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A District Approach in Afghanistan?

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Introduction

As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' one-year timeline to make progress in Afghanistan approaches, the U.S. and the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) still struggle to accomplish President Obama's goals in the region.¹ I suggest that the current top down approach employed by U.S. and ISAF forces requires a corresponding and simultaneous application of a bottom-up approach to maximize operational effects.

Operational experience gained from four deployments and three combat tours to Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) (2004-2008) and thesis research conducted on Afghanistan at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) inspired my hypothesis that the district level is the center of gravity for counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan. My recent attendance and participation in the Small Wars Foundation's Tribal Engagement Workshop (TEW) served to reinforce this hypothesis.

A small group of active duty Army Special Forces officers, other Army officers, Marine Corps officers, academics, former military officers, and members of various Washington D.C. think tanks comprised the TEW. Working groups broke out to focus separately on tactical, operational, and strategic issues. Each of the three groups addressed the following topics:

- Evaluate the value and feasibility of a tribal engagement approach in Afghanistan.
- Assess what secondary effects adoption of a tribal engagement approach would have on the political and military situation.
- Identify the operational components of a tribal engagement approach in Afghanistan.²

Each group shared their findings at the conclusion of the forum. I was shocked to discover that each of the three groups, with little or no collaboration, determined the district level to be the center of gravity in Afghanistan. Each group developed a district approach concept when identifying operational components of a tribal engagement approach in Afghanistan.

¹ President Obama's goals in Afghanistan can be referenced at: President Barack Obama, "White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan," *A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*, March 27, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov> (accessed April 1, 2009).

² Dilegge, David, "SWF/SWJ Looking for Some Experience and Expertise," *Small Wars Journal*, March 9, 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/03/swfswj-looking-for-some-experi/> (accessed March 25, 2010).

The findings correspond with my hypothesis, that in Afghanistan a bottom-up approach incorporating foreign internal defense (FID), and COIN operations focused at the district level, may effectively deny insurgents³ sanctuary, critical resources, and serve to isolate and separate insurgents from the population. In order to illustrate why it is important for the U.S. and international community to recognize Afghan traditional governance at the local level in order to spread influence from the bottom-up, this paper:

- Compares and contrasts a top-down and a bottom-up mission focus in Afghanistan.
- Examines factors that may facilitate the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) endorsement, and the feasibility of a district approach.
- Recommends four lines of operation for military units assigned to a district.

A Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Focus

Acknowledging the importance of employing a balanced approach in the distribution of limited resources to each level of the Afghan government, it is important to understand the difference between a top-down and a bottom-up strategy as it pertains to Afghanistan. Outside of the urban centers of Kabul and Kandahar, Afghanistan is composed of somewhat semi-autonomous communities or "village states," managed by district and village level governances dispersed across the country.⁴

The existence of decentralized local governances, not affiliated with the Afghan central government, is a result of macro historical processes as well as three interrelated contemporary dynamics consisting of: (1) a general recognition of *qawm* or "the basic sub-national identity based on kinship, residence, and sometimes occupation,"⁵ (2) the inability of the central government to effectively provide security and essential services, and (3) numerous ongoing insurgencies that undermine both the central government and local governances.⁶

A top-down strategy allocates resources and places emphasis on the highest-level government institutions and political and military leaders, to spread influence from the government center. According to Dr. Seth Jones, the U.S. and ISAF "have focused the bulk of their efforts since 2001 on trying to create a strong central government in Kabul, capable of establishing security and delivering services."⁷

³ Thomas Ruddig defines the insurgency in Afghanistan as segmented and consisting of seven armed structures: the Islamic Movement of the Taliban, the networks of the Haqqani and Mansur families in the South-East, the Tora Bora Jihad Front (*De Tora Bora Jehadi Mahaz*) led by Anwar-ul-Haq Mujahed in Nangrahar (Eastern region), HIG, small Salafi groups in Kunar and Nuristan provinces (Eastern region) and, as a new phenomenon, a number of not inter-related local ex-mujahedin groups that (or whose historical leaders) had been pushed out of power, are taking up arms and starting to adopt Taliban-like language and behavior, see *The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors, an Approaches to 'Talks,'* 2009, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/AANRuttigSummary2.PDF> (accessed October 25, 2009).

⁴ Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Studies and Analysis Division, 1995), xiv.

⁵ Ibid, xiv.

⁶ Thomas Ruddig, *The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency: Causes, Actors, an Approaches to 'Talks,'* 2009, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/uploads/AANRuttigSummary2.PDF> (accessed October 25, 2009).

⁷ Seth Jones, *U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, April 2009), 7.

A district approach would entail a bottom-up focus and allocate resources to the local or village level, promoting the authority of established local leaders, and embrace the macro historical processes that have manifested Afghan traditional governance.⁸ This method spreads influence from the rural areas outside of the central government's control and considers *qawm*, and existing tribal or community socio-political hierarchies. A bottom-up strategy allocates resources to promote local leaders and as counterinsurgency advisor Dr. David Kilcullen suggests, "assists them in providing security and services to their populations, and may better connect them to the central government when necessary."⁹

I assert that the simultaneous application of a bottom-up and a top-down strategy would effectively link the Afghan central government through each provincial governor with respective district governors. This linkage would facilitate the flow of essential services to the district level to promote and enhance the legitimacy of the GIRoA.

