

Afghanistan

A heavy hand



By Sarah Sewall

The central tension is between the US default towards counterterrorism and NATO insistence on gentle counterinsurgency

NATION-BUILDING, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism coexist uneasily in Afghanistan, and the contradictions are beginning to chafe. As large numbers of civilian casualties begin to feel like terrorism to ordinary Afghans, the West could lose on every count.

Pressure has been building on Afghan President Hamid Karzai for years, and it's not just from the Taliban. His domestic political friends and foes alike demand that he stop his American allies from killing the wrong people. The numbing pattern of "collateral damage" incidents, most dramatically from airstrikes, fuels local perceptions of a brutal ally and undermines NATO's attempts to apply a softer approach to

Afghan security.

It's tempting to attribute the problem to the most visible culprit: airpower. But that is just a symptom of deeper tensions among the West's missions in Afghanistan. On the one hand, an inadequately resourced United Nations-sponsored force seeks to enhance stability and strengthen the central government. Simultaneously, an independent US force shares the same goal but - through a separate chain of command - focuses on capturing or killing the terrorists. Echoes of Somalia, anyone?

The central tension is between the US default towards counterterrorism and NATO insistence on gentle counterinsurgency. As the new Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual explains, counterinsurgency centers on protecting civilians and enhancing the legitimacy of the host nation government. The doctrine stresses defensive and stability operations in addition to offensive actions. When conducting offensive operations, the doctrine demands sensitivity to controlling physical violence and anticipating its political effects.

Consequences still matter in counterterrorism, but they are calculated differently. The civilian population is not the centre of gravity - terrorist capability is. Counterterrorism stresses offensive measures to prevent, deter,

and respond to terrorism. A focus on capturing and killing terrorists may conflict with the primacy of civilian protection that marks successful counterinsurgency campaigns.

This is complicated enough within US thinking and practice. But factoring in our allies' views regarding operations in Afghanistan, the tensions become more acute. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force is avowedly not a counterterror operation. NATO

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even has its own modified approach to counterinsurgency, relying heavily on carrots and negotiations. A live-and-let-live philosophy can infuriate Americans who fear some allies accommodate local power brokers at the expense of Kabul. In turn, NATO officials wonder when they'll see the more finessed approach.

They shouldn't hold their breath. For one thing, there are not enough ground troops to properly implement counterinsurgency. The NATO presence was designed to help compensate for the

and in Afghanistan

shortage of US forces. Even so, the total numbers - including the effective Afghan security forces - are roughly one- 10th the number prescribed by US doctrine. This is where airpower comes in. It helps compensate for a small footprint in a large country, providing mobility and offensive strike capability. This is both necessary, given the overstretched state of American ground forces, and deeply problematic.

It also raises sensitive questions

In fact, both heavy and lite versions will have their place in the insurgency-ridden decades ahead. But counterinsurgency-lite is better for destroying than building. One can clear from the air, but it remains impossible to hold and to build with airpower. Counterinsurgency-lite will prove inadequate where indigenous forces are lacking and security needs loom large, as in Afghanistan today. And, particularly when operating half-blind in a poorly

scores to settle. Now that the West has ratcheted up its offensive against the Taliban, the United States has returned to emphasizing airstrikes, which can go spectacularly wrong without near-perfect intelligence.

Over the years, Karzai's gradual escalation of concern about collateral damage has come to seem feckless. The Afghan legislature has now begun its own campaign to constrain Western forces while advocating negotiations with the Taliban. What happens when Afghan politicians can no longer politically acquiesce to US military action? Where will the fight against terrorists flowing from Pakistan be then? The stakes are as high in Afghanistan as in Iraq, but no one seems to be paying attention except the Afghans. Can we adjust our strategy before the host nation precipitously does it for us?

One key is gradually increasing the troop presence in Afghanistan and beefing up the *training of Afghan* security forces. Equally important is adjusting planning procedures for raiding suspected Taliban or terrorist facilities. Recent incidents involving civilian deaths suggest related weaknesses: Faulty intelligence means *killing the wrong people*, insufficient organic direct fire support means relying primarily on airpower for force protection, and poor information operations leaves villagers doubtful and often able to contradict the US

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about the services' respective roles in counterinsurgency. The Air Force is unhappy with being relegated to a supporting role in an appendix of the new Counterinsurgency Field Manual. The services have begun creating joint doctrine: pairing airpower with *indigenous forces* and just a pinch of US infantry presence, preferably special forces. This is an appealing notion given political reticence to resource the boots-heavy doctrine advocated by ground forces.

understood culture, relying too heavily upon airpower can become counterproductive.

Afghans initially seemed inured to collateral damage, accepting it as the price of freedom from Taliban rule. Over time, though, they expected more from their liberators. Repeated "wedding party incidents" blurred together, but Americans were slow to recognize that their prized air assets were being hijacked by unreliable Afghan "intelligence sources" with local

version of events.

Whether for counterterror or counterinsurgency purposes, offensive action requires a higher threshold of confidence in the target set and a higher level of risk assumption on the part of US forces. This is necessary to mitigate the political backlash from both Afghans and our allies. While many European allies pull relatively light duty in Afghanistan, we need them for a larger global (and often non military) struggle.

The West's use of military power in Afghanistan has been a combustible and confusing mix of doctrine and tools. Along with our NATO allies, we must think through the conceptual blurring of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Future operations - including any Iraq drawdown scenario - will pose similar challenges. Absent greater clarity about resolving these tensions, an "overwhelming force" mentality will inevitably predominate, even at the potential expense of longer-term objectives in the theater and amongst military allies. Hunting high-value targets in Afghanistan is important, but we must align that goal with our broader political aims in Afghanistan and beyond. **COURTESY THE BOSTON GLOBE**

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