



▲ **Back to Basics** A trainee from the 1st Battalion Afghanistan National Army gets his AK-47 cleared by a U.S. Army Special Forces soldier at the firing range after a squad live-fire training exercise in Kabul, Afghanistan. *U.S. Army photo.*

# STRATEGIC IMPLICATION:

**The use of unconventional coercion** Story by Major Mark G. Davis

Unconventional warfare, or UW, is one of the oldest methods of waging war, and throughout the ages it has contributed to both victory and defeat. History has shown that UW has often been the grain of sand that stopped the most powerful military machines.

In the Peninsular War (1808), Spanish guerrillas were a formidable foe to Napoleon's army. In 1812, Russian cossacks, masters of guerrilla warfare, or GW, helped cut the French Grand Army to pieces on its retreat from Moscow. American military history is also replete with examples of guerrilla and anti-guerrilla warfare from the time of the American Revolution through the Indian campaigns, the campaigns in the Philippines, and the Punitive Expedition into Mexico led by General Pershing. The Arabs

led by Colonel T.E. Lawrence during World War I gave the world a very good example of GW. During World War II, guerrilla forces were employed in France, Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Poland, the USSR, China, Burma, Malaya and the Philippines.

In most instances, guerrillas set the conditions for the introduction of conventional forces.<sup>1</sup> The aims of unconventional strategy were limited and designed mainly to divert enemy forces and materiel that would otherwise be available for other operations. Operation Enduring Freedom, or OEF, put a new face on the use of UW and guerrilla forces.

## UNIQUENESS OF OEF

OEF was a radical departure from past U.S. UW strategies in that SOF

and guerrilla forces, rather than setting conditions for the introduction of conventional forces, became the primary mechanism for attaining strategic objectives.

Many in the media, and a few within the military establishment (primarily the Air Force), have argued that OEF is different because of the extensive use of air power directed by special-operations forces, or SOF. No one can argue that air power and precision-guided munitions were not an important component in facilitating the collapse of the Taliban regime; however, they were not the first examples of such a strategy or method of employment — that strategy had been used in Vietnam.

In 1964, early in the Vietnam conflict, a covert organization was cre-

ated, code-named Military Assistance Command-Vietnam Studies and Observation Group, or MACV SOG. This organization was designed to deal with a variety of strategic and operational problems within Southeast Asia. MACV SOG was a joint-service, UW task force that performed a variety of covert missions. One of the most notable was designated OPLAN 35, or the Air Studies Branch, which was responsible for interdicting supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

OPLAN 35 extensively used South Vietnamese Montagnard fighters, SOF and air strikes to cripple the logistics of the Viet Cong — a strategy and employment of air power very similar to those techniques used throughout OEF.<sup>2</sup> Like OEF, OPLAN 35 offered policy-makers the prospect of a high political return with relatively low cost, operational flexibility and, in some circumstances, plausible deniability.

The compelling difference between the UW campaigns executed in the last 200 years and during OEF is primarily a function of strategy. When the Bush administration declared war on terrorism in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the obstacles seemed almost overwhelming. Because Afghanistan is a land-locked country with virtually no economic or governmental structures, conventional ideas of force projection, strategic attack and economic sanctions were limited. In light of these planning constraints, the best strategy for confronting the Taliban government and bringing Osama bin Laden to justice was the indirect approach of UW.

The mission given to the 5th Special Forces Group was straightforward: Conduct UW in the Afghanistan area of operations in order to overthrow the Taliban regime and destroy the terror network of Osama bin Laden.<sup>3</sup>

## **BATTLEFIELD EVIDENCE**

The type of forces employed during the early stages of OEF and the ultimate outcome of the campaign demonstrate that UW was the pri-

mary strategy of defeating the Taliban regime. On Oct. 19, 2001, an SF team dubbed Tiger 03 became the first grain of sand against the Taliban regime. The team's mission was simple, yet its strategic implications were immense. Tiger 03 linked up with a local Northern Alliance commander, General Baryoli, and assisted his war-fighting capability to allow his troops to go on the offensive, with the ultimate objective of capturing the city of Kunduz, which held the largest concentration of Taliban soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

On Nov. 14, less than a month after the team's infiltration into Afghanistan, the guerrilla force, supported by U.S. air power, commenced its attack on Kunduz. The operation ended on Nov. 29 with the surrender of Fazal, the commander of Taliban forces occupying the city of Kunduz.<sup>5</sup> Throughout Afghanistan, SF teams and their indigenous counterparts repeated this type of operation, and by Dec. 9, the overthrow of the Taliban regime was complete, and the terrorist forces of Mullah Mohammed Omar were in a strategic withdrawal.

