

Counterinsurgency and the Conflicts in Afghanistan and Vietnam

Recommended Citation

Henry J. Kenny, "Counterinsurgency and the Conflicts in Afghanistan and Vietnam", Special Policy Forum 9/11, November 02, 2001, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-for-m-911/counterinsurgency-and-the-conflicts-in-afghanistan-and-vietnam/>

November 2, 2001

By Henry J. Kenny

I. Introduction

This essay is by Henry J. Kenny, a research analyst at the Center for Strategic Studies at the CNA Corporation. His essay focuses on counterinsurgency doctrine and strategy used in Vietnam and how it might apply in Afghanistan. It highlights some parallel difficulties in locating and destroying enemy base areas and stresses the need to liberate areas in Afghanistan in order to establish population control. This would entail some casualties, but the alternative would be to allow the Taliban breeding ground for terrorists to continue and gain additional international adherents.

II. Essay By Henry J. Kenny

"Counterinsurgency and the Conflicts in Afghanistan and Vietnam"

By Henry J. Kenny, Center for Strategic Studies at the CNA Corporation

The word "counterinsurgency" is a loaded term, but it seems to imply a struggle against a political and military force seeking to overthrow or radically change a form of government. This definition broadly fits major aspects of the American effort in Vietnam. It does not, however, readily clarify our military effort in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, some of the methods employed in the counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam apply to Afghanistan. This essay will focus on certain similarities, leaving for the reader to discern the major differences in the type of warfare and their relative objectives, including the fact that the Viet Cong never attacked New York City.

U.S. forces in Vietnam attempted many of the methods of counterinsurgency that were successfully employed in Malaya by the British generals Robert Thompson and Richard Clutterbuck. Their methods included at least three parts: first, destruction of enemy terrorists in their base areas; second, population control both by extending protection to some contested areas and by moving

people from other contested to friendly areas; and third civic action and psychological operations in both the contested and friendly areas.

The first task was very difficult in Vietnam and promises to be difficult in Afghanistan. In Vietnam, U.S. forces tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to destroy enemy base areas. One reason for this lack of success was the unwillingness of the United States to take the ground war to North Vietnam out of fear that the PLA would enter the war as they had in Korea. Beyond that, however, there was the difficulty of locating North Vietnamese and Viet Cong base camps. These locations were often across the border in Laos or Cambodia or in dense jungle areas that did not lend themselves to aerial observation. Although the U.S. did bomb Laos, it did not do so in Cambodia until the 1969 "invasion" when U.S. and South Vietnamese forces attempted, again, unsuccessfully, to locate and destroy the Central Office for South Vietnam which was believed to be the operating headquarters for the enemy's National Liberation Front for South Vietnam. Although there was some success, overall, U.S. inability to locate major enemy command centers and logistic bases was a major factor in the length of the war, and the ultimate weakening of U.S. resolve to prosecute it.

The comparison with Afghanistan is instructive. Like Vietnam, there is something of a sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, but unlike Vietnam, that sanctuary is neither as assured nor extensive as those of the Vietnam era. Secondly, the internal hiding places in Afghanistan are arguably more vulnerable to U.S. firepower than those in Vietnam. Although extensive tunnels dot the mountains in many places, their entrances are more easily subject to observation than either the tunnels or jungle base areas of Vietnam. Deep penetrating U.S. bombs can inflict some damage to these tunnels. Nevertheless, the U.S. will face difficulties in finding and fixing the Taliban forces located in mountains where several levels of tunnels and multiple entrances complicate matters. As in Vietnam, this is a factor that can extend the duration of the war and tax American patience.

Destruction of core enemy elements also entails cutting off their source of supply. In the case of Vietnam, both China and the Soviet Union provided enormous quantities of military equipment. The U.S. response in Rolling Thunder (1965-1968) was to bomb North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail leading into South Vietnam. The bombing campaign "took the fight to the enemy" but was unsuccessful for two reasons. First, it was limited in scope and targets. According to Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief of U.S. Forces in the Pacific, Rolling Thunder struck only three percent of JCS "lucrative" targets. Striking things like bridges, truck convoys, and troop movements, it focused mainly on cutting North Vietnamese supply to the South, a difficult task in the face of a determined foe with the ability to ford rivers and proceed along multiple jungle trails in all kinds of weather and terrain. Secondly, the bombing strengthened the resolve of North Vietnam to fight the Americans. For example, I captured a letter from a North Vietnamese woman to her husband in the south that reads, in part: "Recently the enemy has been dropping bombs around us. I teach our children patriotism and to give the enemy what they deserve." Only in 1972, when U.S. bombing devastated supply lines into North Vietnam, did the bombing press Hanoi to negotiate a peace.

Again, the applicability to Afghanistan is instructive. Bombing can take out important Taliban command and control and logistics facilities, and reduce their combat strength, but it risks alienating the people of Afghanistan. Even though targeting is as discriminate as possible, there still are errors in targeting, and the Taliban have been effective in displaying the bombing as an indiscriminate attack on Islam and the people of Afghanistan. The bottom line is that, like the 1972 attacks on North Vietnam, the bombing needs to be heavy and directed against high value targets. It needs to be as discriminate as possible, and done in full recognition that it will strengthen enemy resolve if it persists over a long period without some form of ground attack.

