

# In ESSENCE

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## FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

### Undersea Terrorism

**THE SOURCE:** "A New Underwater Threat" by Wade F. Wilkenson, in *Proceedings*, Oct. 2008.

IN THE WESTERN LOWLANDS OF Colombia, where a labyrinth of rivers flow through rainforests and mangrove marshes teeming with exotic wildlife, drug smugglers are secretly constructing the next generation of naval craft—self-propelled semi-submersible (SPSS) vessels with a range of 1,500 miles and space for up to 15 metric tons of cargo. The SPSS is the new vessel of choice for drug traf-

fickers, says Captain Wade F. Wilkenson, a special assistant to the commander of the U.S. Southern Command, but more ominously, it poses a new danger to American national security.

Generally built of wood and fiberglass, the primitive submarines have a small conning tower with a wave-top view for steering. They ride low in the water, usually about four to six inches above the waves, almost totally submerged. Piping directs the diesel engine exhaust back toward the vessel's wake to

dilute its infrared signature. Global positioning systems allow crews to navigate without external communications, to avoid signal detection. Powerful diesel engines can maintain cruising speeds of more than eight knots, but the boats tend to move slowly to avoid leaving an easily discernible wake.

Constructed and manned at a cost of \$1 million to \$2 million each, five boats, fully loaded, can double the drug traffickers' return on investment in all five if just one of them makes it through, Wilkenson writes. A kilo of cocaine costs about \$1,800 in Colombia but fetches at least \$20,000 wholesale along the U.S. coast, where the drug runners usually rendezvous with dealers offshore. A four- or five-man crew—on board chiefly to offload



Nine out of 10 self-propelled semi-submersible vessels (shown above) escape detection as they ferry cocaine to American dealers.

## FOREIGN POLICY &amp; DEFENSE

## A Second Surge?

**THE SOURCES:** "How Should the U.S. Execute a Surge in Afghanistan?" by Robert A. Downey, Lee K. Grubbs, Brian J. Malloy, and Craig R. Wonson, in *Small Wars Journal*, Nov. 15, 2008, and "After Action Report: The Surge From General Petraeus's Perspective" by Dennis Steele, in *Army*, Dec. 2008.

A SURGE OF ABOUT 30,000 extra troops in 2007 finally allowed the United States to wrest the initiative from the enemy in Iraq after nearly four years of war. So what's the holdup in Afghanistan?

A shortage of troops and a vast porous border, write Lieutenant Colonel Robert A. Downey of the Air Force and Lee K. Grubbs of the Army,

A shortage of troops and a vast open border make Afghanistan a much more challenging theater than Iraq.

Commander Brian J. Malloy of the Navy, and Lieutenant Colonel Craig R. Wonson of the Marine Corps. Afghanistan is a "much more challenging" theater than Iraq. It is bigger, more populous, heavily rural, strongly tribal, and historically ungoverned from the center. It also has a 3,400-mile border across which insurgents slip like minnows through a wide mesh net.

About 42 million Pashtuns live in the broader Afghanistan-Pakistan region, some 14 million of them in Afghanistan. The Afghan Pashtuns act as the sea that buoys 10,000 to 15,000 insurgents of the Taliban, according to the authors. The Taliban

when they reach their destination—gets fresh air through snorkel tubes. There are bunks, but no sanitary facilities. The vessels are typically used for one-way missions, and can be almost instantly scuttled if a law enforcement vessel is spotted.

SPSS vessels accounted for only one percent of the maritime cocaine flow from South America to the United States in 2006, but were responsible for 16 percent a year later, and were on track to carry more than 30 percent in 2008. Only 10 percent of known or suspected SPSS shipments have been intercepted. The underwater detection systems that flagged Soviet submarines when they left their home ports during the Cold War have no counterpart off the coast of Colombia. And sonobuoys work at a distance of two to three miles, and only under very good conditions, Wilkenson says.

The current rate at which the vessels are intercepted is inadequate, he writes. Developing perfect intelligence on every shipment or complete imperviousness in the six-million-square-mile transit zone seems unlikely. But, coordinated with the Colombian navy and marines, interdiction efforts can focus on the 1,800 miles of territorial waters along the Colombian coast.

With November attacks on tourist hotels in Mumbai by seaborne killers raising new concerns about terrorist attacks by sea, the fight against the SPSS vessels off Colombia could have implications for America's security. Nobody expects a Colombian drug lord to launch an attack with weapons of mass destruction, but the SPSS technology might be used by enemies who would.

focuses on coercing or influencing the Pashtun population in the rural districts. In July it operated in 130 of Afghanistan's roughly 400 districts, and from June to August temporarily overran 41 of them, moving back and forth across the ambiguous and unsecured Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Army counterinsurgency doctrine calls for an "optimal density ratio" of about 20 troops to every 1,000 people, an impossible figure to achieve given Afghanistan's scattered population of about 32 million, even with augmented NATO and Afghan National Security Forces, Downey and colleagues acknowledge. What *would* be possible is a surge of eight brigades (to Iraq's five), adding 25,000 to 40,000 personnel. Three brigades would move into villages to clear them of Taliban and take up residence, using the same "clear-hold-build" strategy that has been employed in Iraq. Three brigades would operate along the border, and two would train Afghan security forces. Most of the surge forces would be shifted from Iraq.

Without a surge, the authors conclude, security will continue to deteriorate, the Taliban will assume control over much of the country, and political instability will reign.

In a speech in Washington after stepping down as commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, General David H. Petraeus said that the United States faces a "thinking, adapting, and diabolically brutal enemy" in both Iraq and Afghanistan that requires constant learning on U.S. forces' part. "By the way," he added, so fast and changeable is the enemy that "what worked in Iraq may not work in Afghanistan."