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## COIN in Absurdistan: Saving the COIN Baby from the Afghan Bathwater (and Vice-Versa)

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When General Petraeus guided the elaboration of the new counterinsurgency field manual FM-3-24 in 2006, the main theater of operations happened to be Iraq, and the main operational priority was to analytically discriminate between global and local grievances in order to strategically disaggregate the transnational Jihadist from the “accidental guerrilla” whose space happens to be invaded. Given the urgency of the situation, there was no time to reflect on the “Grievance vs. Greed” debate that had been at the center of the civilian literature on civil wars in the previous decade. As a result, the COIN doctrine enshrined in FM 3-24 is as long on Grievance as it is short on Greed.

But while the Grievance paradigm was by and large adequate to understand the situation in Iraq five years ago, the Greed paradigm is more relevant in the case of Afghanistan - a country that has had a war economy since 1979, where warlordism and poppy cultivation play a central role, and which has achieved the dubious distinction of being the second most corrupt country in the world.

Add to that the “resource curse” represented by the massive U.S presence: beginning with Bush’s quiet surge of September 2008, a series of military surges increasing the number of troops by more than 50,000 (plus an equal number of contractors) has been partly responsible for a fifty percent increase of corruption in the past two years (1).

Today, a good case could be made that the political divergences (Grievance) that once existed between the main protagonists (Kabul officials, regional warlords, Taliban of all stripes, not to mention Pakistani officials) have taken a backseat, and that a convergence of sorts has begun to emerge on a shared economic objective (Greed): milking the American cow for all it’s worth, and for as long as possible.

The on-again, off-again, character of the alleged *reconciliation* process between the GIRoA and the Taliban, in particular, has all the markings of a *collusion* whereby both parties tacitly agree to perform the public kabuki dance required to ensure continued U.S. presence and flow of aid (from which they all benefit) – but nothing more. While the Afghan war may still include a significant Grievance dimension, the recent announcement that Afghanistan sits on \$ 1 trillion of untapped minerals, alone, guarantees that the conflict will evolve toward a Greed-based

“resource war” - the dynamics of which is entirely different from the assumptions of current COIN theory.

For the second time around, then, General Petraeus, the new commanders of ISAF, needs to reinvent COIN doctrine while waging his COIN campaign – an unenviable position described by him as being akin to “building an advanced aircraft while it is in flight, while it is being designed, and while it is being shot at.”

As both U.S. lawmakers in Washington, and the U.S. intelligence community in Kabul, are increasingly paying attention to the Greed factor in the Afghan mess (2), the COIN think-tank community can ill afford to stick to the Grievance paradigm alone. Overtime, repeated pleas for “more resources and more time” cannot but come dangerously close to Einstein’s definition of insanity: “doing the same thing over again and expecting different results.”

The assumption of an elusive “unity of effort,” which constitutes the core belief of the current Faith-based COIN, has led to an un-reflexive “if you build it, they will come” approach to nation-building. But it is becoming clear today that the Afghan Ali-Six-Pack is not the least interested in nation-building; meanwhile, the American Joe-Six-Pack increasingly agrees with President Obama’s view that “the nation that I’m most interested in building is our own.” The growing insurgency at home against Counterinsurgency risks discrediting COIN for a generation. At this particular juncture, the best way to save the COIN baby from the Afghan bathwater could well be to go back to the drawing board and integrate the lessons of the ‘Grievance vs. Greed’ debate in a renovated COIN theory.

Meanwhile, the best way to save the Afghan baby from the COIN bathwater would be for General Petraeus to drop (by July 2011 at the latest) the maximalist COIN approach altogether in favor of a leaner, meaner approach that once went by the name of Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC): namely, Covert Action at the tactical level, Security Force Assistance at the operational level, and Coercive Diplomacy at the strategic level.

The recent proposals for a de facto partition of Afghanistan, put forward by Robert Blackwill and Richard Haas, are likely to set the parameters of the policy debate in Washington until at least July 2011. It is not too early for the military to start thinking of a strategy that would combine region-wide “coercive diplomacy” (Schelling) with Taliban-specific “strategic paralysis” (Warden).

### **“Small War” is Bigger than “COIN”**

To the extent that an overall pattern of war is discernable, the historical trend since 1945 has been marked by a waning of interstate wars and a multiplication of intrastate wars. In the past sixty years, whether in the form of revolutionary wars, (ethnic/religious) identity wars, or resource wars, small wars have been the norm, major wars the exception. But there is much more to “small war” than “counterinsurgency.”

The classical counterinsurgency theory, developed mostly by the French David Galula and the British Robert Thomson in the 1960s, was indissociably linked with revolutionary wars. But

while Grievance-based revolutionary wars were the defining characteristic of the Cold War era, Greed-based resource wars appear to be a more dominant form in the post-Cold War era.

Grievance-based identity wars, to be sure, have also been ubiquitous in the past two decades. But though the emergence of identity wars was initially interpreted in terms of a “resurgence of ancient ethnic hatreds frozen during the Cold War,” subsequent studies have shown that the Greed factor is never totally absent from these conflicts, and/or that the Grievance rhetoric of the participants often masked a Greed agenda. Even when they start as genuine Grievance-based conflicts, the sheer scale and clumsiness of the intervention by the Western humanitarian-industrial complex (inexistent at the time of Galula/Thompson) almost automatically guarantees that what was initially a Grievance-based conflict will morph into a Greed-based conflict.

