

By Scott Stewart

The drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq has served to shift attention toward Afghanistan, where the United States has been increasing its troop strength in hopes of forming conditions conducive to a political settlement. This is similar to the way it used the 2007 surge in Iraq to help reach a negotiated settlement with the Sunni insurgents that eventually set the stage for withdrawal there. As we've discussed elsewhere, the Taliban at this point do not feel the pressure required for them to capitulate or negotiate and therefore continue to follow their strategy of surviving and waiting for the coalition forces to depart so that they can again make a move to assume control over Afghanistan.

Indeed, with the United States having set a deadline of July 2011 to begin the drawdown of combat forces in Afghanistan — and with many of its NATO allies withdrawing sooner — the Taliban can sense that the end is near. As they wait expectantly for the departure of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan, a look at the history of militancy in Afghanistan provides a bit of a preview of what could follow the U.S. withdrawal.

A Tradition of Militancy

First, it is very important to understand that militant activity in Afghanistan is nothing new. It has existed there for centuries, driven by a number of factors. One of the primary factors is the country's geography. Because of its rugged and remote terrain, it is very difficult for a foreign power (or even an indigenous government in Kabul) to enforce its writ on many parts of the country. A second, closely related factor is culture. Many of the tribes in Afghanistan have traditionally been warrior societies that live in the mountains, disconnected from Kabul because of geography, and tend to exercise autonomous rule that breeds independence and suspicion of the central government. A third factor is ethnicity. There is no real Afghan national identity. Rather, the country is a patchwork of Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and other ethnicities that tend also to be segregated by geography. Finally, there is religion. While Afghanistan is a predominantly Muslim country, there is a significant Shiite minority as well as a large Sufi presence in the country. The hardcore Deobandi Taliban are not very tolerant of the Shia or Sufis, and they can also be harsh toward more moderate Sunnis who do things such as send their daughters to school, trim their beards, listen to music and watch movies.

Militancy and the U.S. Drawdown in Afghanistan

Any of these forces on its own would pose challenges to peace, stability and centralized governance, but together they pose a daunting problem and result in near-constant strife in Afghanistan.

Because of this environment, it is quite easy for outside forces to stir up militancy in

Afghanistan. One tried-and-true method is to play to the independent spirit of the Afghans and encourage them to rise up against the foreign powers that have attempted to control the country. We saw this executed to perfection in the 1800s during the Great Game between the British and the Russians for control of Afghanistan. This tool was also used after the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and it has been used again in recent years following the 2001 U.S. invasion of the country. The Taliban are clearly being used by competing outside powers against the United States (more on this later).

But driving out an invading power is not the only thing that will lead to militancy and violence in Afghanistan. The ethnic, cultural and religious differences mentioned above and even things like grazing or water rights and tribal blood feuds can also lead to violence. Moreover, these factors can (and have been) used by outside powers to either disrupt the peace in Afghanistan or exert control over the country via a proxy (such as Pakistan's use of the Taliban movement). Militant activity in Afghanistan is, therefore, not just the result of an outside invasion. Rather, it has been a near constant throughout the history of the region, and it will likely continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

Foreign Influence

When we consider the history of outside manipulation in Afghanistan, it becomes clear that such manipulation has long been an important factor in the country and will continue to be so after the United States and the rest of the ISAF withdraw. There are a number of countries that have an interest in Afghanistan and that will seek to exert some control over what the post-invasion country looks like.

* The United States does not want the country to revert to being a refuge for al Qaeda and other transnational jihadist groups. At the end of the day, this is the real U.S. national interest in Afghanistan. It is not counterinsurgency or building democracy or anything else.

* Russia does not want the Taliban to return to power. The Russians view the Taliban as a disease that can infect and erode their sphere of influence in countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and then move on to pose a threat to Russian control in the predominately Muslim regions of the Caucasus. This is why the Russians were so active in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime. There are reports, though, that the Russians have been aiding the Taliban in an effort to keep the United States tied down in Afghanistan, since as long as the United States is distracted there it has less latitude to counter Russian activity elsewhere.

* On the other side of that equation, Pakistan helped foster the creation of the Pashtun Taliban organization and then used the organization as a tool to exert its influence in Afghanistan. Facing enemies on its borders with India and Iran, Pakistan must control Afghanistan in order to have strategic depth and ensure that it will not be forced to defend itself along its northwest as well. While the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban and the threat it poses to Pakistan will alter Islamabad's strategy somewhat — and Pakistan has indeed been recalculating its use of militant proxies — Pakistan will try hard to ensure that the regime in Kabul is pro-Pakistani.

