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A Strategic Perspective on Taliban Warfare

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“You have the watches, we have the time. We were born here. We will die here. We aren’t going anywhere.”

– Taliban Warfare Narrative¹

Introduction

Taliban Warfare has occupied news headlines in the global information expanse for over a decade. It is also a topic of choice for academics and scholars. However, the subject is often viewed and analyzed in a subjective rather than objective manner. It is mostly looked at across the prism of terrorism - atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by a group of non-state, though not stateless, bandits. Seldom has a theorist or practitioner picked up the pen to draw on the military aspects of the war so as to reach correct conclusions as to how could this war come to an acceptable-by-all end. This line of thought and reasoning might hold good for a given category of politicians but the students of military strategy and those involved in kinetic operations in a counterinsurgency campaign remain bewildered on the nature of the war. There is a need to understand Taliban as people, not monster, and as warriors not gangsters. Likewise, Taliban Warfare is required to be understood in correct military perspective rather than a mere act of crime, terrorism or banditry.



Photographed by the author along Afghanistan border

¹ Sami Yousafzai, and Ron Moreau, “The Taliban in their own words.” Newsweek (September 26, 2009).

For over eight years, the US strategists tried to attain a military victory over Taliban but failed despite bringing in the military forces from better part of the world. After when it was dawned that a purely kinetic scheme is bound to fail, it was decided to draw on strategy of “total approach” using all instruments of national power making choice for information rather than firepower as grammar of the operational dialectic. This too led to a race amongst the writers and scholars. The currency of global academic market has now become the counterinsurgency rather than counterterrorism operations. Information maneuvers, narratives, strategic communications and psychological operation have become the core theme of the books, monographs, articles and op-eds being published on the subject. Military analysis is found wanting. This paper seeks to fill in the gap and contains a strategic perspective on Taliban Warfare in the light of the theories and strategies of Carl Von Clausewitz, Mao Tse-tung, T.E. Lawrence, David Galula and Querine Hanlon with reference to the concepts and notions of Sun Tzu, Max Weber, Ernesto Che Guevara, Henry A. Kissinger and General John H.K. Johnson. It aims at providing basic understanding to the readers interested in military aspects of the war.

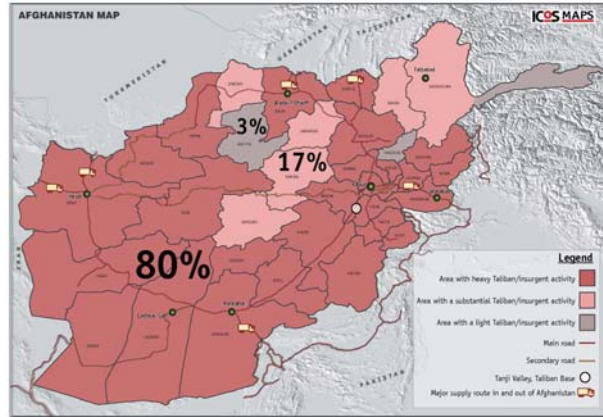


Figure-1: Map showing Taliban Control in Afghanistan

Taliban Warfare

When I first used the term Taliban Warfare in one of my presentations in National Defense University, Washington D.C., a few of my colleagues looked at me with a mix of credence and incredulity as the term had never been used before. Even though, it was an inadvertent oral expression, yet, analyzed in line with the time-honored strategic theories and timeless principles of war in one of my subsequent papers, I found that it was indeed an independent form of warfare. On one hand, it is fit-for-all kind of combat struggle and on the other, it retains an independent status due to its specific characteristics.

The Nature of War

Taliban are waging a hybrid nature of war, which is neither wholly limited nor a total war, and is thus an assortment of the two forms of Clausewitz’s War in Reality. In terms of time, it may be regarded as unlimited. Taliban’s resolve to continue fighting till their stated goal is achieved can be likened to Mao’s Protracted

