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IRREGULAR WARFARE AND REVOLTS FROM THE MARGINS

Paul Rogers

Introduction

In a directive issued by the US Deputy Defense Secretary, Gordon England, at the end of November, the Pentagon has acknowledged that combating terrorism and guerrilla warfare is now to be given equal status in terms of military planning and doctrine as potential conflicts against conventional forces of opposing states. According to a news agency report (*Agence France Presse*, 4 December 2008), what is termed irregular warfare is now as strategically important as traditional warfare:

“Under the directive, irregular warfare is defined as encompassing counter-terrorism operations, guerrilla warfare, foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency and stability operations. It instructs the Defense Department to:

- Identify and prevent or defeat irregular threats from state and non-state actors,
- Extend US reach into denied areas and uncertain environments by operating with and through indigenous foreign forces,
- Train, advise and assist foreign security forces and partners,
- Support a foreign government or population threatened by irregular adversaries,
- Create a safe, secure environment in fragile states.”

According to AFP, Department of Defense officials acknowledge that this directive does little more than codify what has already evolved since the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent start of what was originally termed the “war on terror” but is now more commonly referred to as “the Long War against violent extremists”. Moreover, much of this is reminiscent of the Cold War era, especially in terms of direct US involvement in Vietnam and indirect involvement in numerous other conflicts, including Afghanistan in the 1980s and many Latin American countries over a 30-year period. The main difference is that the hand of Moscow was seen behind those earlier conflicts and there was therefore a consistency and perceived certainty about the situation. It was seen as part of a global struggle against communism, with a known and obvious enemy, even if often operating through surrogates.

After 9/11 there was a strong tendency in US security thinking to see all the manifestations of radical Islam as being part of a similar coherent entity, even to the extent of the “axis of evil” replacing the “evil empire”. This very much included al-Qaida which was itself seen as a clearly structured hierarchical movement under the leadership of Osama bin Laden supported by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri and aided by the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. Indeed, much of the conduct of the war on terror in the months that followed the termination of the Taliban regime was aimed at killing or capturing that leadership.

Seven years later, there is recognition that the al-Qaida movement is just one example of a much more complex and dispersed phenomenon. There is also recognition that the many manifestations of this phenomenon have at least one common operational feature – the ability to engage in asymmetric warfare – what is sometimes called the ability of the weak to take up arms against the strong. The recent Pentagon directive acknowledges this trend and seeks to place much more emphasis on countering it.

Whether it is going to be possible to succeed in such a task is very much open to question, and three different developments during November – in Afghanistan, India and Somalia – all point to the difficulties of applying military solutions to problems that may require much more fundamental approaches.

Afghanistan

The Obama administration appears likely to accept the strategy of the outgoing Bush administration to increase US forces in Afghanistan. Thus the existing intention to commit an additional combat brigade of around 4,000 troops in the next few months will be confirmed, and serious consideration will be given to a much more substantial reinforcement during 2009, involving at least 10,000 more troops. It is significant that the brigade that has already been committed will be deployed mainly to the greater Kabul region rather than the south-east of the country where the fighting is most intense. This is a reflection of the deteriorating security environment around Kabul and supports the view of many independent analysts that the situation in Afghanistan as a whole continues to deteriorate.

Within this overall problem, the most significant development of recent months has been the substantial increase in attacks on supply lines in Afghanistan itself and, much more significantly, across the border in Pakistan. Earlier briefings in this series have pointed to this (see *Multiple Conflicts and Old Thinking*, August 2008) but the effects have recently become far more serious. It is estimated that about 75% of the supplies for foreign forces in Afghanistan come through Pakistan, most of them shipped through the port of Karachi and then taken by road either through Peshawar and the Khyber Pass to Kabul and Bagram or through Quetta to Kandahar. The northern route, in particular, has been subject to frequent attacks on convoys and supply depots. In one of four recent examples, around 100 vehicles were destroyed in an assault on a depot close to Peshawar by over 200 paramilitaries who easily overwhelmed the small security force guarding the depot.

Of itself, the increased use of supply line attacks is a serious matter and is leading NATO to investigate new routes from the north-west. These will require cooperation from states such as Russia and this could prove problematic. The real significance, though, is the manner in which supply-line security through Pakistan has become so problematic. It is further evidence that the foreign forces in Afghanistan are facing a paramilitary opposition that has pin-pointed substantial vulnerabilities that would require either the solid cooperation of the Pakistani government or the stationing of foreign forces within Pakistan to guard the supply lines. The former is unlikely and the latter impossible in the current political climate in Pakistan.

Mumbai

Last month's assault on two luxury hotels, a restaurant, a hospital, a Jewish centre and a major railway terminal killed or injured nearly 500 people in Mumbai, attracted worldwide media coverage over a four-day period and has been described as India's 9/11. For the perpetrators and those behind them it served multiple purposes. Aside from the attention it gained, it raised tensions between India and Pakistan, making it likely that the Islamabad government would redeploy troops towards the Indian border and away from Islamist-controlled districts close to Afghanistan. It also caused real fear within India while targeting the tourist industry and Mumbai's international financial status, and was a source of dismay and anger in Israel.