* This is exactly why India wants to play a big part in Afghanistan — to deny Pakistan that strategic depth. In the past, India worked with Russia and Iran to support the Northern Alliance and keep the Taliban from total domination of the country. Indications are that the Indians are teaming up with the Russians and Iranians once again.

* Iran also has an interest in the future of Afghanistan and has worked to cultivate certain factions of the Taliban by providing them with shelter, weapons and training. The Iranians also have been strongly opposed to the Taliban and have supported anti-Taliban militants, particularly those from the Shiite Hazara people. When the Taliban captured Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, they killed 11 Iranian diplomats and journalists. Iran does not want the Taliban to become too powerful, but it will use them as a tool to hurt the United States. Iran will also attempt to install a pro-Iranian government in Kabul or, at the very least, try to thwart efforts by the Pakistanis and Americans to exert control over the country.

A History of Death and Violence

It may seem counterintuitive, but following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the casualties from militancy in the country declined considerably. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies Armed Conflict Database, the fatalities due to armed conflict in Afghanistan fell from an estimated 10,000 a year prior to the invasion to 4,000 in 2002 and 1,000 by 2004. Even as the Taliban began to regroup in 2005 and the number of fatalities began to move upward, by 2009 (the last year for which the institute offers data) the total was only 7,140, still well-under the pre-invasion death tolls (though admittedly far greater than at the ebb of the insurgency in 2004).

Still, even with death tolls rising, the U.S. invasion has not produced anywhere near the estimated 1 million deaths that resulted during the Soviet occupation. The Soviets and their Afghan allies were not concerned about conducting a hearts-and-minds campaign. Indeed, their efforts were more akin to a scorched-earth strategy complete with attacks directed against the population. This strategy also resulted in millions of refugees fleeing Afghanistan for Pakistan and Iran and badly disrupted the tribal structure in much of Afghanistan. This massive disruption of the societal structure helped lead to a state of widespread anarchy that later led many Afghans to see the Taliban as saviors.

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the communist government in Kabul was able to survive for three more years, backed heavily with Soviet arms, but these years were again marked by heavy casualties. When the communist government fell in 1992, the warlords who had opposed the government attempted to form a power-sharing agreement to govern Afghanistan, but all the factions could not reach a consensus and another civil war broke out, this time among the various anti-communist Afghan warlords vying for control of the country. During this period, Kabul was repeatedly shelled and the bloodshed continued. Neither the Soviet departure nor the fall of the communist regime ended the carnage.

With the rise of the Taliban, the violence began to diminish in many parts of the country, though the fighting remained fierce and tens of thousands of people were killed as the Taliban tried to exert control over the country. The Taliban were still engaged in a protracted and bloody civil war against the Northern Alliance when the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. During the initial invasion, very few U.S. troops were actually on the ground. The United States used the Northern Alliance as the main ground-force element, along with U.S. air power and special operations forces, and was able to remove the Taliban from power in short order. It is important to remember that the Taliban was never really defeated on the battlefield. Once they realized

that they were no match for U.S. air power in a conventional war, they declined battle and faded away to launch their insurgency.

Today, the forces collectively referred to as the Taliban in Afghanistan are not all part of one hierarchical organization under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar. Although Mullah Omar is the dominant force and is without peer among Afghan insurgent leaders, there are a number of local and regional militant commanders who are fighting against the U.S. occupation beside the Taliban and who have post-U.S. occupation interests that diverge from those of the Taliban. Such groups are opportunists rather than hardcore Taliban and they might fight against Mullah Omar's Taliban if he and his militants come to power in Kabul, especially if an outside power manipulates, funds and arms them — and outside powers will certainly be seeking to do so. The United States has tried to peel away the more independent factions from the wider Taliban "movement" but has had little success, mainly because the faction leaders see that the United States is going to disengage and that the Taliban will be a force to be reckoned with in the aftermath.

Once U.S. and ISAF forces withdraw from Afghanistan, then, it is quite likely that Afghanistan will again fall into a period of civil war, as the Taliban attempt to defeat the Karzai government, as the United States tries to support it and as other outside powers such as Pakistan, Russia and Iran try to gain influence through their proxies in the country.

The only thing that can really prevent this civil war from occurring is a total defeat of the Taliban and other militants in the country or some sort of political settlement. With the sheer size of the Taliban and its many factions, and the fact that many factions are receiving shelter and support from patrons in Pakistan and Iran, it is simply not possible for the U.S. military to completely destroy them before the Americans begin to withdraw next summer. This will result in a tremendous amount of pressure on the Americans to find a political solution to the problem. At this time, the Taliban simply don't feel pressured to come to the negotiating table — especially with the U.S. drawdown in sight.

And even if a political settlement is somehow reached, not everyone will be pleased with it. Certainly, the outside manipulation in Afghanistan will continue, as will the fighting, as it has for centuries.

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