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Tribalism and the Future of Conflict

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Ungoverned Territories, State Failure and the Emerging Tribal Front: Mapping the Sub- and Trans-State Contours of Tribalism and Laying the Micro-Foundations of a New Political Order

Human Terrain Mapping (HTM) presents an increasingly accepted solution for achieving victory in the Long War, enhancing security in regions deemed to be largely ungoverned or where state failure and regime collapse have left a political and security vacuum. Using HTM, warfighters as well as stabilization and reconstruction (S&R) teams are able to develop detailed, highly granular cultural knowledge to help focus the application of force and to customize S&R efforts in many parts of the world.

Interestingly, the most sparsely inhabited regions, whether barren desert, arctic tundra, high alpine, or lush tropical forest zones, are seldom truly ungoverned, but are in fact governed by sub-state structures that often lack formal sovereignty but which exert tremendous authority at the local and regional level. Many of these so-called “ungoverned territories” of concern to counterterrorism experts are in fact zones of tribal governance, populated by tribal remnants from the pre-modern world that continue to inhabit these isolated regions where the modern state has never fully penetrated, reflecting a continued underlying tribal topology of the world’s frontier regions.

In tribal zones, where formal state sovereignty never fully reached, borders tend to be porous, and sub-state and trans-state tribes, stateless nations, and minority cultures tend to predominate at the local and regional level. Politics in these zones can be complex, with inter-tribal rivalries and intense anti-colonial sentiment toward their central governments -- providing us with ingredients for micro-level alliances in the war on terror, similar to efforts in past American conflicts dating as far back as King Philip’s War and the French and Indian War, and culminating in the formation of the indigenous Hmong army during the

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Vietnam War that effectively constrained the projection of military power by NVA for many years. American military and diplomatic support for autonomy in Kurdistan and Kosovo built upon these earlier historical experiences during the immediate post-Cold War era, and in the current GWOT, our military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken on an increasing tribal dimension at the sub-state level as we work to restore order.

When engaged in military operations as well as S&R operations in these tribal zones, it is imperative to understand the detailed nuance of tribal identity, culture, and politics in order to comprehend these foundational building blocks of a new political order, and to develop pro-U.S. and generally pro-western allies around the world, whether as part of the GWOT or in future conflicts, such as with an increasingly powerful and confident China, whose southwestern frontier is one of the world's most complex ethnocultural regions, with minority populations like the Hmong, Naxi, Mosuo and Yi numbering in the hundreds of thousands and dominating contiguous territorial enclaves. As the U.S.-Hmong military alliance demonstrated during the Vietnam War, and as our current efforts forging new bonds with tribal entities in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, these efforts can spell the difference between victory and defeat, and between order and chaos.

Probing the Essence of 'Ungoverned Territories'

Recent works, such RAND's 2007 report, *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks* (by Angel Rabasa, Steven Boraz, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Theodore W. Karasik, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Kevin A. O'Brien, and John E. Peters), have probed the interior composition of "ungoverned territories." Rabasa's Fall 2007 RAND Review article, "New World Disorder: Different Types of Ungoverned Territories Warrant Different Responses," notes that "ungoverned territories have become more common since the end of the Cold War, ranging from the Pakistani-Afghan border to the Sulawesi-Mindanao arc, from East Africa to the North Caucasus to Central America," and that they "pose challenges to U.S. national security as breeding grounds for terrorism and criminal activities and as launching pads for attacks against the United States and Western interests."

Rabasa defines an "ungoverned territory" as "an area in which a state faces significant challenges in establishing control," whether "failed or failing states, poorly controlled land or maritime borders, or areas within otherwise viable states where the central government's authority does not extend." It has identified eight "presently ungoverned territories" that include: the Pakistani-Afghan border region, parts of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sulawesi-Mindanao arc straddling Indonesia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia, the East African corridor from Sudan and the Horn of Africa to Mozambique and Zimbabwe,

West Africa from Nigeria westward, the North Caucasus region of Russia, the Colombian-Venezuelan border, and the Guatemala-Chiapas (Mexico) border.”

