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Serving Pork Chops at a Bar Mitzvah: Some Thoughts on Aid in COIN Operations

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Some observers call the American led counterinsurgency efforts, past and present, in Iraq and Afghanistan, "a strategy of tactics". They argue that the American effort on the ground was and is too focused on doing population control village-by-village and district by district, that they forget the big picture of eliminating corruption nationwide and solving the big social and political problems that plague those countries.

I have no argument that, to date, we have failed to create the kinds of reforms within the Karzai regime that will cure wide ranging corruption and poor governance that have allowed the Taliban to make a comeback. However, counterinsurgency (COIN), like politics tends to be local.

Just as a mid-term election in the United States can force an American president (as well as Congress) to change course, many American soldiers and State Department civilian officials in Afghanistan believe that a large number of local successes against the Taliban will force change within the Karzai regime – that Karzai and the national government will feel pressured by rising local stars to reform from the bottom up.

Until then, the most our tactical commanders and Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) leaders can do at the local / tactical level is use combat power to provide security and buy time for the Afghans to create effective security mechanisms and use aid in a way that best enhances the COIN fight by convincing the population that there is a viable alternative to what the Taliban offers.

This is where the theory and practice of COIN collides with long U.S. experience in implementing traditional development programs around the world as done by USAID, the Peace Corps, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and International Organizations (IOs) such as UNICEF and the World Food Program. Hopefully, in the next year, Iraq will become permissive enough for the return of NGOs such as CARE and OXFAM this year; they have been out of the country since 2004. Ultimately, NGOs are the agencies best suited to do long term development in areas where security permits.

COIN theory holds that if you cannot protect the population from insurgent influence and intimidation, you will never get to more successful and permanent long term development. The old line development community is essentially politically agnostic. They want good to be done and are not necessarily concerned with what party is in charge as long as development goes on

unimpeded. Two authors in the spring 2010 issue of the U.S. Army War College's publication *Parameters*, retired Lieutenant Colonel James Gavrilis and Peter Charles Coharis, agree with this approach. They believe that aid should be used to further truly revolutionary goals, even if such efforts lose short term popular support. This kind of advice will be about as welcome as a pork chop at a Bar Mitzvah to those actually engaged in the COIN fight in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Unfortunately for the traditional development community, the Taliban also has a problem with long traditional term development. It often comes with the price tag of non-Sharia based rule of law, women's rights and religious toleration; none of which fits with the Taliban agenda. If NATO / ISAF forces cannot secure the population and win some kind of support from the people living in an area; newly built schools get blown up, electrical programs trashed, and aid workers assassinated. Consequently, traditional attitudes toward long term development cannot only be counterproductive to COIN, but can be used by the insurgents to rally the conservative majority of the population to their side.

The military COIN strategy, as implemented in Iraq and Afghanistan, did and is stressing short term gains in order to protect the population and garner some form of cooperation from it; but this omelet is not being made without some broken eggs, and this is what worries the traditional development community. They fret that large sums of short term money brings out the worst nature in people, and many of the locals end up feuding with each other over control of the lucrative American project money in those places where the Americans have flooded the area with short term Commanders' Emergency Response (CERP) funds and grant money. Rather, than bringing the population together, the development traditionalists argue, it is splitting people apart. They also fear that such projects are not sustainable; they concede that more food is being harvested in place of poppies in places like Nawa in Afghanistan, but ask who will buy it? Many old line developers also argue that bribing the farmers with money not to plant poppies is rewarding bad behavior.

All this is true, but it is also irrelevant. Job one is to get rid of the Taliban, and in places like Nawa in Afghanistan that has happened. Nawa has seen a huge influx of aid and American-led security. For six months it has been remarkably quiet compared to areas remaining to be pacified. Regarding the excess food, we might consider buying it and distributing it someplace where it is needed; that is a small price to pay for poppy eradication. No operation is without risk, but creating an artificial market in places like Nawa is something we can live with.

In places such as Nawa and countless instances in Iraq, a combination of short term high impact aid and a strong security presence have combined to put the squeeze on insurgent leadership awhile keeping young military age men too busy to fight. The intent is to buy time to build up the Afghan security forces and strengthen government institutions. This does not rule out the co-existence of more traditional long term development programs, but it does put them on the back burner and it also means that there are places where programs that advocate long term revolutionary social development programs actually undermine COIN efforts to eliminate the insurgents.

Keeping our Eye on National Strategic Objectives

First, we must realize that the bottom line for America in Afghanistan is essentially negative, and rightly so. Al Qaeda was able to move into Afghanistan under our radar and use it as a base to launch the 9/11 attacks. We do not want a country controlled by a Taliban leadership that will shelter Al Qaeda and likeminded groups in the future. If we can leave Afghanistan with a semblance of democracy and better off than we found it, that is a good thing; but it is not the bottom line.

