SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Myth of Hearts and Minds

Vegetius

Hearts and Minds is a wonderful name for a teen romance novel, but I've always thought it to be a poor name for a counterinsurgency concept. The idea of winning the hearts and minds of the population carries the connotation that there is somehow a magic formula that will turn the population from willing puppets of the insurgency into enthusiastic supporters of the national government. The reality is that the key to defeating an insurgency is in shaping the human terrain so that the host nation can conduct governance and economic development in conditions approaching normalcy.

In most insurgencies, the bulk of the population is sitting on the fence. Success for the insurgent is usually achieved when the majority of the population is actively supporting his cause. If this becomes the case, any foreign power supporting a counterinsurgency effort is in a great deal of trouble. When faced with this situation, the Romans would simply eliminate the population as they notably did in ending the Jewish Revolt in the First Century AD. This option is not likely to be adopted in either in Afghanistan or Iraq as we now call this type of solution "ethnic cleansing", which international tribunals generally frown upon. In Iraq, we were able to temporarily remove large segments of the population prior to the Second Battle of Fallujah in 2004, but that should be an option of last resort.

Shaping the human terrain has three stages, but before those can occur, the area in question needs to be secure enough that some form of human interaction with the population is possible. During the first phase, significant combat action may still be taking place in parts of the area of operations (doctrinally referred to as "battle space" today), but in subsequent phases, kinetic action should be on a steady decrease.

Iraq and Afghanistan are two examples of how a phased approach to counterinsurgency plays out. The first phase is generally characterized by the American or Coalition force element taking the lead with a small, sometimes nominal, host nation force in support. This phase is characterized by what the Marines like to call the "three block war". There may be peacekeeping required between tribes or sectarian factions as well as the need for humanitarian relief to those worst impacted by the conflict. Early in this phase there may still be the threat of significant combat action, although it should decrease as the threat is identified or eliminated. This is a phase where Americans, particularly Marines, seem to excel. These are societies that run on interpersonal relations. The ability to gain trust and mutual respect over the long term is critical in denying the enemy the use of the human terrain. Non-lethal terrain denial can consist of activities as simple as developing a network that gives tips when suspect individuals show up, or

a complex as building a needed school, clinic or other elements of infrastructure that the population wants and needs.

As the area becomes secure enough to bring in civilian advisors to assert local governance, development becomes more of the focus of effort, but the active support of the entire population is not critical. It is enough that we develop a cadre of supporters; if the rest of the population is warily neutral, that is OK. During this stage, the host nation security force should be growing and gaining confidence along with civilian governmental institutions; hopefully the mentoring process will include teaching respect for, and interaction with, the local population by the host nation security forces; this is particularly critical if such interaction has not been part of the culture in the past.

The second phase is the most critical in terms of long range success. This is the phase when the host nation force is in the lead with the foreign assistance force in support and still in a mentoring role. The handover of informant networks and the development of strong relationships between the local and provincial authorities and the security forces are absolutely critical. If local commanders are beginning to take an arbitrarily heavy handed approach, the opportunity for "teaching moments" with leadership or wholesale civil-military reeducation with troublesome units should be exploited. This is also the time when civil advisors can determine if the local and provincial governments are on a glide slope to reasonable responsiveness and transparency, or if they are sitting in their offices and attempting to rule by fiat. This is where leadership by example can help. Local leaders need to get out and view the progress of projects, inspect the delivery of essential services, and generally be seen by the population. The civilian advisor can use aid funding as both a carrot and a stick in this respect.

The third phase is potentially the most problematical. This is the transition period where the Host Nation assumes control of the area and the supporting foreign force is leaving. As the foreign element leaves, its leverage decreases both financially and in its ability threaten to withhold military capabilities from commanders who are doing the wrong thing.

In this phase, a single bad or ill-advised host nation commander can undo months of progress. This happened recently in Iraq when an inept new Iraqi Army brigade commander mucked up months of work by American forces and his predecessors in a six week wave of ineptitude in his battle space. That single setback won't likely impact the entire Iraqi effort, but it highlights how delicate the shaping of human terrain can be.

In the best of all possible worlds, the bulk of the citizens not associated with the hard core of the insurgency would be with the Host Nation government by the time foreign involvement ends, but this is the real world. Having a reasonably competent local government / security force team and a strong cadre of government supporters is acceptable, even if the rest of the population remains warily neutral. In most U.S. elections, the majority of the voting population does not vote, and governance somehow goes on. In counterinsurgencies, not being for us does not necessarily mean being against us.

The author is a government employee and a former infantryman.