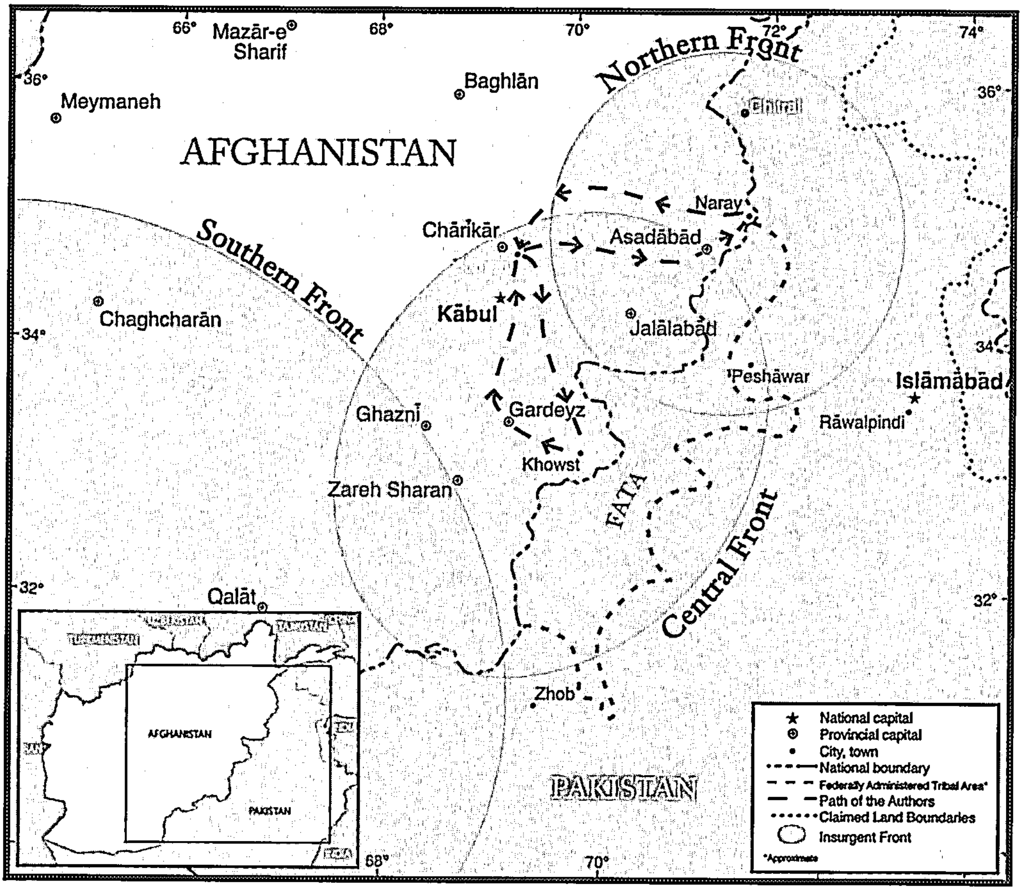
We recently toured the front lines of this struggle, traveling through such eastern-Afghanistan border provinces as Khowst, Paktika, Kunar and Nuristan. The variety of climactic conditions was astonishing. We made our way by helicopter over snow-packed glaciers, followed by vast, empty deserts to bucolic valleys with flowing rivers coursing through steep, forested hills. In spite of the idyllic scenery, the picture is grim. A concatenation of at least fourteen different terrorist and insurgent groups based in Pakistan regularly traverse the border to target Afghan security forces and the American and NATO military units stationed there. These militants include a range of Taliban groups, al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and other radical Afghan religious zealots such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami and their Pakistani jihadi counterparts such as Lashkar-e-Taiba. The problem, as one military intelligence officer candidly told us, is obvious: "We recognize the border. They don't."

