

JULY 2009

MICHAEL MOORE AND JAMES FUSSELL

AFGHANISTAN REPORT I

KUNAR AND NURISTAN

RETHINKING U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS



INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY of WAR

MILITARY ANALYSIS AND EDUCATION
FOR CIVILIAN LEADERS

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Front Cover Photograph: Soldiers with Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 6th Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, patrol through a mountain village on April 17.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a private, nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution whose goal is to educate current and future decision makers and thereby enhance the quality of policy debates. The Institute's work is addressed to government officials and legislators, teachers and students, business executives, professionals, journalists, and all citizens interested in a serious understanding of war and government policy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Although counterinsurgency doctrine was successfully implemented in urban Iraq, it has proved more difficult to apply in the sparsely-populated mountains of Kunar and Nuristan.
- U.S. forces are disproportionately committed to defending marginally significant areas in these remote provinces.
- U.S. missions in eastern Afghanistan, specifically places like the Korengal and Pech River Valley, must be re-examined and forces must be re-deployed to areas where they will have greater effect.
- The Korengal Valley in Kunar province is the deadliest place in Afghanistan. The population is historically hostile to any outside influence, including any Afghans from outside the valley.
 - The Korengalis have successfully fought off every attempt to subdue their valley, including the Soviets in the 80s, the Taliban rule in the 90s, and currently, the U.S. military.
- The presence of U.S. forces in the Korengal generates violence and undermines U.S. efforts to bring stability and security.
 - The current U.S. force disposition in the inhospitable valleys, like the Korengal, relies too heavily on isolated outposts that require massive amounts of artillery and airpower to defend
 - U.S. forces are not denying the enemy the high ground, allowing insurgents to attack and terrorize the population.
 - Artillery and airpower are counterproductive in dealing with the insurgency in this part of the country because their use alienates the very population the U.S. is trying to secure.
 - Committing additional forces in order to hold this remote terrain would be tactically and operationally imprudent. The resistance in this area is confined to locals in the valley. It does not accelerate the insurgency beyond the valley.
- Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan requires less interdiction on the borders and greater security in the population centers. Resources must flow to areas that are strategic priorities in order to allow force densities high enough to practice counterinsurgency effectively.
 - Rather than maintaining positions in the Korengal and many of the small, ineffective posts that dot the Pech River Valley, U.S. forces should conduct active patrols in the populated areas of the lower Kunar River Valley.
 - U.S. forces must protect the specific populations that oppose the enemy and support the government, rather than fighting populations that historically resist the government. U.S. forces in Kunar should concentrate efforts in places like Mara Wara, Sarkani and Khas Konar Districts where the population actually desires U.S. support and presence, unlike the Korengalis.
- Counterinsurgency requires short-term economic support, as well as a dense and mobile force presence. U.S. forces must pair long-term development projects, such as building roads, with short-term, immediate humanitarian assistance and quick-impact projects.

KUNAR AND NURISTAN:

UNDERSTANDING THE ENEMY, U.S. OPERATIONS, AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

By Michael Moore and James Fussell

INTRODUCTION

Counterinsurgency, successfully applied in Iraq, has become an integral component of U.S. military doctrine. Indeed, an effective counterinsurgency strategy will be crucial in stabilizing Afghanistan. However, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are quite distinct, and assumptions true in Iraq will not necessarily hold true for Afghanistan. Thus, U.S. forces will need to tailor their strategy and tactics to the specific condition in each region of Afghanistan.

Examining events in Kunar and eastern Nuristan in 2007 and 2008, this paper begins with a brief overview of Kunar and Nuristan provinces and their strategic importance to both U.S. and enemy forces followed by a discussion of U.S. force disposition and strategy. The next section describes the “enemy syndicate” in the region, while the second half of the paper documents operations and major developments in three areas: the Pakistani border, northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan, and the interior of Kunar province, including the Pech and Korengal River Valleys. In conclusion, this paper challenges some of the assumptions about the U.S.’s counterinsurgency strategy in Kunar.

OVERVIEW: KUNAR AND NURISTAN

Located in eastern Afghanistan, Kunar province borders Nangarhar province to the south, Laghman province to the west, and Nuristan province to the north. Kunar sits on the Pakistani border, with Mohmand and Bajaur Agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to the southeast and the Lower Dir, Upper Dir, and Chitral Districts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) to the northeast. Kunar spans roughly 1,908 square miles, slightly larger than the state of Rhode Island.¹ At its widest point, Kunar is approximately forty-five miles across, while only five miles across at its narrowest point. Nuristan sits north of Kunar and Laghman provinces, bordering Panjshir province to the west and Badakhshan province to the north. Prior to 1896, Nuristan was called Kafiristan, or the “land of disbelievers,” i.e. non-Muslims. After the Iron Amir, Abdur Rahman Khan, finally converted the province at the point of a sword, they renamed the area “Nuristan” for the land of light, and the people were called Nuristani, for the “enlightened ones,”

since they had converted to Islam.² Nuristan also shares a border with Pakistan’s Chitral District to the east and has an area of 3,561 square miles.³ Due to mountainous terrain and an almost nonexistent road network, it is extremely difficult to travel east-west across Nuristan, especially in winter. For example, travelers wishing to go from Nurgaram District in the west to Kamdesh District in the east would first have to travel south through Laghman Province to Nangarhar and then north through Kunar.⁴ Because the harsh terrain limits the movement of individuals and insurgents, this paper will focus on Kunar and eastern Nuristan. This area will be treated as one contiguous enemy system, different from that which emanates from Laghman and western Nuristan. Despite this distinction, it would be an overstatement to say that there is absolutely no overlap between the two or that there is no insurgent movement between eastern and western Nuristan.

The Kunar River begins in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush in Chitral, Pakistan then flows into Afghanistan near Gowhardesh in northern

Kunar's Nari District. The river flows southwest through the province down the Kunar River Valley, which runs parallel to the Pakistani border, before emptying into the Kabul River in Nangarhar province, east of the city of Jalalabad. Several of the districts along the Kunar River Valley center on a tributary that flows into the Kunar River through a subsidiary valley, like branches on a tree trunk.⁵ The largest of these tributaries is the Pech River, which forms a "limb" from west to east through the interior of the province. A maze of river valleys branches out from the Pech River Valley into Kunar's Chapa Dara, Pech,



Photo: Soldiers provide overwatch as other Soldiers search a village below in the Chowkay Valley of the Kunar Province in Afghanistan. Photo Credit: Staff Sgt. Brandon Aird

and Watapur Districts, and Nuristan's Waygal and Wama Districts. The infamous Korengal Valley extends south from the Pech River in Pech District and into high mountain peaks. A river and valley system also originates in Bargi Matal and Kamdesh Districts in Nuristan before joining near the head of the Kunar River in Nari District. Thus, Kunar and eastern Nuristan form one contiguous river valley system.

There are numerous mountain passes along the length of the Pakistani border with Kunar and Nuristan, and the border is roughly five miles from the Kunar River, along which the majority of the population lives. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, Kunar has 401,000 residents.⁶ The population lives almost entirely in the narrow river valleys, leaving the mountain heights and ridges largely devoid of human settlement.⁷ Asadabad, the provincial capital, is the largest town, with a population of roughly

11,000 and sits at the juncture of the Pech and Kunar Rivers.⁸ About half of the population lives in the Districts of the lower Kunar River Valley, south of Asadabad, while the Pech River Valley and the upper Kunar River Valley are each home to a quarter of the province's residents.⁹

The population of Kunar is overwhelmingly Pashtun (nearly ninety-five percent), except for the Nari District, which contains a substantial Nuristani population.¹⁰ It is worth noting that the many residents of the Korengal valley are not Pashtun, rather they share ethnic ties with Nuristanis.¹¹ Additionally, the residents of the Korengal speak a separate language called Korengali, sometimes referred to as Pashai, another name for the ethnic group of the Korengali people.¹² Kunar and eastern Nuristan are conservative, rural societies and have been largely influenced throughout history by more extreme interpretations of Islam (Wahhabi and Salafi).¹³ Olivier Roy writes in his seminal study of the Afghan mujahideen, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, "the 'ulama [Islamic scholars] of the Mashriqi (the three provinces to the east of Kabul [Nangarhar, Laghman, and Kunar—Nuristan did not exist as a separate province]) had a well-established tradition of fundamentalism and anti-imperialism... The fundamentalism of the Mashriqi 'ulama had always been more radical and anti-traditionalist than in other regions."¹⁴ It was the Nuristanis that first revolted against communist rule in 1978, and this rebellion soon spread to the Pashtun areas of Kunar.¹⁵

Because of the realities of the terrain and the lack of a developed road network, many areas of Kunar and Nuristan are isolated. Their inhabitants are generally suspicious of outsiders, including other Afghans.¹⁶ (At the beginning of 2007, there was only one paved road in Kunar linking Asadabad to Jalalabad and no paved roads in eastern Nuristan.¹⁷ There are few bridges that span the Kunar and Pech Rivers, further isolating the various communities.) The continued isolation of certain remote communities in Kunar and Nuristan is still observed by U.S. soldiers today. In late 2008, a U.S. patrol entered an isolated valley in northern Kunar where it was greeted by villag-

ers who thought that the American soldiers were Soviets.¹⁸

Aside from its symbolic value as the area where the jihad against the Soviet Army and the communist regime in Kabul began and where the Soviets first suffered defeat at the hands of the mujahideen, Kunar and eastern Nuristan are strategic terrain. The area constitutes a major infiltration route into Afghanistan, and insurgents can enter these provinces from any number of places along the

