

THE WAR ON TERROR

Lessons of the three major military operations

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Is there anything in common between the armed conflicts in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq? The answer is, practically everything is different: their history, their nature (internal or external), the composition of the conflicting parties and their goals, the legal basis, social and political consequences, etc. Yet, there are some points that permit us to compare these conflicts and even learn some vital lessons from them.

The military operations in Chechnya and Iraq (launched in 1999 and 2003, respectively) have not put an end to the resistance of local armed groups nor have they brought about social and political stability. Moreover, they have transformed the conflicts into protracted guerilla warfare; increasingly, this involves international terrorism and the escalation of terrorist methods. In contrast, the operation in Afghanistan (2001-2002) actually suppressed the armed opposition and created prerequisites for stabilization and the restoration of peace. Those efforts had all the chances for success, but for the U.S. campaign in Iraq which distracted resources from Afghanistan, undermined the authority of the United Nations, split the antiterrorist coalition and inspired the Taliban and al Qaeda to seek revenge.

LESSON ONE

When statesmen and politicians, sitting comfortably in their luxurious air-conditioned offices, decide to send young soldiers into the line of fire, in mud and blood, from where they may well return home crippled or in coffins, these statesmen and politicians must be absolutely sure that all the other means to solve the problem have been exhausted and that the military option is the last resort. This is their supreme moral duty.

This was the case with Afghanistan, when it had become unquestionable that al Qaeda was responsible for “Black September” and all attempts to get the Taliban to repudiate terrorists had failed. But it was very different in Chechnya and Iraq.

LESSON TWO

In cases like the aforementioned examples, maximum legitimacy, i.e. the legal basis, and clarity of a military operation’s purposes are of significant importance. Perhaps politicians, proficient in manipulating the law, do not need this. However, it is necessary for such operations to receive the support of public opinion inside the country going to war, as well as of the international community. Such support, serving as a strong political rear, would provide high

morale to soldiers going into combat and make them confident that their cause is right and they will not be treated as outcasts after coming back home.

This is also important because it helps regulate relations between troops and the local population, reducing inevitable frictions to the minimum. Finally, it is a major factor for undermining the morale of armed resistance.

The unanimously adopted resolution of the UN Security Council on the use of force in Afghanistan accomplished all these tasks. The Russian government did not introduce a state of emergency in Chechnya in either of the two military campaigns, although by law the armed forces were only to be used inside the country under a state of emergency. The use of force by the United States in Iraq was not based on a resolution of the UN Security Council, which alone is authorized to sanction any use of force, save cases of lawful self-defense (Article 51 of the UN Charter). Washington has never been able to prove any link between the regime of Saddam Hussein and terrorists – because there was no such link. Nor did Iraq possess weapons of mass destruction.

LESSON THREE

The strategy of fighting non-military groups (rebels, insurgents, guerrillas) is not a case of simply killing as many militants as possible, but depriving them in various ways of support amongst an overwhelming part of the peaceful population in the conflict zone. Otherwise, an indiscriminate use of force and harsh “preventive” measures against civilians would only cause them to side with the enemy, thus providing it with fresh forces.

A selective use of force, together with the effort to win over the local population, is the main way to win such wars. This method helped suppress the resistance of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan (prior to the beginning of the war in Iraq) quickly and with minimum losses. Ignoring this method or its ineffective use in Chechnya and Iraq has led to a blind course with constant upsurges in the horizontal (geographical) and vertical (in terms of violence scale) escalation of armed clashes and terrorist acts.

LESSON FOUR

This part considers the importance of relying on local forces. In Afghanistan, the forces of the Northern Alliance were organized, armed and trained within a record period of time. They bore the main burden of the ground fighting – the most difficult type of combat that may involve the greatest number of clashes with the local population. In Chechnya, Moscow decided to take everything upon itself. The result was dismal: over a decade the conflict developed into religious and ethnic enmity and a terrorist war without boundaries and moral limits. In Iraq, the U.S. army and its “coalition of the willing” also took everything upon themselves. At first they scored a brilliant military victory, but eventually became bogged down in an endless guerrilla and

terrorist conflict with an increasingly radical Islamic and nationalistic tinge.

Lesson Five

This lesson is related to the aspect of reliance on local forces. Until armed resistance is not suppressed, there should be no rush to form a local government just so the war burden may be shifted onto its shoulders. Whenever a government is involved in an armed conflict it is fully dependent on the outside armed forces, yet it does not control these forces at all. This is why it is not capable of gaining support of the larger part of the local population and therefore assuming a policy of restoring peace.

Moreover, a dependent regime will inevitably add to the division of society, even among the more moderate local circles, and will increase the influence of the radical opposition. Such a regime creates additional difficulties, since it attempts to pursue its own policy (often a repressive one), yet leaves it up to the army to address the consequences. The outside troops and law enforcement agencies must necessarily involve such a regime and its police into their operations and thus constantly run the risk of information leakage, treachery and being stabbed in the back. Furthermore, a newly established regime will impede, in every possible way, negotiations even with a moderate part of the armed opposition. This will only serve to aggravate the conflict and thwart any dialog.

LESSON SIX

If the conditions arise for forming a local government, this must be done not according to imported rules, but by taking into account local traditions and the level of society's social, political and economic development. It is better that this is initiated from the rank-and-file and representative bodies of power, rather than from higher levels of government, including the executive structures. There should also be no hurry to organize local armed forces, since the new authorities must coexist with the outside armed forces and law enforcement agencies.

In this respect, the policy pursued in Afghanistan was for the most part successful, whereas the operations in Chechnya and Iraq have been largely plagued by mistakes and failures.

