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Korengal Valley Observations

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In 2007, Alissa Rubin of *The New York Times* described a “new counterinsurgency doctrine” that consisted of small outposts in the Korengal and elsewhere, in order to patrol among the people. Four years later, the Korengal was abandoned to pursue yet another new counterinsurgency strategy – small outposts in more heavily populated areas.

The scale of the fighting was not the reason for withdrawing. One American soldier was killed in the Korengal in the last ten months, a loss rate less than in an average rifle company. The strongest technical rationale for the withdrawal was economy of force. The troop-to-population ratio and the logistics for air support were too onerous, regardless of the level of fighting.

More problematic was the strategic rationale. “We’re not living in their homes, but we’re living in their valley,” General McChrystal said, explaining that American soldiers were “an irritant to the people... There was probably much more fighting than there would have been (if US troops had never come.)”¹

This was true beginning in 2006, leaving a gap of four years in our strategic thinking. Our military strategy made no sense, if US troops were the reason for the fighting in the first place. Hence a political thesis emerged: the xenophobic Korengalis were ungovernable by anyone - except the Taliban. Even that was disputed by the commander of the US battalion responsible for the Korengal. “I don’t believe there are any hard-core Taliban in the valley,” LtCol Brian Pearl said.

Yet Rubin reported that in 2007, half the fighters were locals and half were hard-core Islamic jihadists. When I was in the Korengal in 2009, the interpreters estimated a third of the voices heard over the enemy radios had Pakistani-tinged accents, a third were Pashto and a third were the local dialects.

The high command hoped that the Korengali fighters would be content to settle down in their remote 10th Century caliphate. “‘Everybody hates them (the Americans),’ Haji Nizamuddin, a Korengali elder said. “They shoot at people, they raid our houses and kill our women and children... our tribes can protect us against the insurgents.”²

¹ Matthew Rosenberg, US Exits Afghanistan’s ‘Valley of Death’, *Wall St. Journal*, April 14, 2010, p. 1

² Matthew Rosenberg quoted in www.washingtonexaminer.com, 15 April 2010

Yet time and again the Taliban has massed hundreds of fighters, driving the Americans from the Ranch House, from Wanat, from Barge Matal, from Keating and from Ganjigal. The American colonels and generals never designed an operational campaign for holding small villages in mountainous terrain. It's not clear at this point why the Korengal tribe would want to protect itself from its own sons, or shun the hard-core leaders who visit from Pakistan. In 2005, the Korengalis were receptive to the initial reconstruction offers of the Americans. But that time has long since passed.

There are two alternative futures for northeast Afghanistan. The first is that the lowland, richer Pashtun tribes will accept the presence of more Afghan soldiers (mostly Tajiks) and at least passively resist the gangs of insurgents loosely called taliban with a small "t". The hope is that the Korengal is an isolated example. If so, the frontier gradually stabilizes itself as the tribes who have gained from American largesse go about their business.

The second future is that the taliban gangs infect the social organisms of the lowland tribes and that as American companies pull back, raids and oppression increase. The problem is that the withdrawal will encourage the insurgents of all stripes. If our high command has no operational means of controlling the mountainous border with Pakistan, how can Karzai do it?

We cannot yet reasonably predict how the northeast frontier will turn out. It depends upon politics both in Kabul and among the tribes. There is a skein of Afghan tribal politics that we will never understand. And we can't understand Karzai.

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