The U.S. military for years has debated the utility of counterinsurgency operations. Drawing from a sentiment that harkens back to the Vietnam War, many within the military have long opposed counterinsurgency operations. Others see counterinsurgency as the unavoidable future of U.S. warfare. The debate is between those who believe the purpose of a conventional military force is to defeat another conventional military force and those who believe conventional military conflicts increasingly will be replaced by conflicts more akin to recent counterinsurgency operations. In such conflicts, the purpose of a counterinsurgency is to transform an occupied society in order to undermine the insurgents.

By George Friedman of Stratfor

Understanding this debate requires the understanding that counterinsurgency is not a type of warfare; it is one strategy by which a disproportionately powerful conventional force approaches asymmetric warfare. As its name implies, it is a response to an insurgency, a type of asymmetric conflict undertaken by small units with close links to the occupied population to defeat a larger conventional force. Insurgents typically are highly motivated -- otherwise they collapse easily -- and usually possess superior intelligence to a foreign occupational force. Small units operating with superior intelligence are able to evade more powerful conventional forces and can strike such forces at their own discretion. Insurgents are not expected to defeat the occupying force through direct military force. Rather, the assumption is that the occupying force has less interest in the outcome of the war than the insurgents and that over time, the inability to defeat the insurgency will compel the occupying force to withdraw.

According to counterinsurgency theory, the strength of an insurgency lies in the relationship between insurgents and the general population. The relationship provides a logistical base and an intelligence apparatus. It also provides sanctuary by allowing the insurgents to blend into the population and disappear under pressure. Counterinsurgency argues that severing this relationship is essential. The means for this consist of offering the population economic incentives, making deals with the traditional leadership and protecting the population from the insurgents, who might conduct retributive attacks for collaborating with the occupying force.

The weakness of counterinsurgency is the assumption that the population would turn against the insurgents for economic incentives or that the counterinsurgents can protect the population from the insurgents. Some values, such as nationalism and religion, are very real among many populations, and the occupying force's ability to alter these values is dubious, no matter how helpful, sincere and sympathetic the occupying force is. Moreover, protecting the population from insurgents is difficult. In many cases, insurgents are the husbands, brothers and sons of civilians. The population may want the economic benefits offered by the occupying force, but that does not mean citizens will betray or ostracize their friends and relatives. In the end, it is a specious assumption that a mass of foreigners can do more than intimidate a population. The degree to which they can intimidate them is doubtful as well.

An alternative to counterinsurgency?

There is of course another dimension of asymmetric warfare, which encapsulates guerrilla warfare and special operations warfare. This is warfare by which highly trained light infantry forces are deployed on a clearly defined mission but are not dependent on the local population. Instead, these forces avoid the general population, operating on their own supplies or supplies obtained with minimal contact with the population. Notably, either side could adopt these tactics. What is most important in considering guerrilla warfare from the perspective of the counterinsurgent is that it is not merely a tactic for the insurgent; it is also a potential alternative to counterinsurgency itself.

Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that the U.S. military is not very good at counterinsurgency. One could argue that the United States should improve its counterinsurgency capabilities, but there is little evidence that it could master such capabilities. There is, however, another form of light infantry warfare to consider, and it is a form of warfare the United States is good at. The alternative does not seek to win over the population but is designed to achieve very definable military objectives, from the destruction of facilities to harassing, engaging and possibly destroying enemy forces, including insurgents.

Special Operations Forces are highly useful for meeting these objectives, but we should also include other types of forces. The U.S. Marine Corps is one such example. Rather than occupying territory, and certainly rather than trying to change public opinion, these forces have a conventional mission carried out in relatively small unit operations. Their goal is to assert military force in highly defined if limited missions designed to bypass the population and strike at the opposition's capabilities. This is exemplified best in counterterrorist operations or the assault on specific facilities. These operations are cheap and do not require occupation. More important, these operations are designed to terminate without incurring political cost -- the bane of prolonged counterinsurgency operations. The alternative to counterinsurgency is to avoid occupational warfare by rigorously defining more limited missions.