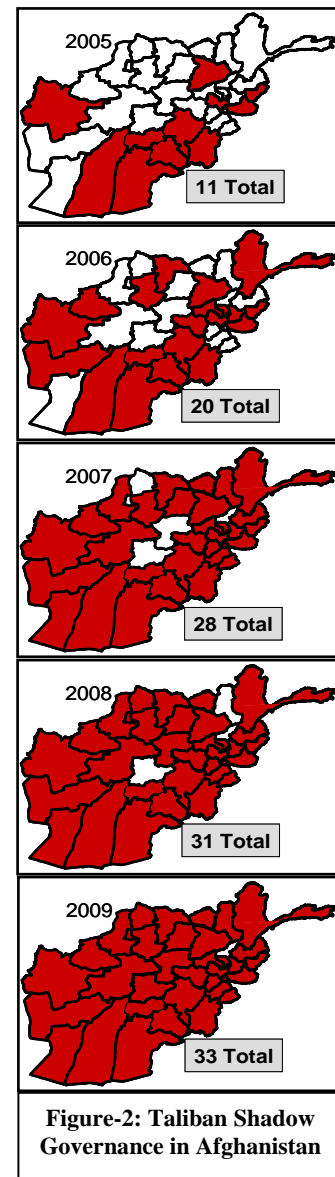


Figure-2: Taliban Shadow Governance in Afghanistan

War. In terms of use of resources too, it may be termed as an unlimited or total war as they are using all means at hand. Likewise, it is total war in terms of its ends i.e. complete politico-military dominance in Afghanistan and eviction of foreign forces but is limited in battle space i.e. Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Insurgency in Afghanistan and Terrorism in Pakistan

This is an important issue and draws the interest of military strategists. Taliban are waging a proper insurgency in Afghanistan wherein they have structured a classic counter-state all over the country. According to a new map of Taliban presence in Afghanistan (Figure-1) issued by the London-based International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) in October 2009, Taliban have now permanent presence in 80% of Afghanistan, up from 72% in November 2008, According to ICOS, another 17% of Afghanistan is seeing 'substantial' Taliban activity.² NATO's unclassified briefing gives even clearer picture. Taliban have a shadow government in 33 out of 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Figure-2 shows the how Taliban Movement in Afghanistan moved from sway on 11 provinces in 2005 to 33 in 2009.³ In the words of Admiral Michael Mullen, Taliban [are] getting pretty effective at it [governance]. They have set up functional courts in some locations, assess and collect taxes, and even allow people to file formal complaints against local Talib leaders.⁴

The case of Pakistan is different in a number of aspects. It is, indeed, a side-show of Taliban Warfare wherein they have made choice for a pure terrorism based on clandestinity with the aim of coercing the Government and the Security Forces to desist from supporting the US and its allies. There is nothing like gaining freedom from an occupying power as is the case with their main theater of operation i.e. Afghanistan. The umbrella organization of the so-called Taliban in Pakistan is known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), literally Taliban Movement Pakistan. The political ends of its terror campaign in Pakistan are to drive Pakistan out of the support to coalition forces in Afghanistan and not to seize power or gain independence. Pakistan remains suffixed to its name. Hence, viewed in terms of strategic theories on irregular warfare, it is pure terrorism rather than insurgency. While in Afghanistan, Taliban endeavor to inflict minimum collateral damage and the mainstay of their operations is against NATO and Afghan forces; in Pakistan they do targets civilians too. Their aim remains to drive the society against the state to get out of the US-led war, in which they are not wholly unsuccessful!

Taliban Warfare in Clausewitzian Concept of People in Arms

Clausewitz is rightly considered to be an Old War theorist. 114 of his 115-chapter "On War" deal with the conventional war. So to speak, irregular warfare was not the strategic problem of Clausewitz. Living through the era of Napoleonic Warfare as part of Prussian Army, he considered the war in conventional terms in line with what Max Weber called the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory in his lecture titled "Politics as a

² ICOS Press Release, September 10, 2009, http://www.icosgroup.net/modules/press_releases/eight_years_after_911 (accessed January 31, 2010).

³ <http://www.infiniteunknown.net/tag/taliban/> (accessed March 12, 2010)

⁴ "Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 55, 4th Quarter 2009, 2.

Vocation” delivered in the Munich University in January 1918.⁵ However, influenced by the Napoleonic concept of *levée en masse*, he discussed the military aspects of irregular warfare in Book VI, Chapter XXVI titled “*the People in Arms*”; Clausewitz lays down five conditions under which a general uprising can be effective. Taliban Warfare has been viewed against these Clausewitzian conditions in Table 1.1.

