

Transformation and the War in Afghanistan

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Abstract

During the 1990s and early 2000s the US military was largely shaped by the concept of the revolution in military affairs (RMA) and subsequent force transformation process, which integrated new information and communication technologies, precision strike capabilities, doctrine, operational approaches, and force structures to allow the military to overcome new strategic challenges. Significant questions, however, have emerged regarding the utility of the RMA and transformation during hybrid wars, where the lines blur between conventional and irregular threats. This article examines the utility of transformation during the war in Afghanistan. It argues that a transformation-influenced “light footprint” of special operations forces and airpower has clear relevancy during present and future hybrid conflicts. This relevancy is enhanced when the use of the light footprint is paired with a clear and achievable war aim.¹

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*A scrimmage in a Border Station—
A canter down some dark defile
Two thousand pounds of education
Drops to a ten-rupee jezail. . . .
Strike hard who cares—shoot straight who can
The odds are on the cheaper man.*

—Richard Kipling
“Arithmetic on the Frontier”

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The US military of the 1990s and early 2000s was shaped largely by the concept of the revolution in military affairs and subsequent force transformation process, which integrated new information and communication technologies, precision strike capabilities, doctrine, operational approaches, and force structures to allow the military to overcome new strategic challenges.² Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda (AQ), the United States responded by launching Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and invading Afghanistan. US special operations forces (SOF), intelligence assets, and airpower supported indigenous Afghan allies in a campaign that overwhelmed the Taliban's military forces and overthrew their government.³ The war in Afghanistan has become the longest conflict in American history, and some scholars question the legacy of the RMA and force transformation on the war effort and whether they hold relevancy during hybrid warfare.⁴ Hybrid conflicts have emerged as one of the primary strategic challenges of the contemporary period and are defined as conflicts in which adversaries employ a varying mix of conventional combat, insurgency, terrorism, information operations, and criminal activity to achieve their objectives. The multi-variant threats within hybrid conflicts force a military to respond to fundamentally different challenges simultaneously. The invasion and occupation of Afghanistan would represent the US military's first hybrid war challenge since being shaped by the RMA and subsequent force transformation.⁵

According to several writers in academia and the popular press,⁶ the transformation process has actually hindered operations in Afghanistan, and this criticism has increased as the conflict continued. This criticism is driven, in part, by followers of classical counterinsurgency (COIN) theory who advocate against relying on the role of technology when fighting insurgencies in favor of embracing population-centric engagement.⁷ In reference to Afghanistan, this debate centers on whether the United States should embrace a "light footprint" approach to COIN and counterterrorism operations that relies on RMA technologies and the pairing of SOF and airpower or whether to follow a "heavy footprint" approach of a traditional, manpower-intensive COIN campaign.

An analysis of the US war effort in Afghanistan shows that, while the light footprint had operational successes, it failed to fully stabilize the security situation across the country. Although the initial invasion was a decisive victory in 2001, the stability of Afghanistan has continued to worsen from 2002 onwards, and this can be attributed in part to the

lack of conventional boots on the ground, which perhaps could have helped quell some of the violence. The insurgency remains undefeated and continues to threaten the Afghan government. However, it would be misguided to lay most of the blame for this with the light footprint approach, as several factors have contributed to this outcome. Many of the Afghan war's problems can be attributed to the muddling over war objectives, which has led to strategic and therefore tactical level confusion. Carl von Clausewitz reminds us that "under all circumstances war is to be regarded not as an independent thing, but as a political instrument."⁸ Confusion over what exactly is the overall objective will have a negative, reverberating effect on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of the war. Furthermore, other factors such as internal corruption within Afghanistan and constraints placed on the US military by different presidential administrations have also helped to undermine the war effort.

Afghanistan has become a tale of two wars; the first is a limited and narrow objective centered on the destruction of AQ's regional presence, and the second is the more ambitious goal of turning Afghanistan into a modern state. The first objective is one that the light footprint is well suited to deal with, as its speed and precision works very well against terrorist groups, particularly those like AQ that lack a core local constituency for support. However, the light footprint is ill suited to dealing with the nation-building objective, because as classical COIN doctrine dictates, technology is less useful here. A heavy footprint centred on manpower-intensive operations may be a better option.

The US government must realize that it will likely never be able to establish a fully functional liberal democratic modern state in Afghanistan, where the situation is too complex; too many hurdles remain within Afghan society and too much corruption within the Afghan government and bureaucracy. What can be achieved is a narrowly focused counterterrorism mission that is designed to eliminate AQ and other groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) now operating in the region. Not only is such a war aim achievable, it is directly linked to what brought the United States to Afghanistan in the first place: the need to prevent terrorist organizations from using the region as a hub to plan and prepare attacks against the United States. This negates the need to send thousands more troops and calls for a reliance on strengthened SOF and airpower usage and must include a loosening of the rules of

engagement (ROE) to allow them, if necessary, to take offensive actions against the insurgency.

The advantage with the light footprint is that it can allow the US to maintain a longer-term presence in Afghanistan that, while not being able to deliver a decisive victory, can nonetheless continue to degrade the operational capacity of the insurgency so much so that they cannot achieve a clear and present threat. By demonstrating US resilience in its COIN efforts, it can ensure the Afghan government can continue to govern despite its weaknesses. A light footprint, with its lower costs in terms of casualties and financial investment, deprives the insurgency of its ability to secure victory via an attritional strategy. By robbing the insurgency of this advantage, the US can wait and try to find a negotiated settlement with the Taliban while continuing to target terrorist groups in the region.

This article argues that a light footprint of SOF and airpower has clear relevancy during present and future hybrid conflicts. This is demonstrated by the operational successes of both SOF and airpower at targeting terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan. Further, this relevancy is enhanced when the use of the light footprint is paired with a clear and achievable war aim that is well matched to its strengths. When a war objective is unclear and beyond the capacity of the light footprint, strategic failure will result. The article starts by outlining the RMA and transformation process and links them to theoretical understandings of insurgency and hybrid warfare. Next, it examines the relevancy of the light footprint to the Afghanistan war effort to identify what failed and what succeeded. It concludes with a deeper understanding of the legacy of force transformation in Afghanistan and relevant options for future hybrid wars.

