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1

Introduction

Overview of the Border Regions of Eastern Afghanistan

The Afghan frontier remains a wild and colorful place, still tied more to what Kipling saw in the late nineteenth century than to the modern world. With the attacks of 9/11 and the resulting U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, America—and its NATO allies—found themselves engaged in a very foreign land, culturally complex, often violent, while at times strikingly hospitable. A kaleidoscope of issues—history, Islam, foreign influence, money, drugs, land, personalities, and arms—came together to make this engagement exceedingly complex. This made it difficult for foreigners to see any sort of "big picture" clearly. At the same time, the (re) entry of the outside world into a conservative, often closed, traditional society certainly was a shock to the Afghans, while being a source of hope as well.

The insurgency and counterinsurgency in eastern Afghanistan involved a complex range of players and factors. These include ethnic and tribal groups; Afghan, U.S., and Pakistani security organizations; and political and religious leaders. In turn, the nature of the insurgency varied from province to province, and even district to district. This book will examine in detail the various factors that influenced counterinsurgency (COIN) during this period. The next sections offer a general overview of the history, culture, and geography of the military zone covered by Regional Command-East (RC-East), with subsequent chapters focusing on particular topics.

History of Afghanistan since 1979: A Series of Wars

Viewed during the years immediately following the U.S.-led overthrow of the Taliban, Afghanistan had suffered a tremendous amount of physical damage, inflicted by twenty-five years of war on an already minimal infrastructure. Much of Kabul was ruined, highway bridges on the major routes out of town were destroyed, public services were minimal to non-existent, and the population was generally exhausted. This was the result of five periods of warfare with almost no intervening periods of peace. The first period was the Soviet invasion, when uprisings against the government, notably in Herat Province in western Afghanistan and in Konar Province in the east, were followed by the deployment of the Soviet 40th Army in December 1979. This war lasted ten years, reaching its height in 1985, when the Soviets made a final major push to win the war—while also devastating the countryside in a counterinsurgency strategy based on forced depopulation.[1] The results of this strategy can be seen to this day, not only in the Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan and Iran, but in destroyed irrigation systems, numerous minefields, and ruined villages.

The second period of warfare pitted the Communist regime of President Najibullah against the mujahedeen groups formed to fight the Soviets, ending in 1992 with the collapse of his regime. Following this was a period many Afghans remember as worse than the Soviet war: the fighting between the various mujahedeen factions. This civil war resulted in the destruction of much of Kabul, particularly West Kabul, areas of which remained in ruin in 2004. Partly in reaction to the resulting anarchy, a fourth period of fighting ensued, with the Pakistani-backed Taliban beginning operations in Kandahar Province in November 1994, and subsequently advancing to capture Herat and eventually Kabul. Finally, the fifth, period of war began with the U.S.-sponsored defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in late 2001.

Following the October 2001 invasion by the U.S.-led coalition, the nature of the conflict along the border changed and evolved. After clashing with Coalition forces—including a battle in the Shah-i-Kot area of Paktia province— al-Qaeda and much of the Taliban leadership fled into Pakistan. There followed a period during which local strongmen struggled for power, while the coalition

Map of Afghanistan and Surrounding Countries

Source: Central Intelligence Agency
Accessed: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/txu-oclc-309295540-afghanistan_pol_2008.jpg, *August 2012*

and Afghan government also acted to increase their control. After appearing largely defeated, the Taliban and associated insurgents intensified their operations in the border provinces beginning in the spring of 2005, mostly thorough an increased quantity and sophistication of improvised explosive devices (IED) strikes but also through coordinated attacks on patrols, indirect fire attacks on bases, propaganda campaigns, and attacks on pro-government and pro-coalition Afghans.

Geography of RC-East:

The area of eastern Afghanistan covered by RC-East, included 13 provinces, from Nuristan in the north to Paktika Province in the south, and northwest to Bamian Province, then west to Daikundi (later split off from RC-East) The city of Kabul was in its own military zone, and RC-East commands had limited activity in the province of Kabul during this time.