The unfortunate irony is that just as U.S. forces have finally begun to understand counterinsurgency in a region that since antiquity has been a graveyard of ambitions for some of the world's most-powerful militaries—including those of Alexander the Great, Great Britain and the Soviet Union—the progress that U.S. military forces have achieved is threatened by the porous border. Pakistan has become a sanctuary for these insurgent forces, which are able to train, equip and mount attacks from the country's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and other border areas with relative impunity.

The unrelenting operations of these insurgent forces imperil everything the United States is trying to achieve in Afghanistan. Indeed, the threat we came to understand is not only to Afghanistan but also to Pakistan and even South Asia, as these powerful centrifugal forces work to destroy national and regional stability

---

Bruce Hoffman is a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a senior fellow at the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He is the author of *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2006). Seth G. Jones is a political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct professor in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is author of *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W. W. Norton, forthcoming).


66°
Mazār-e-Sharif
68°
70°
72°
74°
36°
Meymaneh
Baghlān
AFGHANISTAN
Northern Front
Chitral
Naray
Chārīkār
Asadābād
Southern Front
Kābul
Jalālabād
Chaghcharān
34°
Peshāwar
Islāmābād
Ghaznī
Gardeyz
Rāwalpindi
Khowst
Zareh Sharan
FATA
Central Front
32°
Qalāt
Zhob
PAKISTAN
AFGHANISTAN
PAKISTAN
National capital
Provincial capital
City, town
National boundary
Federally Administered Tribal Area*
Path of the Authors
Claimed Land Boundaries
Insurgent Front
*Approximate

while the United States remains preoccupied with Iraq. A hundred years ago, Lord Curzon of Kedleston, viceroy of India and subsequently British foreign secretary, described these border fault lines as "the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war and peace, of life and death to nations." His statement is no less true today.

One Step at a Time

WITHOUT CONTROL of Afghanistan, it will be impossible to control the lawless border regions. But can conventional militaries effectively counter insurgent groups? Until recently, the evidence was arguably discouraging for the U.S. military. Insurgents captured in eastern Afghanistan regularly told their American captors: "We are fighting because two years ago the Americans kicked in doors, searched our homes, took our arms." These sentiments underscored the inadvertently counterproductive effects of prior U.S. counterinsurgency operations.