RMA, Transformation, and Counterinsurgency

The concept of an emerging RMA came to light in American military thinking in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, when defense intellectuals such as Andrew Marshall identified a potential shift in the character of modern warfare that was centered on a new generation of technologies.⁹ These new technologies included those relating to information technology, advanced digital networking, sixth-generation computers, a variety of electronic sensors, space-based platforms, precision-guided munitions (PGM), and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).¹⁰ The RMA technologies were thought to significantly enhance the US military's speed and

lethality of operations, in particular its ability to project expeditionary forces and have superior battlespace awareness via information dominance. The overwhelming success during the 1991 Gulf War seemed to confirm this RMA thesis in the eyes of many within the US strategic community, and by 1993, the term “revolution in military affairs” became firmly embedded in the lexicon of US defense policy.¹¹ The RMA remains a controversial and contested subject, with some challenging the revolutionary nature of the concept altogether.¹² Ultimately, the RMA refers to a period of major military innovation concerning the exploitation of new technologies related to information processing, communication, surveillance, networking, and precision strike, along with new strategic ideas intended to greatly reshape the character of modern warfare.¹³

To exploit the potential of this RMA concept, US defense planners set in motion a series of organizational and doctrinal changes known as force transformation. The purpose of this process was to shrink the size of the military and increase flexibility while not minimizing lethality. Essentially, force transformation sought to better use RMA technologies to secure qualitative advantages over the enemy.¹⁴ The military was moving toward a light-footprint approach to modern warfare, where high technologies and smaller sized units would be able to dominate future battlefields, rather than the heavy infantry divisions and armored brigades of the Cold War era.¹⁵ SOF’s operational role grew significantly under this move toward a light footprint due to their rapid mobility and specialized skills. Furthermore, airpower had become in many ways the central focus of a transforming US military. The US Air Force (USAF) emerged as the largest benefactor of this transformation process as it came to be viewed by some observers as integral to securing a decisive victory in modern war.¹⁶ The US military in the 1990s was shifting from countering the threat of the Soviet Union to becoming a more agile expeditionary force. Broadly, the force transformation process centered on changing the military into a lighter, more modular force structure of networked units that utilized an effects-based approach to operations where the objective would be to disable the enemy’s ability to function rather than its total destruction.¹⁷

This force transformation process accelerated during the tenure of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense, who viewed transformation as key to overcoming the security challenges of the new century.¹⁸ Rumsfeld’s enthusiasm for transformation was not shared universally within the

US strategic community, as his brash style along with the eventual worsening situations in Afghanistan and Iraq led to some prominent criticisms. Rumsfeld's insistence that all the services speed up their existing transformation agendas would eventually lead to pushback from senior officers, particularly those not wanting the military to stray too far from heavier platforms like tanks and artillery. Other senior officers were concerned that transformation was relying far too much on airpower to achieve strategic aims.¹⁹

Transformation sought to change the US military into a force that was lighter and far more technocentric and expeditionary oriented than it had been in the past. Senior defense officials had hoped this process would allow the military to become more effective at war fighting and to better overcome new security challenges including terrorism and insurgency.²⁰ Transformation is thus defined as the formal introduction of new organizational forms and operational concepts that would allow the US military to better utilize the technologies associated with the RMA and enhance its expeditionary capabilities.

Transformation's enthusiasm for technology's potential to be used against a variety of threats, including insurgency, ran counter to much of the traditional theoretical literature on COIN, which argues technology lacks relevancy in such campaigns. Frederick Kagan argued that transformation has blinded the US military to what is needed to overcome certain strategic challenges encountered during COIN campaigns. Kagan asserts that transformation essentially seeks to apply a "business model" to these conflicts, which emphasizes the reduction of risk to US forces by relying on standoff munitions at the expense of large numbers of boots on the ground.²¹ Further, Kagan cites transformation's light footprint approach as one of the main reasons why the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated following the initial invasion.²² Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker have argued that a light footprint approach is ill suited to dealing with strategic challenges as it forces the United States to form security partnerships with local allies who often prove unreliable. Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker assert that a larger commitment of conventional US ground troops is usually the best option to secure war objectives.²³ Max Boot, an initial champion of Rumsfeld's transformation agenda, felt that its legacy hindered the military's ability to combat insurgencies, which in his view required a substantial number of boots on the ground and nation building in places like Afghanistan

to defeat the insurgents.²⁴ Keith L. Shimko takes a middling position, arguing that while the RMA concept is certainly valid, it is far more impactful on the US military's ability to wage conventional warfare and is far less revolutionary in COIN situations.²⁵

The idea that technology is far less relevant during COIN is hardly new, as that has been a key theme within COIN theory for many years. David Galula, the French military theorist believed by many to be the Clausewitz of COIN, was highly skeptical toward the utility of modern technology, stating that the most useful type of military force is infantry in large numbers and that ultimately complex military sophistication can be counterproductive against insurgencies.²⁶ Galula further stated that COIN campaigns would require only around 20 percent of military action to solve, as the remaining 80 percent of activities were politically related.²⁷ Martin van Creveld wrote that the character of modern warfare has in recent years shifted so dramatically that Western conventional military forces are no longer suitable for dealing with irregular actors like terrorists and insurgents. Van Creveld asserts that modern weapons systems such as airpower and precision munitions cannot lead to a decisive victory in this new era.²⁸ Rupert Smith also follows van Creveld's perspective, arguing that in the contemporary era most conflicts should be classified as "wars among the people," where the objective is not to destroy an enemy but rather to capture the will of civilians, and that Western militaries are not well prepared for such a task.²⁹

