



Department of International Relations

University of Karachi

Training Workshop on Strategic Studies

May 6-8, 2009

**The War on Terror and its Impact on
Military Strategies of States**

Ishtiaq Ahmad

Organized by Department of International Relations, University of Karachi in
collaboration with Hanns Seidel Foundation, Islamabad

Introduction

The War on Terror, as it has been waged since the terrorist events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, has had serious impact on military strategies of states. Given the distinctive nature of terrorism as a politically-motivated violence, especially its international character, traditional military strategies to wage inter-state warfare or fight intra-state conflict have lost much of their relevance. Yet counter-terrorism strategies employed by the United States and its allies to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have until recently been largely grounded in the traditional modes of war based on a reckless use of ground and air force, which is why the War on Terror has proved counter-productive: Instead of diminishing terrorism, it has fuelled terrorism. Pakistan Army faces a similar dilemma in combating Taliban-led terrorism in tribal areas. Given that, the military strategies employed by states to combat terrorism and accompanying wave of urban guerrilla warfare need to be readjusted in accordance with the changed nature of warfare resulting from the emergence of international terrorism. From prevention to pre-emption to counter-insurgency, and the adoption of a host of other counter-terrorism specific measures, military strategies of states must adapt to the radically transformed international security climate in the age of terror.

This paper attempts to address the following four questions: One, what qualitative changes has the emergence of terrorism brought in the nature of warfare? Two, why have the military strategies employed by states as part of the War on Terror proven counter-productive? Three, how can the military strategies of states be re-fashioned to wage an effective counter-terrorism campaign? Finally and more specifically, which traditional and new modes of counter-insurgency, counter-guerrilla campaigns are applicable to urban guerilla warfare that modern terrorism denotes in essence?

Terrorism's Distinctive Character

Even though boundaries between terrorism, guerrilla war and war are blurred in terms of the means employed and the targets sought, terrorism as one of these three forms of

politically-motivated acts of violence is peculiar: unlike soldiers and guerrillas, terrorists do not differentiate between the armed and the unarmed. Like guerrillas, terrorists plan their operations covertly, and if terrorists happen to adhere to a deviant form of religion, they are interested in maximum physical damage and the consequent optimal psychological impact on the targeted state and society. Terrorism may be a weapon of the weak, but if the ‘weak’ has high political ambitions, then a terrorist movement must aspire to become a guerrilla force just as a guerrilla organization’s aim was to make itself as powerful as the standing army of the state against whom it fought.

That is why the insurgent campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan’s tribal areas involve partly terrorist and partly guerrilla activities. Given that, if terrorism has brought an altogether new dimension in the nature of warfare, its corresponding linkage with guerrilla activity during ongoing insurgencies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan’s tribal areas—which constitute the hub of the War on Terror in recent years—has reinforced the need to adopt similar counter-insurgency strategies as were adopted traditionally to combat guerrilla struggles. Finally, terrorism’s assumption of an international character as a negative by-product of globalization necessitates that no state alone can combat the immediate or long-term threat emanating from it.

Consequently, the concepts and the theories of war as applied traditionally to inter-or intra-state conflicts, including wars between traditional armies of states, and local counter-guerrilla or counter-insurgent campaigns, need to be revised. The same is the case with the theory of deterrence, which aimed to create a strategic balance between potentially hostile pairs of nuclear-weapon states to prevent war between them. Nuclear possession does not deter terrorism, and the only relevance of terrorism to military strategy of a nuclear-equipped country is to prevent the acquisition of its nuclear assets by a terrorist organization.

Three developments constitute the backdrop to the emergence of modern terrorism. First, after the 1967 assassination of Che Guvera, the traditional rural-based guerrilla was replaced by urban guerilla war, as ideologues of guerrilla war like Carlos

Marighella argued to take the battle to the cities. When guerrilla war moved to urban settings, the killing of unarmed civilians was a natural outcome. Second, the humiliating defeat of Arab armies by Israeli forces in the 1967 war forced Palestinian resistance movement to opt for terrorism. Third, the Afghan and other Mujahideen, after defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan, adopted terrorism as a means to realize their political ambitions, ranging from capturing political power in Afghanistan, to liberating Kashmir from India and taking revenge from America. These developments occurring in the course of the last over 40 years have effectively set the stage for the current wave of international terrorism.