Advancing women's rights, more tolerance for religious diversity and more equitable distribution of wealth may be good things at some point in the future; but they are not the immediate strategic objective. Too many people working for the U.S. government have failed to grasp that. The allied strategy is to turn the Taliban into something we can live with or destroy the movement completely. There is probably a way to compromise between turning the Taliban into a pile of smoking corpses and convincing them to become a relatively benign political party seeking power through peaceful political means and renouncing support for Al Qaeda's international agenda. Until we sort that out, the bottom line of making Afghanistan a no-go area for Al Qaeda and other exporters of radical jihadist violence is being pursued through a COIN strategy.

In the short term, traditional development has to take a back seat, but COIN and long term development need not be irrevocably mutually exclusive if some semblance of common sense is applied as to how this is done and where it is done.

What follows are some thoughts relative to the application of aid money in a COIN environment. They are primarily aimed at U.S. government funded projects, but NGOs might at least give them consideration if they don't want to totally waste their donors' money.

Project Selection

The most serious and wasteful mistake made in Afghanistan and Iraq by both the military and developmental communities has been to decide what the locals need without consulting with the locals.

The next most serious mistake has been to appoint a local advisory group and assume that it always speaks for the locals. *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran describes a classic case of this. In Nawa, the Americans formed an advisory group. The traditional tribal elder leadership cadre initially refused out of fear of Taliban retribution, but finally got with the program when they realized how much money they were missing out on. As a consequence, when they jumped in, the elders accused the advisory committee of being incompetent toadies. The development critics who talked to Chandrasekaran in his preparation for the story were appalled by this. They must not get out much. Any American who has ever been to a meeting of the local town planning board would feel right at home in the meeting hall a Nawa.

Local politics is unpleasant the world over; get used to it.

My approach has always been to ask the same questions regarding desired projects to three groups; those being the local council (whether selected or appointed), the tribal elders (Sheikhs in Iraq), and to a random selection of residents. On those rare occasions when I found total or even general consensus on a need, I felt pretty confident about the recommendation being a good project candidate. When there was major dissonance with one person strongly pushing a project that no-one else wanted, it usually meant that individual stood to profit.

There is a habit among Americans to want to be loved - and the development community is not immune to this desire. We tend to listen to people who seem well disposed to us. Sometimes the best inputs come from those who don't care what we think. We need to cast a wide net in getting advice on the selection of projects.

A major mistake in the past by some development personnel, both from the COIN and long-term development communities, has been to depend solely on "key leader engagements" (KLE) for information regarding the advisability of projects. My experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia has been that KLE engagements only reflect absolute ground truth about forty percent of the time. That doesn't mean that they should not be done, only that they should be taken with a grain of salt.

For example; in Iraq, one of my primary projects was to try to get water flowing more efficiently in the Abu Ghraib district canal system by enforcing laws against illegally tapping water from the canals which was causing desertification in the northern part of the district. Almost everyone in local governance, and all of my farmer contacts, supported this endeavor. However, my usually reliable local partner, the Deputy Governor (County Manager), was against aggressive enforcement of the law in this case. He was generally a competent and effective administrator, but in this case, the wealthy and powerful Sheikhs who were largely responsible for the water theft were members of his tribe. In this case my key leader input was not valid. I wasn't alone in this. One of the USAID implementers in the area was repairing fishponds that were the worst water theft offenders. Their key leader contact was the Sheikh who owned the ponds.

As a rule of thumb, the repair of infrastructure that already exists is a good idea. Repairing existing roads and cleaning irrigation canals are generally worthy COIN endeavors. There is a reason why they were there in the first place, and repairing them will usually be viewed favorably by the population.

Long term new project starts can be problematical if the population, or a major part of it, doesn't want the project. We have seen this when someone has decided to build a girls' school in a very religious Muslim area, or when we have tried to build roads to areas where the bulk of the population is suspicious of outside influence.

Another general rule is that a project with a goal of social change or enlightenment, no matter how benign its intent, is probably bad for short term COIN goals. They tend to give conservative religiously based insurgents an additional cause and can alienate key elements of the population that we are trying to court. The human rights and traditional long term development crowd won't like hearing that, but that is why we generally send the Marine Corps to places like Iraq and Afghanistan rather than the Peace Corps.

Project Management

Too many projects in both Iraq and Afghanistan have been abandoned because they should not have been started to begin with. Some projects die of simple poor management and inability to control corruption. Others collapse due to poor site security that allows the project to be sabotaged by insurgents or by competing contractors. When these things happen, they degrade the population's confidence in the competence of the counterinsurgency effort. Once a project is started, it should be completed on time with results being demonstrated.