Clausewitz ⁶	Taliban ⁷
The war must be fought in the interior of the country	Taliban are fighting their war in the interior of the country, away from the major communication centers, taking advantage of the rural conditions. However, urban areas too are not out of the reach of their suicide bombers
It must not be decided by a single stroke	It is essentially a guerrilla form of warfare marked by hit-and-run tactics in rural areas and IED blasts in urban areas in order to embroil the state / international forces bit-by-bit, lower their morale and gain moral as well as operational ascendancy.
The theater of operation must be fairly large	The theater of operation of Taliban Warfare is spread across the Hindu Kush Mountain Range engulfing major parts of Afghanistan besides FATA of Pakistan
The national character must be suited to that type of war	Taliban are primarily Pashtun, a tribe known for its warring history, guerrilla tactics and physical endurance. The Pashtun social code of Pashtunwali supports militancy
The country must be rough and inaccessible, because of mountains or forests, marshes, or the local methods of cultivation	The area of operations is mountainous in nature and suits clandestine warfare being waged by Taliban. Lack of communication infrastructure produces tremendous friction

Table 1.1: Taliban Warfare in Clausewitzian concept

Operational Environment and the Center of Gravity

The nature of war, the war economy, unity of effort, terrain and demography of the area are major constituents of the operational environment. Nonetheless, it is ethnic identity and religious belief that contribute to form the ethno-religious ideology for Taliban. In other words, the tradition of Pashtunwali, the Pashtun Social Code, has been combined with Jihad thereby forming a formidable war ideology. This is serving as the nucleus around which everything else is knit and is thus the Centre of Gravity for Taliban Warfare. The constituents of operational environment may seek variants and may witness dip or rise in magnitude but till such time their ideology remains unbeaten, they may continue to fight.

Grand Strategy

Some might argue that a sub-state group may not have a grand strategy; yet, Taliban Warfare does have a grand strategic outlook aimed at seizing legitimacy, credibility and politico-moral ascendancy both by violent and non-violent means. This is where the “New War” differs from the “Old War” – the sub-state actors with a Grand Strategy.

⁵ English translation of the lecture is available at <http://www2.selu.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2010).

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 479.

⁷ Conjecture and analysis by this writer.

Military Strategy

Taliban have an all-inclusive military strategy and are operating at all levels of war on the following lines:

Tactical Level: By means of improvised explosive devices (IED) blasts, suicide attacks and hit-and-run guerrilla actions, lower the morale of soldiers and induce harassment in the common populace. Maintain a ‘ghost’ character by making skillful use of terrain. The point of application must hurt the government and the target population the most.

Operational Level: Dominate the area of operation by a string of tactical successes and complicate the operational environment by launching multiple level attacks at distant points of application ranging from operational to logistics targets. Seize initiative at operational level, embroil the opposing forces, impose organizational caution and keep the opposing formation commanders preoccupied with protection tasks thereby inducing a defensive attitude.

Strategic Level: Overstretch the state / coalition forces, maintain initiative and remain on strategic offensive in all zones of operation thereby eliminating the government presence in the theater of operation. The population must lose trust in the governing mechanism and have more confidence in the Taliban counter-state.

Relationship of Tactical and Strategic Level: From the preceding lines, it may well be deduced that the Taliban strategy hinges on a string of successful tactical battles. IED attacks remain to be the core of Taliban tactics. In case of conventional warfare, tactical gallantries cannot cover up strategic blunders albeit they may, at times, generate strategic effects. Nonetheless, in irregular wars like Taliban Warfare, tactical successes directly contribute to the success at strategic level. Some might ponder how? To be sure, tactical triumphs by Taliban have often led to strategic shift on the opposing side. In some cases, it has even led to friction within the International Security Assistance Force deployed in Afghanistan.