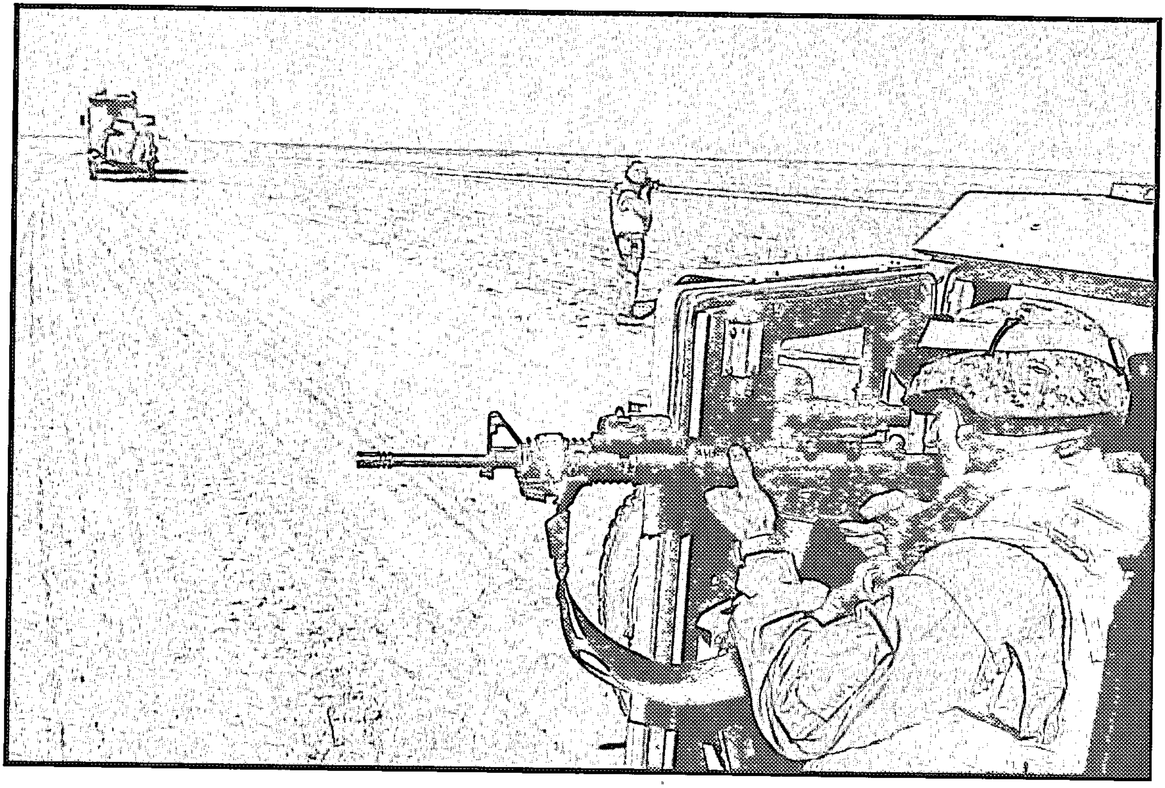
America's inability to reverse the rising tide of insurgent violence submerging Iraq, coupled with the alienation that clumsy, heavy-handed American tactics had on the Afghan people, sowed considerable doubt about the U.S. military's ability to contain, much less defeat, the irregular adversaries it faced in both countries. While the success of the Iraqi surge, orchestrated by General David Petraeus, received the lion's share of attention, the progress achieved in Afghanistan by Major General David M. Rodriguez, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division's Combined Joint Task Force–82, is no less significant. We spoke with members of the 82nd Airborne on our visit to the region in early March, shortly before their return to the United States following a fifteen-month deployment.

Reflecting on their previous experiences both in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 82nd Airborne under General Rodriguez set out to do things differently during this deployment. Its mission embraced the holy trinity of counterinsurgency: security, governance and development. This involved separating the population from the enemy; building the capacity of the Afghan government to address the needs of the Afghan people; and facilitating reconstruction, development and economic growth. In the end, they were doing "nonsoldier things," as one officer put it, more often than combat operations. A trooper explained that this involved "one day handing out kites to kids and the next night setting up an ambush with the ANA [Afghan National Army]." Looking at the numbers, 99 percent of the 82nd Airborne's operations when they were last deployed to Afghanistan in 2004, they told us, were kinetic. This time around, 75 percent were nonlethal.

And even though military operations remained necessary at times, soldiers clearly understood they could backfire. "Even when you do a righteous hit and take out a bad guy kinetically," one field commander explained to us, "we take steps, not a step, but steps, backward." He credited his father's experience as an officer in Vietnam over thirty years ago for this epiphany and the heavy emphasis on the nonkinetic side of counterinsurgency. "It's fighting the IO [information operations] piece that's most important," this colonel argued. "The use of the nonlethal stuff is what changes communities. Bullets don't work to change [this] fight; IO does. Through effects, through governance." In the six districts under his command, he boasted, there was less crime and violence than back in Washington, DC. So in the 82nd Airborne's battle space, winning popular support for the Afghan government, backed up by tangible achievements that were then effectively communicated to the population, was paramount.