In less than three months, the Taliban regime crumbled under the weight of a few hundred U.S. Soldiers, air power and roughly 20,000 indigenous fighters.<sup>6</sup> In the history of modern warfare, OEF may represent the greatest example of economy of force ever performed by a major power. The most significant aspect of the strategy used during OEF is that conventional ground forces were not considered part of the overall campaign plan and were introduced only after the collapse of the Taliban regime.

## **STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

The strategic importance of OEF extends well beyond the rugged mountains of Afghanistan and the current war on terrorism. OEF has provided the U.S. with a laboratory for experimentation in the art and science of UW, a capability that has atrophied in the U.S. military over the past 30 years. Because of a lack of interest in UW over the years, it

is not surprising that policy-makers and conventionally-minded strategists missed the strategic importance of SOF operations in Afghanistan. The combination of UW and precision munitions has demonstrated to potential adversaries that the U.S. possesses a credible coercive capability. The success of SOF in Afghanistan should strike fear into the hearts of potential state and nonstate actors and demonstrate that the U.S. will use UW as a defeat mechanism.

UW is a highly flexible politico-military option that provides strategists a wide range of coercive options from subversion and sabotage to surgical air strikes and GW. UW provides policy-makers a relatively low-cost means of dissuading, deterring or compelling an adversary in situations that would otherwise be impossible because of tenuous domestic, congressional or international support and in instances in which vital U.S. interests are not at stake, but action must nevertheless be taken.

Often in the contemporary operational environment, conventional methods of coercion, such as diplomacy, sanctions and traditional military intervention, are not sufficient to modify the behavior of adversaries who routinely threaten U.S. interests around the globe. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has increasingly found itself trying to coerce countries in impoverished regions of the world or even nonstate actors, often in situations where U.S. vital interests are not immediately at stake. Historically, such situational contexts have represented obstacles to conventional coercive mechanisms that, when used, have often complicated or worsened the strategic situation.

By definition, UW can be conducted unilaterally by SOF or in conjunction with indigenous or conventional military forces. The inherent flexibility of UW provides the U.S. with a scalable coercive capability that is far better at withstanding counter-coercion strategies, which are routinely em-

ployed by state and nonstate actors.

UW is a boots-on-the-ground strategy with three important psychological components that are absent in conventional coercive strategies.

First, unconventional coercion demonstrates commitment. In coercive diplomacy, nothing demonstrates commitment more than the introduction of ground forces. In the past, the U.S. has been hesitant to deploy conventional ground forces because of tenuous domestic support, friction within the international community or complicated geography on the ground. UW provides U.S. policy-makers with

conduct. On the other hand, by its nature, UW is a covert or clandestine activity that can be waged more ruthlessly than other methods of military activity.

In order to fully appreciate the dynamics of UW as a coercion strategy, three further advantages should be stressed. First, unconventional coercion provides a greater chance of achieving escalation dominance. Conventional coercion methods are inherently constrained by the overt nature in which they are designed and implemented. Conventional coercion is habitually constrained by restric-

attackers would be.

Unconventional coercion provides the U.S. with a mechanism for attacking the adversary militarily and by exploiting internal vulnerabilities. Militarily, unconventional coercion provides the U.S. the ability to covertly attack leadership, cronies and infrastructure without the publicity of overt operations, such as air strikes, which routinely lead to claims of collateral damage and ultimately weakens coercive action. Internally, unconventional coercion presents the adversary with a hostile indigenous population, which is a

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a low-visibility response option that demonstrates U.S. commitment in physical terms and gives indigenous forces a psychological boost that enhances recruitment and builds confidence in their cause.