Taliban Warfare and Mao’s Protracted War

Mao’s Protracted War in Mao’s own words passes through *three stages*: “The first stage [Strategic Defensive] covers the period of the enemy’s strategic offensive and our strategic defensive. The second stage [Strategic Stalemate] will be the period of the enemy’s strategic consolidation and our preparation for the counter-offensive. The third stage [Strategic Counteroffensive] will be the period of our strategic counter-offensive and the enemy’s strategic retreat.”⁸ The current Taliban resistance in Afghanistan started with Strategic Defensive in the aftermath of fall of their Government in Afghanistan in 2001. They started to reorganize. By the end of 2004, they had entered a sort of Strategic Stalemate vis-à-vis the coalition forces. By the

⁸ Mao Tse-tung, *On Protracted War*, 19, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm (accessed March 13, 2010).

end of 2008, they had decisively entered the Strategic Counteroffensive Stage characterized by fluid hit-and-run operations and massive use of IEDs. When these lines are being written in March 2010, the coalition forces are struggling hard to seize initiative from Taliban and push them back desirably to Strategic Stalemate and ideally to Strategic Defensive so as to finally destroy them or bring them to the table of dialogue from a position of strength.

Taliban guerrilla operations can be likened to those conducted by Mao Tse-tung's forces in resistance against the Japanese Forces in late 1930s. Mao wrote in 1937, "In guerrilla warfare...avoid the solid, attack the hollow; attack; withdraw; deliver a lightning blow, seek a lightning decision. When guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws."⁹ The guerrilla facet of Taliban Warfare is tactically identical to that of Mao, even though, Pashtun are predecessor rather than successor to Mao in guerrilla tactics. They have used the same scheme of tactical maneuvers against various invaders for centuries.

Mao has given three stages of the pure guerrilla warfare facet of the Protracted War: Guerrilla Warfare; Mobile Warfare; and Positional War. Taliban are over with the Guerrilla Warfare stage and are now in Mobile Warfare stage. Taliban avoid decisive conventional battles which could certainly annihilate them. They are cognizant of their weakness and try to capitalize on whatever they have akin to the Chinese Yin-Yang theory that *concealed within strength there is weakness, and within weakness, strength*.¹⁰ Taliban Warfare compensates for its weakness by means of clandestinity and deception in line with Sun Tzu's theory that *all warfare is based on deception. Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity; when near make it appear that you are far away; when far away that you are near*.¹¹ Their tactical level actions are no different than Sun Tzu's succinct advice, "Sheng Tung, Chi His" i.e. "Uproar [in the] East, Strike [in the] West."¹²

The Lines of Effort (LEs) of Taliban Warfare

The lines of effort of Taliban Warfare when viewed in the perspective of Mao's Doctrine are as given in Figure 3.

⁹ Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2005), 46.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 25.

¹¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Translated Samuel B. Griffith, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1963), 66.

¹² Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 37.