Few COIN theorists have praise for the role of technology, dismissing it either as unimportant or, worse, harmful to the war effort. Gil Merom argues that the central reason why most modern Western militaries fail to win against insurgencies is due to their self-imposed moral limitations as a result of their liberal-democratic values. According to Merom, this morality prevents them from engaging in the savage tactics and necessary levels of violence that are needed to guarantee a victory. Merom points out that technological advantages have not helped Western forces overcome these self-imposed constraints.³⁰ Ivan Arreguin-Toft explains the phenomenon of how weak actors frequently overcome stronger opponents, despite the broad assumption that logically the stronger power should prevail. Arreguin-Toft makes the case that stronger actors lose these conflicts when they adopt the wrong strategy and that insurgents tend to win when they follow an indirect strategy that relies on attrition and limits the ability of the stronger actor to maximize advantages in

force of arms. Essentially, Arreguin-Toft argues that the weak win by simply surviving, and thus not losing. The counterinsurgent actor will eventually grow weary of the conflict when it realizes that direct victory cannot be attained and will not wish to continue investing blood and treasure in the war any longer.³¹ Andrew Mack also feels that insurgents need to focus on not losing, rather than seeking a direct and decisive victory themselves. Mack points out that insurgents are rarely destroyed via decisive battle where military technology is most impactful, and as long as the insurgents maintain the political will to continue fighting, the conflict will continue despite the power differential between insurgent and counterinsurgent.³²

Even within the COIN doctrine of the US Army and Marine Corps, technology is viewed as something that is of marginal relevance to hybrid conflicts. *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* was drafted in response to operational struggles in Iraq; it overwhelmingly ignores the impact of transformation and technology and instead focuses on population-centric engagement. Only nine pages out of 389 are dedicated to the role of airpower, which is largely relegated to a supporting role. The field manual acknowledges that airpower can be used to strike at insurgent targets, but only in certain situations, and the primary role for airpower in COIN is identified as a means of transport or for surveillance operations.³³ These theoretical writings are mirrored by contemporary critics of transformation who try to link it to the operational difficulties faced by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. The central theme is that a technocentric, less manpower-intensive military force will be ill suited for success in hybrid conflicts. However, this argument requires more analysis to determine if that was the case for the US experience in Afghanistan.

Transformation and Hybrid War in Afghanistan

The US war effort in Afghanistan has been mixed in terms of success, and this is the result of multiple factors. The major reason lies with conflicting wartime objectives, which created a negative trickle-down effect on strategy and tactics. The two prominent objectives that have influenced the direction of the war are the counterterrorism campaign against AQ and the nation-building effort across Afghanistan. This muddling of objectives would lead to debates over whether the transformation-influenced light footprint or a manpower-intensive heavy footprint should be at the

center of the war strategy. The war's main successes are the result of when the light footprint is focused on specific objectives, such as the toppling of the Taliban's government or the targeting of terrorist networks. The United States has faced far more difficulties in its nation-building attempts where the light footprint lacks relevancy. Internal problems such as widespread corruption made Afghanistan unsuitable for any nation-building attempt. Further, as the war has continued, the light footprint faced several constraints, such as the diverting of SOF personnel to Iraq or the imposition of restrictive ROEs.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration was clear that it wanted a prompt, military-centric response. US Central Command began to plan for the invasion, yet this process began without the White House laying out a specific war aim. There was confusion as to whether the central focus should be against AQ or the Taliban or to focus on both equally.³⁴ Rumsfeld was adamant that he did not want to commit large numbers of ground forces to Afghanistan to avoid disrupting the lives of the local population. Rumsfeld cited the difficulties that plagued the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan during the 1980s and felt that the United States must avoid similar mistakes. The Soviets had occupied Afghanistan with a large force and were met with fierce resistance from local Afghans as well as foreign fighters who viewed them as imperialist invaders.³⁵ Clearly this was something that neither the US military nor Rumsfeld wanted to repeat.³⁶ Even as US forces and their allies were marching on Kabul, the question of what should be the prime political objective of the war lingered in the White House.³⁷

The desire to maintain a low profile led the United States to develop the light footprint approach that utilized the advantages of force transformation. During the invasion, this approach, which would also become known to some as the Afghan model, involved a combination of US airpower, intelligence assets, and SOF, which were paired with indigenous ground troops (the Northern Alliance) to achieve strategic effects. The Afghan model began with US airpower destroying Taliban air defenses. Next, SOF and intelligence assets identified new targets that included larger enemy field units and command and control centers for new airstrikes. This all occurred while Northern Alliance forces acted as a screen against enemy counterattacks and held captured territory. The speed of the invasion surprised many, and it led to the decisive defeat of the Taliban forces and their AQ allies. However, OEF was a learning process

for the military, and the light footprint is something that has continued to evolve over time. In particular, there was poor coordination between CIA assets, SOF, and airpower during the initial stages of the invasion.³⁸ Stephan Biddle, a vocal critic of light footprint, has pointed out that there were difficulties during OEF, arguing that the lack of US ground forces and at times the unreliability of Northern Alliance units led to many AQ fighters being able to slip away and avoid capture at the battle of Tora Bora.³⁹ Still, despite some operational difficulties, the light footprint was able to achieve success by destroying the central forces of the Taliban and their AQ allies during the initial invasion of the Afghanistan with relative ease.

