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A model for modern insurgency

Anbar, properly adapted, offers lessons for quelling Pakistan's tribal regions

BY MALOU INNOCENT

Following years of promising gains since 2001, Afghanistan is in a tailspin. Not long ago, a sophisticated Taliban assault on a Kandahar prison freed 1,200 inmates, including 350 Taliban members. The attack came only weeks after Afghan President Hamid Karzai survived a fourth assassination attempt.

The main forces behind the country's downward spiral are al-Qaida and the Taliban, which have found sanctuary in the vast unpoliced region of western Pakistan known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

After the U.S.-led invasion toppled the Taliban in late 2001, militants poured into FATA from neighboring Afghanistan. Bereft of any central governing presence, FATA proved a perfect haven, and over the past several years, FATA has become the epicenter of global terrorism. Al-Qaida has reconstituted to pre-Sept. 11 levels. Two of Pakistan's westernmost provinces adjoining FATA, Balochistan and North-West Frontier Province, have experienced spillover from FATA's insurgency, with frequent reports of beheaded women, kidnapped Pakistani soldiers and terrorized politicians. Now, the destruction is sweeping back into Afghanistan, with frequent cross-border attacks and NATO trucks, loaded with fuel and supplies for operations in Afghanistan, gutted by insurgent grenade attacks.

Violence also is spreading from Pakistan's hinterland to large and densely populated cities, including Peshawar, Karachi and Rawalpindi. Despite these developments, officials in the capital of Islamabad have proven unable, and at times unwilling, to uproot the leadership of the Taliban. Even worse, Pakistan's army, like most conventional militaries, has suffered severe losses at the hands of slippery militant guerrilla fighters. Since joining the so-called "global war on terror," Pakistan has lost nearly 1,400 soldiers in clashes with insurgents. Some officers admit morale has not been this low since the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, which Pakistan lost decisively.

Stabilizing the Afghan-Pakistani front of the war on terrorism will require U.S. policymakers to re-examine the fatal misconception that they face only two options: either heading full force into FATA, heedless of the desires of Islamabad and the Pakistani people, or hoping Pakistan's beleaguered army miraculously revitalizes itself. A coherent U.S. policy toward FATA must not be reduced to these two options. Here, the global war on terrorism's wider strategic pattern necessitates a third alternative. The two most prominent fronts in the war — Iraq and Afghanistan — share common elements, including criminal gangsterism, sectarian violence and militant Islamist insurgencies. In

both conflicts, U.S. and allied forces are confronting an adversary who can melt easily into the population. Both are battlegrounds for employing the doctrine of counterinsurgency, such as recruiting indigenous allies, maneuvering the blind alleys of tribal society and cultivating legitimacy from the local population while employing minimal use of force.

U.S. successes in Anbar province, Iraq, hold important lessons for operations in FATA. But U.S. policymakers must understand that remedies for one conflict never can be perfectly transplanted onto another. For one, the two political and security situations are dissimilar. Anbar presents a liberation insurgency that includes indigenous groups attempting to expel a foreign occupier, while FATA has a national insurgency of indigenous groups attempting to control and unseat an established government. In this respect, Americans should not try to force the round peg of Anbar into the square hole of FATA, but rather should look beneath the overarching differences to each conflict's striking subfeatures, such as militant methods and tactics.

IRAQ AND ITS DISCONTENTS

After America's 2003 invasion of Iraq, Anbar quickly devolved into a hotbed of savagery at the heart of the Sunni insurgency. Anbar's western border with Syria was lightly guarded, allowing hundreds of foreign fighters to join local insurgents. Because the new Iraqi government was unable to restore law and order, the region provided fertile ground for al-Qaida to take root.

Resistance to the American presence was stronger in Anbar than in any other province in Iraq. But over time, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the group that in February 2006 destroyed the Shiite shrine in Samarra, also began to overplay its hand, proselytizing militancy and forcing its customs onto local Sunni tribes. In September 2006, U.S. forces tossed out their conventional war-fighting approach and teamed up with more than 30 indigenous Sunni tribes. Although the allegiance and character of many of the enlisted individuals is undoubtedly questionable, the arrangement produced much in the way of tangible gains. Sunni tribes agreed to recruit thousands of men for the Iraqi police and army, as well as provide intelligence to U.S. officials on the whereabouts of AQI; in return, U.S. troops helped local tribes obtain water treatment centers and medical clinics, while Iraq's Interior Ministry provided supplies and other funding.