Twenty-five years ago, Bagram Air Base, the 82nd Airborne's headquarters, was the nerve center of the USSR military forces uneasily occupying Afghanistan, as it is today for the U.S. and coalition military force now building democracy in the country. The contrast between mission and physical surroundings could not be greater. When American forces, for instance, arrived six years ago, the base was largely derelict. Its Soviet-built superlong runway and sprawling tarmac aprons provided a ready-made infrastructure that was impossible to pass up. Working quickly, American military construction crews transformed the facility into an entirely self-contained, small city: complete with shops selling Afghan curios, jewelry and rugs as well as more-familiar attractions such as a discotheque, fast-food outlets, a coffee bar and a convenience store stocking all the same items one would find stateside—along with "Death from Above" T-shirts with skulls and attack helicopters firing rockets, "Operation Enduring Freedom" coffee mugs and various other souvenirs. The base is so big and employs so many Afghans and nationals from other countries (primarily Eastern Europeans) in so many different support roles, that no one was able to tell us exactly how many people lived or worked there. The 82nd Airborne's headquarters were located deep within the base in a separate, strict access-controlled compound that was ringed with razor wire and guard posts. There, we sat down for the requisite command PowerPoint presentation.

They were able to show that things are better in Afghanistan. Compared with the Taliban era, progress today is in fact staggering. Perhaps the most-revealing gauge is the country's introduction to the information age: our BlackBerries worked almost everywhere we visited in Afghanistan—including remote border outposts—and we often had better service than in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Nine thousand schools are functioning today compared with a thousand in 2001. They are staffed by one-hundred-sixty thousand teachers, compared with an eighth of that figure seven years ago. Now, 78 percent of Afghans have access to basic health care, while only 8 percent did during Taliban rule. Virtually no centers of district government existed before; eighty-five new centers have already been built with fifty-three more under construction. There were no radio or television stations when the Taliban ruled, compared with 104 radio and six television stations operating in Afghanistan today.



But the progress has been slow and, while palpable, is as fragile as it is tenuous. Inadequacy of resources is one problem. Our preoccupation with Iraq and desire to ensure the success of the surge continually undermines, if not threatens to vitiate, the successes that have been achieved in eastern Afghanistan. "We're like the Pacific theater in World War II," a civil-affairs officer complained. "We will get more resources after we defeat Berlin." He pointed to the fact that the civil-affairs-planning cell in Iraq had a staff of eighty—compared with nine in Afghanistan—despite the fact that Afghanistan is larger both in terms of population (31 million versus 27 million) and geography (647,500 square kilometers compared with 432,162).

Another problem is capacity. The 82nd Airborne's strategy was guided by the belief that areas with good governance will also have good security. Yet at the district level, only 14 percent of Afghan officials in Regional Command East, the 82nd Airborne's former area of operations, have a high-school education.

Even at the ministerial level, we were told, many officeholders are functional illiterates. But though their education may be poor, their thirst for knowledge is boundless. "You will wear out teaching before they wear out learning" was how one U.S. officer explained the receptivity of the Afghans to American assistance (in stark contrast to many areas of Iraq).

But there are too-few American and coalition military forces, and especially too-few American civilian experts, to ensure permanence of the progress. Some fifty-six thousand coalition military forces are stationed in Afghanistan compared with more than three times that number in Iraq. American troop strength is even more disproportionate. U.S. military force levels in Iraq, for example, are now frozen at one-hundred-forty thousand personnel, while just over thirty thousand are deployed to Afghanistan. Hence, while the U.S. military, other coalition forces and the Afghan army can *clear* and *build*, they generally cannot *hold* territory—the third and most-critical leg of that storied counterinsurgency dictum.

The result, an intelligence officer explained to us, is that "it takes us six months to build a school, it takes them [the insurgents] six minutes to burn it down." The effect of such setbacks, moreover, goes far beyond brick and mortar. The negative impact on popular support for the Afghan government and support for the American presence is incalculable. "We hurt ourselves," another intelligence officer explained. "We encourage people to cooperate with us and then we just leave and never come back."

Troops assigned nation-building tasks could be reallocated to providing more-consistent and -pervasive security if the civilian expertise within places like the U.S. Agency for International Development or the Departments of State, Justice, Commerce or Agriculture could be harnessed for Afghanistan. This is not usually the job of the military. But the rough living, omnipresent security concerns and inability of civilian agencies to fully adapt to a counterinsurgency mission mean that the U.S. military has to shoulder the main responsibilities for governance and economic-development activities.