The climate ranges from intense winter cold and heavy snow in Nuristan and other highland areas to oppressive heat and humidity during the summer in Nangarhar and Khost. In RC-East ,temperatures range over the year from more than 20 degrees below Fahrenheit to 130 above. Many areas are nearly desert, although monsoons at times reach this far north, bringing rain to dry areas. These rains and the spring thaw often result in localized flooding, particularly given the deforestation in many areas.

The scarcity of water in many parts of RC-East is a fundamental factor. Average annual precipitation in Gardez is 8.6 inches, in Jalalabad 9.7 inches, and in Bamian only 5.5 inches [2] Irrigation sys-

Map of Regional Command East and Adjacent Pakistan

tems are key to agriculture, and determine where much of the rural population lives. Several rivers – the Konar, Kabul, and Khost rivers - have large volumes of water year-round. Other streams are intermittent or flow into salt pans, and many areas are covered in rock, sand and thick dust.

State and Social Disintegration

Although the physical damage resulting from the wars beginning in 1979 was what immediately struck any outsider, conversations between the author and Afghans from various social classes during the 2003-2008 period made it clear that the damage to society was even more extensive. First was the sheer number of people killed, with more than one million Afghan civilians losing their lives in the war against the Soviets[1] out of an estimated population of sixteen million in 1979.[4] Equally striking were the masses of refugees, with more than five million displaced,[5] mostly to Iran and Pakistan, but also to Europe, North America, and Australia.

More subtle damages were the cleavages within society, primarily along ethnic lines. In some areas, such as Khost Province in the east, deep divisions existed between those who sided with the Communist regime and those who fought with the mujahedeen. The Taliban years also left social rifts between those who fought with the Taliban and those (particularly in Tajik and Hazara areas) who opposed them. Adding to this is the fundamental disturbance to the tribal system, particularly in the Pashtun areas where it had been both a local government and a source of stability. On a larger scale, the last twenty-five years of Pakistani involvement in Afghan affairs had caused considerable resentment and suspicion on the part of Afghans.

Social Structure in RC-East

While the violence and dislocations of the last decades certainly had a strong impact on Afghanistan, the cultural constants that held the Afghans together still remained. Foremost was Islam, which reached every corner of society, and was an immensely strong influence at both the individual and community levels. The role of families was also very strong, along with kinship units. In Pashtun

areas the "Pashtunwali" cultural code remained, and provided strong behavioral norms and social frameworks.

These were tough people, physically resilient, often willing to use violence, and often courageous (a bravery it seems in part driven by social norms and expectations, but also perhaps by deep religious beliefs and the reality of short lifespans). Gender separation was often stark, particularly in rural areas, where women spend much of their time in family compounds. Rules governing women's behavior were often strict, especially in rural areas, and could be harshly enforced.

A significant percentage of the population had been displaced internally or externally by wars since 1979, adding another stress on this society, and many had spent time in nearby refugee camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) or near Peshawar. As the Pakistani government closed the camps across from RC-East during this period, thousands of refugees cross the border, often on short notice. While the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) and Coalition would scramble to respond, extended families and tribal networks often absorb these populations.

The series of wars beginning in 1979 had, by 2004, exhausted much of the population in the border areas, which was probably bordering on collective post-traumatic stress disorder. This fatigue presented opportunities to both sides—whoever could provide stability and an end to the violence had a chance to win popular support. Security was most people's highest priority—including protection from insurgents, thieves, militias, and enemy tribes, not to mention corrupt security forces. Economic prosperity—jobs and income—was a close second.

Ethnic Groups

The main ethnic groups in RC-East were Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Nuristanis, with some smaller groups including the Peshaei. Along the border areas, the Pashtuns were by far the largest group, with the Hazaras in the central highlands, the Nuristanis in the far northeastern part of the country and the Tajiks further north away from the border (see map). Some of these groups, particularly in the cities, were ethnically mixed, and often spoke more than one lan-

guage. The Kuchis, a mostly Pashtun nomadic group that migrated between Pakistan and Afghanistan looking for pasture for their animals, often caused friction with the settled populations. Where the lands of these ethnic groups met – particularly where Hazara and Pashtun groups came together —there were often tensions.