A bottom up approach at the district level could leverage the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) consisting of: (1) security, (2) governance (rule of law and human rights), and (3) economic and social development.¹⁰ The flow of essential services and capacity building efforts at the district level will encourage national identity, while building trust and confidence in elected officials as well as the central government.

How to Implement a District Approach

The implementation of a district approach will require assessment, political endorsement, allocation of critical and limited resources, and a reversal of existing paradigms. Assessments would determine a priority for which districts to allocate resources first. Following assessments, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would require the endorsement of the GIRoA political leadership.

The recent top-down pilot Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3), conducted in Wardak Province is indicative of this. AP3 disrupted the influence of insurgents in rural areas not protected by Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). AP3 placed emphasis on provincial and district leaders who lead efforts, and recruited Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) volunteers.¹¹

Without the support of Wardak's governor, Mohammed Fe'dai, who facilitated the cooperation of district level leaders, AP3 would not have been possible. Governor Fed'ai took a lead role in shaping public perception and setting conditions for the implementation of AP3. He

⁸ David Kilcullen describes tribal governance as divided into three poles of authority consisting of the khan (tribal leadership), the malik (government representative) and the mullah (religious authority) in, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 80.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Adib Farhardi, *Afghanistan National Development Strategy*, Kabul, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board Secretariat, Author, 2008, 5.

¹¹ This information was ascertained through interviews with members of Special Forces who conducted AP3. Interviews were conducted at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, August 2009.

accomplished this through a campaign of radio broadcasts, addresses, and visits to the districts within his province.¹²

On the surface, implementation of a district approach presents a fivefold dilemma:

- Execution cannot begin immediately.
- A proponent unit and command relationship requires further analysis.
- Commitment of limited ANSF and ISAF to select districts.
- The proponency of *arbakai* (tribal security system).
- *Arbakai* funding, regulation, and demobilization considerations.

Conversely, a district approach will spread legitimacy to the district level and link each level of government. A district approach and its inherent bottom up focus, forces coalition forces to, as General McChrystal acknowledges, “interact more closely with the population and focus on operations that bring stability, while shielding them from insurgent violence, corruption, and coercion.”¹³ Shielding the population will also insulate local leaders from insurgent influence and facilitate the re-establishment of *shuras* (councils), as governing authorities. The development of local security forces, if implemented as part of a district approach, could mitigate the long-term requirements of ANSF at the district/village level to a core cadre of ANP/ Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) advisors, and facilitate the creation of an integrated and tiered ANSF security concept between districts and provincial capitals.

Focus of a District Level Approach

ISAF units assigned to a district, in accordance with the ANDS, should focus on the GIRoA’s development objectives through four areas:

- Governance, insulate the district *shura* representatives and district governors from insurgents allowing them to reassert authority.
- Security, develop the local security apparatus or *arbakai* and place them under the control of local leadership.
- Support local leaders in addressing the rule of law and human rights (already generally understood through *pashtunwali* and *shari’ah* [Islamic law]).¹⁴
- Focus on economic and social development through the incorporation of a District Development Team (DDT),¹⁵ as an attachment to the military unit assigned to the district.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ McChrystal, *COMISAF’s Initial Assessment*, 1–1.

¹⁴ Miakhel Shahmahmood describes the centerpieces of Pashtunwali ideology as consisting of four elements equality (Seyal), the application of equality (Seyali or competition), the protection of female members of society and wealth (Namus), and honor (Ezat) in *The Importance of Tribal Structures and Pakhtunwali in Afghanistan; Their Role in Security and Governance*, 2006, 4, <http://www.pashtoonkhwa.com/files/books/Miakhel%20-%20Importance%20of%20Tribal%20Structures%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf> (accessed October 29, 2009).

¹⁵ Professor Thomas R. Johnson described District Support Teams (DST) or District Development Teams (DDT) as “diplomats, aid workers or agricultural experts,” in his article “All Counterinsurgency Is Local,” *The Atlantic* (October 2008).

Small, versatile, and independently capable units should be positioned in select districts to address GIRoA development objectives, U.S. and NATO stabilization goals, and most importantly, to restore authority to local leaders and marginalize insurgent influence. Units should integrate with the community by renting a compound or “safe house” within the district. The units should operate as decentralized elements, and maintain a presence in the district until it is secure, has improved social and economic conditions, and its governance and security apparatus is assessed as independently capable. The units should ensure that all tribes in the district are represented equally in the *shura*. If it is determined that *arbakai* be trained, the program of instruction (POI) designed for the pilot Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) should be used; however, it could be taught at a pre-determined training area in the district.

Conclusion

In considering a district approach in Afghanistan, I suggest employing a strategy that addresses local conditions as they pertain to Afghanistan, and not attempting to replicate surge operations that may have contributed to relative success in Iraq. COIN in Afghanistan must maximize and focus available resources to enhance security, governance, and development both from the top-down and from the bottom-up simultaneously.

The findings ascertained from the TEW working groups support my hypothesis that a bottom-up district approach would promote and enable established village and district political hierarchies, and separate the insurgents from the population. Successful application of a district approach will require ISAF assessment, the endorsement of the GIRoA, and a reversal of existing paradigms. In conclusion, military units employed in support of a district approach should promote Afghan development objectives through four lines of operation, and link the Afghan central government with district leaders through sustained capacity building, civil-military operations, intelligence and information operations.

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