

# COUNTERTERROR STRATEGY FOR THE AF/PAK THEATER

A SMALLER FOOTPRINT, A TARGET ON TERRORISTS



*Photo: US Army*

The Counterterror option would reduce the number of forces we have in Afghanistan and rely on Special Operations raids and UAV drone strikes to target al Qaeda and other extremist groups.

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## **Counterterror strategy for Afghanistan**

A smaller footprint, a target on terrorists

The other option to Gen. McChrystal's call for a fully-resourced Population Centric Counterinsurgency, is to rely on a much smaller footprint and Counterterrorism (CT) in the Afghanistan/Pakistan theater. In an age of Jack Bauer, CT is very appealing, with our most elite troops swooping in, riding black helicopters, and killing terrorists. Or the vision of silent predator drones tracking bad guys across the wastelands before unleashing a literal Hellfire which destroy the enemy. These end games happen only after long periods of intelligence gathering and planning, sitting on rocks in the mountains watching and waiting. In fact, most missions never happen because actionable intelligence, resources and timing just don't come together. But when they do, it is devastating to the enemy.

Our CT efforts in this theater over the past several years have been very fruitful as hundreds of Taliban, al Qaeda and other extremists have been killed or captured. Gen. McChrystal, now the commander of all forces in Afghanistan, previously commanded the unit responsible for the successes there, as well as those in Iraq. Among the many terrorists they eliminated, this unit was responsible for dispatching Zarqawi and ending his reign of terror in Iraq. Gen. McChrystal has been known to accompany his men on raids, leading from the front. His Task Forces - comprised of SEALs, Rangers, Delta operators and many others - have done tremendous damage to the terrorists and, more importantly, to the networks that support them.

But CT is not simply roving bands of black-clad, rough men doing violence in the night. There is an entire host of other operations, admin and support functions that have to be working perfectly together to put this deadly ballet into play. The single most important need for an effective CT operation is accurate and precise intelligence. Without actionable intelligence, the entire purpose of CT, precise strikes against positively identified targets, is impossible.

A CT operation by definition does not have a large footprint out among the populace. A CT strike comes out of nowhere, acts with swift and precise violence and then is gone. Ideally the force hits quickly and all the enemy are dead or captured. But, before that mission is even remotely possible, the intelligence must be gathered and developed to identify targets and plan a successful raid.

In CT, almost all of the intelligence gathering will be done covertly or electronically. It requires coordination between multiple intelligence agencies with human and electronic sources, large amounts of work analyzing disparate pieces of information, and cross-checking all of these against each other. In addition some of the information comes from other governments and, therefore, accuracy, as well as differing motives, must be taken into account. While our spy satellites and eavesdropping capabilities are useful, the best information comes from people, agents among the enemy, from the locals where they live, or from captured terrorists themselves. Spy handlers, translators, interrogators, analysts and others must all work in concert to create usable intelligence. It is incredibly difficult to sort and evaluate all of this in a timely enough fashion that it leads to a mission. But as we have seen over the past several years, it can be done.

Conversely, in a Counterinsurgency (COIN) operation, much of the intelligence comes from the close contact the troops have while living among the local populace. After sacrifices are shared, rapport is built, and trust is gained with the locals. This

enormous effort produces information from the local populace on who does or does not belong in a particular village. When the locals still fear the insurgents or terrorists among them, they will not inform on them. Once the COIN strategy takes hold, the locals see US and Afghan security forces as providing safety and prosperity, and they are willing to identify infiltrators. It is important to note that, without a COIN operation, CT will not have a substantial “boots on the ground” view.

Coordination with the host nation and its military and intelligence units is vital to the success of CT operations. They have the home field advantage and can use that in ways we simply cannot. In addition, we need to have bases to operate from close enough to hit targets in quick time windows. We have helicopters, UAVs, other vehicles, personnel, weapons, and communications gear that must have a home and, if possible, at a secure, undisclosed location. We also must help the host nation manage the inevitable fall out from even the most successful CT operations; people will die and claims will be made that they were innocent civilians. This puts pressure on the host nation to distance themselves from these strikes, and makes it difficult for them to support the operations publicly.

If CT becomes the strategy for this theater and we reduce our footprint in Afghanistan significantly, an aggravating factor will be a larger area where al Qaeda and Taliban elements can hide. Currently, most are in the tribal regions of Pakistan, and, as we remove forces from Afghanistan, the enemy will fill that void. Without a COIN strategy in effect and less forces on the ground, we will be left with a much larger zone that we need to cover with intelligence and surveillance assets. This opportunity will offer the enemy additional safe havens where they can refit and recruit.

It is important to note that these difficulties are offset by the smaller number of our own forces who are in direct danger. Force protection for our forces will become easier, and we can locate the troops that remain on large bases where they will not be exposed. CT operations, keeping the enemy off balance, would ensure that large groups of enemy could not mass to attack them.

Our goal would be to degrade the enemy by attrition and never allow any significant elements to form. As soon as the enemy built a training camp or gathered in numbers, their activity would trigger a raid or a strike. If the intelligence is actionable, it can be effective in ensuring that both Afghanistan and Pakistan do not serve as safe havens where terror can be planned and launched.

In order for this mission to be successful, it requires extensive improvements to both Afghan security forces as well as the functions of the central government itself. Our presence there, even in reduced numbers for a CT mission, requires a stable central government to host our forces, and we must train and help field enough Afghan security forces to eventually take the mission over from us. The end game for both COIN and CT is a hand off to the Afghans of responsibility for their own security.

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*U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson*

