

The Washington Post

At Afghan outpost, Marines gone rogue or leading the fight against counterinsurgency?

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, March 14, 2010; A01

DELARAM, AFGHANISTAN -- Home to a dozen truck stops and a few hundred family farms bounded by miles of foreboding desert, this hamlet in southwestern [Afghanistan](#) is far from a strategic priority for senior officers at the international military headquarters in Kabul. One calls Delaram, a day's drive from the nearest city, "the end of the Earth." Another deems the area "unrelated to our core mission" of defeating the Taliban by protecting Afghans in their cities and towns.

U.S. Marine commanders have a different view of the dusty, desolate landscape that surrounds Delaram. They see controlling this corner of remote Nimruz province as essential to promoting economic development and defending the more populated parts of southern Afghanistan.

The Marines are constructing a vast base on the outskirts of town that will have two airstrips, an advanced combat hospital, a post office, a large convenience store and rows of housing trailers stretching as far as the eye can see. By this summer, more than 3,000 Marines -- one-tenth of the additional troops authorized by President Obama in December -- will be based here.

With Obama's July 2011 deadline to begin reducing U.S. forces looming over the horizon, the Marines have opted to wage the war in their own way.

"If we're going to succeed here, we have to experiment and take risks," said Brig. Gen. Lawrence D. Nicholson, the top Marine commander in Afghanistan. "Just doing what everyone else is doing isn't going to cut it."

The Marines are pushing into previously ignored Taliban enclaves. They have set up a first-of-its-kind school to train police officers. They have brought in a Muslim chaplain to pray with local mullahs and deployed teams of female Marines to reach out to Afghan women.

The Marine approach -- creative, aggressive and, at times, unorthodox -- has won many admirers within the military. The Marine emphasis on patrolling by foot and interacting with the population, which has helped to turn former insurgent strongholds along the Helmand River valley into reasonably stable communities with thriving bazaars and functioning schools, is hailed as a model of how U.S. forces should implement counterinsurgency strategy.

But the Marines' methods, and their insistence that they be given a degree of autonomy not afforded to U.S. Army units, also have riled many up the chain of command in Kabul and Washington, prompting some to refer to their area of operations in the south as "Marineistan." They regard the expansion in Delaram and beyond as contrary to the population-centric approach embraced by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, and they are seeking to impose more control over the Marines.

The U.S. ambassador in Kabul, Karl W. Eikenberry, recently noted that the international security force in Afghanistan feels as if it comprises 42 nations instead of 41 because the Marines act so independently from other U.S. forces.

"We have better operational coherence with virtually all of our NATO allies than we have with the U.S. Marine Corps," said a senior Obama administration official involved in Afghanistan policy.

Some senior officials at the White House, at the Pentagon and in McChrystal's headquarters would rather have many of the 20,000 Marines who will be in Afghanistan by summer deploy around Kandahar, the country's second-largest city, to assist in a U.S. campaign to wrest the area from Taliban control instead of concentrating in neighboring Helmand province and points west. According to an analysis conducted by the National Security Council, fewer than 1 percent of the country's population lives in the Marine area of operations.

They question whether a large operation that began last month to flush the Taliban out of Marja, a poor farming community in central Helmand, is the best use of Marine resources. Although it has unfolded with fewer than expected casualties and helped to generate a perception of momentum in the U.S.-led military campaign, the mission probably will tie up two Marine battalions and hundreds of Afghan security forces until the summer.

"What the hell are we doing?" the senior official said. "Why aren't all 20,000 Marines in the population belts around Kandahar city right now? It's [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar's capital. If you want to stuff it to Mullah Omar, you make progress in Kandahar. If you want to communicate to the Taliban that there's no way they're returning, you show progress in Kandahar."

Marines support Marines

Until earlier this month, McChrystal lacked operational control over the Marines, which would have allowed him to move them to other parts of the country. That power rested with a three-star Marine general at the U.S. Central Command. He and other senior Marine commanders insisted that Marines in Afghanistan have a contiguous area of operations -- effectively precluding them from being split up and sent to Kandahar -- because they think it is essential the Marines are supported by Marine helicopters and logistics units, which are based in Helmand, instead of relying on the Army.

Concern about the arrangement reached the White House. In early March, Gen. David H. Petraeus, who heads the Central Command, issued an order giving McChrystal operational control of Marine forces in Afghanistan, according to senior defense officials. But the new authority vested in McChrystal -- the product of extensive negotiations among military lawyers -- still requires Central Command approval for any plan to disaggregate infantry units from air and logistics support, which will limit his ability to move them, the defense officials said.

"At the end of the day, not a lot has changed," said a Marine general, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, as did several other senior officers and officials, to address sensitive command issues. "There's still a caveat that prevents us from being cherry-picked."

The Marine demand to be supported by their own aviators and logisticians has roots in the World War II battles for Guadalcanal and Tarawa. Marines landing on the Pacific islands did not receive the support they had expected from Navy ships and aircraft. Since then, Marine commanders have insisted on deploying with their own aviation and supply units. They did so in Vietnam, and in [Iraq](#).