Following the toppling of the Taliban, Rumsfeld was clear that there was to be no significant presence of US boots on the ground, and his directive was reinforced by the initial successes of OEF. There was a belief that the US had secured a great victory with minimal commitment of casualties and financial investment and had ushered in a new era of military interventions centered on this light footprint approach.⁴⁰ However, this new trend was met with significant criticisms. Some observers became highly critical of the Bush administration's handling of Afghanistan in the period of 2002 to 2008 and argued Bush and Rumsfeld should have utilized a heavy footprint of conventional forces to secure the country.⁴¹

During the period of 2002 to 2008, the security situation across Afghanistan began to decline as an insurgency formed and spread across the country. Geographically, most insurgent activity was centered in the southern and eastern ethnic Pashtun regions of the country, and the northern regions of Pakistan were used frequently by insurgents as safe havens.⁴² The Taliban were following an indirect strategy as they were attempting to exhaust the Afghan government and to survive and outlast the US and allied intervention.⁴³ They were not attempting to defeat the new Afghan government or the US forces in a decisive battle since they quickly realized they lacked the capabilities to do so.⁴⁴

The insurgency in Afghanistan is not a cohesive unified force. Rather, it is a series of networks. It primarily consists of the Taliban, AQ, Haqqani network, the Hezb-i-Islami, various foreign fighters, local warlord militias, and criminal gangs. Even the Taliban is not a singular organization but rather a movement of several loosely aligned networks.⁴⁵ All have a vested interest in seeing the central Afghan government fall. The Taliban,

AQ, and Haqqani network are the most prominent groups.⁴⁶ There are senior leaders across the insurgency, but there is a lack of centralized direct control. Senior leaders provide guidance rather than direct orders to local fighters. Not all insurgents are driven by ideological fervor, including Taliban fighters, as many are focused on more localized interests. Often insurgents are driven into fighting due to physical threats, humiliation, drug addiction, and opportunistic financial benefit.⁴⁷

In this period of 2002 to 2008, the war objective expanded from focusing on the systematic destruction of AQ toward nation building. Here, the United States and its allies attempted to develop the political infrastructure of the Afghan state at the federal and local level. Every level of governance in Afghanistan had to be established from the ground up, and this was paired with a major social engineering project to implement human rights in a region lacking any tradition of liberalism or experience with modern governance. The military found itself having to perform a broad variety of tasks, from helping to establish a governmental bureaucratic system to instructing locals on new farming techniques. Further, the military had to establish new security forces for the Afghan state, which was going to be a tremendous task.⁴⁸ What emerged is a situation where the nation-building and counterterrorism objectives were clashing and leading to incoherent strategies. The counterterrorism goal required high-tempo kinetic operations that centered on capturing and killing terrorists, yet this strategy undermined the holistic goal of state building by ignoring the provision of security to Afghan civilians and forced the US to partner with local allies that were at times less than reliable.⁴⁹

Any attempt at nation building was also gutted by poor decision making from the Bush administration. As noted, Rumsfeld held little interest in overseeing nation building, and so the US sought to outsource the security of the Afghan countryside as quickly as possible, as well as secure allies for counterterrorism operations. This led to the US giving preferential support and considerable financial aid to certain Northern Alliance warlords.⁵⁰ Once the Taliban had been defeated, these warlords would fight one another for control over illicit industries like narcotics and toll roads, and they became hated by the average Afghan civilian. This greatly undermined the US attempt at building infrastructure and institutions in Afghanistan. Also, this pattern of instability suggested that the country was not ready for the considerable change necessary to turn into a modern state.⁵¹

The light footprint's relevancy in 2002–2008 faced major constraints brought on by the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, which stripped Afghanistan of much of its SOF personnel and intelligence assets. During the lead up to the Iraq war many SOF personnel disengaged from Afghanistan to prepare for the next war, and some officers had speculated that post-Tora Bora AQ had "gone cold" so there was little need for their continued presence. Sean Naylor observed that at this point the Joint Special Operations Command's (JSOC) Afghan presence consisted of just Seal Team Six, as well as "little more than a Ranger platoon, three Task Force Brown Chinook helicopters and two Predator Drones."⁵² Overall, the context of the period following the fall of the Taliban was that of strategic confusion for both the conventional military assets on the ground as well as SOF. Gen Stanley McChrystal wrote that once he was deployed to the country in May of 2002, "it wasn't clear whether there was any war left."⁵³ McChrystal was also ordered, along with other senior officers, to begin planning for potential operations in Iraq as early as August 2002.⁵⁴ The shifting of US military's attention and resources towards Iraq thus severely hindered the light footprint's ability to have operational success in Afghanistan. The light footprint, which had managed to secure several key victories during the initial invasion of Afghanistan, was constrained highly in the 2002–2008 period, much to the detriment of the US war effort.

In 2009, there was a general perception among observers that Afghanistan was heading toward disorder and that the US lacked a proper COIN strategy.⁵⁵ During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama had made Afghanistan a central part of his national defense platform.⁵⁶ This would set the stage for debate over war objectives and strategy within the new administration. Some, like Vice President Joe Biden, wanted to utilize the light footprint on a strictly counterterrorism mission, while the senior military leadership, including McChrystal, who was now the commander of the Afghan mission, wanted to shift focus toward a manpower-intensive heavy footprint and embrace traditional population-centric COIN.⁵⁷ President Obama opted to side with the heavy footprint option and announced his support for McChrystal's plan in December 2009, deploying an additional 30,000 troops as part of a troop surge to the country.⁵⁸

The troop surge did not lead to a clear victory, and a US troop draw-down was initiated in July 2011; it was later followed by the formal

end of the NATO combat mission in December 2014. Senior military commanders would acknowledge that violence levels had not overall decreased during the surge period.⁵⁹ The heavy footprint had failed to achieve its aims. The situation inside Afghanistan remained completely unsuitable for the nation-building objective as corruption remained rampant and the insurgency was able to sustain itself via its safe haven in Pakistan. Afghanistan remains beset with instability across the country, and the US military presence once again resembles the light footprint by relying on airpower and SOF to target terrorists and the insurgency while other military advisors focus on training the Afghan security forces.

Starting in 2015, the Obama administration placed new constraints on the light footprint's relevancy. It implemented new restrictions on the US military's ROE, and so airpower was no longer being used as an offensive tool against the insurgency—rather it was constrained for use only to target some AQ members, respond to close air support requests from Afghan commanders, and protect remaining NATO forces. This decision negatively impacted the operational utility of the light footprint, which requires the freedom for rapid offensive operations. The restrictive ROE allowed the Taliban to have breathing space to better use staging areas for their own offensive actions. US commanders on the ground felt that airpower would need to be used more to undercut Taliban advances.⁶⁰ Afghan security forces commanders also preferred a more aggressive US presence, including a loosening of the restrictive ROE to help counter any further gains by the insurgency.⁶¹ The overall strategic situation since 2015 is best described as a stalemate between the United States and the insurgency. The Taliban have achieved some battlefield success yet have been unable to translate that into major strategic gains, such as toppling of the new Afghan government.⁶² Afghanistan remains locked in a protracted struggle with no clear end in sight for either side of the war.