Tribes remained strong in some areas, particularly the Pashtun areas in Khost, Paktika, Paktia and Nangarhar. There were a bewildering array of tribes and sub-tribes with often contentious complex relations between themselves. Many of these border tribes claim swaths of territory on both sides of the frontier, and move across at will. In others areas tribal influence had waned, due to historical, social or cultural factors, or had never been strong to begin with. The world of the border tribes was changing rapidly, as improved roads, communications, and increased government involvement came to the area. Clearly, understanding the people was vital to winning the counterinsurgency and to developing sustainable political and economic institutions.

Generalized Ethnic Divisions within Regional Command East and Adjacent Pakistan

Afghans' View of Coalition Forces

The border populace was generally receptive to Coalition forces during this time. Afghans, to some extent, viewed these forces as a stabilizing presence that kept Afghans from fighting other Afghans, particularly at a tribal level. They also saw coalition forces —in the form of maneuver battalions or PRTs as distributors of projects and aid in areas where international organization (IO) or Government of Afghanistan (GOA) projects did not reach. Underlying this support was a deep concern that anarchy will return if Coalition forces were to leave.

Interestingly, many Afghans remembered the U.S. involvement in the jihad against the Soviets and saw the United States (and by extension U.S. troops) and Afghanistan as two countries bound together by war. At the same time, they viewed Americans as being religious people, as opposed to the (as viewed by Afghans) atheistic Soviets.

In contrast, most Afghans in the border areas—through all levels of society— viewed Pakistan as an enemy. They considered Pakistani involvement in the insurgency a clear and obvious fact, and remembered the recent Pakistani backing of the Taliban. They perceived coalition forces, through their presence, as deterring Pakistani meddling.

Islam in RC-East

Islam influences almost all facets of Afghan life and is a basic foundation of society. Even the smallest towns have mosques, and farmers in their fields stop for prayer wherever they may be standing. Historically, Islam has helped unify Afghanistan and the Afghans. Roughly 85 percent of the country is Sunni; the remainder is Shiite.[6] In RC-East, the Hazaras were the largest Shiite group; most of the remainder of the population was Sunni. Tolerance between the two groups as well as Hindus, was the pre-1979 norm. The traditional form of Islam in Afghanistan, while tremendously influential in society, is not particularly radical, although there was heavy social pressure to conform to norms—including the conversion of the Nuristanis to Islam in the 19th century. It also appears to have only minimal hierarchy within RC-East, instead having independent

local leaders. Although influences from the Deobandi school of the subcontinent, as well as Wahhabist and Salafist thought from the Arab world have made inroads, the traditional version remains predominant. Sufism is also practiced, and Sufi leaders such as Pir Gailani have both spiritual and political influence in border regions.

Increased Influence of Mullahs

The influence of mullahs and other religious leaders increased in recent decades in RC-East, according to many Afghans, some of whom described mullahs as previously being tolerated more than venerated. Magnus and Naby[7] explained the traditional role of the mullah as "a man who led the prayer, presented a sermon on Fridays especially, recited or read from the Koran, officiated at life-cycle services, adjudicated disputes, and taught boys how to read the Koran." By 2005 in –RC-East, there was a split in the ranks of the mullahs, with a minority supporting the Taliban and its ideology, and a more moderate majority supporting the Afghan government. This split resulted in violence, with attacks on and assassinations of moderate mullahs.