Pakistani border to gain access to a vast network of river valleys. The Kunar River Valley, just five miles from the mountains of the Pakistani border, channels insurgents to the more densely populated areas of Jalalabad and Nangarhar, from which they can reach Kabul and areas beyond. Alternatively, insurgents can travel up the Pech River Valley and gain access to Laghman and Kapisa Provinces through Nuristan, and ultimately, the northern approaches to Kabul. The vast ungoverned spaces of Nuristan and Kunar provide sanctuary to

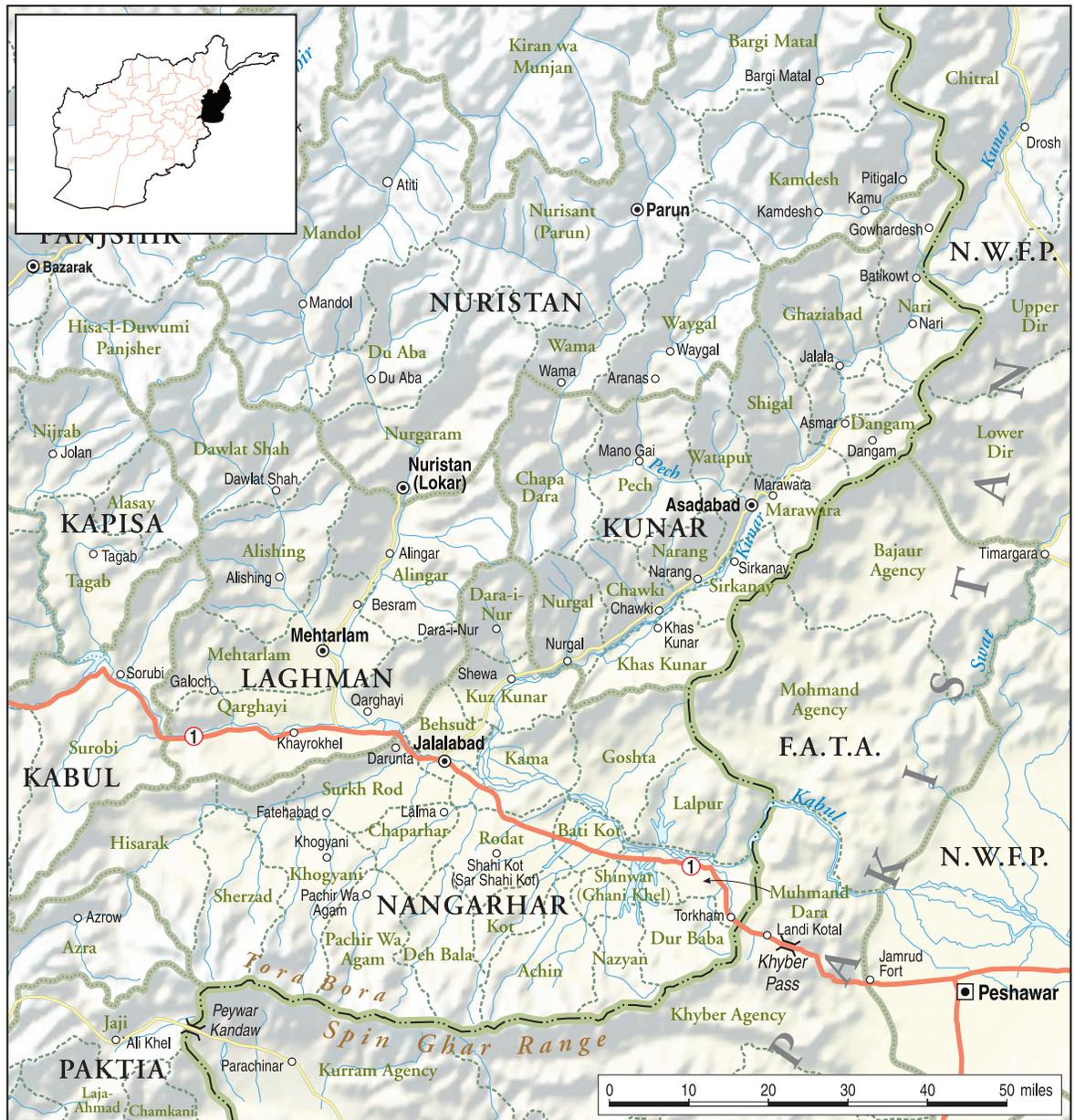


FIGURE 1: MAP OF KUNAR AND NURISTAN PROVINCES

fighters coming from Pakistan, allowing them to survive for days or even weeks in the mountains away from major population centers.¹⁹

The Taliban has recognized the strategic importance of Kunar and Nuristan. In 2008, the Taliban claimed that in its annual spring offensive it would “surround” Kabul and create a “strategic corridor” running from the FATA (Bajaur and Mohmand) through Kunar and Nuristan in order to ensure an uninterrupted supply of men and materiel.²⁰ U.S. commanders rejected the claim that the Taliban could actually surround Kabul as the mujahideen had done against the Soviets in the 1980s, stating that the Taliban could at most only create the “psychological perception” that Kabul was surrounded.²¹ Even so, the importance of Kunar and Nuristan as a major insurgent infiltration route should not be discounted.

Finally, Kunar and Nuristan are important because high-level al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, are believed to be hiding across the border in Pakistan’s Bajaur and Mohmand Agencies and the Chitral District.²²

U.S. FORCE DISPOSITION AND TACTICS

Kunar and Nuristan fall under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force’s (ISAF) Regional Command (RC) East.²³ ISAF assumed complete command from the U.S.-led coalition in October 2006. In February 2007, Major General (MG) Benjamin Freaklely, commander of the Tenth Mountain Division, transferred authority for RC East to the 82nd Airborne Division, led by MG David Rodriguez.²⁴ Although there was a division-level headquarters in RC East, the actual footprint of combat troops was much smaller. A single brigade—the Third Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the Tenth Mountain Division (3-10 BCT)—was responsible for all fourteen provinces

in RC East, an area the size of Georgia and South Carolina combined. In early 2007, as the 82nd Airborne assumed command, the 3-10 BCT was extended for four months, increasing the number of brigades in RC East to two.²⁵ This additional brigade, led by Colonel (COL) John Nicholson, was actually on its way home from Afghanistan at the time. Under “Task Force Spartan,” the brigade would be responsible for an area known as “N2KL:” the provinces of Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Laghman.²⁶

With its headquarters at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Fenty in Jalalabad, Task Force (TF) Spartan’s area of operation (AO) had previously been occupied by just a single battalion—about a fifth of its size.²⁷ The addition of the 3-10 BCT allowed commanders in RC East to pursue the classic population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy of “clear, hold, build.” In the “clear” phase, the brigade aimed to drive a wedge between the insurgents and the population through kinetic operations:

killing the enemy, capturing them, forcing them to flee, or forcing them to surrender. Its larger force size allowed the 3-10 BCT to operate in the interior of Kunar and along the Pakistani border, where it aimed to disrupt the flow of insurgents into Afghanistan—a difficult task given the mountainous terrain as well as the elevation of and distance between border posts. During the “hold” phase, the brigade sought to establish a “permanent presence” among the population along with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the Afghan government. U.S. and Afghan forces intended to provide security for the population, protecting them from insurgents and other criminals, and to foster ties between the people and their government, demonstrating that the Afghan government could respond better to their needs than could the insurgents. Lastly, in the “build phase,” Afghan government presence and capabilities would be expanded along with

The “clear” and “hold” phases of the new population-centric COIN strategy required U.S. and Afghan forces to expand their operations in Kunar and Nuristan and establish a permanent presence among the population.

investments in economic and social development, to ensure the support of the local population and its continued rejection of the insurgency.²⁸

The “clear” and “hold” phases of the new population-centric COIN strategy required U.S. and Afghan forces to expand their operations in Kunar and Nuristan and establish a permanent presence among the population. This is what the extension of forces from 3-10 BCT in N2KL was supposed to enable. The 3-10 BCT nearly tripled its footprint and began pushing out platoon-sized elements among the villages.²⁹ One battalion was pushed north from Kunar’s Nari District into Nuristan’s Kamdesh District, while elements of another battalion ventured further up the Pech River Valley in the interior of Kunar Province, building new FOBs and combat outposts (COPs) as they went along. These units were accompanied by elements of a field artillery battalion.³⁰ In implementing the COIN strategy, however, U.S. forces operated somewhat counter-intuitively: Rather than committing the bulk of forces to the area south of Asadabad in the lower Kunar River Valley, where about half the population in Kunar lives, U.S. forces actually pushed north into remote valleys in the interior of Kunar and eastern Nuristan where fewer and fewer people lived. In these sparsely-populated areas, the people were even more spread out and more difficult to reach, and thus extremely hard to defend, especially given the limited number of forces available in eastern Afghanistan.