By summer 2007, this united Anbar Salvation Council had overseen a substantial reduction in violence. Attacks fell from 1,350 in October 2006 to little more than 200 by October 2007. In his testimony to Congress in September 2007, Gen. David Petraeus said Anbar showed how the country could quell its violence: "A year ago, the province was assessed lost politically. Today, it is a model for what happens when local leaders and citizens decide to oppose al-Qaida and reject its Taliban-like ideology."

Since the "global war on terror" is, in fact, a series of battles on multiple fronts, Anbar's success can be used as a template for organizing indigenous tribes in other theaters, including the insurgency along the Pashtun tribal belt straddling the Afghan-Pakistani

border. Understanding what to do in FATA requires an understanding of how its status as a militant stronghold developed.

An epic showdown occurred between the U.S. and al-Qaida at Tora Bora, the massive cave complex in eastern Afghanistan across the border from Pakistan. About a month after the U.S.-led bombing campaign swiftly toppled the Taliban regime, top-level militants, including Osama bin Laden, poured into FATA from Afghanistan. Many found sanctuary in FATA's Kurram Agency, one of the seven autonomous tribal agencies on Pakistan's western frontier. Former CIA officer Gary Schroen, who led the first American paramilitary team into Afghanistan in 2001, said the ground campaign at Tora Bora didn't go far enough, and he claimed Pakistan's military and intelligence service was reluctant to apprehend bin Laden so soon after 9/11 because an uproar within Pakistan and around the Islamic world would have shaken the foundation of the Pakistani government.

Aside from hesitant Pakistani leaders, militants found sanctuary for many other reasons. Pashtun tribes native to FATA adhere to the pre-Islamic tribal code of Pashtunwali, which by custom extends assistance to strangers who request protection. In addition, these areas provided fertile recruiting ground for foot soldiers waging jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, as well as against India in Kashmir and the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance in Afghanistan during the 1990s. Moreover, FATA's deep ravines and isolated valleys, many of which can support only foot traffic or pack animals, are difficult to infiltrate, and the region's tenuous lines of communication inhibit the monitoring of militant activity.

Although the president of Pakistan assumes direct jurisdiction over FATA, the area has been devoid of an overarching government for several centuries. Until recently, FATA was ruled by a system of political agents who answered directly to the governor of the North-West Frontier Province, as well as tribal elders (maliks) who formed a Council of Elders (jirgas) who would orchestrate a consensus decision to turn orders into policy. Those who broke consensus were punished.

But today, in many areas of FATA, relentless Taliban incursions have led to the collapse of civilian and tribal administration. Critically, militants now have turned against their former hosts. In 2007, former Pakistan-based freelance writer Nick Schmidle offered this vivid account of the Taliban's influence in the Pashtun tribal belt: "At the edge of town, Taliban rode around in flatbed trucks, pointing weapons in the air and ordering motorists to remove the tape decks from their cars." The Taliban "deemed music — and anything that plays music — un-Islamic." Militants also banish music stores and barber shops, destroy girls' schools and threaten men who don't grow beards. Over the past five years, the mutilated bodies of more than 150 pro-government maliks have been found in the region's scattered hamlets. "Oftentimes," Schmidle recalled, "the Taliban dumped the bodies by the side of the road for passers-by to see, with a note, written in Pashto, pinned to the corpse's chest, damning the dead man as an American spy."

CONTOURS OF TWO MODELS

Although Pashtun loyalties traditionally have been with pro-Taliban militants, the spike in violence could turn them. In FATA, as in Anbar, U.S. Central Command should capitalize on the injustice unleashed on locals by militant groups. One element of the Anbar model that is informing policy in FATA is the emphasis on increased human-intelligence sharing. In March, the first of six joint U.S.-Afghanistan-Pakistan military intelligence centers was opened along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The centers are intended to limit cross-border militant movement in the region and coordinate information and tactics among U.S., Afghan and Pakistani officials. U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Votel said three of the centers will be built in Afghanistan and another three will be built in Pakistan, at a cost of about $3 million each. The centers will allow 20 personnel from each of the three countries to watch live video feeds from U.S. spy planes, which can be played back in real time to ground forces on both sides of the border.

