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The Kandahar Offensive: Avoid the Snake Oil

Jonathan Pan

Sometimes doing nothing or doing less is better than doing anything in a counterinsurgency. However, the preference of action over inaction is deeply embedded within the United States military if not within the American culture as a whole. Lt. Gen. William B. Caldwell and Capt. Mark R. Hagerott, of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, recently offered a new metaphor for describing Afghanistan: “think of the country as an ailing patient -- in many ways analogous to a weakened person under attack by an aggressive infection.”¹ To cure this infection, they’ve suggested that the body, mind, and spirit of the nation must be addressed. In my opinion, to prevent a stalemate or worse in the upcoming Kandahar operations, senior decision makers should avoid snake oil in an attempt at curing this infection.

Snake Oil Vendor #1: “Kandahar needs alternative forms of government after the Offensive”

I like to call the National Solidarity Program’s Community Development Councils (CDCs) “Ghost CDCs” because I have not seen one in Kandahar in the last year; of course they exist in spreadsheets (just like equipment and weapons for the Afghan National Security Forces). The other option, the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program was created as a stopgap until District Elections, as part of the Parliamentary elections, were held. This has been delayed from May to September. Why implement an alternative form of district level governance for a few months which will ultimately compete with legitimately elected officials at the district level?

Snake Oil Vendor #2: “The Offensive will drive the insurgents out of Kandahar City and its environs”

If the Marjah operation can serve as a recent example, the insurgents will move somewhere else; progress will be slow. Therefore, this seems more like a “delay” action. How long can the coalition delay the insurgents’ form of governance from overtaking or discrediting the government of Afghanistan even further? A “surge” has a beginning and an end. If the surge is indeed going to end in 2011 or soon thereafter, is there a plan to ensure that the government of Afghanistan is able to properly deliver governance, development, and security for the population?

¹ Caldwell, William B. and Hagerott, Mark R. “Curing Afghanistan” Foreign Policy, April 7th, 2010. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/07/curing_afghanistan?showcomments=yes

Snake Oil Vendor #3: “Ahmed Wali Karzai needs to be replaced”

Ahmed Wali Karzai is an elected member and the president of the Kandahar Provincial Council as well as a senior elder of the Popalzai tribe. Afghanistan is a sovereign nation. Without hard, direct evidence, all the talk about the removal of Ahmed Wali Karzai, a public official, is tantamount to challenging Afghanistan's sovereignty at the very time when the coalition wants the government to demonstrate its sovereignty. Did someone do a poll of Kandahar residents and the results showed that he is considered corrupt by Afghan standards? The mere existence of the Ahmed Wali Karzais, the Abdul Razziqs, and the Matiullah Khans prove only one thing: they have survival skills. Whether or not these survival skills entail collaborating with insurgents in any shape, form or fashion doesn't matter. The emphasis needs to be on influencing the low/mid level tier players because they are who the citizenry sees on a daily basis; they are the “face” of corruption.

Snake Oil Vendor #4: “Kandahar needs a political deal between the tribes”

The major Pashtun tribes seem to be doing fine with each other. Ahmed Wali Karzai represents the Popalzai tribe. The Provincial Governor, Tooryalai Wesa and the Kandahar City Mayor are from the Mohammadzai tribe. The Kandahar Executive Director is a Barakzai, a former deputy governor to Gul Agha Sherzai, former Governor of Kandahar (another Barakzai). The Alikozai tribal leader reportedly convinced his tribe to vote for Hamid Karzai in 2009, something his father chose not to do. Colonel Abdul Razziq is doing just fine as the Achekzai tribal leader in Spin Boldak. The coalition knows a lot of superficial data about tribes but nobody really knows how they work. It is time to accept that balancing tribal power is an Afghan game with Afghan winners and Afghan losers. Power is not going to be split into equal parts. Someone is going to lose and maybe not everyone that loses will join the Taliban.

Snake Oil Vendor #5: “ISAF is ready for an offensive in the summer before Ramadan”

There is a lot of movement going on this summer, the 2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division and the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment are coming and the 4th Brigade, 82nd Infantry Division and the 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division are going. There are tremendous logistical and administrative requirements in the first and the last month of a unit's deployment. Unless hope triumphs over experience, the American Brigade Combat Teams will not be ready for an offensive. The Canadians have one Battle Group centered around the 1 Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. This leads me to believe that the operation will heavily involve the Afghan National Security Forces, which is good. Hopefully Kandahar City residents don't get too attached to the Afghan National Civil Order Police.

Change is inevitable and irreversible

Change can mean many things to include stalemate or defeat, and those two options are definitely something that the international community does not want. Afghanistan is indeed a sick patient, but sometimes the only cure is time (like the common cold). Time is what the coalition will buy with the offensive and with this time hopefully the government of Afghanistan will have successful parliamentary elections. Realistically, some unsavory characters will be

elected, but at least for the first time the Afghan people have some modicum of a choice at the district level. The political process at the district level will be painful and time consuming but the healing will be real. It's time to throw away the snake oil.

Captain Jonathan Pan is serving in Afghanistan. The views in this article are solely of the author and not those of the Department of Defense.

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