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Learning From History: Can the U.S. Win the Afghan War?

By Ivan Eland

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The United States military is attempting to transfer its recipe for “success” in the conflict in Iraq to the war in Afghanistan. In Iraq, after many years of stumbling to relearn the lessons of counterinsurgency warfare gleaned from many years of staggering in Vietnam, the United States happened upon a technique that attenuated the Sunni insurgency. That gambit was dividing the Sunni opposition by paying former Saddamists to fight the recalcitrant al-Qaeda.

In the short term, this strategy has dampened the violence in Iraq. In the long term, it may aggravate the still likely civil war between the Kurds, Shia, and Sunnis by training, arming, and paying the Sunnis, as well as the Kurds and Shia. But Afghanistan’s war is really between a recalcitrant Taliban and U.S.-supported warlords (the Afghan government is weak and corrupt), the U.S. military, and NATO allied forces. So to divide the opposition, couldn’t the United States just pay off some of the Taliban? Afghan’s president, Hamid Karzai, has proposed just that and has gotten some U.S. support.

Although throughout history, counterinsurgency “wins” have been few, dividing the opposition has been a major factor in prominent episodes that have proved successful. For example, in the 1950s, the classic British win in Malaya has helped write the military doctrine on counterinsurgency warfare ever since. After initially stumbling with a scorched-earth policy, the British implemented the same “hearts and minds” approach, aimed at winning the support of the indigenous population, that the U.S. has adopted in Afghanistan. This more benign method succeeded in winning over the Malayan population, thereby eliminating support for guerrillas among the people—the key to any counterinsurgency success. But the British were helped by

one significant factor. Malays were already divided about rebelling against their colonial overlord. The Malayan Communist Party insurgents had the support of only a small part of the population.

A similar situation existed during the Greek government's successful counterinsurgency against Marxist guerillas from 1946 until 1949. The guerrillas became divided when the Soviet Union demanded that they adhere to the values of the international Communist movement, which prevented them from taking advantage of strong feelings of Greek nationalism among the population.

So from these two cases and the at least short-term success in Iraq, isn't Karzai's effort to divide the opposition by bribing the Taliban with jobs and money a good idea? Given that the U.S. seems to be unwisely sinking deeper into the Afghan quicksand, trying to bribe your enemies, instead of fighting them, may again have at least short-term merits and is worth a try. But one other crucial issue has not been mentioned in the Malayan, Greek, and Iraqi success stories: the overwhelming factor of foreign occupation.

The primary reason that counterinsurgency warfare has not been very successful over time is that although counterinsurgents are usually much stronger than insurgents, they are also often foreign occupiers. This is one huge strike against them. People naturally get really annoyed when foreigners invade their country, as our own experience with British forces in the American Revolution attests. Even if the foreign troops are fairly benevolent—building schools, roads, and health clinics and handing out candy to children—they are still foreigners who are killing civilians by accident and arrogantly telling locals what to do at gunpoint, thus creating a nationalist backlash.

In the aforementioned three episodes, hatred of foreign involvement was either mitigated (in the Malayan and Iraqi cases) or went against the insurgents (in the Greek case). In the Malayan case, the Communist Party was overwhelmingly Chinese in ethnic origin. The Chinese, a minority in Malaya, were regarded as hated foreigners—even more so than the British. So the insurgents were the minority of a minority, and ethnic Malaysians helped the British get rid of them.

In the Iraqi case, the Sunni insurgency was originally directed against the Americans but then became preoccupied with a civil war against the Shia majority and the excessively bloodthirsty and foreign-led al-Qaeda. Eventually, the mainstream Sunni rebels believed that receiving money, training, and arms from the foreigners would help them in their future fight against these perceived alien groups. So the mainstream Sunni insurgents flipped and began helping the Americans.

In Greece, the people have always been nationalistic, and the Greek government, backed by only indirect U.S. aid, used such nationalism to battle an insurgency of internationally oriented communists, which were getting aid from Albania, Yugoslavia, and Greeks outside Greece.

Unfortunately for the United States in Afghanistan, however, the label of “foreign occupier” is an albatross the U.S. will likely never be able to shake or mitigate. Although the Taliban is often brutal (but may now be toning this down in its own realization that it must win greater public

support) and unpopular, so is the U.S. occupation and the corrupt client government of Hamid Karzai. After the fraudulent election, the U.S. stewed about putting distance between the United States and Karzai, but more important—and something Americans don't want to face—is that to survive, Karzai must stiff-arm the foreign occupier. In the all-important quest for the hearts and minds of the Afghan public, the Taliban is at least perceived by those people as being Afghans acting independently. In addition, the Taliban guerrillas are fighting to get back their home turf, and that means they, like the North Vietnamese, will likely have much more patience than the foreign occupier. One must go back in history to centuries before Christ—to Cyrus the Great of Persia—to find a conqueror of Afghanistan who actually was able to maintain control of it. So the U.S. escalation in Afghanistan is likely to face insurmountable long-term obstacles.