Still, U.S. officers would argue that there were advantages to this strategy. As U.S. and Afghan forces move into an area, the insurgents were displaced, but not before making contact. From their positions on the high ground along mountain ridges, insurgents launched attacks on U.S. forces as they moved through the valleys below. Although the ambushes were effective at least initially, the insurgents’ exposure on the heights left them vulnerable to U.S. artillery and airstrikes. The U.S. military’s superior firepower was brought to bear, often with devastating effect on the insurgents.³¹ This strategy resulted in U.S. forces dropping substantial amounts of bombs and artillery in RC East, and Kunar specifically. During 3-10 BCT’s time

in RC East, they fired in excess of 30,000 rounds of artillery, 8000 mortar rounds, and over 300 tons of bombs.³² Subsequently, the units which took over for 3-10 BCT have continued the heavy reliance on indirect fires through 2008 as one element from the Artillery Battery stationed in the Pech River valley has been the busiest artillery unit in the entire Army based on the number of shells fired.³³

The Pakistani border, which stretches for almost 150 miles along the eastern edge of Kunar and Nuristan, posed another significant challenge. The terrain is extremely rugged, and the border can be crossed at any number of places. With limited resources, U.S. commanders recognized that they could not hope to police the entire ill-defined border, preferring instead to defend the population in the interior. However, they identified several chokepoints at various mountain passes, and attempted to interdict insurgents there.³⁴

When the 3-10 BCT finally departed Afghanistan in June 2007, they transferred authority to the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team (under Task Force Bayonet), led by COL Chip Preysler. The 173rd was augmented by two additional battalions, although one of its own battalions was sent to another brigade with the 82nd Airborne in Paktiya.³⁵ Task Force Bayonet built on the work of Task Force Spartan and continued to push into the interior of Kunar and the Pech River Valley and up into eastern Nuristan, dispersing into smaller elements and living with the local population.³⁶ One battalion, which was part of Task Force Saber, was led by Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Christopher Kolenda and was responsible for northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan.³⁷ Task Force Saber had an additional company attached to it from the battalion that had been sent to Paktiya.³⁸ A second battalion, led by LTC William Ostlund, established its headquarters at FOB Blessing near Nangalam in Pech District--previously occupied by just a single company.³⁹ Elements of a field artillery battalion were detached to Task Forces Saber and Rock, although the unit also maintained its own area of operations in western Nuristan as Task Force King.⁴⁰

The 173rd Airborne BCT focused on two priori-

ties: First, it sought to increase the size and capability of the ANSF in N2KL, including the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP), and the Afghan Border Police (ABP). A large emphasis was placed on training, equipping, and growing the border police, which would be integral in interdicting insurgent traffic at the various chokepoints along the border. Second, TF Bayonet focused on economic development through road building. The construction of roads was intended shorten the time it took farmers to reach market and thus provide an economic boon and an improvement in the everyday lives of local people. It would also connect the outlying villages to the government and allow the government to increase its presence in previously inaccessible areas.

Through road building, the ANSF sought to expand the “security bubble” established in the “clear and hold” phases. Although the 173rd’s commanders recognized that the insurgents could use the newly built roads, U.S. and Afghan forces intended to interdict them at checkpoints.⁴¹

In April 2008, the 101st Airborne Division, led by MG Jeffrey Schloesser, assumed command of RC East from the 82nd Airborne.⁴² Then in July 2008, Task Force Bayonet transferred authority for N2KL to Task Force Duke, led by COL John Spitzer and the Third Brigade Combat Team, First Infantry Division (3-I BCT).⁴³

THE ENEMY SYNDICATE

U.S. commanders describe the insurgency in Kunar and Nuristan as a “syndicate” of enemy groups.⁴⁴ These groups include al Qaeda, the Quetta Shura Taliban, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, the “Salafi” Taliban, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, the Haqqani Network, and others. They may have “disparate

tactical goals,” but their “strategic goals” are loosely the same. Broadly speaking, all the enemy groups view the government in Kabul as illegitimate, and they are all violently opposed to the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. Beyond this, however, their interests diverge. Their positions toward the Pakistani state vary greatly. Some of these groups have a good—or at least a neutral—relationship with Islamabad and have at times received funding and training from the Pakistani military and the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI, Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency), while others are violently engaged against the Pakistani state. Additionally, some U.S. officers worry that there are elements that engage in combat against

U.S. forces in the Kunar and Nuristan regions which are not affiliated with any of the member groups of the “enemy syndicate,” but rather, fight U.S. forces because U.S. forces are there and have established outposts in their historical lands. Some of these Afghans remain distrustful of outsiders as they have been for centuries.⁴⁵

The enemy syndicate is divided between groups that are focused on Afghanistan; those who are focused on Pakistan; and those whose interests span the border, the region, or in the case of al Qaeda, the globe.

Thus, the enemy syndicate is divided between groups that are focused on Afghanistan; those who are focused on Pakistan; and those whose interests span the border, the region, or in the case of al Qaeda, the globe. The members of this enemy syndicate work together occasionally to coordinate their operations, but such cooperation is ad hoc and happens relatively infrequently. U.S. commanders estimated the total insurgent force in RC East as ranging from 7,000 to 11,000 fighters in late 2008.⁴⁶

Al Qaeda acts as an “ideological ringleader” in Kunar and Nuristan and across the border in Bajaur, Mohmand, and Chitral.⁴⁷ It funds and facilitates other insurgent groups in the area, helping them move money, men, and resources. Al Qaeda is responsible for bringing in most of the foreign fighters that come from outside of the region—mainly Arabs, Chechens, and Uzbeks.⁴⁸

The Enemy Syndicate in Kunar and Eastern Nuristan

Globally-Focused Group



Al Qaeda (AQ)

Overall Leader: Osama bin Laden

AQ Leader in Kunar is an Egyptian named Abu Ikhlas al Masri

The group funds and facilitates other insurgent groups in the area, helping them move money, men and resources. It operates as a cadre system, with a small number of dedicated foreign fighters training, equipping, and leading larger forces of local insurgents on both sides of the border. Despite extensive assistance, AQ is rarely involved in executing attacks.

Afghanistan-Focused Groups



Haqqani Network (HQN)

Overall Leader: Jalaluddin Haqqani

Operational Leader: Sirajuddin Haqqani

The group has roots in the Soviet invasion. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, is currently directing the movement. It reportedly operates in Kunar and Nuristan provinces

Quetta Shura Taliban (QST)

Overall Leader: Mullah Mohammad Omar

QST Leader in Kunar, Nuristan, Bajaur, and Mohmand is Qari Ziaur Rahman

The group consists of elements of the former Taliban and its new members who are nominally led by Mullah Mohammad Omar from Quetta, Pakistan. QST's main operational focus in Kunar and Nuristan is the Korengal Valley, Sirkanay District in Kunar, and Kamdesh District in Nuristan. Qari Ziaur Rahman also operates training camps in Bajaur.

Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG)

Overall Leader: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

The group dates back to the anti-Soviet *jihad* . It reportedly operates in Kunar and Nuristan provinces.

Salafi Taliban

This group has a Salafist orientation. It has carried out attacks in the interior of Kunar province in Chawki, Pech, Watapur, and the Asadabad districts. Members are likely a group of local Kunar insurgents who coordinate with the Taliban and other militant groups from time to time.

Pakistan-Focused Groups



Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Overall Leader: Beitullah Mehsud

Commander in Bajaur Agency: Maulana Faqir Muhammad

TTP is an umbrella organization set up by South Waziristan's Baitullah Mehsud in December 2007. The TTP provides assistance to both al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and is believed to be active in Kunar province.

Tehrik-e-Nafaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM)

Overall Leader: Sufi Maulana Mohammad

Leader in Bajaur Agency: Dr. Ismail

TNSM is an insurgent group active in Kunar province. The group had close ties to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan during the 1990s. After the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, TNSM sent thousands of volunteers to fight the Americans.

Regionally-Focused Groups (India, Afghanistan, Pakistan)



Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)

Leader in Bajaur is Qari Ziaur Rahman

JeM is a Punjab-based group originally set up with ISI support to fight India in Kashmir in 2000. Prior to 9/11, it developed close ties with al Qaeda and soon turned against the ISI and the Pakistani state. JeM also fights U.S. Forces in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.



Laskar-e-Taiba (LeT)

Leader in Mohmand Agency: Shah Khalid until July 2008.

LeT was formed in 1990, and is one of the largest and best-funded Kashmir Islamist militant groups.



It is believed that LeT maintains a presence and training facilities in Kunar province. It is also believed to have been involved in the July 13, 2008 attack on a combat outpost in Wanat (Pech District of Kunar) that killed nine U.S. Soldiers.

FIGURE 2: The Enemy Syndicates in and around Kunar and Nuristan Provinces

U.S. commanders believe that al Qaeda operates as a cadre system, with a small number of dedicated foreign fighters training, equipping, and leading larger forces of local insurgents on both sides of the border.⁴⁹ Al Qaeda runs safe houses in the Kunar River Valley from Asadabad to Jalalabad, which it uses to facilitate the movement of foreign fighters and weapons.⁵⁰ It helps coordinate attacks with other militant groups in the region, and there is evidence to suggest that it may be importing tactics from in Iraq—primarily improvised explosive devices and suicide bombings.⁵¹ The first suicide attack in Kunar only occurred in March 2007.⁵² Still, suicide bombing in Afghanistan is not a widespread phenomenon, given the Afghan population's intolerance of civilian casualties. For many Afghans in the Kunar and Nuristan region the taking of innocent lives is intolerable and numerous ulamas have issued rulings in RC East opposing the use of suicide bombings.⁵³ The lead al Qaeda facilitator in Kunar is an Egyptian named Abu Ikhlas al Masri, also known as "the Engineer." Abu Ikhlas first came to the province to fight the Soviets in the 1980s; he stayed and married an Afghan woman from the Korengal Valley.⁵⁴ Abu Ikhlas also has ties to Korengali timber baron-turned-insurgent leader Hajji Matin.⁵⁵ Despite its extensive assistance, al Qaeda is rarely involved in executing attacks.⁵⁶

There are groups in Kunar and Nuristan that call themselves "Taliban," a term that has become a catch-all phrase to mean anyone fighting against the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as U.S. and ISAF forces. Thus, people that are referred to or who refer to themselves as "Taliban" may have no connection with the Taliban regime that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 or its remnants. For the purposes of this paper, "Taliban" will refer to those former regime elements and its new members who are nominally led by Mullah Muhammad Omar from the city of

Quetta in Pakistan's Balochistan Province. The Taliban also refers to itself as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan"—the official name for the country under its rule—and it has leadership hubs based around shuras in Quetta (the main shura), Peshawar (NWFP), and Miran Shah (North Waziristan, FATA).⁵⁷ When a known Quetta Shura Taliban spokesman claims responsibility for an attack, only then will this paper refer to the attackers as "Taliban."