In short, though unlike the classical Counterinsurgency Era (1945-1975), Grievance is no longer the only, nor even the main, driver of conflict, in the New Counterinsurgency Era (2005-present), it continues to have a paradigmatic value in current COIN theory. (3)

To be more specific: the paradox of the COIN discourse of today is that, while the *doctrine*, as illustrated by the 416 pages of FM 3-24, prides itself on its “comprehensive approach” (so comprehensive, as Rory Stewart wryly remarks, that “it is almost impossible to say what counterinsurgency does *not* include”), the *theory* on which it rests is actually quite thin: Lawrence and Mao for insurgency theory, Galula and Thompson for counterinsurgency theory. Add to that a couple of minor classics in political sociology or social psychology, not to mention the use and abuse of Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” – a construct which, far from being universal and atemporal, mostly reflects the value system of the American suburban middle-class circa 1950 - and that’s about it.

Not to make too fine a point: COIN doctrine may be a mile wide, but COIN theory is only an inch deep. The COIN community continues to refer to the need to deliver “governance,” “security,” or “justice,” as if these were self-explanatory concepts, though anthropology has by now demonstrated that they are in fact *culture-specific*, and that the Afghan understanding may widely diverge from that of Americans. Worse still, with its uncritical commitment to “armed nation-building,” COIN theory even manages to ignore the cutting-edge literature on state-building and on the political economy of civil wars of the past two decades.

Perusing the COIN-related literature, you would never guess that the political sociology of war and violence has made some progress since Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* (1951) and Ted Robert Gur’s *Why Men Rebel* (1971) (4); that modernization theory, which informed both classical and modern COIN theories, never fully recovered from Samuel Huntington’s *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968); or that the economics of wars today goes well beyond the narrow confines of “defense economics” as traditionally understood and include the economic agendas of civil wars.(5) With a few exceptions, the work of a David Keen or a Paul Collier are rarely mentioned in the COIN literature and are nowhere to be found in the curriculum of U.S. war colleges. (6)

For military officers steeped in Clausewitz, to be sure, thinking of war as anything other than “the continuation of politics by other means” does not come spontaneously. Yet, war these days

is just as likely to be the continuation of economics by other means, and not just in the sense of Cicero's "endless money forms the sinews of war." As David Keen observed, Greed can be the main driver to the point where one side will sell arms to the other side, and both sides will focus on waging war against civilians while refraining from attacking each other. Not exactly the typical Clausewitzian understanding of war.

While the conventional economic wisdom on civil wars once emphasized the *costs* of civil wars, the recent literature analyzes these conflicts from the standpoint of the *benefits* of war. As David Keen sums it up:

"Civil wars have usually been presented as a contest between government and rebel groups, with each seeking to "win the war" and "defeat the enemy." Diplomats and journalists have tended to operate within this conceptual framework. However, the image of war as a contest has sometimes come to serve as a smokescreen for the emergence of a wartime political economy from which rebels and even the government (and government-affiliated groups) may be benefiting. As a result of these benefits, some parties may be more anxious to prolong a war than to win it (...) In some circumstances, the most revealing question may not be which groups support a rebellion or counterinsurgency campaign but which groups seek to *take advantage* of a rebellion or counterinsurgency campaign and for which kind of purpose of their own" (7)

Turning Cicero on his head, the modern literature explores, in essence, the proposition that "endless wars form the sinews of money." At its best, the study of the political economy of civil wars also picks up where the peace-building literature on "spoilers" stops. (8) Rather than see war as an "interruption" of a natural and benevolent development, and/or warlords as mere "spoilers" in a process of reconciliation, the Greed literature approaches war economies as an "alternative" mode of development in which warlords and their associates function as entrepreneurs and stakeholders.

Interestingly, this economic approach to civil wars is itself not always devoid of a thinly-veiled *political* agenda. Thus, the very decision to frame the question of intra-state wars in terms of "complex *emergencies*" betrays an interventionist bias, while precluding any *strategic* reflection on the cost-benefit of intervention from the standpoint of the national interest (a major "complexity" if there was ever one).

In addition, in the World Bank version popularized by Paul Collier, the Greed literature is heavily influenced by considerations of bureaucratic politics and political correctness. To make a long story short: by the late 1990s, as globalization was spontaneously lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, the World Bank was desperately in search of a mission that would justify its continued existence. Having been severely criticized in the 1980s for causing poverty in the developing world with its absurd one-size-fits-all policies (the "Washington Consensus"), the World Bank tried to regain a virginity of sorts by hyping the devastating effect of the "new wars" on the "bottom billion."

But by the late 1990s, Western public opinion happened to be suffering from "compassion fatigue," and tended to view the various identity wars of the previous decade with fatalism

(“ancient ethnic hatreds”). To justify its interventionist policy, the World Bank needed to show, not only that Greed-based resource wars are more widespread, and cause more regional damage, than commonly believed, but also that alleged Grievance-based conflicts are often Greed-based conflicts in disguise.

In addition to bureaucratic politics, the World Bank literature reflects the unavoidable political correctness at work in international organizations. From that standpoint, the added-value of the Greed-paradigm is that it altogether “brackets” a most inconvenient truth: the centrality of the Muslim factor in today’s civil wars, be it in the form of intra-Muslim wars or fault-line wars. (9)

Be that as it may, civilian students of small wars have come up with some of the right questions that military officers, with their understandable focus on “winning vs. losing,” all too often fail to consider. (10) Four years after the publication of FM 3-24, a certain theoretical stagnation among COIN advocates is painfully apparent. Since the very concept of counter-*insurgency* seems to be so inherently steeped in the Grievance paradigm, it might well be necessary to develop, separate from COIN theory, a counter-*warlordism* theory (11) that will give the Greed paradigm its due.