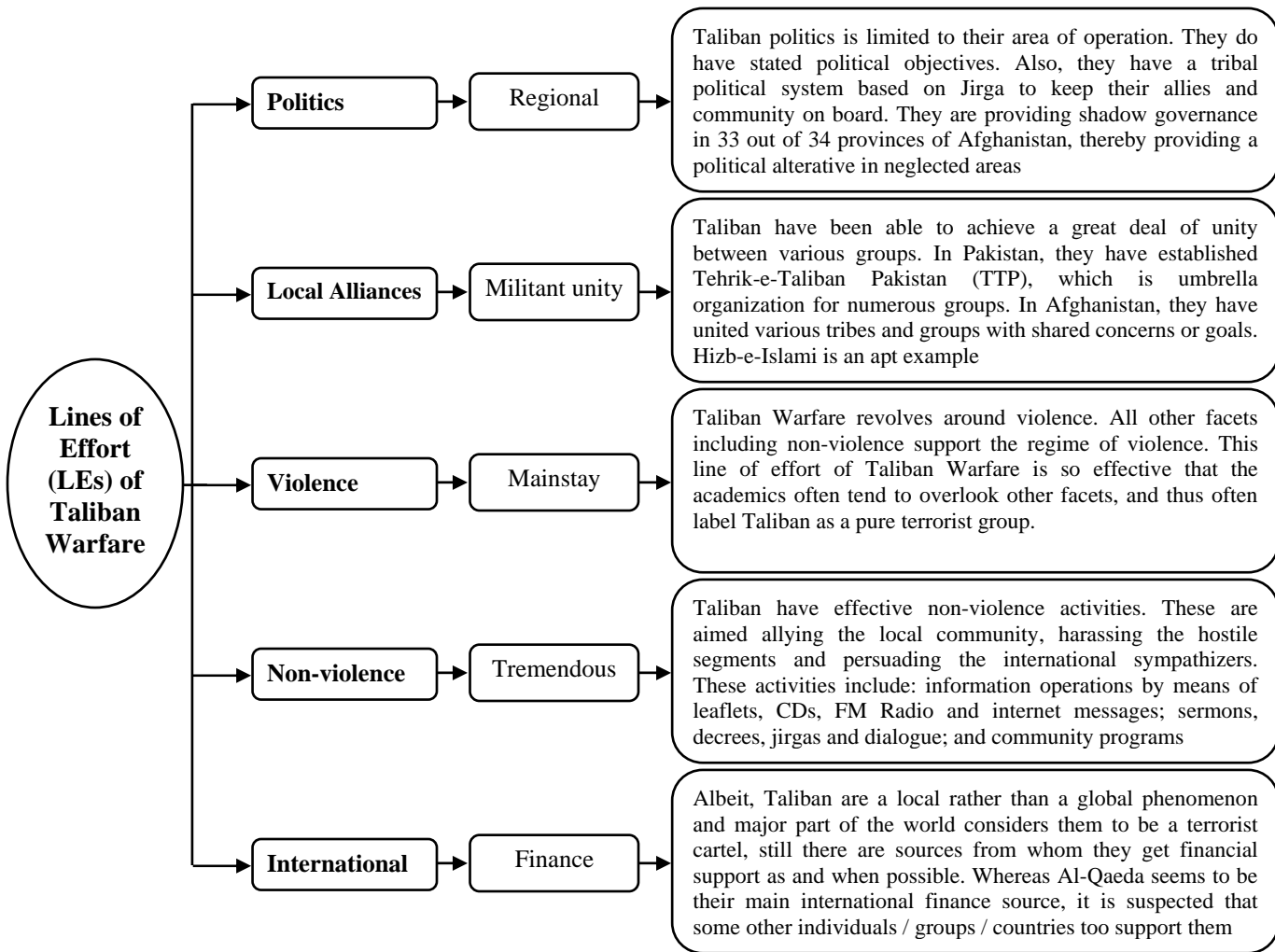


Figure 3: The lines of effort

Taliban Warfare and David Galula's Insurgency Doctrine

David Galula has described two patterns the insurgents follow; the Orthodox and the Shortcut. Both consist of five steps of development, but differ in only the first two steps as shown in Table 1.2 below. Taliban Warfare is predominantly following the Orthodox Pattern of Galula's Doctrine. However, the third and fourth step is mixed with the second step of the Shortcut Pattern i.e. selective terrorism. David Galula's notion of selective terrorism is, indeed, based on the actions by Algerian insurgents to terrorize or eliminate the Algerians working for the French administration or suspected of being pro-French. Taliban, too, have a similar pattern. They have, heretofore, selectively killed or maimed the pro-Government tribal leaders in FATA as well as Afghanistan. They have also targeted the security as well as civil officials besides iconic members of the society including the religious scholars who opposed suicide bombings. To this

end, they have been trying to coerce the populace and deliver a message that one could differ with Taliban only at the peril of death. It is considered that Taliban may not be able to enter the final step or stage of the Galula's Doctrine i.e. Annihilation Campaign in the relevant future in view of the military preponderance on opposing side i.e. Pakistan's Security Forces in FATA and the ISAF in Afghanistan. To enter this stage, they would need to conduct head-on operations, which is neither within their capability nor a strategy of choice for them, as they are embarking on a Protracted War rather than a decisive conventional blow.

David Galula's Insurgency Doctrine ¹³		Taliban Warfare ¹⁴
The Orthodox Pattern	The Shortcut Pattern	
Create a Party	Blind terrorism	The movement (party) already existed since 1994
United Front	Selective terrorism	Various ethno-religious groups joined to form a united front
Guerrilla Warfare	Guerrilla Warfare	Clandestine guerrilla operations and selective terrorism
Movement Warfare	Movement Warfare	Movement Warfare while selective terrorism goes unabated
Annihilation Campaign	Annihilation Campaign	Yet not entered this phase due to organized international opposition

Table 1.2: Taliban Warfare and David Galula's Insurgency Doctrine

Taliban Warfare and the Elements of T.E. Lawrence's Strategy

Taliban Warfare is not at variance with the elements of Lawrence's strategy. The strategic context of Lawrence's concepts has been the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The strategic problem of revolting Arab tribes and the Pashtun tribes as Taliban is somewhat similar. Arabs revolted against Turks, who were seen as the outsiders and an antithesis to the Arab culture. Taliban are waging insurgency against the international forces being seen as outsider and thus an antithesis to the tribal society of Afghanistan.