Transformation's Relevancy in Afghanistan

Although the US war effort in Afghanistan has hardly led to a decisive victory, there are some clear signs of transformation's relevancy in hybrid war situations. This relevancy is tied to the role of SOF and of airpower, particularly the role of unmanned aerial vehicles in targeting insurgent and terrorist groups.

SOF in Afghanistan undertook two primary roles. The first was direct targeting of the insurgency, and the second was indirect where SOF personnel are integrated with local security forces to increase their readiness and operational capacity. Other indirect roles include community engagement where SOF personnel spent time with village elders. This enabled them to form key partnerships to help in future counterterrorism and COIN operations.

In rural villages, SOF members often acted as dispute mediators and worked in other promotional activities, such as building water wells.⁶³ SOF and their light footprint allowed the United States to raid areas that were culturally sensitive with greater ease than if they had attempted similar operations with a larger group of conventional soldiers. Conventional troops have a slower operational pace due to their larger numbers, and they often use much heavier equipment such as tanks or other mechanized combat vehicles; their operations are far more disruptive for local civilians. A small SOF team is able to maneuver in and out of a village unnoticed, and its unique skill set often allows it to capture targets without causing widespread destruction during operations. SOF also proved to be, by far, the most effective at integrating with the Afghan National Army (ANA) for conducting offensive operations against insurgents and for gathering intelligence.⁶⁴

While the versatility of SOF was initially championed under Rumsfeld, it was the Obama administration's embrace of the SOF-driven "kill and capture" campaign against insurgent leadership that helped elevate the role of SOF to another level. Kill-capture operations were paired with precision airstrikes to deal with insurgents in an offensive manner, as opposed to passive, traditional, population-centric strategies that rely on overwhelming ground forces. The significant growth of the size and importance of the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) in Afghanistan is tied to the kill-capture campaign, which was spearheaded by JSOC. Here, SOF personnel used signals intelligence capabilities that gave them exponential advantages in surveillance, communications, and information analysis compared to their insurgent opponents.⁶⁵

JSOC embodies how force transformation embraces high technologies and network-centric structures. JSOC is not structured in a traditional hierarchal, pyramid-style command. Instead, various elite units are linked via an innovative joint command. In practice JSOC is quasi-autonomous and decentralized in its operations where information and

intelligence sharing are done with relative ease. The command is highly technologically driven, with operations shaped by near real-time surveillance and targeting data; this is not possible without advanced digital networking.⁶⁶ Computer networking also played a significant role in JSOC's effectiveness. Personnel use software to upload intelligence data such as transcripts, images, and biometrics that can then be freely accessed by all other members of the network. JSOC is quasi-independent in that it is allowed to draft its own wanted list of suspects and then pursue their capture or killing.⁶⁷

McChrystal became a strong proponent of this network-centric approach to warfare, stating that, "we had to figure out a way to retain our traditional capabilities of professionalism, technology, and, when needed, overwhelming force, while achieving levels of knowledge, speed, precision and unity of effort that only a network could provide."⁶⁸ McChrystal's leadership was integral for letting JSOC maximize its ability to adapt its organizational networks to their full potential. He sought to form interagency networks between JSOC's SOF capacity and other government organizations, particularly those relating to intelligence. McChrystal formalized this by forming a joint interagency task force (JIATF) to assist this process. The primary task of JIATF in Afghanistan was to trace and analyze the transnational connections of local insurgents beyond the border into Pakistan. Once the insurgent networks were mapped, SOF would then seek to eliminate them via targeted strikes.⁶⁹

McChrystal's primary goal with these reforms was to create a quasi-flattened command hierarchy for JSOC, which would allow for maximum organizational efficiency by attempting to streamline information gathering, analysis, and distribution. McChrystal had identified information access as the main obstacle to campaign success among clandestine units and organizations, and this was a challenge that only a networked organization could overcome.⁷⁰ JSOC and McChrystal were able to build on lessons learned from their time in Iraq and apply them to Afghanistan.⁷¹

JSOC became focused on night raids as part of their kill-capture operations. These raids shifted focus from exclusively targeting senior leadership figures to the "middle management" of the insurgency, which include those responsible for logistical support such as arms procurement and financing. The raids also occurred with incredible frequency. In 2010, JSOC averaged 600 unique raids per month. The Obama

administration was highly supportive of JSOC's activities and consistently increased support and granted political approval for its activities in regions like Northern Pakistan.⁷² JSOC was responsible for one of the most high-profile victories of the Afghan war, and perhaps the entire Global War on Terror, with the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on 1 May 2011. The raid was symbolically important and also captured a significant amount of hard intelligence data from bin Laden's compound.⁷³ Given the exceedingly geopolitically sensitive location of the bin Laden compound, which was located in the heart of Pakistan, this operation could only have been achieved with SOF, as regular ground forces would have been too cumbersome and far too high profile.