To the extent that politics can be defined as “who gets, what, when, and how” (Lasswell), it is of course always possible to argue that the Clausewitzian dictum, in theory at least, can accommodate a reflexion on the political economy of wars. At the end of the day, though, the one “remarkable trinity” that has the greatest heuristic value is not the “Government, Army, People” trinity of Clausewitz so much as the “Need, Greed, Creed” trinity of today’s theorists (12).

For General Mattis and General Petraeus, the new commanders of CENTCOM and ISAF, there is, at any rate, one famous warning from Clausewitz that has not lost its relevance: “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and Commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking: neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.” In the Afghan case, and at the risk of simplifying, this act of judgement boils down to this: to what extent is the Afghan war still a Grievance Conflict, to what extent has it morphed into a Greed Conflict? Judge for yourself.

### **Warlordistan on \$ 300 Million a Day**

A generation ago, Lockheed-Martin Chairman Norman Augustine took a hard look at the exponential increase of per-unit costs of aircraft and came up with the “First Law of Impending Doom or the Final Law of Economic Disarmament,” known today in the trade as Augustine’s Law: “In the year 2054, the entire defense budget will purchase just one aircraft. This aircraft will have to be shared by the Air Force and Navy 3 1/2 days each per week except for leap year, when it will be made available to the Marines for the extra day.”

Though designed with high-tech conventional warfare in mind, Augustine’s Law may soon apply to low-tech irregular warfare as well. Just do the math: as of June 2010, according to CIA director Leon Panetta, there are no more than 100 Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, with the 30,000 troop surge nearly completed, the costs of the Afghan war for the U.S. alone are set to soar to 100 billion dollars a year – *one billion dollar for every Al Qaeda member*.

If current trends hold, then, by 2054, the entire budget of the Pentagon will be devoted to killing only *one* insurgent – by which time Bin Laden will have won. For the strategic goal of Al Qaeda is not so much to restore the Caliphate (that's only declaratory policy) as to "Provoke, Exhaust, and Bankrupt" the Great Satan – a goal that looks less and less utopian with each passing day. (13)

In Washington today, you can still find armchair strategists arguing that the July 2011 deadline set by President Obama is counterproductive, and that the U.S. should stay as long as it takes to get a negotiated settlement (from-a-position-of-strength-of-course) between the Karzai government and the Taliban. But if the situation on the ground is any indication, it is clear that Afghan officials, regional warlords, Taliban insurgents, and Pakistani, are already "reconciled" on at least one objective: milking the American cow for all it's worth, as long as possible. The Afghan war today resembles more a *collusion* among all the parties than a *contest* between good guys and bad guys.

Afghan officials? As Ann Marlowe puts it:

"There is almost nothing to distinguish the Taliban from the Karzai mafias, whose tentacles reach down to the most obscure rural districts. American commanders will tell you of governors, police chiefs, district governors, and district police chiefs so corrupt, abusive, and vicious that the Taliban are a desirable alternative. We are talking about Afghan government officials who sell famine aid for their own profit, rape boys and women, run drugs in police cars — and often conspire with insurgents to kill Afghan civilians and security forces, and even American troops. Ahmad Wali Karzai is running a mafia out of Kandahar, and his brother Hamid Karzai is protecting him. This mafia is worth over a billion a year to him, if the *Times* of London is to be believed....In fact, it may no longer be the case that AWK does what he does in order to strengthen the hand of his brother: It may be that Hamid does what he does to strengthen the hand of AWK." (14)

Taliban and Warlords? Here too, it could be said that "there is almost nothing to distinguish" between the two. Both benefit – to the tune of \$ 2.16 billion - from the process whereby the U.S. military out-sources to Afghan contractors who in turn subcontracts to warlords or Taliban. As Ambassador Galbraith, the former deputy-chief of the UN mission in Afghanistan, points out:

"Americans view the war as a contest between the U.S.-backed Karzai government and the Taliban insurgency. The reality is more complex. In the Pashtun south where the insurgency is strongest, local power brokers and officials have relations with the Taliban, who are tribesmen and relatives. They make deals with each other to run drugs, trade weapons, eliminate rivals, and rig elections. Both sides collaborate in order to profit from massive U.S. expenditures. The U.S. spends hundreds of millions on Afghan

security companies who use the proceeds to pay off the Taliban not to attack, *or, in some cases, to stage attacks so as to enable the local warlord (a.k.a. security contractor) to hire more men at higher prices.*"(15).

It is therefore no surprise if the U.S. intelligence community has not seen any serious sign that "insurgent" groups are interested in reconciliation. (16) Why should they? The existing Karzai-Warlord-Taliban *ménage a trois* is a business profitable enough to reportedly enable the Taliban to offer a bounty of 2,400 dollars for each NATO soldier killed (17). While some Taliban networks may still be politically motivated, other Taliban groups are doing quite well economically while contributing to the bankrupting of America, and have no reason to trade such a profitable "stalemate" for a "victory" that would dry their financial resources and force them to have a modicum of political accountability. For them, continued political-military stalemate *is* the very definition of victory.