"This is not about brigades, but about the capacity of the interagency," a civil-affairs officer stressed to us, referring to the confluence of U.S. government agencies necessary for counterinsurgency operations. We saw this firsthand. The commanders of two of the rural Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) we visited were U.S. Navy officers. The sight of these sailors serving in the remote mountainous terrain of a completely landlocked country was disorienting. We later learned from another navy officer how they got there. After the State Department proved unable to staff its share of the PRTs then being established in Afghanistan two years ago, a "hey you" call was issued throughout the navy and air force, whereby persons with relevant—and sometimes not-so-relevant—qualifications were told they were going to Afghanistan. A several-week course in governance and development at Fort Bragg was about all the additional preparation provided—followed by a fifteen-month deployment.

"It is a steep slope for us military folks to come into development," one PRT commander admitted. The result is something akin to the fabled Dutch boy trying to plug multiplying holes in the dike with his fingers. "Every day we take the lead on anything is another day we ensure that we'll be here," one commander told us. Yet despite these challenges, there is significant improvement in the U.S. military's ability to understand and execute counterinsurgency operations. Unfortunately, this only extends to the borders of Afghanistan.

An Albatross in the Way

ALL THE progress that the U.S. military has made in counterinsurgency doctrine, training and operations is threatened by a range of groups able to operate out of Pakistan with relative impunity. Some groups are directly supported by individuals in Pakistan's security services, making solutions to this problem doubly difficult. "The border is our albatross," one American officer lamented.

There are roughly three main fronts. The first is along the northern section of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in Nuristan and Kunar. Nuristan, "land of the enlightened," was called Kaffiristan, "land of the infidel," until the late-nineteenth century, when its inhabitants were forcibly converted to Islam. It was the setting for the well-known Rudyard Kipling story "The Man Who Would Be King." Like Kunar, Nuristan's population is situated in lush valleys with surging rivers ringed by the rugged mountainous terrain of the Hindu Kush. Basically, ideal territory for insurgent operations. For this reason, we traveled in Black Hawk helicopter gunships that periodically fired antirocket flares to deflect any attempt by insurgent ground forces to shoot us down with surface-to-air missiles.

We were greeted upon landing by the PRT commander, who escorted us to his headquarters located in a nineteenth-century mud fort with ten-foot-thick walls. "Insurgent groups are freely able to bring across fighters, arms and logistics," he told us. They are fighting for the establishment of a pure Islamic state, and many have gravitated toward targeting U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. There is a mix of those attempting Islamic revolution like Hezb-i-Islami; Pakistani jihadis like the group Lashkar-e-Taiba, who have drawn their attentions away from Kashmir and onto the Afghan theater; and those trying to bring about Sharia law in Afghanistan and Pakistan like Tehreek-e-Nafaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi.

WE WANT
PEACE

Paktika is as colorless as Kunar and Nuristan are verdant. Dry, dusty, brown and poor, it is an unforgiving environment where the 82nd Airborne's nation-building accomplishments are directly targeted by al-Qaeda. Across the border is the second front, based out of Pakistan's FATA. Al-Qaeda is in this area, and disturbingly—but of no surprise—the PRT commander from Paktika Province observed, "Al-Qaeda has been effective as a force multiplier by improving the capacity of insurgent groups." This includes helping indigenous insurgents make more-sophisticated improvised explosive devices, instructing them in fund-raising techniques to create an income stream from the international jihadi philanthropic community, and conducting more-effective information operations using the Internet and a range of media outlets. One of the most-significant insurgent groups, led by Sirajuddin Haqqani and able to execute attacks deep into Afghanistan, has close links with Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), from which it receives aid.