It is believed that the overall leader of the Taliban in Kunar, Nuristan, Bajaur, and Mohmand is Qari Ziaur Rahman, a young (mid-thirties) Afghan national from Kunar Province.⁵⁸ Madrassa-educated, Ziaur Rahman speaks Arabic and has

substantial connections to Osama bin Laden and other Arab militants. He has a more global orientation than many older members of the Quetta Shura Taliban leadership, and he first gained notoriety for fighting the Americans in Kunar and Nuristan.⁵⁹ Coalition forces placed a \$350,000 bounty on his head, and he was captured by the ISI and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in

Peshawar. However, he was released in May 2008 in exchange for the kidnapped Pakistani Ambassador to Afghanistan, Tariq Azizuddin, in a scheme reportedly brokered by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Baitullah Mehsud.⁶⁰ Ziaur Rahman supposedly represents Kunar and Nuristan on the Quetta shura. In an interview shortly after his release in May 2008, Qari Ziaur Rahman stated that the Taliban's main operational focus in Kunar and Nuristan is the Korengal Valley, Sirkanay District in Kunar, and Kamdesh District in Nuristan.⁶¹ Unlike many older Taliban commanders, Ziaur Rahman operates rather brazenly in Pakistan in direct defiance of the Pakistani state. For example, in June 2008, he staged a public execution in Bajaur of two Afghans from Kunar that were accused of being American "spies;" he also warned others not to cooperate with the U.S. or Pakistani

*In an interview shortly after his release in May 2008, Qari Ziaur Rahman stated that the Taliban's main operational focus in Kunar and Nuristan is the Korengal Valley, Sirkanay District in Kunar, and Kamdesh District in Nuristan.*⁶¹

militaries against the Taliban.⁶²

Ziaur Rahman also operates training camps in Bajaur.⁶³ In August 2008, the Pakistani military launched Operation Lion Heart in Bajaur, a massive offensive against militants in the area.⁶⁴ During the operation, U.S. forces attempted to coordinate with the Pakistani military in an effort to interdict militants crossing the border, although they had difficulty in engaging in successful dialogue with their Pakistani counterparts.⁶⁵ Qari Ziaur Rahman fought fiercely against Islamabad and even contacted the media to claim responsibility for attacking the Pakistani Army.⁶⁶ He stated, “Our mission is to wage Jihad against U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan but Pakistan forced us to fight against its own security forces by creating hurdles for us to cross the border and destroy positions of our fellow tribal Mujahideen in Bajaur.”⁶⁷ Ziaur Rahman’s focus on Pakistan, along with other militants in Kunar and Nuristan, led to a reverse flow of guerillas out of Afghanistan to fight in Bajaur and subsequently a decrease in violence in Kunar.⁶⁸

Qari Ziaur Rahman is also sometimes described as a leader of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in Bajaur.⁶⁹ JeM is a Punjab-based group originally set up with ISI support to fight India in Kashmir in 2000.⁷⁰ It was an offshoot of another ISI-supported group, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, which was established in the 1990s. JeM was the first terrorist organization to introduce suicide bombing in Indian-held Kashmir in 2000.⁷¹ Prior to September 11, 2001, it developed close ties with al Qaeda and soon turned against the ISI and the Pakistani state.⁷² In December 2003, al Qaeda and JeM suicide bombers attempted to assassinate Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.⁷³ JeM also fights U.S. forces in Kunar.⁷⁴

Another Punjab-based group that has broadened its focus from fighting India in Kashmir to include fighting the United States in Afghanistan is Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).⁷⁵ LeT was formed in 1990 and is one of the largest and best-funded Kashmir Islamist militant groups.⁷⁶ LeT, along with JeM, was implicated in the deadly December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, and the

November 2008 Mumbai attacks, which left more than 170 people dead.⁷⁷ LeT has also sent suicide bombers to Iraq.⁷⁸ It is believed that LeT maintains a presence and training facilities in Kunar.⁷⁹ Many of the best trained fighters in Kunar—some in leadership positions—are current or former LeT members from Punjab.⁸⁰ LeT is believed to be behind the July 13, 2008 Battle of Wanat, which killed nine U.S. soldiers—the second single greatest loss of life by U.S. forces in Afghanistan.⁸¹ Some sources also state that JeM conducted the attack.⁸²

Up until July 2008, Shah Khalid led Lashkar-e-Taiba in Mohmand Agency. His so-called “Shah group” carried out attacks across the Afghan border in Kunar, often infiltrating through the Nawa Pass in Sirkanay District.⁸³ In 2008, the Pakistani security establishment attempted to drive a wedge in the insurgent movement in FATA between pro-Pakistani groups and the anti-Islamabad groups led by al Qaeda and Baitullah Mehsud’s TTP, which were becoming a serious threat to the Pakistani state. By backing the pro-Pakistani, anti-American elements in the enemy syndicate, Islamabad hoped that it could undermine Mehsud’s network and end their resistance against Pakistan, if not bring these elements to some sort of settlement in Afghanistan. In Mohmand, the ISI selected Shah Khalid to undermine Mehsud, as the former was primarily interested in fighting U.S. forces in Afghanistan and not launching attacks in Pakistan. However, Mehsud realized the ISI’s scheme and ordered his forces to move against Shah Khalid in Mohmand in July 2008.⁸⁴ These fighters were led by Omar Khalid, also known as Abdul Wali, who was the leader of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen in the area. The fighting between the two groups caused concern among the Taliban’s leadership, because it threatened the Islamic Emirate’s rear bases in Bajaur and Mohmand and their infiltration routes into Kunar and Nuristan. Thus, Qari Ziaur Rahman and Ustad Muhammad Yasir—the Taliban commander for Afghanistan’s Nangarhar Province and Pakistan’s Khyber Agency—were sent to mediate between the two factions.⁸⁵ A ceasefire was reached, and Shah Khalid agreed to leave for Khyber Agency. However, before that could happen, some of his fighters

attacked and killed one of Omar Khalid's lieutenants. The fighting that ensued left more than fifty dead, including Shah Khalid. The TTP and Omar Khalid remained in control of Mohmand Agency, thwarting the ISI's intrigues.⁸⁶

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is an umbrella organization set up by South Waziristan's Baitullah Mehsud in December 2007. It is opposed to U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan and Islamabad, but its primary focus is in Pakistan.⁸⁷ The TTP provides assistance to both al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and is believed to be active in Kunar.⁸⁸ Maulana Faqir Muhammad is the TTP commander in Bajaur Agency, and is also a deputy of Mehsud.⁸⁹

Maulana Faqi Muhammad was formerly a commander of Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), another insurgent group which is active in Kunar.⁹⁰ TNSM was founded in the early 1990s by Maulana Sufi Muhammad after he became disillusioned with the Pakistani Islamist Party, Jamaat-e-Islami. TNSM had close ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, TNSM sent thousands of volunteers to go fight the Americans.⁹¹ TNSM, reportedly joined forces with the TTP in 2007.⁹² In Bajaur, TNSM is reportedly led by a man named Dr. Ismail, who continues to send fighters into Kunar.⁹³

Another insurgent group active in Kunar is the so-called Salafi Taliban, which emerged in the spring of 2008.⁹⁴ It presumably has a Salafi orientation, as opposed to Mullah Omar's Taliban, which has its roots in the Deobandi movement. Salafism is a conservative Islamic reform movement similar to Wahhabism that looks to emulate the first generation of early Muslims (salaf means "ancestors" or "pious forefathers" in Arabic).⁹⁵ Salafi Islam is extremely prevalent in Kunar, where Saudi and other Arab missionaries and fighters have spread the religion over the years, more so than in other areas of South and Central Asia.⁹⁶ The Salafi Taliban have carried out attacks in the interior of Kunar in Chawki, Pech, Watapur, and Asadabad districts.⁹⁷ The Salafi Taliban claim to be a part of Mullah Omar's Taliban, but this is unlikely given that they maintain an independent media opera-

tion to publicize their own attacks and distinguish themselves as "Salafi."⁹⁸ It is more likely that the Salafi Taliban are a group of local Kunar insurgents who coordinate with the Taliban and other militant groups from time to time.

Other groups that reportedly operate in Kunar and Nuristan are Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami, which dates back to the anti-Soviet jihad, and the Haqqani Network, now led by Sirajuddin Haqqani, which also has its roots during the Soviet invasion, but in the Hezb-e Islami faction led by Maulvi Muhammad Yunis Khalis.⁹⁹

THE KUNAR RIVER VALLEY AND BORDER

Kunar's border with Pakistan is about one hundred miles long and runs parallel to the Kunar River, which lies five miles to the west.¹⁰⁰ The mountains along the border are extremely rugged, with some reaching 12,000 feet above sea level. There are few roads, but with numerous major passes and even smaller associated footpaths, the border can be crossed at almost any point.¹⁰¹ Thus, it is no surprise that Kunar's border with Pakistan has been a major guerilla infiltration route since the days of the anti-Soviet jihad.