To illustrate these operations, consider what we regard as a major emerging threat: Non-state actors potentially acquiring land-based anti-ship missiles. Globalism brings with it intensified maritime trade. Meanwhile, we have seen the dissemination of many weapons to non-state actors. It is easy to imagine that the next stage of diffusion would be mobile, land-based anti-ship missiles. A guerrilla group or insurgency, armed with such weapons, could take advantage of land cover for mobility but strike at naval vessels. In fact, we have already seen several instances where groups employ this strategy. Hezbollah did so in operations against Israel in 2006. Pirates off the coast of Africa are a non-state threat to maritime shipping, though they have yet to use such weapons. Likewise, we see this potential in suicide boat bombs launched from the coast of Yemen.

The world is filled with chokepoints, where the ocean narrows and constricts the flow of ships into corridors within range of land-based anti-ship systems. Some chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Gibraltar, are natural, while others, such as the Panama and Suez canals, are man-made, and they are vulnerable to weapons far less sophisticated than anti-ship missiles. These chokepoints, as well as other critical coastal waters,

represent the vulnerabilities of the global economic system to state and non-state actors. Occupying them is the logical next step up from piracy.

Providing naval escorts to protect commercial vessels would not solve the problem. The escorts would not be in a position to attack the land-based attackers, whose location would be unknown. Airstrikes are possible, but as we have learned in places like Kosovo, camouflage is an effective counter to airstrikes despite its shortcomings.

These are the circumstances under which scalable, self-contained units would be needed. U.S. Marines, who have forces of sufficient scale to engage attackers in relatively larger areas, are particularly well suited for such missions. Special operations teams would be useful against identified and static hard targets, but amphibious light infantry in various sized units would provide the ability to search, identify and destroy attackers who are constantly moving or redeploying. Because these would be land-sea operations, cooperation between naval forces and ground forces would be critical. These clearly are Marine missions, and potentially urgent ones.

This is one mission among many that can be imagined for smaller-unit operations against non-state actors in a hybrid war scenario, which would avoid the obvious pitfalls of counterinsurgency. Most of all, it would provide boots on the ground distinguishing between targets, camouflage and innocent victims and still be able to deploy unmanned aerial vehicles and other assets.

The issue is not between peer-to-peer conflict and counterinsurgency. While increasingly rare, peer-to-peer conflict still represents the existential threat to any country. But the real problem is matching the force to the mission without committing to occupation -- or worse still, the social transformation of the country.

Scale and mission

The type of government that Afghanistan has is not a matter of national interest to the United States. What is of national interest is that terrorist attacks are not planned, practiced or launched from Afghanistan. Neither occupation nor transformation of the social structure is necessary to achieve this mission. What is necessary will vary in every conflict, but the key in each conflict is to contain the commitment to the smallest level possible. There are three reasons for this. First, doing so defines the mission in such a way that it can be attained. This imposes realism on the mission. Moreover, minimizing commitment avoids the scenario in which prudent withdrawal is deemed politically unacceptable. Last, it avoids the consequences of attempting to transform an entire country.

Military intervention should be a rare occurrence; when it does occur, it should be scaled to the size of the mission. In the chokepoint scenario addressed above, the goal is not to defeat an insurgency; an insurgency cannot be defeated without occupying and transforming the occupied society. The goal is to prevent the use of land based missiles against ships. Missions to destroy capabilities are politically defensible and avoid occupational warfare. They are effective counters to insurgents without turning into counterinsurgencies.

These missions require a light force readily transportable by multiple means to a target area. They should be capable of using force from the squad level to larger levels if necessary. Forces deployed must be able to return as needed and remain in theater without needing to be on the ground, taking casualties and engaging in warfare against non-essential targets and inevitably against civilians. In other words, the mission should not incur unnecessary political costs.

The key is to recognize the failure of counterinsurgency, that warfare is conducted on varying scales of size and that any force must be able to adapt to the mission, ideally operating without large onshore facilities and without moving to occupation.

The current debate over counterinsurgency opens the door to a careful consideration of not only the scalability of forces but also the imperative that the mission includes occupation only in the most extreme cases. Occupation leads to resistance, resistance leads to counterattacks and counterattacks lead to counterinsurgencies. Agile insertion of forces, normally from the sea, could beget disciplined strategic and operational planning and war termination strategies. Wars are easier to end when all that is required is for ships to sail away.

Not all wars can be handled this way, but wars that can't need to be considered very carefully. The record for these wars does not instill optimism.

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