Based on his experience, observations and analysis of Arab Revolt, T.E. Lawrence has described and discussed three key elements of revolt and insurgency i.e. *algebraical*, *biological* and *psychological*.¹⁵ These have been analyzed in Table 1.3.

¹³ Stephen Vrooman, "A Counterinsurgency Campaign Plan Concept: The Galula Compass." US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, AY 04-05. 6-7.

¹⁴ Conjecture and analysis by this writer.

¹⁵ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 197.

T.E. Lawrence's Elements of Strategy		Taliban Warfare ¹⁶
Element	Effects and Explanation	
Algebraical	To Lawrence, these included known variables, fixed conditions, space and time, inorganic things like hills, climates and railways, with mankind in type-masses too great for individual variety, with all artificial aids and the extensions given our faculties by mechanical invention... the algebraic factor would first take practical account of the area we wished to deliver, and I began idly to calculate how many square miles: sixty: eighty: one hundred: perhaps one hundred and forty thousand square miles. And how would the Turks defend all that	Taliban have hitherto endeavored to keep the Lawrence's Algebraical Element i.e. both the known variables and the fixed conditions in their favor at all levels of war. They are making the best possible use of the friction generated by the area of operation as advocated by Sun Tzu. The theatre of operations is also fairly large in consistent with the Clausewitzian concept. In keeping with the Lawrence's strategy, they are not only dominating the area of operation by the way of guerrilla actions and mobile warfare but have also made it difficult for the counterinsurgents to defend the entire theater
Biological	According to Lawrence, This dealt with the life and death, and wear and tear	Taliban are accepting casualties and, at the same time, inflicting considerable damage on the COIN forces in men and material in order to embroil them. Alongside, they are inflicting unbearable loss on Pakistani state and society by the way of selective terrorism in order to coerce the Government
Psychological	Lawrence's psychological element dealt with ideas, and drew on dialectics and propaganda in order to gain popular support and prepare the insurgents	Taliban are fighting a war of ideas on three prongs. Prong-1 deals with the Taliban fighters who have been psychologically imbued with the ethno-religious ideology by mixing up Pashtunwali with the fundamental of Jihad. Prong-2 generates narratives for the population both by means of acts and ideas that we are a legitimate movement. Prong-3 deals with the international forces that we have a tremendous capacity to fight a protracted war, the potential to win and that, ultimately, we would win, come what may.

Table 1.3: Taliban Warfare and the Elements of T.E. Lawrence's Strategy

Hanlon's Ethnic War Theory

Taliban Warfare has a peculiar ethnic dimension too – the Pashtun Character. While on one hand, it is being waged against the international forces present in Afghanistan and their collaborators i.e. the Government of Pakistan, on the other, it is a war being seen by some to protect the ethnic interests vis-à-vis the non-Pashtun ethnic communities in Afghanistan who are siding with the US and NATO. At least one of Dr. Hanlon's models has relevance to the Taliban Warfare under each of the Three Images of Ethnic War discussed by her.¹⁷

¹⁶ Conjecture and analysis by this writer.

¹⁷ Querine Hanlon, *The Three Images of Ethnic War* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2009).

Firstly, *Ethnic Leadership Model* of the First Image is quite applicable to Taliban Warfare, which Dr. Hanlon describes as, “If an ethnic leadership determines that group goals require violent means and if it acts successfully to mobilize group members in support of those means, then the group will adopt a strategy of interethnic violence”.¹⁸ Interethnic violence in case of Taliban Warfare is their war against the non-Pashtun communities e.g. Tajiks siding within the foreign forces.

Secondly, *Exclusion Model* of the Second Image is also quite relevant to Taliban Warfare, which Dr. Hanlon illustrates as, “If an ethnic group is excluded or is threatened with exclusion from the polity, then the ethnic group will be more likely to adopt violent means”.¹⁹ In case of Taliban, it is linked with their ouster from the Government in Kabul in 2001 and a fear of the Pashtun community that despite being an ethnic majority, they might be reduced to the political minority.