Pakistani officials? According a much-discussed report published by the London School of Economics (18), the Pakistani intelligence service continues to fund and train Taliban (presumably with the use of the \$ 7.5 billion U.S. aid package) and is even represented on the group's leadership council. Here again, as Robert Haddick points out, it is not unreasonable to assume that "Pakistani leaders do not want to see a bitter United States pack up and leave as it did after its defeat in Vietnam. That would leave Pakistan cut off from U.S. aid and left to fend off India by itself." (19)

The Afghan population at large? Nearly 40% of the Afghan population is partially dependent on Western food aid for basic subsistence, and so is not exactly in a hurry to see the U.S. to leave. That, incidentally, does not mean that the populace is happy with the West - quite the contrary. The average Afghan resents the fact that "of every dollar of aid spent on Afghanistan, less than ten percent goes directly to Afghans" (20) The irony of it all is that the pilfering of aid (the result of mostly of local greed) ends up becoming a source of new grievances against the West. In short, Western aid not only increases economic corruption in theater (Greed), but it also increases political alienation from the West (Grievance). In Afghanistan, no good deed ever goes unpunished. As one academic researcher explains:

"While many projects have clearly had important humanitarian and development benefits, we have found little evidence that aid projects are "winning hearts and minds," reducing conflict and violence, or having other significant counterinsurgency benefits. In fact, our research shows just the opposite. Instead of winning hearts and minds, Afghan perceptions of aid and aid actors are overwhelmingly negative. And instead of contributing to stability, in many cases aid is contributing to conflict and instability. For example, we heard many reports of the Taliban being paid by donor-funded contractors to provide security (or not to create insecurity), especially for their road-building projects. In an ethnically and tribally divided society like Afghanistan, aid can also easily generate jealousy and ill will by inadvertently helping to consolidate the power of some tribes or factions at the expense of others - often pushing rival groups into the arms of the Taliban." (21).

While the U.S. military is not wrong to think of money as a “weapons system” (i.e. aid as leverage), it might take another decade, and an army of development anthropologists, before the “user’s manual” of this weapons system becomes available. Until the U.S. military is in a position to conduct, so to speak, Effects-Based Aid Operations, commanders on the ground will continue to be damned if they do, and damned if they don’t, spend that Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) money.

Memo to the ISAF intel analysts: don’t try to fit a square peg into a round hole. Whenever a situation does not appear to make sense from the standpoint of political rationality, follow the money, and chances are you will find some economic rationality. Karzai’s behavior is erratic only if you think of him as the Afghan president rather than as the CEO of “Karzai Incorporated” (as his former finance minister Ashraf Ghani put it). In that latter capacity, Karzai has repeatedly shielded various cronies from the investigations of those increasingly nosy Americans, all the while trying to use his presidential office to get control of a greater share of foreign aid and increase his patronage. This is the Don Corleone approach to “good governance,” as practiced in the Mezzogiorno since time immemorial (The Mezzogiorno could actually be a cautionary tale for starry-eyed U.S. nation-builders: in the past fifty years, the EU Commission has poured tons of money in the Italian South, with the only noticeable result being a spectacular increase of corruption).

### **Nation-Building Anyone?**

Shortly before his resignation in June 2010, an exasperated General McChrystal reportedly blurted to an Afghan crowd: "My father has a son and two nephews fighting for your freedom here in Afghanistan. How many of you have sons fighting for Afghan freedom? How many of you are willing to make the sacrifices necessary for your country's future?" (22). This is indeed the 64,000 dollar question: is there *anybody* in Afghanistan these days who cares about Afghanistan? Or are the Afghan people simply trying to compete with the Palestinian people for the title of “the people who never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity”?

In the Western literature on development, allowing the natives to take ownership of a project is the fundamental condition for success. In Afghanistan, though, “taking ownership” tends to be understood only in a literal sense. As David Wood reports:

“By 2011 the United States will have spent roughly \$20 billion building the Afghan army. NATO estimates it will take \$1.8 billion a year to sustain the Afghan army at its current size, a cost beyond Afghanistan's modest finances. [But] Petty corruption and lethargy seem to infuse the ranks, U.S. and allied soldiers say. Last week, the Afghan trainers were issued 5,000 gallons of fuel; two days later, 2,000 gallons were missing (...) Soldiers in the new Afghan battalions are issued everything from shower sandals and socks to armored Humvees. "Half the stuff we give them they sell, and we have to resupply them -- so we're paying for it twice," muttered a U.S. soldier involved in supply.” (23)

Though the U.S. military, under the leadership of the indefatigable General Caldwell, has done just about everything possible to train recruits, Afghan security forces won’t be up to speed until



2014 at the earliest. Which raises an interesting question: “The US Army takes between 9 and 11 weeks to train new recruits. The infantry then undergoes another 17 weeks of advanced training. That amounts to about a half-year. The Marines do pretty much the same (...) America's largest Police Departments, led by New York's NYPD with a strength greater than 37,000, take no more than 6 months to train new recruits. The LAPD training program also runs about 26 weeks. The Chicago Police Department has a training program that consists of 1000 hours or about 17 weeks.” (24) Why is it taking so long?

Since Afghanistan is a warrior culture where, by age fifteen, just about every male knows how to handle a weapon, it should logically take much less time than in America to train recruits. The illiteracy problem? Sure, but the Taliban are equally illiterate, and that does not seem to impede their ability to operate; they even manage to administer justice in a way that the average Afghan find both more swift and more fair than the government courts.

By all accounts, U.S. trainers are passionate about their jobs; by all accounts, the Afghan trainees are not. Lack of will, not lack of skills, seems to be the main issue. As David Wood points out:

“The American trainers have worked hard to cram what used to be 14 weeks of basic training into eight – it was shortened to increase the production of new soldiers. Even so, Afghan instructors knock off work in the early afternoon. “They'd all leave at noon if we'd let them,” said one frustrated infantryman. “In our army we train until the task is done; here, they train until 1500 (3 p.m.), and leave no matter what,” he said.”