Despite the need to travel with an entourage, the Marines are willing to move fast. The commandant of the Corps, Gen. James T. Conway, offered to provide one-third of the forces Obama authorized in December, and to get them there quickly. Some arrived within weeks. By contrast, many of the Army units that comprise the new troop surge have yet to leave the United States.

"The Marines are a double-edged sword for McChrystal," one senior defense official said. "He got them fast, but he only gets to use them in one place."

Marine commanders note that they did not choose to go to Helmand -- they were asked to go there by McChrystal's predecessor, Gen. David D. McKiernan, because British forces in the area were unable to contain the intensifying insurgency. But once they arrived, they became determined to show they could rescue the place, in much the same way they helped to turn around Anbar province in Iraq.

They also became believers in Helmand's strategic importance. "You cannot fix Kandahar without fixing Helmand," Nicholson said. "The insurgency there draws support from the insurgency here."

'Mullahpalooza tour'

The Marine concentration in one part of the country -- as opposed to Army units, which are spread across Afghanistan -- has yielded a pride of place. As it did in Anbar, the Corps is sending some of its most talented young officers to Helmand.

The result has been a degree of experimentation and innovation unseen in most other parts of the country. Although they account for half of the Afghan population, women had been avoided by military forces, particularly in the conservative south, because it is regarded as taboo for women to interact with males with whom they are not related. In an effort to reach out to them, the Marines have established "female engagement teams."

Made up principally of female Marines who came to Afghanistan to work in support jobs, the teams accompany combat patrols and seek to sit down with women in villages. Working with female translators, team members answer questions, dispense medical assistance and identify reconstruction needs.

Master Sgt. Julia Watson said the effort has had one major unexpected consequence. "Men have really opened up after they see us helping their wives and sisters," she said.

The Marines have sought to jump into another void by establishing their own police academy at Camp Leatherneck in Helmand instead of waiting for the U.S. military's national training program to provide recruits. The Marines also are seeking to do something that the military has not been able to do on a national scale: reduce police corruption by accepting only recruits vouched for by tribal elders.

"This is a shame culture," said Terry Walker, a retired Marine drill instructor who helps run the academy. "If they know they are accountable to their elders, they will be less likely to misbehave."

Then there's what Marines call the "mullahpalooza tour." Although most U.S. military units have avoided direct engagement with religious leaders in Afghanistan, Nicholson has brought over Lt. Cmdr. Abuhena Saifulislam, one of only two imams in the U.S. Navy, to spend a month meeting --

and praying with -- local mullahs, reasoning that the failure to interact with them made it easier for them to be swayed by the Taliban.

At his first session with religious leaders in Helmand, the participants initially thought the clean-shaven Saifulislam was an impostor. Then he led the group in noontime prayers. By the end, everyone wanted to take a picture with him.

"The mullahs of Afghanistan are the core of society," he said. "Bypassing them is counterproductive."

Reviving a ghost town

In December, columns of Marine armored vehicles punched into the city of Now Zad in northern Helmand. Once the second-largest town in the province, it had been almost completely emptied of its residents over the past four years as insurgents mined the roads and buildings with hundreds of homemade bombs. Successive units of British and U.S. troops had been largely confined to a Fort Apache-like base in the town. Every time they ventured out, they'd be shot at or bombed.

To Nicholson and his commanders, reclaiming the town, which the Marines accomplished within a few weeks, has been a crucial step in demonstrating to Helmand residents that U.S. forces are committed to getting rid of the Taliban. To other military officials in Afghanistan, however, the mission seemed contrary to McChrystal's counterinsurgency strategy.

"If our focus is supposed to be protecting the population, why are we focusing on a ghost town?" said a senior officer at the NATO regional headquarters in Kandahar.

Nicholson notes that Helmand's governor supported the operation, as did many local tribal leaders. Hundreds of residents have returned in recent weeks, and at least 65 shops have reopened, according to Marine officers stationed in Now Zad.

"Protecting the population means allowing people to return to their homes," he said. "We've taken a grim, tough place, a place where there was no hope, and we've given it a future."

Nicholson now wants Marine units to push through miles of uninhabited desert to establish control of a crossing point for insurgents, drugs and weapons on the border with [Pakistan](#). And he wants to use the new base in Delaram to mount more operations in Nimruz, a part of far southwestern Afghanistan deemed so unimportant that it is one of the only provinces where there is no U.S. or NATO reconstruction team.

"This is a place where the enemy are moving in numbers," he said, referring to increased Taliban activity along a newly built highway that bisects the province. "We need to clean it up."

Nicholson contends that if his forces were kept only in key population centers in Helmand, insurgents would come right up to the gates of towns.

Other U.S. and NATO military officials say that what the Marines want to do makes sense only if there were not a greater demand for troops elsewhere. Because the Marines cannot easily be moved to Kandahar, U.S. and British military and diplomatic officials have begun discussions to expand the Marine footprint into more populous parts of Helmand with greater insurgent activity where British forces have been outmatched. That shift could occur as soon as this summer, when a Marine-run NATO regional headquarters is established in Helmand.

Until then, however, Marine commanders want to keep moving.

"The clock is ticking," Nicholson told members of an intelligence battalion that recently arrived in Afghanistan. "The drawdown will begin next year. We still have a lot to do -- and we don't have a lot of time to do it."

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

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 governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2010 The Washington Post Company