The third front is located along the southern section of the border. The largest group there is Mullah Omar's Taliban, based in the vicinity of Quetta, Pakistan, with easy access to Afghanistan's southern provinces such as Kandahar and Helmand, where there is some of the worst disorder and violence. The Taliban today is a much-different organization than the one that conquered Afghanistan in the 1990s, and has become far-more media savvy. It is, in the words of one American intelligence officer we met, "a hell of a lot better at IO than we are." The Taliban is not only more adept at fighting and exercising command and control of combat operations, but it has also created a variety of Web sites and regularly uses al-Qaeda's production company, Al-Sahab Media, to make videos, which are vastly superior in quality and clarity of message to previous efforts. "The Taliban's IO campaign is as strong as ever," an intelligence officer averred. Its use of the Internet has dramatically increased, both to spread propaganda and recruit potential fighters. And the Taliban publishes a series of newspapers, such as *Zamir*, and magazines, such as *Tora Bora* and *Sirak*.

The Taliban has also forged close ties with a number of Afghan Pashtun tribes, especially the Ghilzai. These relationships provide the Taliban with critical logistical support and additional fighters and endow it with a local legitimacy that is pivotal, since all politics in Afghanistan is local. The Taliban's strategy involves approaching local tribes and commanders at the village and district levels. Sometimes Taliban commanders are well received because of common tribal affinities or because locals have become disillusioned with the Afghan government, fed up with the slow pace of reconstruction and the paucity of security. Where they aren't well received, they sometimes resort to brutal tactics. "They have perfected the art of targeted assassination to intimidate locals who support the Afghan government," one soldier noted. "A bullet in the head is all it takes."

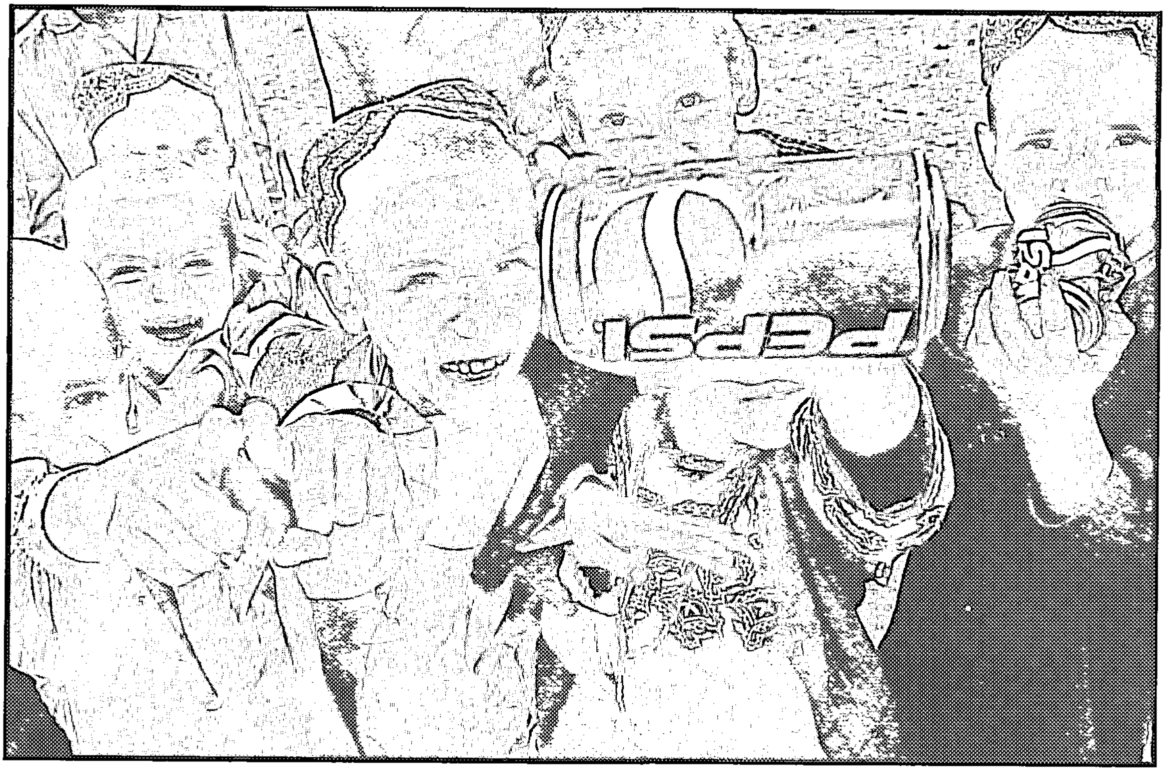
The southern front also boasts a range of criminal groups, especially drug-trafficking organizations, which operate on both sides of the border. The skyrocketing trade in poppy has been a boon to insurgent organizations like the Taliban, as well as to Afghan government officials. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that 93 percent of the world's heroin and other opiates originate in Afghanistan, and the country's well-oiled narcotics machine generates more than 50 percent of its gross domestic product. The Taliban has increasingly profited from the drug trade. It levies taxes on some poppy farmers, offers protection from NATO or the Afghan government's eradication efforts, and imposes taxes along roads that it controls. The corruption that this largesse creates presents another dire threat to the 82nd Airborne's impressive progress in governance and economic development.