Wait a minute. Are we to understand that the U.S. military is expected to stay another four years, at the cost of 100 soldiers a month and \$ 100 billion a year, so that Private Mahmoud can go home at three in the afternoon, right on time for his three cups of tea? Are Afghans building an army of freedom fighters, or an army of free riders? Here again, there may not be much political rationality, but there is an undeniable economic rationality: for the sooner the Afghan military is up and running, the sooner the U.S. military will be able to pack and leave and, therefore, the sooner the Afghan soldier will no longer have the opportunity to sell U.S. equipment on the back market. In fact, some members of the security forces are so eager to make sure the U.S. never leaves that they have adopted the ultimate hedging strategy: “policeman by day, insurgent by night.”

With each passing day, there is more and more evidence that the Afghan masses are not anymore interested in nation-building than Afghan elites. Westerners calling for “more resources and more time” find themselves increasingly vulnerable to the charge that they are either unsuspecting “useful idiots” of the Afghan warlords – or in bed with the Beltway bandits. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of a never-ending economic crisis at home, there is more and more evidence that the American Joe-Six-Pack increasingly agrees with President Obama’s view that “the nation that I'm most interested in building is our own.”

As the politically-savvy Petraeus must have realized by now, long before July 2011, a majority of Americans will have decided that making the Hindu Kush safe for kleptocracy is not exactly a top priority. (25) This does not mean that we should pull the plug, but it does mean that, by July

2011 at the latest, the COIN-as-armed-nation-building approach should be altogether dropped in favor of a leaner, meaner approach once known as Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC). In a nutshell:

- At the tactical level, the “counterterrorism” campaign (the one undeniable, yet unheralded, success of the McChrystal plan) should be reframed in terms of “covert action” and extended beyond terrorists proper to include warlords of all stripes, particularly those who intend to gain political immunity by having themselves elected in the parliamentary elections of September 2010. From now on, the motto of special forces should be: You steal a ballot - you get a bullet.
- At the operational level, the name of the game should simply be Security Force Assistance. To his credit, Karzai in February raised the idea of restoring the conscription that existed until the Soviet invasion. This proposal should be given serious consideration, not only because it is more sustainable economically than an all-volunteer force, but because historically the most effective way of doing nation-building has been through military conscription. With the return of conscription, we would find out, once and for all, whether there is an Afghan national will, and therefore an Afghan nation.
- At the strategic level, the time for cooperative diplomacy is long gone – time to try coercive diplomacy instead, in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan (26). There was all along a contradiction between the Obama policy and the McChrystal strategy. For either the policy is (rightly or wrongly) to consider Karzai as indispensable, in which case his Kandahar brother is untouchable, and a Kandahar offensive is a non-starter; or a Kandahar offensive is seen (rightly or wrongly) as the indispensable centerpiece of a COIN strategy, in which case Karzai’s brother has to go. That’s Policy & Strategy 101.

In last analysis, if McChrystal’s campaign failed to deliver, it was because of the failure of U.S. policy-makers to make use of coercive diplomacy, *but also because of the failure of ISAF Commander McChrystal (unlike Ambassador Eikenberry) to clearly warn his civilian masters that the military surge would end in a failure without simultaneous coercive diplomacy.*

Part of the problem comes from the fact that, when it comes to the division of labor on political-strategic issues, the “population-centric” COIN community tends to adopt the “war amongst the people” paradigm of British General Rupert Smith and, with it, his minimalist conception of the military’s political role: “We intervene in a conflict in order to establish a condition in which the political objective can be achieved by other means and in other ways. We seek to create a conceptual space for diplomacy, economic incentives, political pressure and other measures to create a desired political outcome of stability, and if possible democracy.” (27)

But this minimalist approach, representative of a generation of officers that has only known peace-keeping operations (PKO), contrasts with an earlier, and more demanding, conception defined by British General Frank Kitson in the context of COIN: “It is worth pointing out that as the enemy is likely to be employing a combination of political, economic, psychological and military measures, so the government will have to do likewise to defeat him, and although an army officer may regard the non-military action required as being the business of the civilian authorities, they will regard it as being his business, because it is being used for operational

reasons. At every level, the civil authorities will rightly expect the soldier to know how to use non-military forms of action as part of the operational plan..." (28)

While the Smith approach hints that political-strategic issues are best left to the PKO international civilian bureaucracy, the Kitson approach suggests a more proactive role on the part of the military, who at the very least have to remind their civilian masters that COIN is "eighty percent political, twenty percent military," and that a military surge means nothing without a political surge (i.e. increased diplomatic pressure).

The COIN community has lately come to realize the limits of COIN doctrine at the political-strategic level, but has yet to fully grasp the logic of coercive diplomacy. One cannot peremptorily declare that "there is no alternative to Karzai," then wonder out loud about the best way to increase U.S. leverage over him (29). Even if Karzai was indeed indispensable, he would still have to be handled as if he was not. For the minute you let a player know that you consider him indispensable, you have deprived yourself of any leverage over him. That's Coercive Diplomacy 101.

If, on top of it, having publicly claimed that Karzai is "indispensable," you then ostensibly try to outflank him by playing the regional/tribal card for all it's worth, you just compound the problem. Coercive diplomacy has to be conducted in a way that avoids loss of face. "Hurting without humiliating" is the first law of coercive diplomacy, particularly in honor-and-shame" cultures.

