The War against the Taliban: Tactical Operations and Strategic Moves

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ABSTRACT

Operation Enduring Freedom was hampered by a chronic shortage of attack helicopters available to ISAF forces in Afghanistan. Tactical operations into Taliban-held territory were launched even though close air support capable of dealing with "danger close" situations could not be assigned in advance. It led to significant ISAF casualties if the Taliban decided to fight back rather than withdraw. Departing from a Clausewitz-style, i.e. second-mover advantage, mixed-strategy equilibrium and taking account of the "Irregular Warfare" nature of the pay-offs, the paper looks into the existence of strategic moves. In particular, as playing a mixed strategy if rotary wing air support is unavailable merely incentivises a more aggressive Taliban response to any kind of operation due to the information asymmetry, it is argued that by moving away from the mixed-strategy equilibrium ISAF casualties in properly supported operations could be reduced, thus handing a first-mover advantage to ISAF.

Keywords: Asymmetric Information, Clausewitz, Counterinsurgency, Fog of War, Irregular Warfare, Strategic Moves

1. INTRODUCTION

The Afghanistan war exhibits two special features. First, it is exemplified not only as the most recent example of “Irregular Warfare”, or IW, but as the prime example for the kind of armed conflict the West has to expect in the 21st century. Whichever definition of IW one looks at, its paramount characteristic is a (strong) asymmetry of the opponents’ objective functions. In order to achieve overall, i.e. politically sustainable, victory, it no longer suffices to defeat the enemy army but other aspects such as culture, religion or the problem of dealing with less perfect Third World-style “democracies” in general have to be taken into account. In particular, IW today is about the – almost mantra-like – “winning the hearts and minds” of the civilian population, which becomes all the more difficult if that civilian population does not feel represented by its, i.e. the host country’s, government. Further, as on the one hand the political support in a parliamentary democracy for conducting a war in a faraway country dwindles with every body bag arriving home and, on the other hand, in order to neither unduly damage the position of the host nation’s government nor offend the host nation’s culture, the footprint left by the occupying army not only has to be limited in terms of size, but in terms of the duration of the campaign, too, time would be on the side of the insurgents as well.

DOI: 10.4018/IJSDS.2015070102
It is the second feature that gave rise to relying on so-called Forward Operating Bases, or FOBs. Their prime purpose has been two-fold: on the one hand, by their mere presence right in the middle of Taliban-controlled areas, they were supposed to reassure the civilian population that ISAF, by not just hiding within heavily fortified garrisons, was not only present but also willing to take on the Taliban in order to liberate in due time Afghan villages from the Taliban stranglehold; on the other hand they were a means to project power into Taliban-held territory by providing a (more or less) safe haven from which tactical operations could be launched on a routine basis.

To simplify matters, ISAF operations are assumed to be of two types only. Whatever the exact purpose of an operation, in an ideal world it should follow a pre-planned schedule. It would not suffice to rely on close air support to be delivered by fixed-wing aircraft alone. Insurgents would be at an advantage once it comes to “danger close” fighting because fixed-wing aircraft could no longer deliver close air support without endangering the lives of the very troops they are supposed to protect. They would thus have every incentive to attack at close quarters thus making ISAF forces’ casualties more likely. Attack helicopters should therefore be assigned in advance and made to wait on station. In reality, though, as, e.g. the experience from the Afghanistan war has shown, such helicopters may not always be available in sufficient numbers, and quite often they could only take to the air once troops in contact has been declared. The resulting delay implies that the troops on the ground would be without air support when it is mostly needed. An ISAF operation would thus either have attack helicopters assigned in advance, or, due to the lack of resources, it would not.

Once an operation has been launched, the Taliban would have to decide whether to hold the ground and to ambush-style fight ISAF forces, or to withdraw. At the moment they have to make up their mind, though, they would not know whether attack helicopters are waiting just over the horizon. The ISAF commander would of course know about the availability of attack helicopters. If they are available, he would launch the operation because this is what the scenario is all about. If they are not, he would have to decide whether to go on anyway or to refrain from launching the operation. He would not know, though, how the Taliban are going to react.

The situation is very much in line with the Clausewitzian conjecture that whoever knows about the decision taken by his opponent, or the options he has to be content with, would be expected to enjoy some kind of advantage. The Taliban would be happy to learn about the kind of air support available to ISAF in advance, but all they can do is to make an educated guess from their past experiences. Likewise the ISAF commander would be eager to know the Taliban tactics of the day.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the situation by modelling it as a game with asymmetric information. In particular, due to the “Irregular Warfare” nature of the situation, the availability of strategic moves is examined in order to establish whether such a situation would still be compatible with the conventional Clausewitzian paradigm, or if either side could enjoy some kind of first-mover advantage.

2. SCENARIOS AND EVALUATION

ISAF operations can be of two types: either sufficient close air support has been assigned in advance (CAS), or, due to the lack of resources, the operation has to be conducted without close air support (w/o CAS). On the other hand, the Taliban can choose between either trying to fight back and hold the ground (FIGHT) or withdrawing (W/DRAW). Hence, four possible scenarios, denoted clockwise by Roman numerals, can be identified as shown in Table 1.
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