The lower Kunar River Valley represents a transient insurgent environment, with fighters infiltrating to and from different areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan—the Korengal and Pech River Valleys, Nuristan, Jalalabad, etc. In addition, militants stage quick, cross-border strikes into Kunar, often remaining on the fringes of the Kunar River Valley for a few days before returning to various insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan.¹⁰² Much of the insurgent activity is focused around Sirkanay District, which is home to several strategic mountain passes that lead into Bajaur and Mohmand Agencies, including the Nawa Pass and the Goraparay Pass. In addition to those two major passes, there is Ghakhi Pass to the north of Nawa Pass in Marawara District as well as the Sheik Baba trail network in the vicinity of Goraparay.¹⁰³

U.S. bases, Afghan government offices, and ANSF posts in the Kunar River Valley routinely

take rocket and mortar fire from insurgents firing from across the Pakistani frontier. This indirect fire is notoriously inaccurate and frequently hits civilian homes. U.S. and Afghan forces cannot engage militants inside Pakistani territory, and until recently, neither did the Pakistani security establishment.¹⁰⁴ The police in the town of Pashad in Sirkanay District are another frequent target of insurgent attacks. A likely explanation for this is that Pashad lies between the Goraparay Pass and the Narang Valley, a key infiltration route into the Korengal Valley.¹⁰⁵ The Afghan Border Police, particularly in the Nawa Pass, are also vulnerable to cross-border raids.¹⁰⁶

intended to provide a more robust border force for Kunar, in addition to allowing U.S. forces to operate in the interior of the province.¹⁰⁷ However, given the realities of the border, the 3-10 BCT and the units that followed it—the 173rd Airborne and the 3-1 BCT—decided to prioritize the interior and focus on protecting the population. Policing the border remained an economy of force mission, and the Kunar River Valley did not see the same construction of COPs and FOBs as areas in the Pech River Valley.¹⁰⁸ In order to make up for this economy of force, the 173rd Airborne partnered with the Afghan Border Police—training it, equipping it, and growing it—so that it could take the lead on the Pakistani border.¹⁰⁹ By the end

The extension of the 3-10 BCT in 2007 was

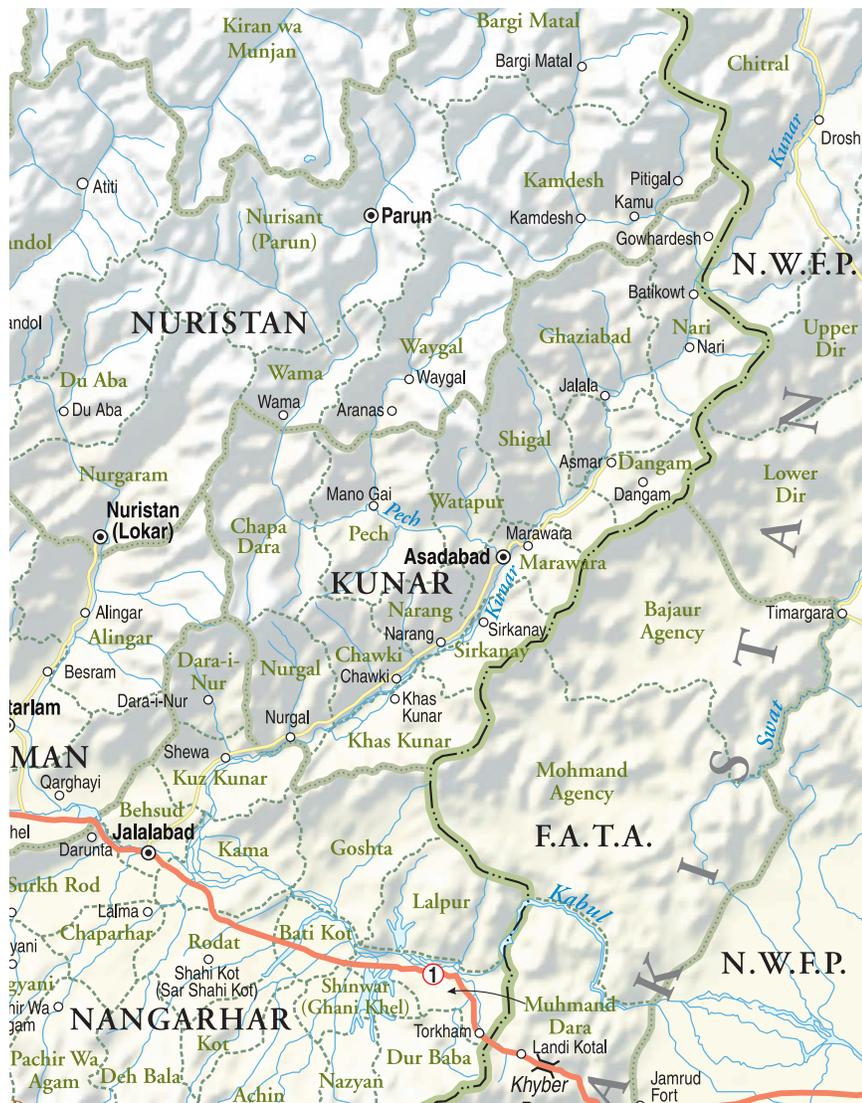


FIGURE 3: MAP OF KUNAR AND NURISTAN PROVINCES

of its tour, the I73rd had tripled the capacity of the ABP in its AO.¹¹⁰ U.S. forces worked together with the Border Police to identify key infiltration routes and to position forces there to interdict insurgent traffic.¹¹¹

During this time, U.S. forces also attempted to expand their communication and cooperation with the Pakistani military. At the operational and strategic levels of command, U.S. forces sought to build relationships with their Pakistani counterparts on the other side of the border, sometimes even communicating via radio and cell phone. The intent was to share intelligence as well as other information, and to attempt to better coordinate operations on either side of the border.¹¹²

In reality, the relationship was far from perfect. Cooperation and communication between U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani forces were complicated by the difficult terrain as well as by mutual suspicion and even hostility between Afghan and Pakistani troops.¹¹³ On June 10, 2008, a combined U.S.-Afghan force was returning from a patrol in the vicinity of the Goraparay Pass, when they were attacked by suspected TTP and Taliban militants just inside the boundaries of Kunar. They informed their Pakistani counterparts that they were under attack and were returning fire. A U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle observed more militants massing on the Pakistani side of the border in Mohmand, and airstrikes were called in; U.S. and Afghan ground forces did not cross the frontier. During the ensuing bombardment, a Pakistani Frontier Corps outpost was bombed, killing eleven, and causing a major diplomatic row.¹¹⁴ It was later revealed that the paramilitaries had come to the aid of the militants and had actually fired on U.S. and Afghan forces. This was not the first, nor the last time that such a thing would happen.¹¹⁵

NORTHERN KUNAR AND EASTERN NURISTAN

Operations in northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan in 2007 and 2008 illustrate what a successful counterinsurgency can accomplish, while highlighting some of the limitations faced by U.S. forces in Afghanistan. U.S. commanders

have described the region as “a classic insurgent environment.” Situated along the porous Pakistani border, northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan span approximately 925 square miles of extremely mountainous terrain.¹¹⁶ At the beginning of 2007, there were few roads in the area, none of which were paved. The region’s demographic and economic factors presented the insurgents with a plentiful pool of potential recruits. Northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan have an extremely young population, with forty-two percent of the region’s 190,000 residents under the age of sixteen, and sixty percent under the age of twenty-five.¹¹⁷ With a forty percent literacy rate, this young population is largely uneducated, and there are few schools.¹¹⁸ The area was economically depressed, and there was no running water and no electricity.¹¹⁹ Ninety percent of the people were subsistence farmers, and a similar percentage of the males of fighting age were unemployed outside of that line of work.¹²⁰ Thus, the area provided the Taliban and its allies with a large pool of poor, young, uneducated, unemployed, bored, and highly impressionable young men—prime targets for insurgent recruitment.¹²¹ Yet, the economic rather than ideological motivations also meant that these recruits could be separated from the insurgency if U.S. forces seized the opportunity and established the right conditions.

Thus, when U.S. troops from the 3-10 BCT began to push north into Kamdesh District in eastern Nuristan in early 2007, as part of their expansion in N2KL, they were entering a region that was hotly contested by insurgents and that had been an enemy safe haven for years.¹²² There was limited Afghan government and ANSF presence in the region—only seventy men patrolled the hundred-mile border with Pakistan.¹²³ As they expanded, U.S. forces built a new COP in March 2007 near Kamu, in order to establish security along the Kamdesh road. Attacks along the road decreased; however, insurgents responded to the U.S. move into the area, beginning with an intimidation campaign aimed at the local population. On March 17, 2007, insurgents attacked four trucks delivering supplies to U.S. forces near Kamdesh.¹²⁴ The vehicles were torched, and their Afghan drivers were captured. The militants

eventually released the drivers, but not before cutting off their ears and noses, as “punishment” for delivering supplies to U.S. forces when they had been previously warned not to.¹²⁵ This act also served as a warning to those who would consider aiding U.S. forces in the future.

