

## Why Night Raids in Afghanistan Should Continue

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The US and NATO forces should resist the demand by the recent Loya Jirga in Kabul to stop night raids as this has been one of the most effective



asymmetric counterinsurgency tactics since the war in Afghanistan began. Night raids are a highly sensitive issue in the conservative Afghan society, where the mere act of strangers entering a home and seeing women living inside is considered a grave offense. Afghan district and provincial leaders are under pressure from the Taliban, whose apparatchiks are riddled through the Afghanistan political system, because they are so successful. Yet, the West must not fall for an appeal to cultural or social sensitivities; a classic attempt to exploit our propensity for political correctness, even in times of war.

Night raids involve special force operations, led by Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams launching a surprise entrance

on a Taliban militant in the dead of night.



We have all seen the footage of the Navy Seal team bursting through Osama Bin Laden's compound in Pakistan; green night vision goggles and red-dot shooting out from their weapon of choice with a direct and concentrated amount of aggression that overwhelmed a stunned and surprised adversary.

The great Chinese warrior and philosopher, Sun Tzu wrote, *"if the enemy is superior in strength, evade him. If his forces are united, separate them. Attack him where he is unprepared. Appear where you are not expected."* US Army Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, who heads the coalition's Joint Command Special Operations Forces was right when he said that night raids allow US-NATO forces to put constant pressure across the entire insurgent network that we're going after.

Military success in Afghanistan is as much about exploiting an adversary's weaknesses while exploiting one's own strengths as it is about an overwhelming application of power and resources. This is what the Taliban and al-Qaeda have been doing to us for years. Now when the worm turns, they make political appeals to the Afghan leadership for this asymmetric tactic to stop.

The irony is that the dominant US standard of warfare gives its adversaries an incentive to differentiate, by adopting idiosyncratic

technologies (the Improvised Explosive Device – IED) or tactics (civilians as human shields). The US was differentiated from its Vietnamese opponents in level of resources available, level of military technology, type of warfare (conventional or guerrilla), and in perceived costs of conflict (the Vietnamese were willing to take much larger casualties than the US).

The ability to apply asymmetrical tactics depends as much on a mindset, as it does in how limited resources are utilised. Ahmed Rashid, author of the ‘Taliban’ and ‘Decent into Chaos’<sup>1</sup>, explains this well. Rashid suggests that the devastation and hardship of the Soviet invasion and the following civil war influenced Taliban ability to survive.



In my view the simplicity of life is a camouflage for their ability to prevail against asymmetrical threats – climate, environment, the terrain and technologically superior foreign forces. They don't study

asymmetrical warfare and have probably never read Sun Tzu, Clausewitz or ‘The Accidental Guerilla’. For the Taliban, their method of engagement and how they deploy resources is a fact of life - they just do it.

The Taliban also know how to appeal to the West's political and cultural sensitivities. It is as much about our societal psychology as our abundance of resources that is seen as a weakness by the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The fact is the greater the gap in relative power, the less resolute and more politically vulnerable strong actors are, and the more resolute and less politically vulnerable weak actors are. Big nations therefore lose small wars because frustrated publics (in democratic regimes) or countervailing elites (in authoritarian regimes) force a withdrawal short of military victory.

The post Afghanistan conflict environment, regardless of whether it is counter terrorism, counter radicalisation or stability operations, is going to require more simplistic driven resourcefulness than ever before. Night raids exactly fit this concept of small teams with a light footprint in sensitive environments. Again the Osama Bin Laden raid is a great example.

Michael Gross gives this notion a good shake that may make some feel uncomfortable in ‘Moral Dilemmas of Modern War: Torture, Assassination, and Blackmail in an Age of Asymmetric

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<sup>1</sup> Rashid, Ahmed. (2008) *Descent into Chaos: The world's most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books.

Conflict<sup>2</sup>. A person, a tribe and a nation has to be placed into a position to ask whether they still have the ticker for the fight. The Taliban and al-Qaeda have a sense of the effects their actions will achieve in the cultural and religious environment in which they operate. We often misread the cultural context of this movement and misjudge its ability to undermine Western psychological and moral dimensions. The Ismaili poem says; “*by one single warrior on foot, a king may be stricken with terror, though he own more than a hundred thousand horsemen.*” This was the fear and terror unleashed by the Assassins or Hashishins from the order of Nizari Ismailis, that existed from around 1090 across Syria and Persia<sup>3</sup>. The Assassins tactic is a simple but effective act that psychologically undermined a more powerful opponent at little cost.

US led strategy in Afghanistan has in some areas inflicted a simple, discriminate and psychologically effective tactic with the high rate of night-raids. Even though President Karzai continues to call for an end to night-raids, the US Commanding Generals in Afghanistan should be praised for resisting the pressure to stop the night raids. Karzai’s complaint should be seen for what it is, a political statement sent by the Taliban

who ironically oppose the political structure in Afghanistan.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

Loya Jirga image:

<http://www.polytechnic-kabul.org/Pictures/loyajirga.jpg>

ISAF night raid image:

[http://outlookafghanistan.net/assets/assets0911/Night\\_raids.jpg](http://outlookafghanistan.net/assets/assets0911/Night_raids.jpg)

Taliban fighter image:

[http://cdn1.beefco.com/files/poll-images/normal/taliban\\_664.jpg](http://cdn1.beefco.com/files/poll-images/normal/taliban_664.jpg)

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<sup>2</sup> Gross, Michael (2009) *Moral Dilemmas of Modern War: Torture, Assassination, and Blackmail in an Age of Asymmetric Conflict*. Cambridge University Press

<sup>3</sup> The Assassins cited in Belfield, Richard (2005) *Terminate with Extreme Prejudice*. Robinson Books.