### **Counterinsurgency and Coercive Diplomacy**

The 'population-centric' counterinsurgency doctrine elaborated in 2006 represents nothing less than a revolution in military affairs for a U.S. military used to think in terms of 'enemy-centric' conventional warfare. Just because its relevance is open to question in the case of Afghanistan does not mean it should be thrown away. As Secretary Gates warned last year, there will be other COIN campaigns down the road and, in this respect, given the importance of early intervention in counterinsurgency, the COIN community would be well advised to start shifting its gaze from the Hindu Kush to the Rio Grande, where the Tex-Mex narco-wars (a Greed conflict if there was ever one) have caused more civilian deaths in the past three years than the Afghan conflict in nearly a decade.

Though by and large, the new generation of officers has adapted remarkably well to this change of paradigm, the limits of the doctrine itself are nevertheless becoming increasingly apparent, at the level of theory as well as that of policy, particular on the "unity of effort" assumption.

Since the classical COIN doctrine of Galula/Thompson was elaborated in a *colonial* context in which military and political authorities reported to the same government (France in the case of the Algerian war, the UK in the case of Malaysia), "unity-of-effort" was taken for granted, and thus the question remained unexamined. When today's COIN theorists redefined COIN as "armed nation-building," they predictably focused all their efforts on the question of horizontal coordination (interagency) while trying to wish away the question of vertical subordination (POL

vs. MIL) by positing the existence of a “unity of effort” between host-nation government and foreign military.

Yet, such “unity of effort” was already found to be lacking in the context of UN-led peace-making and nation-building operations of the 1990s, and this tenet of Faith-based counterinsurgency constitutes today the main intellectual stumbling block for the elaboration of a Reality-based COIN doctrine. The COIN community urgently needs not only to assimilate the Grievance/Greed debate, but to take a closer look at the *systemic* dilemmas of state-building, the *dynamics* of estrangement among partners/allies, and the *semiotics* of coercive diplomacy in a cross-cultural context. (30)

Coercive diplomacy, as first theorized by Thomas Schelling in his classic ‘Arms and Influence’ (1966), has a bad reputation among the U.S. military. In the aftermath of the fall of Saigon, the military wasted no time throwing the Schelling baby out with the Vietnam bathwater and, from then on, focused solely on military coercion through airpower.

Time to revisit Schelling. His work was written in a special context (the Cold War), with limited *conventional* war (Korea) and crisis management (Cuba) in mind, and was a work of *theory* that was poorly translated into *policy* by the McNamara team. Schelling is not anymore responsible for Vietnam than Clausewitz is responsible for the Great War. And Schelling’s conception of war as “violent bargaining” can a priori be adapted to an era of “warlordism” with some modifications.

The theory itself was not so much flawed as incomplete. It did not deal with asymmetries of will, or strategies of deterrence and compellence against non-state actors. Nor did it take into account that while, in one context, Credibility is demonstrated by Commitment, in another context, it might just as well be demonstrated by Conditionality. Similarly, while coercion through “graduated escalation” makes sense in certain situations, in other contexts, a more appropriate approach will be coercion through “graduated disengagement.”

Schelling was right to argue that coercive diplomacy resembles the game of “chicken,” but forgot to add that, in certain circumstances, the game can be played “in reverse.” While pulling the plug in Afghanistan today would not necessarily be the best policy, the *threat* of pulling the plug in July 2011 is, at this particular juncture, the best way to concentrate the mind of regional players who, as Kissinger recently pointed out, have objectively more to fear from the hypothetical chaos resulting from a U.S. drawdown than America itself.

That is why, as Vice-President Biden rightly argues, the July 2011 deadline for the beginning of a drawdown is not negotiable. It creates a sense of urgency by signaling that, when all is said and done, we have more urgent things to attend, and we can more easily live with chaos in Afghanistan than anyone else in the area. That is also why Secretary Clinton recently signaled that aid to Pakistan would no longer come with no strings attached.

The most encouraging news that has come out of Washington in recent times is that Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton are not the only two people left who understand the logic of coercive diplomacy. Both former Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Blackwill and Council on

Foreign Relations Chairman Richard Haas have come up with plans that would, in essence, call for a region-wide coercive diplomacy coupled with Taliban-specific “strategic paralysis.” Within the limits of this essay, it is not possible to explore these proposals in details, but they are likely to set the parameters of the political debate between now and the beginning of the drawdown in July 2011.

For Robert Blackwill, the solution is a de facto partition of Afghanistan:

“After the administration’s December Afghanistan review, the U.S. polity should stop talking about timelines and exit strategies and accept that the Taliban will inevitably control most of its historic stronghold in the Pashtun south.(...) With an occupying army largely ignorant of local history, tribal structures, language, customs, politics and values, the United States cannot, through social engineering, win over, in the foreseeable future, sufficient numbers of the Afghan Pashtun on whom COIN depends. (...) This might mean a longtime residual U.S. military force in Afghanistan of about 40,000 to 50,000 troops. (...) There might even come a time when a stronger Afghan National Army could take control of the Pashtun areas... *In the context of de facto partition, the sky over Pashtun Afghanistan would be dark with manned and unmanned coalition aircraft — targeting not only terrorists but, as necessary, the new Taliban government in all its dimensions. Taliban civil officials — like governors, mayors, judges and tax collectors — would wake up every morning not knowing if they would survive the day in their offices, while involved in daily activities or at home at night.*” (31)