Night-vision devices, ultra-high-frequency satellite equipment and other sophisticated signals intelligence devices are critical for monitoring Taliban and al-Qaida communications traffic. But because many militants still rely on traditional modes of communication, such as human couriers, U.S. policymakers must remember that signal and communication intelligence, while indispensable, is no substitute for human intelligence. Central Command must direct its efforts toward understanding the clans, subclans and extended families that weave the complex fabric of tribal society. Such human intelligence is crucial for combating the insurgents' militant zeal.

As in Anbar, recruiting local allies to fight militants in FATA will be critical for stabilizing Pakistan as a whole and for operations in Afghanistan. But a fair assessment of any model requires scrutiny, and by far the biggest impediment to implementing such an ambitious approach in FATA is lack of manpower, as the scope of America's commitment in Iraq severely limits what it can do in Pakistan, and Islamabad continually refuses to allow more U.S. troops into the area. Most important, the Army-Marine Corps Field Manual on Counterinsurgency provides that stability operations typically require a density ratio of 20 to 25 troops per 1,000 residents. By the U.S. military's own standards, a mission in FATA would require 133,000 to 167,000 troops. Today, fewer than 100 U.S. Army trainers and special operations forces are performing limited ground and air operations in and around FATA. But a heavier U.S. combat presence would have the unintended risk of provoking a backlash among the Pakistani people. Civil unrest inevitably would strain the Pakistani Army, forcing it to quell violence and street protests at the cost of leaving the frontier areas unsupervised. Squaring this circle is next to impossible, although a lighter U.S. footprint may be a blessing in disguise.

What about indigenous forces? FATA's traditional law enforcement entity is the Frontier Corps (FC), the tribal areas' locally recruited paramilitary force. Balochistan's Frontier Corps is roughly 80,000 strong, while about 50,000 Frontier Corps are split between North-West Frontier Province and FATA. A 40-page classified document titled "Plan for Training the Frontier Corps" is under review at Central Command. The plan would train the FC and significantly increase the size and scope of America's training role in Pakistan. But training will take years, and training alone will not resolve problems

surrounding morale and motivation. Moreover, ethnic and ideological sympathies to militants prevail in the FC; one U.S. soldier equated it to the Taliban, saying "The Frontier Corps might as well be Taliban. ... They are active facilitators of infiltration." Lahore-based Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid says the FC is teeming with jihadists.

In this respect, applying elements of Anbar in FATA will have to rely less on a heavy U.S. combat presence and more on encouraging and enabling Pakistan's Army — not the Frontier Corps — to exterminate safe havens. But sizable minorities of Pakistani Army soldiers are sympathetic to al-Qaida and the Taliban for both strategic and ideological reasons. This lack of willingness is the central problem facing Pakistan's Army and, hence, Pakistan itself. It is not a problem that can be talked away. Confronting extremists will take a broader national resolve, such as greater economic prosperity and an opening of the political system. Steps can be made to counter the country's extremist fringe from bleeding into the political mainstream. The first is for the Army to overcome its series of demoralizing defeats, and this is where Washington can help. One confidence-building measure between U.S. and Pakistani Army forces would be to increase the number of Pakistani officers trained through the U.S. Defense Department's International Military Education and Training program (IMET). Joint military-to-military exchange programs are not unusual. Many countries receive some type of military training in the U.S., such as Israel, Japan and Kuwait. For Pakistan, training at elite American institutions would help to mitigate the Army's tilt toward radicalism and hone its counterterrorism efforts. In 2006, Pakistan's Army scheduled 306 soldiers to train in the U.S., 157 of whom were junior officers. But these are paltry numbers considering that the Pakistan Army has more than 600,000 soldiers.