The proliferation of insurgent groups along these fronts has created an enormous challenge for U.S. forces operating in Afghanistan, since there is no central insurgent command-and-control hub. In fact, Afghanistan today looks increasingly like Iraq in 2003, with a broad array of insurgent groups acting both independently and in cooperation with one another. They operate as part of both ad hoc and more-formal relationships, and outside any common, unified command structure. They cooperate with each other and with local tribes and criminal groups to carry out attacks, share tactics and techniques, exchange intelligence and engage in joint training. And they have increasingly reached into urban areas to conduct attacks, such as the April 2008 assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

This organizational style also makes it harder to carry out traditional counterinsurgency strategies that focus on decapitation of the senior-most guerrilla commanders. "Elimination of midlevel and senior commanders," a senior U.S. commander explained, "produced a tougher set of insurgents, who buy into global jihad and engage in even more terror tactics, including beheading and kidnapping."

What makes this development all-the-more disconcerting for U.S. forces is that an important part of it happens on the Pakistani side of the border, where all of these groups have their own command-and-control and logistical headquarters. "We don't go there in any sustained manner," one U.S. soldier told us. "It's Pakistan's sovereign territory. And, besides, local tribes don't like Americans very much. In fact, they hate us." Another bluntly observed, "We can never address this insurgency and defeat it until we address the FATA."

Not only are the U.S. and Pakistani governments not executing the strategy that U.S. forces such as the 82nd Airborne gradually developed on the Afghan side of the border, but elements of the Pakistani government—especially the ISI—are actively supporting groups like the Taliban, just as they did during the 1990s. Current- and former-ISI officials help train some Taliban and other insurgents destined for Afghanistan and Kashmir. United States and other NATO officials have also uncovered several instances in which the ISI provided intelligence to insurgents, including tipping them off about the location and movement of Afghan



and coalition forces, which undermined several anti-Taliban military operations. The ISI and other organizations, such as the Frontier Corps, have also provided a range of other assistance to insurgent groups—logistical support, shelter and protection. "Pakistan is supposed to be our ally in the war on terrorism," one intelligence officer complained. "Sometimes it's helpful in capturing or killing insurgents, and sometimes it helps groups trying to kill us. How's that for an ally?"

Backing Out of a Dead End

THE PROBLEMS the United States has faced in Afghanistan and Pakistan are now immensely complicated by Pakistan's fluid, unstable domestic political situation. The new government led by Benazir Bhutto's widower, Asif Zardari, has expressed a desire to conclude a truce with the same Pakistani insurgent forces that threaten Afghanistan. The inevitable result of such an agreement will be to strengthen the hand of the insurgents, as demonstrated by similar agreements in 2004, 2005 and 2006. America's preoccupation with Iraq at the expense of Afghanistan has thus led U.S. policy in this critical region of South Asia right into a dead end. There is now a potentially successful counterinsurgency in Afghanistan but no clear political or military strategy to deal with the forces undermining that country's stability and security across the frontier in Pakistan.