For Richard Haas, the solution is a “patchworkization” of Afghanistan:

“Under this approach, the United States would provide arms and training to those local Afghan leaders throughout the country who reject Al Qaeda and who do not seek to undermine Pakistan. Economic aid could be provided to increase respect for human rights and to decrease poppy cultivation. ...It would require revision of the Afghan Constitution, which as it stands places too much power in the hands of the president. The United States could leave it to local forces to prevent Taliban inroads, allowing most U.S. troops to return home... Leaders of non-Pashtun minorities (as well as anti-Taliban Pashtuns) would receive military aid and training. The result would be less a partition than a patchwork quilt. Petraeus took a step in this direction last week by gaining Karzai’s approval for the creation of new uniformed local security forces who will be paid to fight the insurgents in their communities. *Under this scenario, the Taliban would likely return to positions of power in a good many parts of the south. The Taliban would know, however, that they would be challenged by U.S. air power and Special Forces (and by U.S.-supported Afghans) if they attacked non-Pashtun areas, if they allowed the areas under their control to be used to supply antigovernment forces in Pakistan, or if they worked in any way with Al Qaeda.*” (32)

What both proposals have in common is the idea that - as any self-respecting Clausewitzian will agree - a tactically defensive move can constitute the core of a broader strategic offensive. And,

at any rate, “trading space for time” can be a strategy as appropriate for counterinsurgency as it is for insurgency.

If the only way to “find, fix and finish” the enemy is to let it come back to power, for a limited time and/or in a limited space - so be it. We may not be that great at irregular warfare yet, but we sure have a pretty good track record when it comes to conventional bombing. In fact, the drone era offers new opportunities to refine and adapt what Colonel John Warden, two decades ago, called “strategic paralysis.” (33) The time may have come for military intellectuals to re-examine Schelling and Warden, and think of ways of combining region-wide coercive diplomacy with Taliban-specific strategic paralysis. (34)

Some will object that these two scenarios could lead in the long term to a break-up of Afghanistan. True - but so what? After all, Afghanistan as we know it today became a sovereign state in 1919, at the same time as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia – two states that no longer exist today, and are not missed by anyone. There is also the distinct possibility that “a self-governing Pashtunistan inside Afghanistan could become a threat to the integrity of Pakistan, whose own 25 million Pashtuns might seek to break free to form a larger Pashtunistan.”(Haas) True, but here again - so what? Pakistan is an even more recent invention (1947) than Afghanistan and, when East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) seceded in 1971, it certainly was a bloody affair, but it was not the end of the world. Since Pakistan has not exactly been helpful lately, even the simple signal that the U.S. is willing to contemplate the “risk” of a dis-integration of Pakistan would be enough to wonderfully concentrate the minds of Pakistani officials.

Were it not for the group-think prevailing in the Beltway Bubble these days, U.S. officials would have by now realized that, with each passing day, U.S. credibility in the eyes of the world is more diminished by promising to stay at all costs rather than by threats to slam the door and turn off the lights at the risk of chaos. Over time, repeated U.S. promises of unconditional commitment can only make America look like the world’s Indispensable Sucker.

### **Petraeus and Mattis to the Rescue**

“Know your enemy, know yourself,” the wise Sun-Tzu remarked, “and you can fight a hundred battles without fear.” In the past five years, the U.S. military has made tremendous progress in the “know your enemy” department; when it comes to the “know yourself” part, though, there is still room for improvement. The proverbial can-do attitude of the U.S. military is a most admirable quality – most of the time. But this institutional bias in favor of action can, at times, become indistinguishable from sheer military hubris, as when COIN theorists adopt a maximalist definition of COIN as “armed nation-building” – i.e. social engineering on the grandest scale.

Add to that the fact that, after a decade of expeditionary ventures, some military officers (whether active-duty or recently retired) are beginning to suffer from *localitis* - a disease that once was the occupational hazard of career diplomats alone. In various op-eds or testimonies to Congress (not to mention the now-infamous *Rolling Stone* interview), some leading COIN advocates have come dangerously close to “blaming America first” for the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, while letting our “Afghan partners” get away with murder.

General Petraeus is unlikely to indulge in “Operation Infinite Surge.” From his Iraqi experience, Petraeus knows only too well that even a successful military surge can fail to be exploited politically by the natives: as of this writing (July 2010), there is still no government in Iraq since the March elections. Unlike McChrystal, whose team reportedly fostered “group-think,” Petraeus is also known for welcoming dissent. The Petraeus team should start by acknowledging that the four cardinal sins of COIN theory to date have been: 1) to assume there is a “unity of effort” between host-nation government and foreign military; 2) to think of “small war” only in terms of a Grievance-based contest, when it can just as well take the form of a Greed-based system; 3) to deny that an *arithmetic* increase of U.S. resources invariably leads to an *exponential* increase of corruption; 4) to forget that the grand strategy of Bin Laden and his supporters is to “Provoke, Exhaust, Bankrupt” America.