The question that arises is two-fold: first, if traditional military strategies of states are not as much applicable to manage domestic, regional and international security threats caused by a global wave of terrorism, then which new strategies should the states individually or collectively adopt to combat contemporary terrorism effectively? Second, is there anything in the conventional military strategies of states which is useful to counter the threat from terrorism, which knows no borders, whose causes may be located in one region and effects may be visible in another, whose victims are essentially the unarmed and perpetrators operate mostly in clandestine manner, and, above all, where insurgencies involve a mix of terrorist and guerrilla activities.

Given the peculiar nature of terrorist violence, especially its uniquely international character which the world has never experienced in terms of its intensity and impact, any military strategy of state or states based upon the use of conventional ground and air operations may only prove counter-productive. A successful counter-terrorism military strategy, therefore, has to incorporate much more than what a conventional military strategy to deal with inter-and intra-state conflict necessitated in the past. However, this does not mean that lessons learned from successful counter-insurgency campaigns in the past cannot be applied to combat current wave of terrorism, especially because terrorism today is part of an insurgent campaign involving a) target killings of unarmed civilians, b) guerrilla tactics employed specifically against security forces, and c) isolated incidents of actual combat between insurgents and security forces.

These three patterns of insurgent-terrorist violence are visible in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal regions.

Enters Asymmetrical Warfare

The War on Terror resembles a protracted asymmetrical warfare. As Lawrence Freedman wrote¹ in the aftermath of 9/11, the ideal type of a symmetrical war involves two belligerents of similar capabilities, with the outcome determined by the creation of a decisive advantage through superior training, tactical prowess, strategic imagination, technical innovation, and mobilization of national resources during the course of the war. Traditional military strategies of states, including those of great powers, were framed to wage symmetrical conventional and unconventional wars. In the post-Cold War, the United States, for instance, wanted to achieve invincibility for managing symmetrical conflicts through the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs. However, the rise of global terrorism changed the very nature of warfare, introducing an asymmetrical dimension the world has never seen before.

The ideal type of an asymmetrical war, according to Freedman,² is of two belligerents of quite different capabilities with the outcome determined by one side's superior ability to find counters to the capabilities of the other. In this case, the United States as the only remaining superpower in the post-Cold War, with superiority in every form of military capability, finds itself pitted against a non-state entity of limited means, an enemy able to find sanctuary by merging into a mountainous and inaccessible terrain for defensive purposes and possessing the ability to merge with global civil society to mount attacks against enemy assets, including in its homeland. The extremity of its weakness in conventional military terms is matched by the extremity of its dependence on terrorism.

¹ Lawrence Freedman, "The Third World War?," *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Winter 2001-2), p 64-6.

² *Ibid.*

Terrorism is an obvious tactic of the weak to be employed against the strong. Instead of taking on directly the military and police organizations responsible for protecting the states they wish to challenge, the weak seek to circumvent them by attacking the more vulnerable elements of civil society. This can cover a wide range of activities, from the assassination of senior political figures to indiscriminate assaults against civilians, with or without warning, to the sabotage of critical infrastructure. Unlike traditional armies, guerrilla groups and terrorists do not expect to hold territory. They need time more than space, for it is their ability to endure while mounting regular attacks that enables them to grow while the enemy is drained of patience and capability.