LESSON SEVEN

This lesson concerns negotiations with terrorists. When speaking about more general negotiations which are aimed at achieving a peaceful settlement to terrorist-prone conflicts, such negotiations are necessary if armed opposition cannot be suppressed by force, and if the conflict tends to escalate. There are two criteria for choosing counterparts to the negotiation process: first, they must be individuals whose reputations have not been sullied by the organization or participation in terrorist acts, and second, they must enjoy support among the local population. Lastly, they must be able to control a large part of the militants in order to make them lay down arms on certain terms.

The main issue is not, of course, legal aspects (in this respect the conflicts in Chechnya, Iraq and Palestine are completely different), but rather the dynamics of an armed conflict with a clearly expressed terrorist coloring, together with the sensitive issue of negotiating with the enemy. When the involvement of one or another leader in terrorism or other crimes is not clear, the settlement of the negotiations issue requires enormous state will and political skill. In Afghanistan, a peaceful settlement following the military operation would have been impossible without negotiations and without the involvement in the process of Pushtu leaders, including those who were closely linked with the Taliban but who had not compromised themselves by collaborating with al Qaeda.

LESSON EIGHT

The eighth lesson seems to be purely technical, but in reality it is political. Without shutting off the boundaries of an armed conflict zone, operations against militants and terrorists are like drawing water with a sieve. If the boundaries are porous, guerrillas freely enter the area, delivering supplies and executing attacks, and then elude pursuit by escaping across the border. Once they are beyond the border, they are able to rest, reorganize and “exchange experiences.” Worst of all, open borders help militants, escaping retaliation, to put peaceful civilians under retaliatory strikes and thus cause them to join their ranks. This is one part of the political question concerning the border issue.

The closure of a conflict zone is not only a problem of resources, well-trained troops (e.g., frontier troops), equipment and legislation (for example, using frontier troops on Chechnya’s administrative borders requires amendments to the law *On the State Border of the Russian Federation*). It is also an issue concerning relations with adjacent countries, that is, a problem of establishing an antiterrorist coalition on the basis of the settlement of a wide range of disputes concerning interstate relations.

In Afghanistan, this concept worked. In Chechnya, all the administrative boundaries, except for the southern border with Georgia, remain open for the movement of the militants, while Russia’s relations with adjacent countries – Azerbaijan and especially Georgia – leave much to be desired. Together with the absence of a legal regime such as a state of emergency, Chechnya’s porous boundaries are the greatest obstacle to an effective policy against the unlawful armed units and terrorists. As far as Iraq is concerned, Washington was so confident of its military superiority that it did not bother to give consideration to such a “trifle” as the Iraqi borders. Moreover, neighboring Iran and Syria were included by Washington in the ‘axis of evil’ and were named as prospective targets for U.S. attacks. Thus, Iraq has become a veritable Mecca for terrorists from around the world, who come and go across open borders quite freely, thus

greatly reducing the effectiveness of the U.S. military and political efforts.

LESSON NINE

Before launching operations of this kind, it is important to give considerable thought to a postwar settlement. Such an approach justified itself in Afghanistan. The second Chechen campaign and, to an even greater extent, the U.S. invasion of Iraq demonstrated that it is possible to win a war and yet lose the peace; this fact makes a mockery of even the most brilliantly conceived military operations. Without a well-conceived and realistic plan for restoring peace (that includes reliance on the non-hostile local forces) it would not be prudent to start a war, whatever military superiority one possesses.

LESSON TEN

This concerns the new nature and role of terrorism in such conflicts. When a state really implements force against terrorism, the latter may be successfully suppressed (as was the case in Afghanistan before the reckless operation against Iraq was launched). However, if there were no terrorists in the area of conflict, and if the popular slogan of combating terrorism was simply employed as a means to achieve other purposes, then terrorism raised its head and entered the conflict zone just as an infection attacks an open wound.

A worse situation is when the banner of combating terrorism is used to achieve other goals (even quite good and lawful ones). This inevitably discredits the true strategy of countering terrorism, disunites the international antiterrorist coalition, undermines practical efforts in this field, and destroys the unity of society in individual countries.

In Chechnya, the original goal was not combating terrorism but putting an end to militant ethnic separatism – and a large-scale military campaign was not the best method for solving that problem (as the first catastrophic operation of 1994-1996 showed). In Iraq, the military operation was aimed at overthrowing the hated Saddam regime and obtaining access to Iraqi oil. In both cases, terrorism, as a secondary phenomenon, exploded in keeping with the law of a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy.’

Taking into account the global nature of terrorism, the war against it will be successful only if it is waged on a multilateral, international basis. To this end, countries must give up, once and for all, the practice of applying double standards: no goals, even the noblest ones, can justify terrorist methods. No rights of nations or religions can be recognized if terrorist outrages are committed in their name. No geopolitical or economic interests can justify any connivance at terrorism. It is not permissible to hunt for al Qaeda activists around the world and simultaneously provide political asylum to the leaders of Chechen militants. Or denounce Chechen terrorism and justify Palestinian or Iraqi terrorism. Or accuse Syria of assisting Palestinian terrorists and, at the

same time, shut one's eyes to Pakistan's connivance at the Talibs who have survived the operation in Afghanistan or at Kashmir terrorists.

The above ten lessons are applicable to most other regions with terrorist activities: Middle East, Central Asia, the rest of North Caucasus, South-East Asia and South Asia.

The civilized world has all the required resources and capabilities to successfully combat terrorism. Yet, it lacks the most important components: unity, mutual confidence, and a readiness to give up double standards and sacrifice secondary political and economic interests for the main common goal.

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