While the Petraeus Team is likely to include (if only for political cover) the usual suspects, the new ISAF Commander would be well inspired to set up a Red Team made of area specialists - preferably of European origin. Not that the Euros necessarily have the right answers but, compared to the “COINdinistas,” they have two undeniable advantages:

- Europeans are not haunted by U.S. history, and are therefore not tempted to see in Afghanistan a unique opportunity to wage a “better war” that would redeem Vietnam. (35). When they look at Afghanistan, they simply see Afghanistan: the good, the bad, the ugly. Among U.S. officers today, the single most important impediment to an understanding of the Afghan challenge might not be the lack of knowledge of the Afghan “human terrain” so much as the collective memories of Vietnam that keep getting in the way of their better judgment. Paradoxically, precisely because he studied the issue as a scholar (Vietnam was the subject of his doctoral dissertation at Princeton), General Petraeus may be the one soldier-scholar most immune to the temptations of revisionism and wishful thinking that circulate within the U.S. military community today.
- Europeans know their own history, and are not tempted to see in past campaigns (successful or not) the kind of “kinder, gentler wars” fantasized by many COIN theorists today.(36) Neither the Algerian war nor the Malaysian emergency qualified as benevolent “armed social work”: for the most part, they were rather ugly affairs. At their most enlightened (Lyautey in Morocco), past COIN campaigns still required an artful combination of ruthlessness and magnanimity.

The closest thing we have to a Marshall Lyautey today is General James Mattis - a widely read soldier-scholar who has not lost the no-nonsense philosophy that you would expect from a Marine’s Marine (“You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn’t wear a veil. You know, guys like that ain’t got no manhood left anyway. So it’s a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them.”)

The Afghan campaign has suffered from poor strategic conception, and from poorer still strategic communication. Mattis may have a challenging time designing a region-wide strategy but, if his remark to Iraqi tribal sheiks is any indication, he already has the stratcom part under control: “I

come in peace. I didn't bring artillery. But I'm pleading with you, with tears in my eyes: if you fuck with me, I'll kill you all."

After years of mixed signals on the part of Washington, Mattis can bring to "diplomatic signaling" a much-needed clarity – not to mention a certain panache. For of all the criticisms that have been made of the foreign policy of the Obama administration, perhaps the one that is most widespread abroad concerns the exasperating blandness of its diplomatic style. Diplomacy is not simply "the art of remaining silent in several languages," nor is it just the mastery of techniques and tactics of negotiation. Diplomacy must also be, at times, the art of brinkmanship. As Thomas Schelling remarked long ago:

"There can be times when a country wants to shake off the rules, to deny any assurance that its behavior is predictable, to shock the adversary, to catch an adversary off-balance, to display unreliability and to dare the opponent to respond in kind, to express hostility and to rupture the sense of diplomatic contact (...) This is still diplomacy: there are times to be rude, to break the rules, to do the unexpected, to shock, to dazzle, or to catch off guard, to display offense, whether in business diplomacy, military diplomacy, or other kinds of diplomacy." (37)

It is to be hoped that Washington policy-makers will be wise enough to let General Mattis make a few "calculated gaffes" whenever necessary. U.S. strategic communication towards the region at large would gain in potency and clarity by adopting as a compass Mattis's motto for the Marine Corps: "No better friend, no worse enemy." For when all is said and done, it is high time that the various players be reminded that America is a full-service Indispensable Nation: if you genuinely want to shine, we'll be glad to help you shine; but if you'd rather glow in the dark, we can help you with that, too.

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## **Endnotes**

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(8) On the “spoiler” debate, see Stephen Stedman’s seminal “Spoiler Problems in Peace Process,” *International Security*, 22, 2, 1997, [http://iis-db-stanford.edu/pubs/20634/Spoiler\\_Problems\\_in\\_Peace\\_Processes.pdf](http://iis-db-stanford.edu/pubs/20634/Spoiler_Problems_in_Peace_Processes.pdf), and Edward Newman and Oliver P. Richmond, eds., *Challenges to Peace-Building: Managing Spoilers during Conflict Resolution*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2006.

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Buddhist violence in Thailand, Muslim-animist violence in Sudan, Muslim-Igbo violence in Nigeria, Muslim-Muscovite violence in Chechnya, or the different varieties of inter-Muslim violence between traditionalists and Islamists, and between Sunnis and Shia, nor would it assuage the perfectly understandable hostility of convinced Islamists towards the transgressive West that relentlessly invades their minds, and sometimes their countries.” (“The Middle of Nowhere,” Prospect, issue 134, 26 May 2007, [www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2007/05/themiddleofnowhere](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2007/05/themiddleofnowhere)).

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(13) See David Kilcullen’s brilliant demonstration in *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, London: Oxford University Press, 2009.

(14) Ann Marlowe, “Dying for the Karzai Cartel,” National Review Online, May 20, 2010.

(15) Peter Galbraith, “Petraeus vs. the Mafia,” The Daily Beast, June 24, 2010. Emphasis added. As former CIA analyst Robert Baer puts it: “For lack of troops and an absence of Afghan government authority, we've had no choice but to outsource security for 70% of our logistic lines to Afghans we know almost nothing about. For instance, the warlord in charge of security for supply convoys between Kabul and Kandahar apparently is known by only one name. He has connections to the Karzai family, but beyond that, he's a mystery. ...Our ignorance about this man is all the more astonishing considering that the fate of any operation to retake Kandahar depends upon him. What if, in the middle of the battle, he joins the Taliban and cuts off supplies? (...) American military contracting officials haven't met the Afghan warlords protecting our convoys because they don't feel safe enough to get off base. Which leads to another question: If we know so little about the Afghans we outsource our supply lines to, supposedly our allies in the conflict, how much do we really know about the Taliban? (Robert Baer, “Outsourcing in Afghanistan: Who’s protecting our supply lines?,” Time, June 28, 2010.

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(17) Miles Amore, "Taliban win £1,600 bounty for each Nato soldier killed," The Sunday Times online, May 23, 2010.

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