Second, unconventional coercion provides legitimacy. UW is in part a grass-roots activity that has the dual purposes of assisting the indigenous population to create a more secure environment and of achieving U.S. strategic objectives. Additionally, UW blurs the hard-line image of U.S. imperialism because the activity is primarily conducted by disenfranchised segments of the enemy population.

Finally, unconventional coercion produces fear. Fear is a necessary component in coercion and a powerful ingredient in weakening resistance and modifying behavior. UW is a close-contact activity and is more effective in producing fear than sanctions, bombing or invasion.<sup>7</sup>

In today's sensitive political environment, the international community generally scrutinizes conventional coercion more closely; therefore, arbitrary limits are often placed on the types of military action that U.S. forces are able to

tive objectives, rules of engagement, coalitions and domestic politics. When all these factors are combined, the net result is a reduction in the ability to inflict costs and, at the same time, an increase in the adversary's capability to counter-coerce.

Unconventional coercion provides a much wider range of kinetic and nonkinetic attacks that includes disruption of the infrastructure, psychological operations, intelligence collection, target acquisition, direct action, subversion, sabotage and guerrilla warfare. Unconventional coercion can be conducted unilaterally or combined with conventional coercion strategies, such as air strikes or forced-entry operations.

The advantage of this strategy is simple: No matter where the adversary chooses to increase pressure, the U.S. has the ability to overwhelm its adversary in that area. Unconventional coercion decreases the political costs to the coercer and, at the same time, makes it more difficult for the adversary to escalate or counter-coerce. Additionally, because UW is a home-grown activity, the coercer is in a much better position to identify and attack regime pressure points than conventional

compelling threat to any regime. Unconventional coercion is by design a scalable politico-military activity and is therefore more capable of influencing elites or of attacking the political components of the adversary's regime, which are often more important targets than the adversary's combat power.

Finally, a nation that promotes and supports a successful resistance movement has a great political advantage in that region at the conclusion of hostilities, particularly if the movement is ultimately supported by the arrival of conventional forces.

Unconventional coercion should not be considered a silver bullet in resolving all forms of international disputes. Like other coercion strategies, it does have its limitations. First, unconventional coercion requires time. Policy-makers conducting unconventional coercion must understand that it will require a long-term political and military commitment and is not without the possibility of some U.S. casualties. Second, guerrillas existing and fighting under conditions of great hardship develop extreme attitudes and become very jealous of their prerogatives to determine the post-





▲ **DOWN RANGE** A U.S. Army Special Forces soldier checks a target to see how well a new recruit fired at the ANA firing range in Kabul, Afghanistan on May 18, 2002. U.S. Special Forces Soldiers are helping train and equip the new army. *U.S. Army photo by Kevin P. Bell.*

war complexion of the country. This may make it difficult or impossible to establish a moderate government in the liberated country. An extreme political faction that fights for a common cause against an enemy during war could become a powerful trained and armed adversary of its own government.

## CONCLUSION

The use of UW as a coercion in the current battlespace is a strategy that should not be allowed to languish. As seen in OEF and in the opening days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, skilled ARSOF Soldiers can become the primary mechanism for attaining strategic objectives. In the end, however, successful unconventional coercion will depend on the proper integration and application of the instruments of power, and more importantly, strategies that exploit the nuances of UW. **SW**

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Major General Alexander Ratcliffe, *Partisan Warfare: A Treatise based on Combat Experiences in the Balkans*, Historical Division, Headquarters U.S. Army, Europe, 1953. Document is now declassified.

<sup>2</sup> William Rosenau, *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets: Lessons from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War*. RAND, 2001, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Brigadier General John Mulholland, com-

mander, Task Force Dagger, telephone interview, October 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Master Sergeant John Bolduc, acting commander of an SF operational detachment, telephone interview, October 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Bolduc.

<sup>6</sup> Colonel Mark Rosengard, J3 Task Force Dagger, telephone interview, October 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Dane Grossman, *On Killing* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 98.

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