If there is a model for al-Qaeda's campaign, it is the old anarchist notion of the 'propaganda of the deed.' This notion justified acts of terrorism as a means of undermining the old order or the status-quo by demonstrating that those who claimed to be all-powerful were in fact vulnerable. Dramatic deeds would cause the ruling classes to lose their nerves while at the same time inspiring the masses. Part of this strategy assumed that the ruling classes would lash out to preserve their position. In the process, so the theory went, they would diminish themselves further. Every punitive act would open the eyes of the masses and feed their clamor for justice and an end to oppression. Given that, however unrealistic and non-pragmatic ambitions terrorist organization, be it al-Qaeda against America or Taliban against the state of Pakistan, may have, the grave security threat they respectively pose cannot be taken at face value. The conflict may be asymmetrical, but the presumably weaker side (the terrorist organization) in this conflict employs a tactic whose political value neutralizes the military superiority of the perceived stronger side (the state).

Pitfalls of the War on Terror

It is clear that the way the War on Terror has thus far been waged has proven counter-productive to the very aim for which this war began in the first place in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Its blowback or unintended consequence is visible primarily in the aggravating insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas. Instead of combating

terrorism, the War on Terror has fuelled terrorism. Instead of reducing clash between the Muslim world and the West, it has widened the perceptual gulf between people of the two regions. One of the principal implications of the War on Terror for military strategies of states emanates from the doctrine of Pre-emption, employed by the neo-conservative administration of George W Bush in changing the regime in Iraq.

The uniqueness of terrorism demands that strategies to combat it have to be unique. Since terrorists plan their spectacular events in secret, and since, at least in al-Qaeda's case, the scope of their ambitions also appears to be limitless, a great power military strategy can be expected to be guided by the notion of nipping the evil before the bud—meaning eliminating the threat before it materializes. Therefore, pre-emptive and preventive operations will always be a part of a successful military strategy. The problem is that if a great power adopts such a strategy, then other states or regional actors will also mimic it. For example, at least in rhetoric, India attempted to emulate American pre-emption in Iraq. Pre-emption in the guise of counter-terrorism poses the same challenge for state sovereignty, the core principal of modern state structure as it has evolved since the middle of the 17th century, as the yet-undetermined status of a terrorist, as different from a criminal and a soldier, for the international law which has taken an equal, if not less, time to evolve until present.

Adam Roberts argues³ that counter-terrorism military operations have characteristics that are far removed from the traditional inter-state armed conflicts and result from factors relating to the nature of the opposition. First, neither all terrorist activities, nor all anti-terrorist military operations, even when they have some international dimension, necessarily constitute armed conflict between states. Second, anti-terrorist operations may assume the form of actions by a government against forces operating within its own territory; or, more rarely, may be actions by opposition forces against a government perceived to be committing or supporting terrorist acts. In both cases, the conflict may have more the character of non-international armed conflict (that

³ Adam Roberts, "Counter-Terrorism, Armed Force and the Laws of War," *Survival*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 2002), pp. 11-12.

is, civil war) as distinct form of international war. Third, a basic principle of the laws of war is that attacks should be directed against the adversary's military forces, rather than against civilians. This principle, violated in terrorist attacks specifically directed against civilians, can be difficult to apply in anti-terrorist operations, because the terrorist movement may not be composed of defined military forces that are clearly distinguishable from civilians.

However, counter-terrorism campaign cannot be confused with anti-terrorist operations. The main problem in the War on Terror is that states waging it, be it the United States or Pakistan, have, thus far, preferred anti-terrorist operations over counter-terrorism missions. This is largely because military strategies and strategic thought have failed to evolve in accordance with the changed nature of warfare posed by the rise of international terrorism and its accompanying wave of urban guerrilla warfare. The consequent transformation in the international security climate requires a careful identification of the enemy, redefinition of threat perception, and articulation of a clear political goal. The military strategies adopted by states in the course of the War on Terror have displayed serious shortcoming in each respect. There has been confusion and ambiguity about who the enemy was, what level of threat it posed, and what the broader goal of the War on Terror was. It is only recently that a pragmatic assessment of the issues revolving around the identity of the enemy, the nature of terrorist threat and the political objective of the war has begun. For example, the US administration of President Barack Obama has limited the political objective of the war in Afghanistan to the defeat of al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies, rather than continuing with an ambiguous goal of waging a War on Terror against all ethno-religious local and foreign groups in the war-torn country, thereby precluding the possibility of reconciling with the moderate local insurgent groups, as was the case in Iraq.