Insurgents also began to assassinate local leaders. At the end of April 2007, the Taliban executed a cleric from Nari District, who they claimed was an “American spy.” Their spokesman said the intelligence he provided had led to the death and capture of several Taliban fighters at the hands of the Americans, and they threatened others with the same fate.¹²⁶ Days later, insurgents assassinated another cleric, Ahmad

Wahid Muslim, who was a former mujahideen commander from Bargi Matal and a security official in Kamdesh District.¹²⁷ In this latest slaying, the insurgents miscalculated in eastern Nuristan: thousands of people, including women and girls, rallied in Bargi Matal a week later to demand that the government arrest the killers.¹²⁸ By protesting the

government for its failure to catch the assassins and demanding that it take action, the residents of Bargi Matal were implicitly recognizing the government, not the insurgents, as the legitimate authority in the area. The incident galvanized public opinion against the insurgency, giving the Afghan government and U.S. forces an opportunity to drive a wedge between the population and the insurgents. This turn against the insurgents was not confined to Bargi Matal District.

When the forces from 3-10 BCT finally left Afghanistan in June 2007, their replacements—troops from the 173rd Airborne BCT—continued the strategy of “clear, hold, build:” separating the insurgents from the population, fostering connections between the people and their government, and promoting socioeconomic development. They also focused programs on the local children, given the area’s young and impressionable population.

Road building projects continued, including the widening and paving of the road from Asmar in Kunar to Kamdesh in Nuristan, a project that had been underway for years.¹²⁹

U.S. counterinsurgency operations, combined with insurgent brutality against the population, turned the tide of public opinion against the insurgency. In early July 2007, insurgents attempted a rocket attack against a U.S. base in Nari District. They missed, killing a ten-year-old boy and wounding three other civilians along with five U.S. soldiers.¹³⁰ Hundreds of people from dozens of villages attended the boy’s funeral and expressed their outrage at the militants.¹³¹

*In this latest slaying, the insurgents miscalculated in eastern Nuristan: thousands of people, including women and girls, rallied in Bargi Matal a week later to demand that the government arrest the killers.*¹²⁸

The turning point in the insurgency in northern Kunar and eastern Nuristan came at the end of July 2007, during a U.S. operation named “Two Mountains.” A convoy of U.S. paratroopers was returning from a meeting with tribal elders near Kamu in Kamdesh District, when it was ambushed by insurgents. A firefight ensued, resulting in the deaths of two U.S.

soldiers and the wounding of thirteen others. At least twenty-four insurgents were killed.¹³² Provincial officials also claimed that four Afghan civilians were killed in an airstrike during the operation.¹³³ A few days after the battle, village elders came to the local U.S. commander, LTC Christopher Kolenda, and explained that they were tired of the violence. They pledged their support to U.S. and Afghan forces, leading to the establishment of the hundred-member Kamdesh shura, which would prove instrumental in future counterinsurgency operations and decreasing violence in the area.¹³⁴

The Taliban, however, continued their intimidation campaign, this time targeting police. At the beginning of August 2007, they attacked a police post near Gowhardesh along the border between Nari District and Kamdesh District.¹³⁵ The Gowhardesh post sits at a strategic loca-

tion, guarding a border crossing into Pakistan and a key bridge along the road from Kunar into Nuristan.¹³⁶ The Taliban captured five policemen, but after the intervention of tribal elders, the policemen were released two days later.¹³⁷ The Taliban threatened to kill them if they returned, and the policemen soon abandoned their post, effectively ceding the Gowhardesh Valley and the Gowhardesh Bridge to the insurgents, cutting off the Asmar-Kamdesh road. U.S. and Afghan forces would venture into the valley along the road four more times over the coming year, being ambushed each time. “Where the road stops,” said one U.S. officer, “is where the insurgency starts.”¹³⁸

At the end of August 2007, the Taliban conducted a similar kidnapping of fifteen new police recruits in Kamdesh District in another attempt at intimidation.¹³⁹ However, the intimidation only alienated the population. A few weeks later, villagers from Kushtoz (near the town of Kamdesh), took up arms and drove the insurgents away.¹⁴⁰

October saw more kidnappings of policemen and even an attempted suicide bombing at the U.S. base near Barikowt, Nari District, but the insurgency quieted as the winter snows set in over Kunar and Nuristan.¹⁴¹ Some attacks on the police persisted, in an attempt by the insurgents to disrupt governance and development at the local level. At the end of January 2008, four Afghans were abducted by insurgents as they were working on a road building project in Kamdesh District. The four men were beheaded when their families could not pay the ransom.¹⁴² This effectively halted construction on the Asmar-Kamdesh road.¹⁴³ The incident revealed that the insurgency viewed U.S. and Afghan counterinsurgency efforts in these areas as a threat.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, it also accelerated the growing public aversion to the Taliban’s brutal tactics. In an attempt to stem this negative public opinion, a week after the Kamdesh decapitations, Mullah Muhammad Omar issued an edict stating that the Taliban would no longer execute “spies” by beheading—something which was seen as denigrating to Muslims.¹⁴⁵

At the end of April 2008, U.S. and Afghan forces launched Operation “Mountain Highway II” to



Photo: A U.S. Army Soldier with 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, scans for insurgents hiding in the hills surrounding the tiny village of Barge Matal in Afghanistan’s Nuristan province. (Photo by the U.S. Army)

retake the Gowhardesh Bridge, which had been abandoned in August 2007. The operation involved more than one hundred U.S. and Afghan soldiers and was the largest operation to date. By securing the bridge and the surrounding valley, U.S. forces sought to create conditions stable enough to resume construction on the Asmar-Kamdesh road and to bring governance, jobs, and economic development to the area, dealing a blow to the insurgents. Unlike previous times they had entered the Gowhardesh Valley, they were not attacked. The primary reason was that this time they had the consent of the Kamdesh shura, which had travelled from village to village before hand, telling the locals not to fight. The counterinsurgency strategy was working.¹⁴⁶

Attacks did continue in the area, but Kamdesh and Nari Districts stayed relatively quiet over the next few months. The successful operations pushed the insurgency north into Bargi Matal District. In July and August 2008, insurgents—including foreign fighters reportedly from Pakistan and Tajikistan—repeatedly attacked Bargi Matal’s District Headquarters. The residents of Bargi Matal were largely on their own, however, as there were no U.S. forces in the area and few ANSF, with the exception of local police.¹⁴⁷

The 173rd Airborne was replaced by the Third Brigade, First Infantry Division in July 2008. In September 2008, commanders decided to shut

down the outpost at Gowhardesh that had been established five months earlier during Operation Mountain Highway II, because the troops were needed elsewhere. As soon as U.S. forces announced to local villagers that they were leaving, attacks against Gowhardesh resumed, demonstrating the fragility of the gains made during the previous year.¹⁴⁸

INNER KUNAR PROVINCE: VALLEYS OF DEATH

The interior of Kunar Province is one of the most violent regions in Afghanistan. The U.S. battalion that operated in inner Kunar in early 2007 suffered combat losses that accounted for half of those sustained by the entire Third Brigade, Tenth Mountain Division (which included six other battalions).¹⁴⁹ Its replacement accounted for more than half of the 173rd Airborne Brigade's combat losses in N2KL.¹⁵⁰ The epicenter of all this carnage is the Korengal Valley, located in southern Pech District. Just six miles long, the Korengal Valley is the deadliest place in Afghanistan. One-fifth of all the fighting in Afghanistan takes place in this valley, and three-quarters of all the bombs dropped on the country have landed in the surrounding area.¹⁵¹

The Pech and Korengal River Valleys sit on an important smuggling route from Pakistan, originally used by the mujahideen against the Soviets. After crossing the border into Kunar, insurgents can travel up the Pech River Valley or cross the Kunar River and travel up valleys in Nurgal, Chawki, or Narang Districts, from which they can gain access to Korengal. Once they have reached the upper Pech, insurgents can hike along the ridges of Nuristan and gain access to Laghman Province and the strategic Tagab Valley in Kapisa Province, and from there, Kabul.¹⁵²

The Pech River Valley and its tributaries, which span the districts of Chapa Dara, Pech, and Watapur, are home to roughly 100,000 people (a quarter of the province's population). An additional 27,000 people live in the adjacent Wama and Waygal Districts in Nuristan, which are connected to the Pech by tributary river valleys.¹⁵³

Residents of the interior of Kunar Province, especially in isolated valleys like Korengal and Watapur, have been described as "clannish," "violent," "suspicious of outsiders," and practitioners of Wahhabi Islam.¹⁵⁴ The Korengalis, who are ethnically and linguistically different than the Pastuns who dominate the Kunar river valley, have successfully fought off every attempt to subdue their valley, including the Soviets in the 1980s, the Taliban in the 1990s, and currently, the U.S. military. Their houses, built into the side of mountains out of stone and huge logs, can often withstand airstrikes and artillery bombardment.¹⁵⁵