Thirdly, *Resource Model* of the Third Image is also relatable to Taliban Warfare. To this end, Dr. Hanlon writes, “If an ethnic group with grievance against ethnic stranger secures sufficient arms and resources to sustain a strategy of ethnic violence, then the group will be more likely to adopt violent means.”²⁰ The ethnic strangers for Taliban are the foreign forces as well as non-Pashtun ethnic groups. They have enough means to fuel violence against them across the entire theater of operation.

Is Taliban Warfare a People’s War?

This is an important academic question calling for response in the perspective of strategic concepts on irregular warfare. In reality, no aspect of People’s War is found missing from Taliban Warfare. It is primarily a political war being waged in population battlefield with full-scale violence, which the West calls as terrorism, Mao termed as struggle and Taliban call as Jihad (which also means struggle).

Ernesto Che Guevara wrote in Cuban Missile Crisis 1962, “Tactics and strategy are the two main elements of the art or war, but war and politics are intimately related by a common denominator.”²¹ To this end, Mao noted, “Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.”²² Taliban Warfare is politics with bloodshed. Nonetheless, there is one major difference between Taliban Warfare and the Mao’s People’s War. His struggle was for materialistic emancipation of the people of China from oppression and tyranny of an authoritarian ruler. On the other hand, Taliban believe in their combat to be a Holy War against foreign powers who have occupied their country. They believe that their war against the invaders would not only emancipate them in this world but would also be instrumental in salvation in the life hereafter, in line with the Muslim belief. This has practical implications. While Pashtunwali, the Pashtun Social Code, provides meso level i.e. tribal (community) platform to Taliban to fight the opponent in keeping with its proviso of Badal i.e. revenge, Jihad supports them even at micro

¹⁸ Ibid, 7.

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

²⁰ Ibid, 9.

²¹ Ernesto Che Guevara, “Tactics and Strategy of the Latin America Revolution,” <http://irelandsown.net/Tacticsandstrategy.pdf> (accessed March 14, 2010).

²² Mao Tse-tung, *On Protracted War*, 33.

level wherein the individuals are ready to fight and die on the way of Almighty God. This facet was missing from Mao's People's War and thus makes Taliban Warfare an even more powerful People's War calling for some out-of-the-box rejoinder rather than a simple military response.

Mass Line: This calls for vertical mobilization of the locals using bottom-top approach. Besides, lateral mobilization at meso level i.e. tribe-to-tribe and group-to-group complements the bottom-top i.e. micro-meso-macro pattern of mobilization. Mao called it horizontal unity, vertical unity and unity of spirit.²³ They demand from the locals to support the Taliban Movement by means of persuasion in the name of ethnicity or religion. The least they expect from the people is not to support the state operations or endeavors. Those who fail to comply with come across drastic consequences. A number of tribal chieftains in FATA have, heretofore, been assassinated by Taliban on the plea that they were pro-government. Likewise, countless individuals have been beheaded with a message on their dead body that *he was an American spy...this is the result of allying with the infidels...etc.* In sum, whatever works, whether stick or carrot, Taliban do endeavor to mobilize the people.

Unity of Effort: Taliban are successfully keeping all forces with similar aims, objectives and ideology aligned. Some individuals or groups may not have the same objectives but they have joined Taliban due to shared concerns. An apt example in this regards is the Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of Hizb-e-Islami. He had been Prime Minister of Afghanistan from 1993 to 1994. He was one of the political victims of Taliban, when they took over in mid-1990s. Nevertheless, after fall of Taliban Government, he joined them in their struggle against the international forces. He does not share the end goal i.e. political comeback of Taliban to Afghanistan but does share the concern i.e. presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. In FATA region of Pakistan, TTP is working as an umbrella organization for a number of organizations and groups with same concerns and / objectives. Some of the criminal groups are even reported to have joined the ranks of TTP in order to pursue their interests by "other means".