The SOF kill-capture campaign had a considerable effect on the operational capacity of the insurgents. Despite having a somewhat decentralized structure, terrorist groups such as AQ have a challenging experience replacing individuals in leadership positions due to the influence of their internal organizational dynamics. Insurgent groups are incredibly violent and clandestine in nature, and this creates clear problems for a smooth transition or succession to occur because of infighting between rivals. The highly secretive nature of an insurgent and terrorist organization places increased pressure on the importance of leadership since individuals at lower levels in the organization lack the formal organizational-bureaucratic experience to oversee a smooth transition of power, and potential leaders often view internal rivals with suspicion.⁷⁴

Some of the internal organizational structure of the Taliban helped exacerbate the effects of a kill-capture campaign, as the movement places great value and prestige on individuals who possess information and secrets. As a result, commanders are often reluctant to inform their subordinates of information to which they are privy to maintain their own prestige. Secrecy is valued as it is needed to prevent counterinsurgents from gaining intelligence on the activities of the insurgent cell. When a promotion occurs and a lower level insurgent combatant becomes a midlevel or senior commander, he must then reestablish all the various information networks of the previous commander. In this period, there is a clear loss of initiative and momentum at the local level of the insurgency. Furthermore, some midlevel insurgent commanders have refused leadership promotions out of fear of becoming a target for the US.⁷⁵ David Kilcullen has pointed out that the rapid, 24-hour cycle of

intelligence-driven strikes carried out by JSOC against midlevel insurgent targets rather than senior leadership achieved clear success. This is a key factor, as it is the mid-ranked commanders who carry out the operations of the insurgent groups, and thus this type of targeting is highly successful at dismantling and destroying insurgent and terrorist networks.⁷⁶

Airpower is also a key part of force-transformation relevancy in hybrid conflicts. The northern border regions of Pakistan have proved to be a very attractive area of operations for the insurgency.⁷⁷ However, the daunting geography of the Afghanistan–Pakistan (Af-Pak) borderlands poses considerable challenges for any counterinsurgent forces. The mountainous region provides the various insurgents networks with natural protection and cover where new fighters train for combat against coalition forces. The Taliban and AQ have formed personal relations with some of the tribal networks of the region.⁷⁸ In effect, Northern Pakistan is a safe haven and staging area for insurgents, and this was openly recognized by President Obama.⁷⁹

The Taliban and AQ have been using Northern Pakistan as a base of operations since spring of 2002. Initially, Pakistani security services attempted to crack down on AQ members in urban centers; however, those operating in rural areas were left alone. The Taliban have taken considerable advantage of the lack of Pakistani governmental control by establishing a *de facto* state in the region.⁸⁰ The Pakistani military lacks the capabilities and regional presence to engage in any sustained COIN operations in the northwestern part of the country. The territory is too vast and the insurgents too fierce. At times, thousands of Pakistani troops have been deployed and they have become bogged down fighting local militias, unable to deal adequately with the transnational insurgencies of the Taliban and AQ. The large number of Pakistani troops is necessary because they lack the technological sophistication and structural organization to engage in a light footprint approach in the northern parts of their country. Pakistani forces lack access to the sophisticated electronic sensors, UAVs, or even SOF personnel.⁸¹ Further, the insurgency has received direct and tacit support from members of the Pakistani security services, particularly from within its Inter-Services Intelligence agency.⁸²

Classical COIN theory points out that insurgents will favor international border areas if neighboring states are sympathetic to the insurgent cause. Furthermore, rugged and hard terrain filled with natural barriers such as mountain ranges also favor the insurgent.⁸³ Thus, from a theoretical

position, it would seem that the Afghan insurgency has considerable advantage over the US military given the environment of the Af-Pak borderlands. The borderlands are simply too large and too physically imposing to engage in traditional approaches to COIN. It is nearly impossible to block this Afghan border area with fences and fortifications. The workable alternative is to use a flexible airpower response, more specifically the use of UAVs, to disrupt any insurgent safe havens.⁸⁴

UAVs are primarily used to target insurgent leadership in decapitation strikes and for intelligence gathering.⁸⁵ In some ways, drones have allowed the United States to overcome the troubles with national borders and transnational insurgents. The Pakistani government would be strongly against the deployment of US ground forces on its sovereign territory. However, the use of drones is seen as less intrusive and not as politically inflammatory for Pakistani nationalists. Drones therefore prevent Pakistan from becoming a complete safe haven.⁸⁶ Some of the local tribal networks in the Af-Pak borderlands have been wary of assisting the insurgency out of fear of being targeted in a strike. Insurgents have been forced to abandon the use of key technologies, such as cell phones, because they will be tracked by US intelligence for a future strike. The new training camps AQ and insurgent groups had established in the borderlands have been dismantled by choice, as the insurgency is no longer able to train in the open. The safe haven no longer appears to be so safe. UAV strikes have also led to infighting amongst insurgents as some have been paranoid that other members have become informants for the US. Ultimately, the use of drones has at times reversed much of the momentum the insurgency generated in the borderlands and has forced them to take a passive rather than offensive posture.⁸⁷

Drone strikes against insurgent leadership produce multiple tangible results. The insurgency is placed in a position of chaos, due to the difficulty it has during leadership transitions. Strikes can also lead to a decrease in large-scale offensive actions, since the remaining members of the organization often go into hiding and their ability to coordinate operations becomes incredibly diminished. Most importantly, these strikes help to create a talent gap within the insurgency. For example, if a drone kills an insurgent network's most skilled bomb maker, the individual replacing him would likely be less efficient in that role, and so the overall operational effectiveness and professionalism is reduced.⁸⁸

The number of high-value AQ targets killed in Pakistan demonstrates the relevancy of precision strikes from drones.⁸⁹

Furthermore, the constant threat of drone strikes has taken a psychological toll on many insurgents. They fear meeting in large groups or even many public places such as mosques due to the possibility of being killed. In some cases, insurgents have abandoned sleeping in buildings, preferring the safety of the outdoors, assuming they are less of a target there.⁹⁰ Leadership vacancies caused by the strikes also lead to organizational infighting, as was the case in the Af-Pak borderlands in 2007. Following a series of targeted leadership strikes, infighting broke out between Taliban fighters in South Waziristan and AQ operatives from the group Islamic Movements of Uzbekistan. In this feud several hundred insurgents were killed. The leadership strikes helped exacerbate a growing divide between the groups over AQ's killing of local rivals, whereas the Taliban wish to remain focused on fighting the United States and its allies. Mullah Omar, who was the Taliban's central leader at the time, could have directly intervened in this dispute but decided to rely on intermediaries due to fear of being the target of a drone strike, and this noticeably delayed the process.⁹¹ Prior to his death, bin Laden, along with the rest of AQ's senior leadership, became considerably paranoid about being killed in a drone strike.⁹²