Timber is a valuable natural resource in this part of Kunar, and it is a motivating factor in the Korengal insurgency. The Korengalis are business rivals in the timber trade with those who live farther (east) down the Pech River Valley. After the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Pech Valley timber barons sided with the Americans and convinced them to bomb the house of Hajji Matin, their biggest rival from Korengal. After this affront, Matin was radicalized and joined with Abu Ikhlas, the Egyptian al Qaeda operative who had settled in Kunar.¹⁵⁶ When Afghan President Hamid Karzai attempted to regulate the timber industry, the Taliban offered to smuggle out the Korengalis' timber in exchange for fighting the Americans.¹⁵⁷ By the time U.S. forces figured out what had happened, it was too late. In 2007, an attempt was made to mediate the timber dispute with Korengali elders, but the negotiations failed.¹⁵⁸ (U.S. forces had already built a Combat Outpost on one of Hajji Matin's old saw mills.)¹⁵⁹ The licit timber trade has been officially shut down—forcing many people out of jobs—but the smuggling continues and it funds the insurgency.¹⁶⁰ The Taliban pay the highest wage in the valley to people who have many other reasons to fight U.S. forces and the Afghan government.¹⁶¹

Provincial officials estimated in 2008 that there were at least 2,000 insurgents in the mountains of Kunar.¹⁶² This number probably varies widely given the proximity to the Pakistani border and the ease with which insurgents can cross the frontier. About half the insurgents in Korengal are believed to be local fighters, while the other half

are believed to be foreigners, including Pakistanis, Arabs, Chechens, and Uzbeks.¹⁶³

When the 3-10 BCT was extended in N2KL at the beginning of 2007, one of its battalions was reassigned to the Pech River Valley and surrounding areas. As part of 3-10 BCT's strategy of expanding its footprint and protecting the population, the battalion pushed deeper into the interior of Kunar in platoon-sized elements.¹⁶⁴ A string of COPs and FOBs were built along the Pech River running northwest from Asadabad to FOB Blessing near Nangalam. The goal was to establish "bubbles of security," and then connect the dots. One U.S. officer likened it to the island hopping campaign in the Pacific during the Second World War.¹⁶⁵ In practice, the strategy more closely resembled that used by the French in Vietnam, where troops built fixed positions along the main lines of communication but secured little else. Troops also pushed south into the Korengal Valley, but they only made it about half way down the six-mile valley because the southern half was firmly in the

hands of the insurgents and would remain that way for the foreseeable future.¹⁶⁶ Distance and success was measured in terms of hundreds of yards, not miles.¹⁶⁷ Troops in the battalion also moved north from Mano Gai along the Waygal Valley into Nuristan.¹⁶⁸ They oversaw the beginning of construction on the Pech River Road, which took eight months to complete and reduced the travel time from Nangalam to Asadabad by more than half.¹⁶⁹ When 3-10 BCT left Afghanistan in June 2007 at the end of its 16-month deployment, the battalion in the Pech Valley area had lost twenty of its soldiers and ninety-nine more were wounded.¹⁷⁰ Despite their heavy losses, the battalion was credited with killing a major insurgent leader, Habib Jan, at the end of April 2007.¹⁷¹

When the forces from 3-10 BCT rotated out of the Pech Valley, they were replaced by a battalion from the 173rd Airborne. The new battalion continued to push out in platoon-sized elements amongst the population in the interior of Kunar, and it

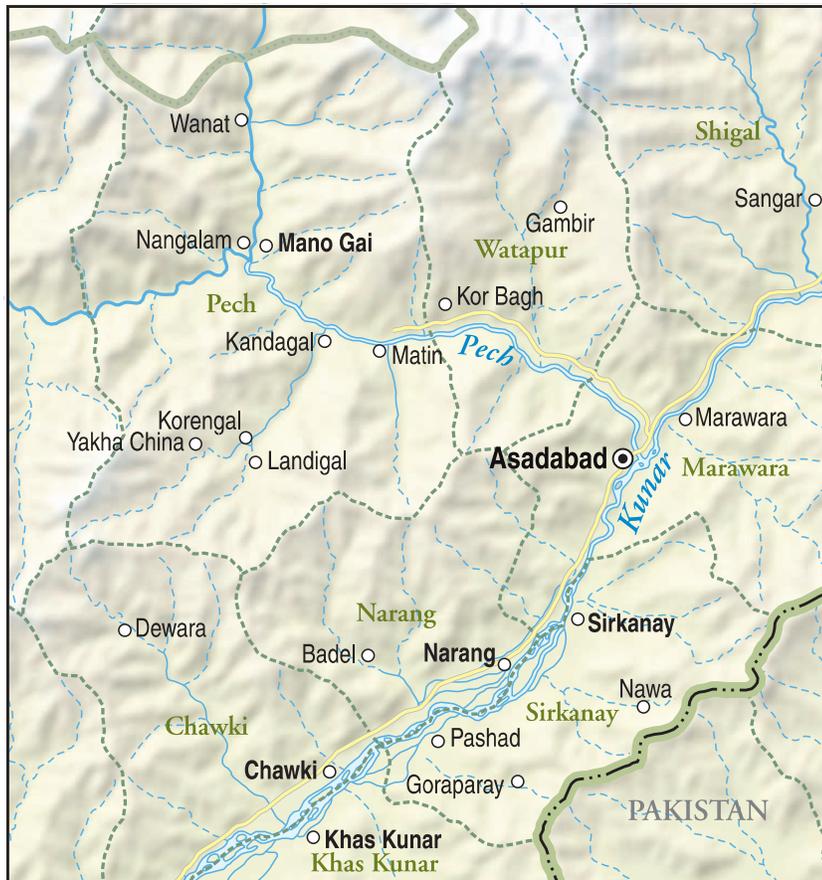


FIGURE 4: THE PECH RIVER-VALLEY

moved its battalion headquarters to FOB Blessing near Nangalam, which had previously only been occupied by a company of U.S. soldiers.¹⁷² The battalion, along with additional elements, was designated Task Force Rock, and it continued to execute development projects, building roads and bridges along the Pech River Valley.¹⁷³ In some areas, soldiers successfully interacted with the population, but in others, like the Korengal Valley, they remained isolated from the locals, as the population remained relatively hostile or at least apathetic. Paratroopers in these areas were frequently attacked as soon as they left their bases in near-constant ambushes.¹⁷⁴

As U.S. forces in RC East seemingly embraced counterinsurgency strategy, commanders repeatedly emphasized the importance of protecting the population. This emphasis was presumed to be the logic behind expanding the U.S. footprint in the valleys, pushing out in small platoon-sized elements, and establishing “a persistent presence with the

people.”¹⁷⁵ Yet, U.S. commanders admitted that the bulk of the fighting was taking place in remote areas, like Korengal, far away from the majority of the population. U.S. forces, at their then current levels, could not deny the enemy from operating in these areas, as population protection would have required; but they could bring to bear their advantages in firepower. U.S. officers routinely commented that the U.S. continued to “defeat” the enemy in every engagement with the help of that overwhelming firepower.¹⁷⁶ Thus, the “persistent presence” approach developed into a defensive “counterpunching” strategy that served as a substitute for the “search and destroy” mission. By building roads and bases in these areas, U.S. forces provoked the insurgents into attacking well-defended positions where the U.S. had a decisive advantage. The enemy sought out the U.S. position or patrol, and the U.S. destroyed the enemy when it attacked.¹⁷⁷ Put another way,

the U.S. strategy was to “clear” by “holding.” One U.S. commander described the U.S. presence in the remote areas of Kunar and eastern Nuristan as a “Taliban magnet,” which pulled the insurgents away from more populated areas, and thereby improved security in these places. One of his subordinates described the same strategy another way: “Basically...we’re the bullet sponge.”¹⁷⁸

On August 22, 2007, a platoon of the 173rd Airborne was ambushed at a U.S. outpost in Waygal District near Aranas. Ranch House, as the post was named, had been established by the Tenth Mountain Division and was still under construction at the time. The insurgents, who had amassed more

than sixty fighters, attacked early in the morning and almost overran the American position. Some insurgents were even wearing ANA uniforms, which had enabled them to approach the base. The militants breached the perimeter, advancing within ten meters of the defenders, but the platoon was able to repel the assault after calling in close air support on their position. Eleven of the

twenty U.S. soldiers defending Ranch House were wounded, while two ANA soldiers were killed.¹⁷⁹

Two months later, on October 19, 2007, the battalion launched a massive operation codenamed “Rock Avalanche.” In addition to three companies from the battalion, the operation involved another U.S. company from elsewhere in RC East, as well as several companies from the ANA’s 201st Corps. The operation, which lasted six days, aimed to disrupt insurgent networks and capture or kill insurgent leaders, including associates of Abu Ikhlas. U.S. soldiers air assaulted into the valleys of five districts: Pech, Watapur, Chapa Dara, and Narang, hoping to sweep the insurgents into their lines.¹⁸⁰

The focal point of this operation was Yakha China, a small village at the southern end of the Korengal Valley and a known insurgent sanctu-

When U.S. forces air assaulted into the village, hoping to entice the residents with an \$11 million road building project and turn them against the insurgents, they were instead met with an ambush.

ary.¹⁸¹ When U.S. forces air assaulted into the village, hoping to entice the residents with an \$11 million road building project and turn them against the insurgents, they were instead met with an ambush. An airstrike was called in on a house suspected of holding insurgents, which resulted in five civilian deaths (including women and children) and eleven more wounded.¹⁸² Battalion and company leaders held a shura with the elders of Yakha China the following day in order to explain their position and deliver humanitarian assistance but were met with more hostility.¹⁸³ Later, U.S. intelligence assets monitoring insurgent radio communications overheard that the elders of Yakha China had decided to fight.¹⁸⁴