Re-thinking Counter-Terrorism

If terrorists were soldiers, then the traditional employment of military instruments could be justified. If it was only the case of a guerrilla struggle, and if such struggle was

confined to one country alone, then waging a traditional counter-insurgency campaign would have been enough. The problem is that terrorists do not wear a uniform, and that they prefer attacking civilians rather than security personnel. An additional problem is that quite often the very forces committing terrorism simultaneously wage a non-terrorist, guerrilla-like insurgent campaign. The latter may be confined to a single country or a region, but given its close connection with cross-border or transnational terrorism, the traditional country-specific war against guerrilla insurgency is potentially ineffective. That is why the evolution of strategic thought during the course of the ongoing War on Terror seems to support a global counter-insurgency strategy as an effective counter-terrorism model, with, of course, some additional components specifically to combat terrorism. Some of the traditional counter-guerrilla operations, such as separating insurgents from the population, which may be sympathetic to their cause, are still applicable. However, given that terrorism essentially represents a grand shift of guerrilla war from rural to urban settings—with the insurgents using the available powerful means of communications as part of the age-old insurgent strategy of the ‘propaganda of the deed’—counter-insurgency operations require much more than what was practiced traditionally in defeating guerrilla campaigns in the Frontier.

Kevin Croke,⁴ Peter Canonico,⁵ James Forest⁶ and Robert Cassidy⁷, among others, have substantively discussed what the new counter-terrorism strategy and counter-insurgency campaign should entail. The scholarly discourse on the subject as it evolved in the last over eight years of the War on Terror, be it Western or non-Western, is somewhat similar and gradually moving towards a consensual position. As for the emerging Western scholarly approach on counter-terrorism, the principal arguments advanced by Croke and Canonico are worth-mentioning.

⁴ Kevin Croke, “Rethinking the War on Terrorism: The Lessons of Counterinsurgency Doctrine,” Policy Report (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, November 30, 2006).

⁵ Peter J. Canonico, *An Alternative Military Strategy for the War on Terrorism* (Monterey CA: Storming Media, 2004).

⁶ James J. F. Forest, *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency and Terrorism in the 21st Century: International Perspectives* (Boulder, Col: Praeger, 2007).

⁷ Robert M. Cassidy, *Counter-Insurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War* (Boulder, Col: Praeger, 2006).

Kevin outlines key tenets of counterinsurgency theory and how they apply to the US-led War on Terror. He suggests a three-pronged strategy. First, winning the hearts and minds: The most important task of counterinsurgency, he argues, is to separate insurgents from their base of popular support. For the war on terrorism, counterinsurgency theory suggests the following principles: a) use measured force. Unless it can be carefully targeted, use of conventional military power against non-state groups will backfire; b) hold the moral high ground. Abusive interrogation techniques or unlimited extralegal detention are counterproductive at the strategic level; c) support political reform. A patient, multilateral strategy of support for indigenous political reform is the best way to repair America's image in the Muslim world; and d) pay attention to soft power. The US also needs to use the neglected tools of soft power, such as economic aid, trade preferences, diplomatic leverage, public diplomacy, and the attractive power of American ideals.

The second leg of the counter-insurgency strategy proposed by Kevin pertains to targeting the enemy. He says intelligence is the key to target hardcore terrorists. For the purpose, the United States, according to him, must: a) Prioritize intelligence and police work. Day-to-day counterterrorism is mostly police and intelligence work, which means that continued intelligence reform is critical; b) build anti-terrorism coalitions. Breaking up terror plots requires the cooperation of foreign authorities, so good international working relationship must be a top priority; c) avoid civil liberties absolutism. The primacy of police and intelligence work means that Americans will have to make new tradeoffs between security and civil liberties; and d) invest in area and language knowledge. Counterinsurgents need to have an intimate knowledge of the language, culture, and history of the host population.