War of Ideas and Strategic Communication: War of ideas is a powerful element of Taliban Warfare. It is, indeed, an ideology versus ideology – the Islamic ideology versus Western line of thought. To be true, this facet is burgeoned more by the West rather than Taliban when the Western academics and leaders knowingly or unknowingly try to link terrorism with Islam. On the other hand, Taliban know how to exploit such narratives through counter narratives and creative narratives. In form of psychological warfare, Taliban are carrying out effective strategic communication using internet blogs, websites, media statements, press releases, audio and video tapes, and CDs. The issues they normally discuss include: the legitimacy of USA's occupation of Afghanistan, Israel's occupation of Arab lands and India's occupation of Kashmir; justness of Taliban cause in the light of Islamic injunctions; low morale of coalition soldiers; and the role of the Western policies in the current dismal condition of the Muslims. They also highlight their military successes against the coalition forces. They also discuss incidents of torture of prisoners by the US intelligence agencies, killing of civilians by the NATO forces and activities of the Muslim militants in various parts of

²³ Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 91-92.

the world. Lately, they have claimed that CIA and Blackwater are responsible for various blasts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For instance, they blamed Blackwater for the bomb blast in Peshawar (Pakistan), which killed 108 people in October 2009. Taliban spokesman stated, “Our war is against the Government and the security forces and not against the people. We are not involved in blasts.”²⁴ This all adds to the fog of war, breeds hatred in the society and multiplies friction within the anti-Taliban forces.

Why Do Those Who Support, Support!: This is an important question for the strategists and the policy makers as to why do Taliban have a mass appeal in Pashtun society. There are a number of reasons that can be cited in this regard. Firstly, as David Galula puts it that the counterinsurgent will *not be able to rally the bulk of population so long as the population is convinced that the counterinsurgent the will, the means and the ability to win*. This denotes that the population supports the one who *will win*.²⁵ I think there are three more notions that the population may have to support a given side: who is ours; who will stay; and who is neither ours nor is to stay but supports rather than hurt our interest. Afghanistan has an interesting situation in this regard. Taliban have been seen as a winning side in last about four years. They are also seen as “ours” and those who are “to stay” by many. The events to come would prove whether NATO and the US can occupy the first category or otherwise. They cannot fall in second and third category in a hardcore tribal society like that of Pashtun. Nevertheless, using all instruments of national power, they can seize the fourth category thereby winning the hearts and minds of the locals.

The Upshot

These lines have been purely aimed at putting the Taliban Warfare in strategic perspective. The discussion herein shows that Taliban Warfare is on one hand no different to several other irregular wars, on the other, it has peculiar characteristics too. The geo-political or geo-strategic aspects of the conflict and the strategic rejoinder to Taliban Warfare have not been the theme of this paper. I would cover these in some subsequent paper. Nonetheless, it is of note that a pure military response cannot meet the challenge. A “total approach” with sincerity of purpose can meet a threat of such an enormity. What Mr. Henry Kissinger wrote at the end of the Vietnam War is relevant to the situation in Afghanistan today. He noted, “We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla warfare: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win. The [North Vietnamese] used their armed forces the way a bull-fighter uses his cape – to keep us lunging in areas of marginal political importance.”²⁶ A few months back, I had pitched a counter-quote by noting, “The US is fighting a military war even today [in Afghanistan] in the face of a political one. It is seeking to gain a military victory disregarding physical attrition of its forces fast leading to psychological exhaustion. Not only that the Taliban guerrillas aren’t losing

²⁴ “Taliban blame Blackwater,” The Frontier Post, Peshawar, Pakistan, October 30, 2010. Statement of the TTP spokesman was also broadcasted on Aljazeera on November 16, 2009.

²⁵ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2006), 55.

²⁶ Henry A. Kissinger, “The Vietnam Negotiations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 47, No. 2 (January 1969): 214.

but are being seen now as a winning side. They have taken combat to the non-combatant, politics to the apolitical and governance to the ungoverned.” However, the situation is changing with each click of the clock now.

In the words of General H.K. Johnson, “Military force... should be committed with the object beyond war in mind. Broadly speaking the object beyond war should be the restoration of stability with the minimum of destruction, so that society and lawful government may proceed in an atmosphere of justice and order.”²⁷ In sum, a sound COIN campaign for Afghanistan can be coined based on the observation of Mr. Henry Kissinger and the concept of General Johnson.

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Personal archives and experience of service along Afghan Border.

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