

The Washington Post

Petraeus rewrites the playbook in Afghanistan

By David Ignatius

Tuesday, October 19, 2010; A15

Gen. David Petraeus appears to be making a strategic pivot in Afghanistan, supplementing his primary mission as military commander with the "warrior-statesman" role he had in Iraq, where he was able to fuse the political and military elements of the campaign.

Petraeus has long been a proponent of the idea that wars in tribal societies are inevitably a mix of talk and shoot. He pounded the Sunni and Shiite insurgents in Iraq, and at the same time he opened new channels for them to find a path to accommodation with the U.S.-backed government.

The American commander is adopting something of the same two-sided approach in Kabul, four months into his job as the leader of NATO forces in Afghanistan. He is shooting more, increasing special-operations raids and bombings on Taliban commanders. But he is also talking more -- endorsing President Hamid Karzai's reconciliation talks with Taliban officials and guaranteeing their safety to and from Kabul as a confidence-building measure.

This is all out of the Petraeus playbook and an example of how he uses sometimes-eccentric emissaries to pass conciliatory messages, even as he steps up the tempo of attacks. In Baghdad, Petraeus maintained an unusual back-channel network of Arab aides who could pay midnight visits to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and others to woo them to agree privately to what they refused to acknowledge publicly. It's an approach well suited to societies where helping others save "face" is an essential aspect of dealmaking.

With Petraeus in the political-military driver's seat, he can steer a process to push the disparate Taliban groups toward a political settlement.

The diplomatic side of this game depends on Petraeus's ability to pound those who resist -- with devastating firepower. That's why he has been pushing Pakistan so hard to step up its operations against the Haqqani network, sheltered in the tribal areas of the northwest, and against the Quetta Shura Taliban fighters, who operate from Baluchistan in Pakistan's southwest.

Interestingly, as Petraeus pushes his talk/shoot offensive, we're hearing less about the counterinsurgency strategy that supposedly was his great contribution to military doctrine. Though Petraeus helped write the doctrine in 2006 while he was on a stateside tour as commander at Fort Leavenworth, it is a more basic approach than the wily strategy he has actually used both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Advertisement



Take the central counterinsurgency precept of "protect the population." Petraeus and his deputies are still pushing this "population-centric" approach in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, although senior military officials say it has had only limited success so far.

But the real action has been "enemy-centric" -- in stepped-up operations to capture or kill Taliban leaders, along with support for Karzai's attempt to cut a political deal with them. President Obama, having signed off in December on the counterinsurgency approach, is now watching his commander execute a strategy whose biggest successes have come from hard-nosed counterterrorist tactics -- the midnight raid, kick-down-the-door ferocity of the Joint Special Operations Command.

There's something about this mix -- a CT wolf in a CI sheep's clothing -- that again is characteristic of Petraeus's protean nature. According to one Special Forces operative, a recent review of operations Petraeus requested showed that 90 percent of the operational success in Afghanistan has come from 5 percent of the forces -- primarily those secret JSOC teams.

Petraeus's biggest challenge, from the first, has been the clock. His discomfort with Obama's July 2011 timetable for the beginning of the withdrawal of U.S. troops was obvious from the start. It wasn't the planned drawdown that seemed to worry Petraeus so much as the signal it would send to the Taliban -- and the way it might undercut his political-military strategy. What tribal enemy would bargain with a superpower that advertised its departure?

Petraeus and his advisers have come up with an ingenious finesse for the July 2011 time problem. He is urging NATO to focus at its summit meeting in Lisbon next month on Karzai's proposed 2014 timetable to transfer security to Afghan control. That has the welcome effect for Petraeus of adding three years to the clock -- and more credibility to his argument that the Taliban should get on board Karzai's reconciliation train.

The Obama administration's strategy, by its own account in a bleak report to Congress this month, hasn't been going very well. It's typical that Petraeus has been experimenting with another mix.

davidignatius@washpost.com

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies