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Info ops are prominent weapon in Afghanistan

Army's 'Asymmetric' War Advisers Unaffected By New Drawdown Plan

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An Army office of handpicked experts will continue to supply frontline troops in Afghanistan with advisers and tips on asymmetric warfare tactics as U.S. forces begin to leave the country in accordance with President's Obama's drawdown plan, according to a service official.

"The Asymmetric Warfare Group will continue to provide advisory assistance and solution-development to soldiers and combat leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan as long as U.S. forces remain," AWG Director Col. James Mis told Inside the Army. The group, which sends embeds to Afghanistan, understands its job is to provide "warrior-counselors" on the complex business of asymmetric warfare, according to Mis.

President Obama announced a plan on June 22 to remove 10,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2011 and 23,000 more by the end of next summer. "After this initial reduction, our troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead," Obama said.

The announcement follows an assessment by Gen. David Petraeus that security progress in the impoverished nation is noticeable but "fragile and reversible." Army Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command, has called the campaign by violent Taliban extremists a "rural insurgency."

The term "asymmetric warfare" gained prominence as military thinkers sought to describe a new reality on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, where relatively few and poorly equipped insurgents successfully attacked the hugely expensive American war apparatus.

Mis' group tries to keep up with the ever-changing tactics of violent groups in Afghanistan, for example by assisting commanders dismantle the networks of individuals involved in attacking Western forces with improvised explosive devices.

Part of the job description involves exposing the Achilles heel of those waging asymmetric war against the United States, Mis said in a June 20 interview. "We, too, can capitalize on the vulnerabilities that those enemies present to us," he said.

While "direct action" is part of U.S. forces' tactics in an asymmetric world, "non-lethal targeting" also has proven to be key to destroying enemy networks, according to Mis. The term refers to the employment of information operations to achieve certain objectives.

Officials in Afghanistan find themselves faced with insurgents' information campaigns aimed at controlling the local population and, consequently, ensuring freedom of movement in certain areas of the country, according to Lt. Col. Eric

McFadden, who is the AWG's concepts and integration squadron commander. Measures range from simple intimidation to social campaigns and education campaigns, McFadden said. "That is extremely challenging to work against, from our perspective."

One tactic is to formulate counterpoints to the insurgents' claims and then help local leaders and tribal elders "get the word out effectively to their constituents," Mis said.

Mis and McFadden described as successful a relatively new Army push toward making intelligence-analysis capability available to lower-echelon formations. "We've always known that intelligence drives operations," Mis said. "But usually where we see it . . . becoming effective is at the battalion level" because battalions have the requisite staff and infrastructure, he added.

The advent of company intelligence support teams, however, is giving formations at the tip of the spear a better sense about immediate threats and how to defeat them, according to McFadden. The teams bring with them improved connectivity to information networks. They also employ analytic capabilities -- like pattern analysis and time analysis -- crucial to presenting commanders with a "different perspective" of their areas of operations, he added.

Asked about what he would consider the greatest weapon for countering the threats of asymmetric warfare, Mis said "adaptive leadership is probably the most effective solution." McFadden offered a similar response, saying work remains in increasing the "flexibility of the mind." -- Sebastian Sprenger

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