The second major focus of counterinsurgency doctrine is gaining and retaining control of the

population. In this regard, the U.S. role in Vietnam was constrained by two factors. First, the United States depended heavily on its South Vietnamese ally for population control. Early in the war former President Ngo Dinh Diem's strategic hamlet program moved country people from their traditional villages to fortified hamlets that were constructed in areas controlled by Saigon. Once established in the new areas, they were often neglected, leaving many disaffected with the government. Later in the war the U.S. forces helped their South Vietnamese counterparts to initiate voluntary programs that included civic action and developmental programs in the new villages. These proved far more effective in securing support for the government than the strategic hamlet program. Nevertheless, the second factor constraining the United States, the proscription from entering North Vietnam with ground forces, meant the war was like a football game where you cannot cross the 50-yard line. The population of North Vietnam was always in the hands of the enemy, and eventually won the war.

In one sense gaining control of the Afghan population is easier. It is a smaller country and the Pushtun areas of Pakistan do not quite equate to North Vietnam as an untouchable source of enemy manpower. In the past, the Pakistanis have provided significant military support and troops to the Taliban, but General Musharraf is resisting further support and is unwilling to accept many more Afghan refugees. The real U.S. difficulty, not unlike Vietnam, is how to get the force it is supporting to attack the enemy in his lair so as to gain control of a larger population. Some of the South Vietnamese Army at least fought, and fought well, taking many casualties in the process. But the Uzbeks and Tadjik groups that constitute the bulk of the Northern Alliance have little stomach for putting their lives on the line until the battlefield is cleared of significant Taliban resistance.

Thus the counterinsurgent idea of population control is fraught with difficulty. Without some U.S. troops on the ground there is little chance of substantial gains in this area. Special Operations personnel evidently have found little in the way of outright Pushtun willingness to break from the Taliban. Perhaps a more concerted effort at unconventional warfare to line up Pushtun support will only work in combination with a ground offensive that looks successful. Both are needed if the U.S. is to gain any Pushtun support, as the recent assassination of Abdul Haq has shown. Special Forces need to support a Pushtun leader who has some hope of mobilizing support. They also need to be able to provide him, on short notice, with arms, ammunition, communications, and other needs of an incipient Pushtun force. The protection of that leader is a fundamental requirement for success. The bottom line is that without some Pushtun support, population control will fail.

The third area advocated by General Thompson is civic action and psychological operations. These actions, although practiced by many advisers, Marines, and Special Forces teams, only became central to U.S. strategy in Vietnam later in the war, under the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development program. This program entailed security arrangements for the hamlets and villages of South Vietnam, together with aid programs designed to make those hamlets and villages more self-reliant. Emergency food aid was provided, schools and medical facilities were encouraged and supported, and self-defense units were formed. All this was done with the objective of making a better life for people so they would not feel the need to join the Viet Cong. Viet Cong raids continued and some young men were impressed into their service, but large numbers of young men were no longer volunteering. The net effect was to dry the sea in which the guerillas swam. Unfortunately, the success of the civic action was unaccompanied by an equivalent psychological operations effort. Government leaflets dropped by air were less effective than the direct appeals of the Viet Cong direct to the villagers. Like Afghanistan today, the Viet Cong produced pictures of areas supposedly (and in some case actually) devastated by U.S. air strikes. The U.S. side of the propaganda war was not very well attuned in Vietnam.

The current U.S. civic action program for Afghanistan is focusing on "manna from heaven." The airdrops of food and basic necessities may be a good start, but more needs to be done to attract the

Pushtun people on both sides of the Pakistani border. A "liberated zone" of Pushtun people needs to be established, with all the elements of the CORDS program applied to it. In order for this to take place, U.S. forces on the ground will be needed. Population control may mean some reliance on local warlords, but security and aid for the Pushtun people in the zone should be swift and complete. Life in the zone could then be advertised throughout Pushtun areas. Along with these advertisements, pictures depicting U.S. assistance to the Afghan people and statements by Afghans reporting such assistance are a crucial. Airdrop, leaflet drop, radio, and other indirect means can help, but as in Vietnam, there is no substitute for direct contact by word of mouth. Like the Viet Cong, we need to establish temporary control over population centers so that the Pushtuns themselves get the word out. U.S. forces can do this, particularly in the winter when the Taliban will be immobilized.

Any comparison of Vietnam and Afghanistan must take into account the different circumstances of the two conflicts. The purpose of this essay was to focus on the counterinsurgency doctrine and strategy used in Vietnam that might apply in Afghanistan. It highlights some parallel difficulties in locating and destroying enemy base areas, pointing out the limits of air power; it stresses the need to liberate areas in Afghanistan, particularly Pushtun areas, in order to establish population control; and it identifies the need for swift and extensive civic action in liberated areas, followed by a massive campaign to discredit the Taliban and highlight American good will. It is the opinion of this author that such actions would necessitate light U.S. forces on the ground, skillfully employed, and prepared to remain until a significant Pushtun force can be recruited. This would entail some casualties, but the alternative would be to allow the Taliban breeding ground for terrorists to continue and gain additional international adherents.

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/counterinsurgency-an-the-conflicts-in-afghanistan-and-vietnam/>

Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org