As for Washington, its policy must take into account the rest of Pakistan's 165 million inhabitants, many of whom are virulently anti-American. In this respect, Central Command should be ready to act if it comes across actionable intelligence on the whereabouts of top-level al-Qaida operatives, but it also must remember that Pakistani officials in Islamabad must not be perceived as putting Washington's interests above those of their own people. As Robert D. Lamb writes in his meticulously researched report "Ungoverned Areas and Threats from Safe Havens," "for diplomatic, legal, and practical reasons, the host state cannot be ignored or bypassed, but nor should it be permitted to impede progress against safe havens when other entities are positioned to help. An appropriate balance is needed." The countries of South and Central Asia are firmly interlocked, and a shift in U.S. policy toward one country could affect seemingly unrelated U.S. policies toward another. Thus, any U.S. effort must coordinate with officials in Kabul and Islamabad, both civilian and military, to meet shared challenges of the region. After consulting with leaders and gaining a firm understanding of the complexities of its people, the next U.S. commander in chief ultimately must decide which path to blaze in FATA.

But U.S. officials should keep in mind that sustaining a lighter footprint is consistent with a central tenet of counterinsurgency: executing military power precisely and discriminately rather than employing overwhelming force and firepower. This counterinsurgency approach limits collateral damage, lowers the possibility that U.S.

tactics will serve as a recruiting tool for al-Qaida and other extremists, and helps foster a bottom-up solution, one achieved through human-intelligence gathering, building legitimacy and neutralizing terrorism.

The advantage to a nimbler version of the Anbar strategy is that lying low with fewer troops is exactly what South Asia scholars support. American University Professor Akbar Ahmed, who served in Pakistan's Civil Service in the 1960s, thinks a long-term strategy for FATA should involve cultivating relations with Pashtun tribal chiefs and jirgas. "America and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan must put more on the table than Army incursions and the wanton destruction of tribal homes and local schools by unmanned aircraft if they ever hope to reduce sympathy for the Taliban and al-Qaida. Ordering Pakistan to send in more troops to be slaughtered by far craftier Pashtun tribal forces only piques local resentment against both the government and its American patrons, while creating an ever-growing demand for more military equipment that Pakistan doesn't need."

Other political observers who also are skeptical of using blunt force in FATA say it will only push wavering tribes into the Taliban camp and further radicalize the population. FATA should be understood for what it is — a relic of the 19th century's imperial era, a slice of territory left unconquered by the British. The fiercely independent Pashtun tribes who inhabit FATA have been invaded by empire after empire and never have been subjugated. Pacifying this Hobbesian state of nature will require more than firepower.

Steve Coll, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who has visited the tribal areas on numerous occasions over the past 20 years, said he believes that despite the many setbacks facing the U.S., engagement in the tribal areas can be achieved: "Defining, never mind successfully executing, a political strategy in western Pakistan and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas is a really daunting project. But there is, nonetheless, reason to believe that the people who live in these tribal areas are themselves modernizing ... and there is an appetite for self-government outside of the old tribal arrangements."

The Peshawar-based non-governmental organization Community Appraisal & Motivation Program, which aims to promote peace and sustainable development in the tribal areas, concurs with Coll's point. It found that many of FATA's inhabitants want a gradual change in the Frontier Crimes Regulation, a system of governance that many people strongly oppose because it is regarded as too draconian. Survey respondents instead favored the Wolasi jirga system, which they say accords proper justice to all parties. The rest of Pakistan's population also says it wants to put an end to FATA's semi-autonomous status. A survey released in January by the U.S. Institute for Peace and the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes found that large majorities of the Pakistani public want to absorb FATA into the country's overall governing structure.

The previous Pakistani government led by Gen. Pervez Musharraf emphasized a military solution to the tribal areas. The new civilian government led by the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) temporarily continued and then

discontinued the military's policy of peace talks with radical groups. Unfortunately, these peace deals did not also employ counterinsurgency tactics; in fact, the Pakistani Army thinned its presence in territories confirmed to be safe havens for militants, a move which only emboldened radicals and expanded their territorial gains. But as the so-called "Anbar awakening" shows, there is a middle ground. Eradicating safe havens likely will be a difficult and long-term process, however, requiring years of patience and flexibility.

In May, the U.S. Government Accountability Office discovered that although the United States has a plan to combat terrorism, no executive-level department has a comprehensive strategy to eradicate FATA's safe havens. This is a profound strategic miscalculation in the global war on terrorism; however, the absence of a coherent policy provides an opportunity for unique solutions. Afghanistan will not stabilize so long as the havens exist in Pakistan. Until a plan for FATA is reached, America will be losing in the most crucial theater in the global war on terrorism.