We should add to these regions the ethnoculturally complex frontier region of southwestern China, including the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) as well as the ethnically complex provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, which abuts Southeast Asia; Burma, which is equally complex, and whose ruling junta has devolved considerable autonomy to the indigenous minority groups in order to end to numerous insurgencies and to restore order; Laos and Vietnam, whose large Hmong population, both historically and currently, presents a compelling trans-state opportunity to induce communist regime collapse; the Andean highlands including Bolivia and Peru, in addition the Colombia-Venezuela frontier; and the circumpolar Arctic region, where inter-tribal conflicts as well as continuing movements for tribal sovereignty present both a challenge and an opportunity for the advancement of U.S. interests into this resource-rich region.

Rabasa observes that “these territories are not devoid of governance, but the structures of authority that do exist are unrelated to the formal institutions of the state” – and recent work on the Arctic region verifies a complex, institutionally rich environment of sub-state, tribal governing structures that possess many elements of formal sovereignty, in the absence of full state penetration. Post-Saddam Iraq, and post-Taliban Afghanistan, present us with similar lessons.

The Tribal Front -- Beyond the Terror Threat

Rabasa considers several factors with regard to the risk of terror emanating from an ungoverned territory: adequacy of infrastructure and operational access, availability of income sources, favorable demographics, and the ability of terrorists to blend into the population, and thereby escape detection. But the challenge – and the opportunity – goes beyond the issue of terrorism. The underlying tribal topology of these “ungoverned territories” or tribal zones as I prefer to think of them presents numerous strategic opportunities for containing and/or rolling back communism (in China, Laos, and Vietnam), combating dictatorship and oligarchy (in Burma, Guatemala and southern Mexico; and the Andean highlands), and securing access to newly emergent natural resources (in the Arctic regions, Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, and much of South and Central Asia) The tribal front, while geographically dispersed and highly localized, will be a salient frontline in a global struggle against China once the GWOT comes to an end and the risks of Islamist terrorism, extremism and insurgency are effectively contained. Indeed, twice during this past year, unarmed Buddhist monks spontaneously rose up in opposition to their heavily armed authoritarian governments in both Burma and Tibetan China, suggesting the efficacy of a sub-state mapping of ethnic, tribal, and sectarian identity for

understanding potential faultlines for resistance to even the most brutal of regimes.

In their November 2005 statement to the House Armed Services Committee (“Force Planning for Ungoverned Regions and Failed States”), Hans Binnendijk and Stuart Johnson of the NDU’s Center for Technology and National Security Policy identified several elements of S&R operations that they believe “require greater emphasis,” and these include: the ability to interact with nonmilitary partners and build consensus; negotiating skills; and the understanding of historical/cultural contexts, all which can be enhanced through HTM. And, in his December 2005 LA Times article, “Navigating the ‘human terrain,’” Max Boot noted how at Quantico, “all incoming second lieutenants are instructed that, in the words of one PowerPoint slide, ‘Navigating Cultural and Human Terrain is just as important as navigating geographic terrain,’” and that “‘culture can be like a minefield’ if Marines are ignorant of the languages and customs of the places where they operate.” He argued that “if they understand ‘the human terrain,’ they will have ‘opportunities to leverage and exploit operational success.’”

And while “no one is under the illusion that the average gunnery sergeant will become as proficient at Pashtu as at disassembling an M-16,” Boot believes that “even a little knowledge can make life easier in the next hot spot.”

Into the Tribal Zone -- CCS and the Future of Conflict

The Program for Culture and Conflict Studies (CCS) at NPS is “premised on the belief that the United States must understand the cultures and societies of the world to effectively interact with local people,” and as such it is “dedicated to the study of anthropological, ethnographic, social, political, and economic data to inform U.S. policies at both the strategic and operational levels,” taking the lead in a “collaborative effort to provide current open source information to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), mission commanders, academics, and the general public.”

Going forward, CCS could broaden its geographical focus, to develop and disseminate detailed HTM data on not just Afghanistan and Iraq, but other current conflict zones as well as future arenas of conflict in the world’s tribal zones.

By shifting beyond the black-box of “ungoverned territories” and “failed states” to the more transparent concept of tribal zones, and by developing a detailed taxonomy of each zone’s ethno-cultural, historical, and political heritage, CCS can help arm future generations of warfighters and S&R teams with the knowledge they’ll need to successfully expand American interests by forging

order from chaos, and developing enduring bonds of friendship throughout all of the world's tribal zones.