Getting the community involved in a project and interested in its successful completion is not only good COIN practice, it is good governance anywhere. As in project selection, it is good to cast a wide net to ensure that you are getting a *real* community-wide perspective and not *just dealing with local elites* who may or may not have a financial interest in your project. You can be sure that if you put anyone on an advisory council, he will develop a financial interest in your project. There are some mechanisms to help lessen the negative impact:

Project Review Committees

Having a local project review committee in place can be a powerful tool in working with your contracting office to oversee the projects. The committee should be able to approve projects that are your idea, and suggests projects of its own.

The committee should be a function of the local elected or appointed council, but you should push to include members of the informal leadership whether they come from a Shura or a Sheikh's (or country specific equivalent) advisory group. It also ought to include some respected private citizens.

Use the Government Contracting Process. If you want it bad, you will get it bad. Taking the time to use recognized best contracting practices protects you legally, and it gives you an excuse not to give your business to a local power broker or warlord just to keep in his good graces. As cumbersome as government contracting can be, it gives you the ability and not to have to sole source to a rip off artist posing as your ally as journalist turned NGO Sarah Chayes recounts in her book, *The Punishment of Virtue*. A local war lord gets a sole source contract for providing road building material and charges the Army ten to twenty times the actual cost of materials. This has become a recurring horror story in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is good to be able to say: "Nothing personal, but I legally have to compete this contract."

Firewall Your Local Contractors from Your Project Review Committee

If you don't do this, your contractors will get shaken down. Set a rule that if someone has a problem with the quality of the work they should come to the American or ISAF (or country specific equivalent) representative on the committee with the complaint, not to the contractor. After the problem has been investigated, you should follow up with whoever made the complaint. They may not like the answer, but they will know someone is looking.

Stress to Local Officials that You are Ultimately Responsible for How Your Government's Money Gets Spent

Local government officials will argue that they are responsible for projects in their area and that they will live with them when you are gone. In this, they are right. If you are doing a project that the local government is utterly opposed to, you are undermining that body. The project review process can help them to be involved without leaving your projects open to corrupting influences from local officials. At the end of the day however, you must maintain control over the purse strings.

That rule doesn't hold true for outright grants to local governments or individuals to do projects themselves, but when that happens you need to realize that you lose control of the process. You have to balance your trust in the competence of the organization or person(s) getting the grant money with the possible consequences of failure of the project. If you develop a reputation for giving grants that produce no results, you will ultimately lose your authority to do so as well as suffer damage to your professional reputation with our side - and you get a local reputation in the local community of being a sucker.

The Danger of a "Do No Harm" Approach

An oft heard piece of advice in the development business is the admonition to, "do no harm".

That is a good general guideline to consider any time one selects a project. However, it should not be taken to extremes. I have seen decision makers at the Provincial Reconstruction Team level become so concerned with not doing harm that they stop doing anything. In a COIN environment somebody is going to get harmed no matter what you do. Hopefully it is the insurgent cause that gets hurt. Your job is to make sure that it is the insurgents and their objectives which get armed.

Most developmental fratricide occurs when people fail to anticipate the unintended consequences of their projects and end up doing harm with the best of intentions. Risk management is much more difficult in a foreign culture; the proverbial case of handing American military rations (MREs) containing pork products in a humanitarian operation in a Muslim country is an obvious one, but most are more subtle. Much of the problem comes with the question of sustainability.

In Iraq, I changed my opinion on the subject of solar lights. When I first got there, solar lighting projects were the current rage. My initial impression was that they were probably unsustainable and seemed to me to be an unneeded concession to the green craze back home. However, over time, I noted that the level of violence went down dramatically in areas where we put them. I'm still not sure of the cause and effect relationship. It may be that the real cause of the drop in violence was due to the fact that we were also patrolling heavily in the areas where the lights went up, but even if that was the case, they were doing no harm to our side and the locals seemed to like them; they were also not dependent on the notoriously fickle national power grid.

I'm still not sure that they can be sustained when we are gone. If the population really likes the solar lights, one hopes that they will pressure the government to maintain them. However,

putting in a state of the art hospital dependent on electricity in an area of Afghanistan where there is no hope of getting reliable electric power in the near future is clearly irresponsible and is setting the host nation and local government up for failure.

The best advice here is to rely heavily on Bi-lingual/Bi-cultural advisors and to use the aforementioned project review committee process. Mistakes will be made and some amount of waste is inevitable. War is an essentially wasteful activity.

Conclusion

We made quite a few mistakes in Iraq, but we largely used aid money as a short term COIN tool successfully in the end. It was not without its share of disastrous mistakes, and this article is designed to warn those who are continuing such work in Afghanistan of the potential pratfalls. The bottom line of the mission in Afghanistan is the elimination of its use as a sanctuary for Al Qaeda. Until somebody gives our military and governmental operatives a change in that mission, that is the bottom line. Development beyond that is nice to have at best and potentially mission compromising at worst.

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