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Needed: An Exorcism in Kandahar

Vegetius

It is said that President Obama is looking for a proof of concept for General McChrystal's proposed strategy in Afghanistan. Kandahar is probably an excellent place to start. According to [an article](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* by Michael Phillips, NATO forces will soon attempt to retake Kandahar from the Taliban who are in de facto control of Afghanistan's second city.

Kandahar is critical on a number of levels. Most importantly, it is the heart of the Pashtu dominated portion of Afghanistan; the Pashtu led Taliban movement was born there. Second, Kandahar sits at a key crossroads on the ancient Silk Road between the west and Asia; it is strategically vital to control of Afghanistan. The Afghan government never lost Kandahar in a military sense, but the Taliban dominates its soul; its shadow government dispenses a rough form of governance and justice that competes favorably with the warlord dominated kleptocracy that pretends to run the city.

A few hundred American and Canadian trainers are allowed to be billeted in the city by the Taliban because they pose no real threat and chasing them out would bring unwanted attention to the cadres of the Taliban who are the real rulers of the city.

If the Phillips article is correct, the first phase of NATO plan for wresting control of the city from Taliban domination is sound. The coalition commander will attempt to isolate it and control all traffic in and out. This is a good strategy for laying siege to any city in conventional or irregular warfare. Where the plan breaks down is in its second phase.

According to the *Journal*, the British commander in the area plans on using Afghan troops to secure the city itself. This is a very bad idea; if the Afghan security forces could control the city in the first place, we would not be going to all this trouble taking it back. In applying the "let's give the Afghans a win so they can feel good about themselves" approach, we are repeating the same mistakes that we made in the urban areas of Iraq in 2004-5 when we pushed the unprepared Iraqi Army and police too far too fast.

The real battle for Kandahar will not be for its urban terrain, but rather for its soul. Unless we can truly clear and hold the warren of neighborhoods that make up Kandahar's lifeblood, we will never have a chance to grow and mentor a local government and security force that can compete favorably with The Taliban. The Taliban offer very little that is positive, but they are light years ahead of the corrupt thugs that have represented the Kabul government to date. That "build" function of the clear, hold, build approach that McChrystal wants to introduce cannot be done

without savvy American or dependable coalition troops who are veterans. Afghanistan is not Iraq, but some elements of counterinsurgency theory are immutable.

Clearing and Holding; Swimming in the Sea of the People

Clearing Kandahar will not be hard. The Taliban know that they cannot win a stand up urban fight and won't try if they are facing real soldiers. Holding what we win will be another matter. As in Baghdad and Samara in Iraq, we must be prepared to establish neighborhood joint security stations in which American soldiers and trainers can mentor their Afghan Army and National Police partners in the skills of both urban patrolling and community policing. They need to become part of the landscape and learn to know the neighborhoods as well as the residents.

Where possible these forces should be Pashtu. This needs to be a family feud, and our group of cousins from the extended Pashtu family need to be able to outfight and outthink the Taliban. We won't need Iraqi-style T-walls to keep the population from each others' throats; the city is overwhelmingly Pashtu.

As the Afghan security forces are trained and professionalized, we can push them to the lead as we did in Iraq, and eventually phase ourselves out. However, unlike Iraq, we should do this transition one neighborhood at a time, not city-wide on some fixed timetable.

The Build Phase- Avoiding Some Iraq Mistakes and Learning from Successes

If the Phillips article is correct, the planners of the Kandahar campaign are going to do one thing right in the build phase. Rather than create alien local democratic councils in the American image, they plan on building upon existing neighborhood councils that are tribal in nature. By using these as a foundation, they will save valuable time and frustration that would otherwise be expended in overlaying an artificial governance edifice on top of something that already exists and probably works in its own fashion. These are the people who know what services the locals will want and how best to deliver them.

Dwellers in cities everywhere need three things aside from the security needed to go about their daily business without fear. Reasonably clean water, electricity, and basic sanitation/medical services are a must. If the government can show a constant improvement in these functions, it can win the trust and confidence of the population. This was done in North-West Baghdad by creating a series of neighborhood Public Works Sub Stations in the mean streets of Mansour. Unlike the mindless centralized public service bureaucracies that characterize most large cities, these local stations, collocated with Joint Security Stations were designed to provide responsible and accountable services at the local level. They became rallying points for local pride and rebuilding. Such facilities can be expanded to include medical services and vocational training facilities if those things are needed.

A ground up approach to governance in Kandahar will be easier than cleaning up the cesspool that is the national government in Kabul, because it can be done on a local scale. We can start by retaining those existing officials that seem competent and recruiting young Pashtu into the local civil service who show aptitude and willingness. We have a strong cadre of veteran city

management advisors from Iraq who can help teach and mentor the “young Turks” in the Kandahar civil service.

A word of caution is in order here. This new urban management team in Kandahar cannot be diverse; it had better be largely Pashtu if it is to work, and it had better be heavily male. Afghanistan is mentally several centuries removed from the caring-sharing values so beloved by American human resources people.

If the Obama administration wants to win what is now its war, Kandahar is a good laboratory. Kandahar does not need a battle; it needs an exorcism. If America and her allies can win the souls of that troubled city, they can win anywhere.

The author is a government employee who is a former infantryman.

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