Third, Kevin argues that supporting reform must be an important element of a counter-insurgent, counter-terrorism military strategy. Counterinsurgency doctrine, according to him, stresses the need for reforms that undercut popular support for insurgency, including a) the promotion of political and economic modernization: The US needs to fight the root cause of extremism—the Middle East and South Asia are lagging

economic, political, and social development; b) divide the enemy: The US should seek opportunities to exploit internal divisions among jihadist groups; and c) help Europe integrate its Muslims: The susceptibility of some European Muslims to extremist ideology means that better integration policies are critical.

The global counter-insurgency model proposed by Peter Canonico to wage a successful US-led international campaign against terrorism has a lot in common with the counter-terrorism strategy suggested by Kevin, but it has some additional components. According to him, the current focus is on direct confrontation of the opponent and disruption of al-Qaeda's terrorist network. Instead, what is needed is to shift the emphasis of the international counter-terrorism campaign towards influencing the population and the international community. This, according to him, can be accomplished with three mutually supporting strategies for the campaign.

First, the adoption of a Short Range Strategy aimed at interdicting terrorist leadership and infrastructure. Such a strategy should entail basing direct action efforts on their strategic influence rather than tactical impact. Second, the realization of a mid-range strategy to create a global counter-terror network, which should include a) increased emphasis on non-technical methods of intelligence gathering, specifically human intelligence; b) increased emphasis on the primary al-Qaeda network's support base in the international community, the non-state actor; c) work through and with allies, especially Muslim governments and organizations; and d) continue to reinforce/expand state support for the counter-terrorism international coalition. Thirdly, the implementation of a long-range strategy addressing the underlying causes and waging a war of ideas. This important strategy should include a) Increased focus on the religious ideological support for the al-Qaeda network; b) globally focused influence operations; efforts to discredit al-Qaeda's legitimacy at its Islamic core; c) aggressively reinforce counter-terrorism coalition's messages of freedom, democracy, and tolerance; and d) international counter-terrorism coalition's strategies must retain a global emphasis and appeal.

Canonico concludes his study by saying that short and mid range strategies are designed to disrupt and control the terrorists. The long range strategy focuses on the core ideological support to the terrorists. As long as the population continues to provide support to the al-Qaeda network, there will continue to be a threat to the United States. To create an international environment inhospitable to terrorists and all those who support them, the United States must first address the underlying causes of the threat. Only then can the threat be diminished. All three strategies must be initiated simultaneously. The mid and long range strategies require time before any sign of effectiveness becomes evident. In the case of the war of ideas, results may be measured in generations rather than years. A mid or long range strategy does not mean that it is initiated in the mid or long term future. All three must be initiated immediately and prosecuted aggressively.

Concluding Remarks

Slowly but surely, a shift in the War on Terror from simplistic anti-terrorist strategy to holistic counter-terrorism strategy is visible. The language of the War on Terror has already started to change. Therefore, policies and strategies constructed on this language will also change, if not now but sooner than later. As the preceding discussion manifests, the critical discourse on the War on Terror reflects a scholarly consensus in the West and the rest that the principal reason why military strategies adopted by states threatened by terrorism have not worked is because they are still grounded in the use of force options suitable only to waging traditional inter-state conventional and non-conventional warfare, or fighting a guerilla insurgency facing a state. Insofar as an insurgency involving a mix of guerilla activity and terrorism or urban terrorism is concerned, the evolving critical scholarship treats the employment of military instrument as one important element of a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the population generating terrorist recruits or sympathies for terrorist causes—and much else. Militarily defeating insurgent-terrorist forces is identified as identified as only part of a wider security, political, economic and social counter-terrorism agenda, for which enhanced level of international cooperation at all levels is the primary requirement. The

uniqueness of terrorism, as compared to all other politically-motivated acts of violence, including war and guerilla warfare, means that strategies to combat terrorism will have to be equally unique.