Whatever its longer-term political impact in the sub-continent, the Mumbai attack was also important in the context of irregular warfare. There have been many multiple bomb attacks in recent years, including Madrid, London, Istanbul, Amman, Casablanca and others. There have also been many examples of groups of paramilitaries using light arms in organised attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

What distinguished the Mumbai assaults was the level of organisation, the quantities of armaments used, the willingness of all of the attackers to die and, most important of all, the manner in which they took over the two large hotels. The choice of tactics and weapons, and the use of large numbers of foreign hostages, meant that the Indian authorities had to rely on relatively small numbers of highly trained counter-terrorism special forces available to the government. It was for this reason that the attack was so protracted and therefore had an impact that was so much greater than the other serious incidents that have affected India

in recent years. As with the supply line vulnerabilities in Pakistan, this was another instance of the evolution of paramilitary tactics developing faster than the means to counter them.

Somalia

The third development in November was the focus on piracy off the north-east coast of Africa. Of around 10,000 commercial vessels transiting the Gulf of Aden in the first six months of this year, 71 were boarded, 12 were hijacked and 11 were fired upon. 190 crew members were taken hostage in these incidents and seven were killed. This was a substantial ongoing problem but attracted far more attention last month with the hijacking of the *Sirius Star*, a Saudi-owned oil tanker, following the earlier hijacking in September of a ship carrying armaments from Ukraine. The *Sirius Star* attack was notable not just for the size of the ship, carrying close to 400,000 tonnes of oil, but that it was boarded in just twenty minutes and was hundreds of miles offshore heading for South Africa not through the narrow straits into the Red Sea.

The response to the problem has included the deployment of naval forces from several countries, most recently with a coordinated European force being established at the end of November. The difficulties in countering this form of piracy are substantial, since the area subject to the attacks is over two million square nautical miles in extent. Furthermore, many of the attacks are undertaken by converted fishing boats. These may appear to be engaged legitimately in fishing yet can be transformed in an instant into attacking craft. The practice is to fire warning shots at the bridge of a ship, resulting usually in immediate surrender. Ships are then held for ransom – there are reported to be 14 ships and 260 crew currently held, and \$30 million has been believed to have been paid so far this year.

Modern-day piracy is not limited to Somalia and is prevalent on a much smaller scale off the shores of parts of Indonesia and some West African states. It is almost impossible to control through naval action as long as there are safe bases ashore, and this is what Somalia provides to an extent greater than anywhere else in the world and close to one of the most concentrated shipping routes.

The presence of Ethiopian troops backed by the United States, together with a small inter-African peace-keeping force, was intended to support and stabilise a weak interim government in Mogadishu, following the termination by the Ethiopians of the Islamic Courts government that was in power for barely six months in 2006. That movement brought a short period of relative stability to Mogadishu and parts of southern Somalia but was seen by the United States as an entirely unacceptable terrorist regime linked, however loosely, to the wider al-Qaida/Islamist movement.

Within much of Somalia it was welcomed for the relative stability that it brought, being less extreme in its imposition of order than, for example, the Taliban in late-1990s Afghanistan. After its fall in 2006, some of the more moderate groups within the Courts movement sought to work with elements of the interim government and the clan leaders that supported it. That government now controls little in the way of territory except parts of Mogadishu. The more moderate Courts Movement elements are now largely sidelined and more radical elements in the Shahab militia, are rapidly gaining control of much of southern Somalia and may well take over the capital in the coming months.

Throughout the last ten years, and especially since the fall of the Islamic Courts government, there has been little central control over the northern coast of Somalia. This has coincided with five trends:

- High levels of poverty and deprivation among coastal communities.
- Fishermen with considerable sea-going skills but facing competition for stocks from ocean-going trawlers from other countries.
- Ready availability of firearms including rocket-propelled grenades.
- Lucrative shipping routes.
- Interaction of organised criminal and paramilitary elements with the sea-faring abilities of the fishing communities.

Given these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that the problem of piracy can be fully brought under control without addressing the root economic and social problems in Somalia. The most likely outcome in the coming months is that the Shabab militia will gain control of much of the country. It is by no means clear that these more radical elements will make any attempt to control the piracy and, in any case, their gaining control of the country may result in US action against them leading to further insecurity.

Conclusion

While there may be a direct political relationship between the serious supply line problems in Afghanistan/Pakistan and the Mumbai attack, piracy from Somalia is far less connected in political terms. Where it is relevant is in being another and particularly potent example of developments in irregular warfare. What appears likely, and is evident in the new Pentagon directive cited above, is that these issues will continue to be seen primarily in terms of security problems that require military responses. The wider issue of developing a different security paradigm, drawing on such initiatives as Oxford Research Group's sustainable security analysis, is still in its early stages, but the those three manifestations of violence that have been so prominent during November are further indications of the importance of this work.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.