By the end of the operation, over two dozen insurgents had been killed, none of which were high value targets. U.S. forces failed to make much contact with the enemy as news of the assault had leaked out before the operation began.¹⁸⁵ The heaviest fighting took place in the Korengal Valley, where three U.S. soldiers lost their lives.¹⁸⁶ After the operation, LTC Ostlund, the battalion commander, held a shura with the Korengali elders to discuss Operation Rock Avalanche.¹⁸⁷ Ostlund gave the elders ten days to side with the Americans over the insurgents. When the leaders of the Korengal Valley told the battalion to leave, the unit stayed, and the fighting continued.¹⁸⁸ Despite village elders in the valley constantly rebuffing U.S. desires to build a road into the valley, U.S. forces have continued to persist in attempts to convince the Korengali people that a road into their valley would be in their best interest.¹⁸⁹

A few weeks later, on November 9, 2007, U.S. paratroopers were returning from a meeting with village elders in Waygal District, Nuristan, just north of the Korengal Valley, when they were caught in a complex ambush near Aranas—site of the infamous Ranch House battle just a few months earlier.¹⁹⁰ Six U.S. paratroopers were killed, along with three ANA soldiers.¹⁹¹ The soldiers and elders had been discussing potential development projects to be brought to the area.¹⁹² After this attack, LTC Ostlund scrapped the list of projects the battalion had been considering for Waygal. “Some areas have made their choices,” he

said, “and they’re going to be left behind.”¹⁹³

After the winter snows melted and the spring 2008 fighting season had begun, the airborne battalion launched another major operation, similar to Rock Avalanche, at the beginning of May. Operation Rock Penetrator lasted ten days, during which the battalion air assaulted into five valleys in Chawki, Narang, Pech, and Watapur Districts. Special emphasis was placed on Narang, as the paratroopers sought to disrupt insurgent smuggling routes into the adjacent Korengal Valley. However, as in Rock Avalanche, insurgents heard of Rock Penetrator before it started and began to move out of the area. Even so, provincial officials claimed that dozens of insurgents were killed.¹⁹⁴

On July 4, 2008, a U.S. combat outpost near Aranas in Waygal District, Nuristan, was attacked by an insurgent mortar team. The U.S. soldiers called in air support, and helicopters destroyed two vehicles as they were driving away. U.S. officials asserted that over a dozen militants had been killed.¹⁹⁵ However, Afghan officials in Nuristan, including the provincial governor, claimed that the NATO airstrikes had actually destroyed two vehicles carrying civilians, resulting in the deaths of twenty-two innocent people. The alleged killing of innocent civilians sparked protests and a political crisis in Nuristan.¹⁹⁶

Nine days later and only six miles down the Waygal Valley, U.S. forces suffered the worst attack since 2005, when nineteen U.S. troops were killed in Kunar.¹⁹⁷ In early July 2008, U.S. commanders decided to withdraw from COP Bella near Aranas in Nuristan. The small outpost frequently came under attack, and there was little support among the local population for U.S. forces or the Afghan government. Furthermore, the location was technically outside of the battalion’s area of operation. Intelligence also indicated that the insurgents were planning to stage a large assault against the post in the near future.¹⁹⁸ Thus, the platoon manning COP Bella moved down the Waygal Valley and established a new outpost near the village of Wanat, in the Waygal District of Nuristan.¹⁹⁹ Even though U.S. commanders had received intelligence that insurgents were planning to attack COP Bella,

they believed the enemy would not stage a massive assault against the new post at Wanat, preferring instead to probe its defenses.²⁰⁰

That attack, however, came on the morning of July 13, 2008, just five days after the forty-eight paratroopers and twenty-four ANA soldiers had arrived.²⁰¹ As they had only been there a short time, the defenses of the outpost—at the time, only a vehicle patrol base (VPB) and not a fully built Combat Outpost—only consisted of some crude fortifications, concertina wire, and a few Humvees.²⁰² An observation post had been built outside



Photo: A U.S. Army Staff Sgt. helps secure an area along the Pech River during a meeting between key leaders in the Kunar province of Afghanistan on Feb. 4, 2007. (DoD Photo)

the VPB's perimeter. More than 200 insurgents massed for the attack, including foreign fighters from Chechnya and Pakistan.²⁰³ Various accounts describe the attackers as Taliban, al Qaeda, Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, or some combination of these groups.²⁰⁴ They masked the sound of their advance by running water through an irrigation canal in a nearby field, and they forced villagers to leave in order to set up positions in their shops, mosques, and homes.²⁰⁵ U.S. investigations later found the District sub-governor, the chief of police, and the local police force complicit in the attack, although some U.S. commanders believed that they were acting under duress.²⁰⁶

The ambush was well-coordinated, and militants first targeted the platoon's heavy weapons systems—the mortar pit and TOW (wire-guided) missile launcher—before attacking the observation post. The battle lasted for four hours, the perimeter

was breached, but the position was not completely overrun. In the end, nine U.S. soldiers were killed and twenty-seven were wounded, along with four ANA soldiers. This tragic assault occurred just days before the 173rd Airborne was due to leave Afghanistan.²⁰⁷ Prior to the attack at Wanat, the battalion had not suffered a combat death since January 2008.²⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

In counterinsurgency theory, the population is paramount—it is the center of gravity in the fight. Seizing and holding territory is less important than protecting the population where it lives. The primary goal of a counterinsurgency strategy should be to secure the populace and thereby legitimize the government rather than focus on militarily defeating the insurgents. While this theory was successfully implemented in Iraq, it has been difficult to implement in Kunar. In the sparsely-populated mountain regions of eastern Afghanistan, some strategists have argued for holding the high ground—a tenet of classical mountain warfare—as a necessary precondition for protecting the population. The argument suggests that if the counterinsurgent does not deny the enemy the high ground, then the guerillas will be able to attack and terrorize the population at will. In the Kunar and Nuristan regions, this argument requires U.S. forces to pursue a combination of counterinsurgency warfare, with its focus on the population, and mountain warfare, whereby the U.S. forces seize and hold the high ground.

However, in places like the Korengal and Pech River Valleys, there are not enough U.S. and Afghan forces to protect the population and clear and hold the territory where that population lives. Furthermore, in some of the interior valleys such as the Korengal, it is not certain that an increase in manpower would equate to success, as the population remains distrustful of and even hostile to outsiders. In the Korengal, the presence of U.S. forces exacerbates tensions and results in anger and resentment. This facilitates violence in the region, rather than stability and security which is the desired endstate of a counterinsurgency.

Given a hostile population and too few troops, U.S. forces have been forced to pursue a defensive “counter-punch” strategy whereby they draw the enemy in to attack their patrols and bases in the valleys and then counterattack with their superior firepower. This approach, however, is neither sustainable nor conducive to waging a successful counterinsurgency strategy.

The situation in the Korengal is not the problem; it is a consequence of uninhibited infiltration routes that the insurgents use to cross the border. There is an almost inexhaustible flow of insurgents into Afghanistan from Pakistan. They can survive for days or weeks in the mountains away from population centers and quickly exfiltrate back to safe havens in Pakistan if needed. It appears that many insurgents only come to Afghanistan for a few days or weeks at a time. The “counter-punch” strategy assumes a finite number of insurgents can be captured, killed, or forced to give up. For this assumption to be true, the Pakistani border would have to be effectively sealed off, or at least adequately interdicted, especially if substantial forces continue to be dedicated to interior areas like the Korengal Valley. Moreover, the enemy can attack U.S. and Afghan forces at will and, given the insurgents proximity to the border, is probably not entirely dependent on the local Afghan population for support. In fact, the enemy may be fighting in the interior of Kunar simply because that’s where U.S. forces are vulnerable.

There is little reason to establish large COPs or FOBs in the interior mountains. Strung out at small, isolated posts they cannot effectively mass the necessary force to conduct an offensive or counter an enemy threat without sacrificing security gains made elsewhere, as battles like Wanat and Ranch House have demonstrated. Moreover, establishing fixed outposts in such inhospitable terrain inevitably leads to the use of massive amounts of artillery and airpower to defend these isolated positions. Artillery and airpower have often been and continue to be counterproductive in dealing with the insurgency in this part of the country. Some forty years ago, John Paul Vann discussed the futility of firepower in insurgencies when he argued that counterinsurgencies call for

“the utmost discrimination in killing. The best weapon for killing is a knife. The worst is an airplane. The next worst is artillery. Barring a knife, the best is a rifle--you know who you’re killing.” The U.S. strategy in valleys like the Korengal has led to isolated outposts reliant on large amounts of indirect fire which by its very nature often hurts the counterinsurgency strategy by alienating the very population it is trying to secure. This is the limitation of the “persistent presence” strategy in Kunar province.²⁰⁹ It is costly, fragile, and requires a long-term commitment and it has gotten U.S. and Afghan forces no closer to victory.

Rather than maintaining positions in the Korengal and many of the small, ineffective posts that dot the Pech river valley, U.S. forces would be better utilized in conducting active patrols to secure the population along the lower Kunar River Valley in places like Mara Wara, Sarkani, and Khas Konar Districts where the population desires U.S. support and presence, unlike the population of the Korengal. As they do so, U.S. forces must demonstrate the tangible benefits of their presence to the local population. Although the current strategy of building roads and bridges does have an economic impact in the longer term, those projects must be paired with short-term, quick impact civil affairs and humanitarian assistance projects. These smaller projects often times better demonstrate the benefit of an expanded American presence in Afghan villages. U.S. forces must assess the needs of the local populations and give them immediate, quantifiable humanitarian assistance such as medical and dental aid, radios, and blankets. Not only will this support demonstrate that the population is the center of gravity, but it will raise the cost of infiltration for the insurgents.

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