Economy and Development

Afghanistan was and is one of the poorest countries in the world—the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP's) 2004 report on Human Development Index noted that "Afghanistan's [2002] HDI value of 0.346 falls at the bottom of the list of low human development countries, just above Burundi, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sierra Leone."[8] Life expectancy in 2002 was just over 44 years, and national literacy rate was just above 28% (but only 14.1 percent for females), one of the lowest among developing countries. Adjusted per-capita GDP was only $822. Particularly in the rural areas of RC-East, the general lack of basic services and the meager gains from subsistence farming could be shocking to outsiders from developed countries. While these numbers improved by 2008, clearly this very low baseline was a challenge for development workers and counterinsurgency efforts.

Much of the population in RC-East is rural, subsisting on irrigated crops and livestock, while the towns support small shopkeepers

and limited light industry. Overall, poverty is endemic, and even the most well-off towns are far from wealthy.

At the national and international levels, the Interim-Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS and eventually the ANDS) and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund provided overarching frameworks. However, these plans were just being implemented during this period, and local Afghan officials as well as coalition officers were often not well informed about them. The "lead nation" concept was agreed to at the Tokyo donor's conference in 2002, designating individual nations with responsibility for a specific developmental area (for example the Italians were to lead on justice, and the Germans on the police). However, such designations generally did not translate to activity by these nations on the ground in RC-East.

General Overview of Government

The general structure of local governance had been established over previous decades, although the series of wars had caused already weak structures to deteriorate. In theory, the Afghan government is a strongly centralized system, with power mostly flowing from Kabul. In practice, the central government had limited influence in much of RC-East, due to lack of financial and human resources, corruption and inefficiency, and the inherent difficulty of governing the border regions and its people. Roles and responsibilities were defined in law, although in practice it was often ad hoc, driven by personality, and varied considerably between and within provinces. The relationship between the central government in Kabul and the provinces was not always clear and often depended on personal relationships.

At the top of the local political hierarchy were the provincial governments, headed by governors, appointed directly in Kabul for open-ended terms. Ministries' representatives for provinces reported to Kabul, and were not accountable to the governor. The district governors, also appointed, the only officials the majority of Afghans ever met, were on the bottom rung of governance. Municipal government was ill defined in many ways, covering both urban and rural areas of varying sizes. Elections in the fall of 2005

chose members of the provincial councils, as well as members of the *wolesi jirga* (the lower house); members of the *meshrano jirga* (upper house) were indirectly elected.

During this period, the Afghan Government at all levels—national, provincial, district, and municipal—was undergoing a slow and difficult process of reestablishing itself. Rebuilding (or building) government in the middle of an insurgency, with limited human and financial resources, was difficult, and tribes and communities often provided governance where the reach of the formal government did not extend. At least on paper, Afghanistan has one of the world's most centralized governments, which put control of development planning and funding in the ministries in Kabul. At the same time, the ministries were "stovepiped," with lines of authority extending directly to officials of that ministry in the provinces, often bypassing governors' or mayors' offices.

Pakistan's Influence on the Border Areas

RC-East shares a long border with Pakistan, mostly the North West Frontier Province (NWFP, later renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) along with a small border with Baluchistan in the south. The Federally Administered Tribal Area (within the NWFP) fronted much of this roughly 1500 kilometer shared border. Much of the actual border was the Durand Line, drawn by the British in the late 1800s and never accepted by the Afghan Government. This line effectively divided the Pashtun populations in both countries, although in many places, it was more a line on a map than a firm border dividing two countries, with people and goods flowing across with only limited regulation. The reality of a largely artificial border dividing the Pashtuns, coupled with closely related and linked insurgencies on both sides of the border, meant that events in Pakistan had a very direct impact on RC-East (see chapter 9 on the Afghan–Pakistan border for a more detailed discussion).

Meeting between U.S. soldiers and local Pashtun leaders to discuss development projects. Afghan interpreter to left, in black fleece jacket and hat. Paktika Province, winter of 2004.

Meeting with local men to discuss U.S. presence and development programs. Pesh Valley, Konar Province, 2004.

Irrigated fields and family compounds seen from the door of a helicopter. Khost Province.

Border between Khost Province, Afghanistan, and North Waziristan, Pakistan.

Houses and fields in Hazara area, Bamian Province, 2005.