The continuous use of kinetic airpower does not follow the traditional COIN paradigm, which emphasizes direct engagement with the local civilians to create a physical and ideological separation between them and the insurgency. There has been much journalistic and academic research dedicated to the impact of drone strikes in northwestern Pakistan, where critics suggest that drone strikes cause the local civilians to support the insurgency due to the level of collateral casualties among civilians. Civilians reacting to the death of their kinsmen may be more susceptible to recruitment by insurgents who are able to use the aftermath of the strikes as a propaganda tool. These critics further assert that, if the United States loses the public opinion battle for local civilians, it will not be able to achieve victory since the insurgent groups rely on local civilians for material supplies and shelter.⁹³ Critics, including proponents of population-centric approaches to COIN such as David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum, essentially make the case that the collateral damage caused by drones might have overly negative consequences in terms of blowback, particularly within Pakistani territory.⁹⁴

However, much of this literature has to rely on questionable journalistic reports from the affected regions. In the wake of a drone strike, Taliban forces almost always secure the surrounding area, preventing any investigation in the immediate aftermath.⁹⁵ Even if you count every “unknown” or unidentified person killed by a drone strike as a civilian, the casualty rate is speculated to still be 4:1 in favor of insurgent deaths. When it comes to high-value targets, the gap is estimated to be even larger with a rate of 36:1. In the period 2004–2010, US drone strikes in northern Pakistan had a considerably lower civilian casualty rate than those of Pakistani ground forces during their offensive campaigns against the insurgents.⁹⁶

Part of the criticism directed at US drone strikes in the Af-Pak borderlands is that such actions run counter to orthodox COIN theory, which rests on the assumption that they turn local public opinion against the US war effort. However, this is at best a half truth. Polling data suggests that public opinion in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) regions of northern Pakistan tends to be against the US strikes because of the collateral damage associated with them. Yet the people in the region are still not overwhelmingly anti-American, as they view some of the insurgents with great suspicion, particularly AQ members who are mostly foreign-born fighters and thus lack any direct connection to the local area. The insurgents often inflict violence on civilians who refuse to support them, which in turn causes tensions.

It is very difficult to accurately measure northern Pakistani public opinion on the drone-strike issue. Although several polls have demonstrated the majority of people in the areas are against the strikes, there are some that tell a different story. Farhat Taj conducted interviews with people living in the FATA regions and observed that, “contrary to the wider public opinion in Pakistan, the people of FATA welcome the drone attacks and want the Americans to continue hitting the FATA-based militants with drones until they have been completely eliminated.”⁹⁷ Many people in these tribal areas actually prefer drones to more intrusive ground operations from the Pakistani army and feel they are more accurate and would cause less collateral damage than Pakistani air strikes.⁹⁸

Aqil Shah points out that public opinion surveys in Pakistan regarding the use of drones tend to disproportionately sample from areas that are largely unaffected by their use. Shah responded by conducting his own surveys from the regions with the highest levels of drone activity and talked to a wide variety of responders including tribal elders, lawyers,

students, and other local people. Shah discovered that the clear majority endorsed their use against the militants. Interestingly, this survey data also found that most responders felt that most of the civilians who are killed in these strikes are either collaborators or sympathisers to the insurgency.⁹⁹

The insurgency has been very active in developing a propaganda response to the strikes. Since insurgents lack the weaponry to counter US airstrikes, they must rely on propaganda to try and dissuade their use.¹⁰⁰ However, a study carried out by Megan Smith and James Walsh indicates that sustained drone strikes have not given the insurgency the ability to increase its propaganda effectiveness. Although the Taliban is an ethno-nationalist Pashtun organization, it has not been able to capture widespread public support among fellow Pashtuns, many of whom actually hold considerably negative opinions of it.¹⁰¹

From the start of the drone strike campaign in 2004, thousands of insurgents have been killed and AQ's regional presence has been devastated.¹⁰² The kinetic use of airpower, primarily via drone strikes, has been devastating on insurgent leadership. Drones have allowed the US military to overcome one of the major challenges posed by a rural insurgency, which is the ability to use international borderlands that have noticeably rugged terrain as a way to hide from counterinsurgents. Drones have allowed the United States to maintain constant and threatening presence in the borderlands without having to deploy hundreds of thousands of ground forces.

The relevancy of force transformation in Afghanistan is best demonstrated via the operational successes of SOF and airpower. Their precision allows the US to engage the enemy without fear of overly disrupting the lives of civilians; further, their use has allowed the United States to save considerable amounts of its own blood and treasure in the war. Combined, SOF and airpower have demonstrated the ability to degrade the capacity of the insurgency and proved particularly useful in defeating AQ. Even Gen David Petraeus has argued that SOF raiding, along with airstrikes, became an integral part of any COIN campaign.¹⁰³

Future Options for Hybrid Wars

Hybrid wars have come to categorize the majority of conflicts across the globe, and the debate over the relevancy of the RMA and force transformation is paramount to formulating a successful response to this phenomenon. The debate has considerable bearing on the future of US mili-

tary operations. Particularly, it will influence the size and commitment of future military interventions and can influence whether the US embraces or shies away from COIN in the future.

The United States has been at war in Afghanistan since 2001, so clearly force transformation has not provided a “silver bullet” for hybrid challenges. At the same time, this does not mean it lacks relevancy in this area. Although the expectations of the champions of the RMA and force transformation did not come to fruition, the criticisms and disinterest levelled against technocentrism within existing counterinsurgency theory are also unjustified. While the US experience in Afghanistan has clearly demonstrated that it is far easier to achieve victory in conventional combat than insurgency situations, the employment of SOF and airpower has allowed the military to target hybrid opponents with lethal precision and speed.