Current policy initiatives—such as training and building the capacity of Pakistan's unreliable paramilitary Frontier Corps to police the border—are not only too little too late, but will take years to bear any fruit, if at all. "The Frontier Corps are not worthless," we were told by a senior U.S. commander, "but it will take a lot of years" to get up to a standard where they can meaningfully intervene. And, even so, the main "problem with the Frontier Corps is that they are locally recruited and positioned in areas where tribal ties are still pretty strong," this officer continued, casting doubts on their loyalties and allegiance to Islamabad—much less their ability or desire to follow a U.S.-influenced effort to secure the border.

Defending Afghanistan will not eradicate a terrorist network based in Pakistan, but failing to defend Afghanistan will almost certainly give that terrorist movement new momentum and greater freedom of action. In concrete terms, succeeding on the Pakistani side of the border will require embracing the same strategy that U.S. forces executed successfully in eastern Afghanistan, again the holy trinity of counterinsurgency: security, governance and development. And all this must be done in common cause with Pakistan.

The first step is to clear territory held by militant groups. This can include both a "bottom up" and a "top down" component. Since power in the tribal areas has historically been decentralized, any successful strategy must adopt a bottom-up approach that involves working with local Pashtun tribes, subtribes and clans that have been marginalized by the Taliban and foreign fighters. Many need arms, training and logistical support, but have sufficient legitimacy at the grassroots level and seek revenge for the gradual "Talibanization" of the tribal areas over the past decade that has usurped their power. So, a top-down approach is also critical and involves encouraging the Pakistani government to conduct sustained operations against insurgent groups. The biggest challenge for the United States will be impacting the political will of the Pakistani government, which feels constrained by domestic politics and unwilling to weaken such groups as Lashkar-e-Taiba (which has long pursued the government's interests in Kashmir) and the Taliban, which are helping with the Afghan-focused agenda. As the United

States demonstrated on September 12, 2001, however, a mixture of unambiguous sticks and carrots can significantly impact Pakistan's cost-benefit calculations.

The second is addressing governance challenges in the tribal areas. Government institutions are weak, social and economic conditions are among the lowest in the world, and political reform is critical. While the Pakistani government is keen to obtain funding for development, it has been less willing to politically liberalize the tribal areas. Despite the introduction of voting rights, the people of the tribal areas do not enjoy political and legal rights as equal citizens of Pakistan—though the 1973 constitution declares that all citizens are equal before the law, it is not applicable to FATA. Following the introduction of voting rights to the tribal areas, elections were held in 1997 and 2002. But despite persistent demands by some political parties and civil-society organizations in the region, they have not been allowed to extend their activities in the tribal areas.

The third step includes promoting economic development. Security options are limited without providing tangible benefits to local, disaffected communities. Yet short of undermining the power of militant groups, it remains unclear who will benefit from development funds in FATA. At present, the likely beneficiaries are local religious leaders and militant leaders, as well as the military-run Frontier Works Organization. The tribal areas have the least access to health care, roads, schools, electricity, water and other public services in Pakistan. This inequality has bred animosity and needs to be addressed.

Every day that the United States allows the unsatisfactory situation along both borders to continue is another day that al-Qaeda and its allies have to regroup, reorganize and marshal their strength. The growing list of terrorist attacks and foiled plots in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark and Spain that are directly linked to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions presents the single-most-important threat to U.S. national security.

American and European intelligence agencies have identified Pakistan's border region as the location of core al-Qaeda members such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who are actively plotting attacks in the United States, Europe and around the world. If the United States wants to prevent a doomsday scenario from occurring, it needs to start making the stabilization of Afghanistan and Pakistan a higher priority. The costs and risks of failing in this task are exorbitantly high. □

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Cellphones in the Hindu Kush
SOURCE: Natl Interest no96 Jl/Ag 2008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: http://www.nationalinterest.org/