Due to the advanced training of SOF, they are able to prepare and engage multiple mission types within unique sociocultural environments. Their low profile allows SOF to operate without inflaming local populations via a large, intrusive presence, and their smaller-scale operations minimize chances for collateral damage. The sheer scale and speed of JSOC’s targeting campaign demonstrates they are an integral tool to eliminate not just senior leadership but also mid-level commanders of insurgent groups, thus severely degrading their operational capacity.

Airpower has also allowed the US to target insurgents with lethal efficiency. UAVs have allowed the United States to reduce the strategic effects of the insurgents’ safe haven in northern Pakistan. Their use has greatly degraded AQ’s regional presence and has embedded a destabilizing psychological sense of fear within the remaining insurgents. Airpower has also acted as a force multiplier, allowing the counterinsurgents to have a wide presence across the large and highly rural area of operations. US conventional aircraft engaging in close-air support missions have prevented a resurgent Taliban from holding territory or from being able to defeat the Afghan government’s forces in any large-scale battle.

With the 2016 election of Pres. Donald Trump, there is a window for a new era of the Afghan War. Some observers and even advisors in the White House are calling for the United States to send thousands more conventional boots on the ground to try to break up the stalemate that has characterized the conflict for the past several years.¹⁰⁴ The first thing the US must do to set a new course for the war is to articulate a clear and

actionable objective. In war, strategy is that which connects the political objective to military, economic, and diplomatic power to achieve desirable political consequences. Force essentially is just a means to an end and cannot be fully used to its potential without clear ends.¹⁰⁵

The new Trump administration's Afghan policy is centered on three core elements. The first is a minor troop increase, including more SOF personnel to help combat the insurgency and terrorist groups in the region. The administration has also loosened the ROE for the troops, to allow them to participate in more offensive-orientated operations.¹⁰⁶ Second, there is an indication that more pressure must be placed on Pakistan to deal with insurgents and terrorists operating within their territory. The third policy is to move away from nation building and refocus US forces on counterterrorism operations while searching for a long-term political settlement with the Taliban. The Trump administration has also decided to move from a timeline-oriented approach for the military's continued role in the war to a conditions-based one.¹⁰⁷

There are some promising features of this new Trump policy that may allow the light footprint to thrive. By narrowing the US war aim to a counterterrorism objective focused on the elimination of AQ and ISIS networks, while also removing the previous administration's restrictive ROE, the new policy helps to establish a situation in which the light footprint can be used to its fullest potential. The United States has the opportunity to use the light footprint's speed, precision, and firepower to target and destroy the remaining AQ and ISIS terrorist networks. Paired with this renewed counterterrorist campaign, the US can utilize the light footprint to also adopt a strategy of containment against the Taliban and Haqqani insurgent networks to keep them bottled up in northern Pakistan and the most southern regions of Afghanistan. Here, the US can utilize its technological advantages with airpower and SOF to prevent these insurgent networks from taking any major offensive actions against the Afghan central government while also maintaining a lower commitment in terms of its own forces. This containment strategy will not be able to decisively defeat these insurgent networks, but it will be able to deny them the ability to make any further territorial gains and allow for the US to manage the conflict in an acceptable way so that it can focus on its other counterterrorism objectives. By containing the insurgency, the US will be able to bypass the various internal challenges that are hindering state building in Afghanistan, which continues to be

beset with internal corruption. With the insurgent networks bottled up, the United States can then intensify its diplomatic influence on Pakistan to further pressure the insurgency towards accepting a negotiated settlement with the US and the Afghan government in Kabul.

As of 2017, the Taliban movement remains highly fractional and is largely suffering from a lack of cohesion and direction due to weak centralized leadership plagued by internal power struggles. Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada is the current primary leader of the movement, yet he is widely seen from within as being ineffective. This fragmentation within the movement has prevented the Taliban from capitalizing on some of its more successful combat achievements in 2016, as many subnetworks within the movement feel alienated from its leadership. Many within the Taliban have shown a deep dissatisfaction with the state of the movement and its position in the struggle for control of Afghanistan, and there is a growing sense that the conflict is losing a coherent sense of direction. Events such as the expulsion of Afghan refugees from northern Pakistan have placed further pressures on the movement. Now is the time to try to bypass the centralized Taliban leadership who wish to continue to obstruct the peace process and tap into the wider state of dissatisfaction within the movement.¹⁰⁸ The United States has no need to fight the Taliban forever; it is a regional actor that lacks any global ambitions. By reaching a negotiated settlement with a sizeable portion of the movement, the US can further concentrate on eliminating terrorist networks from the region.

As the United States continues to develop and implement its strategy for the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, defense planners should heed the lessons of the hybrid conflict in Afghanistan. A light footprint approach can allow the US to severely degrade the capacity of a terrorist group's ability to function. It can allow the US to counter these types of threats with reduced costs in a relatively nonintrusive manner for local civilians in a region wary of the large presence of conventional US troops. However, as the Afghan experience has shown, often such conflicts will take years and do not end cleanly. When the United States considers what to do next, it should be clear that existing capabilities are better suited for limited-scope counterterrorism campaigns rather than any new attempts at nation building or any other objective beyond the capacity of the military. **SSQ**

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Dr. James Fergusson and Dr. Andrea Charron for providing helpful feedback on earlier drafts of the article, as well as the University of Manitoba's Centre for Defence and Security Studies.

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4. The core idea behind "hybrid war" is that few conflicts are purely conventional or purely irregular in nature. Rather, many conflicts, including the war in Afghanistan, essentially blur the line between conventional combat, insurgency, terrorism, and criminal activity. There have been recent attempts to describe hybrid war as a new phenomenon often associated with the recent Russian involvement in the Ukraine (2014); however, the concept is not new and has been a common aspect of global conflict since ancient times. The only thing that is truly new in contemporary hybrid conflicts is that advances with information technology have added considerable importance to information operations.

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14. See Osinga, "Rise of Military Transformation."

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