



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

## The Strategic Risk versus Tactical Safety: What Happens When We Lose the COG

by Jeremy Kotkin

GEN Petraeus' COIN Guidance is published and on the bulletin boards in hundreds of staff offices in Kabul. As the vanguard of this new policy, Afghan Hands have a charter to operate under the COIN Guidance in concert with the mission statement developed for the program: *“to build long-lasting, positive partnerships with GIROA, Afghan entities, and civilians, in order to demonstrate the long-term commitment of ISAF to build capacity and capability within Afghanistan and deny support among the Afghan people to insurgents.”* These two concepts, the COIN Guidance and the Afghan Hands Program intent before it, should operate in perfect harmony, each reinforcing the other. Afghan Hands, through eyes unencumbered of 9 years of standard operating tactics and procedures, should be allowed the professional scope to “get the job done” in ways which no other individual augmentee can.

COMISAF's COIN Guidance, especially when wielded by Afghan Hands, should be the combination to take this war in a new, winning direction. It will, unfortunately, not take hold in an environment more concerned about tactical and shortsighted personnel safety and standard operating procedure where attempting to follow the strategic intent and spirit of the new guidance is met with UCMJ punishment. The strategy operationalized by the Commander's COIN Guidance is failing in Kabul, the most visible expression of GIROA's power, to the perceptions of the center of gravity (the people) and this carries an unacknowledged risk to the entire campaign plan.

The current COIN strategy can be a winning one. Whether it is enacted by Trinquier's quadrillage, Marshal Lyautey's oil-spot, or a modern version of the USMC's Combined Action Platoons on a massive scale, ISAF is conducting a classic Galulian three line of operation plan focusing on security, the economy, and development. This, coupled with the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program and US anti-corruption efforts, are what Afghan stability desperately needs to germinate. The nature of Afghanistan and its history, however, should very strongly caution us from forgetting about the capital; yet, this is exactly what we are doing. **Our strategy, focusing on the population centers in the outlying areas of the Key-Terrain Districts (KTDs), is leaving Kabul to the corruption of the central government and allowing the insurgent/guerilla to reoccupy spaces once cleared due to our own policies which segregate US/NATO Forces from the capital. The vacuum created by our absence is marking an easily followed path for the population to turn away from their government.** Kabul, as the center of gravity's (the population's) capital, should be *the* most important oil spot; it should be the geographic center on which everything depends; the point against which all our energies should be directed. What we are doing through our own policies is voluntarily ceding this ground to the insurgent not because of his direct action, but because we are forcefully separating

ourselves from the people and, in turn, creating a wedge between the people and their government.

Civilians in Kabul see our lack of effort; see a lack of economic assistance within easy reach yet kept behind hescos; and in a culture distinctly centered around bravery and honor, see us as cowards afraid to interact with them in their own largely stable and secure cities. Our actions speak louder than our words. We do not travel “outside the wire” (truly, the most pathetic line to hear from soldiers in Kabul bases; but it’s not entirely their fault – it’s the mindset they’re being inculcated with) and live up to our own Population Centric (PC)-COIN theory. Afghans realize this. In that realization, we cripple their trust in the very government we are trying to support. If people are the center of gravity, and the capability we are trying to promote is stability and trust, what does it say that we don’t even apply the Commander’s guidance here? **Why do we think the Kabul bubble is immune from their youth being radicalized...by our very own actions no less?** Basic COIN theory would have us separate the insurgent from the population. What we have done in Kabul is separate the population from ourselves. This has marked effects on them psychologically, economically, and civically.

### *A Forgotten Focus*

Stabilization and security are both necessary in the KTDs and outlying provinces but these areas and these populations will not secure the future of a stable Afghanistan. The thesis here is that while we focus on these areas, our current policies with respect to our footprint in the capital are negating the long-term benefits of applied PC-COIN. Our strategy will not be met because the residents of Kabul are losing their trust in us and, in turn, their government day-by-day. This essay is written with the full realization that COMISAF’s COIN guidance is aimed not at HQs, but at the PRTs, platoon leaders, company and battalion commanders, and soldiers pressing the flesh with the village locals. But the village locals will not provide the necessary stability in Kabul to ensure the viability of the central government.

It is fine and well that successful PC-COIN will generate security and stability in District X to create some semblance of good governance and economic development. All 33 other of Afghanistan’s provinces could be rendered stable and allowed to undergo Transition relating to conditions-based realities on the ground. But in the time it takes for this feat to be achieved, Kabul is on a gradual trend-line of being lost. Our actions as a result of force protection standard policy and procedure will push the populace further away from both ISAF and their own elected government. **The capital is where the survival of GIROA will be made or broken, not in the outlying provinces.** Our actions constitute the very opposite of what we should be accomplishing vis-à-vis the COG; we are ourselves eating away at the center of gravity’s critical capabilities - without any assistance from the Taliban.

This is because the provinces will remain disconnected from GIROA; this suits GIROA and the provinces just fine. As long as sufficient capacity from local GIROA and ANSF footprints can one day enable an enduring and minimal sense of stability, the outlying provinces will not feel like have a need to play a decisive role in the future direction of this country. Historically, they never have. They will not need nor want to if their needs and self-determination are nominally met through traditional Afghan mechanisms at the local level. It is only when Kabul tries to change the fabric of Afghan society in the provinces that revolution and coups occur.

Residents of Kabul will, however, determine what happens in the Presidential Palace and the viability of this form of government. **The time it will take for successful COIN, ISAF-GIRoA Transition, reconciliation and reintegration, etc, to be realized to the point ISAF can disengage from day-to-day Afghan security will be enough time to cause the process described here to be irreversibly set.** By that point, through the compounded effects of segregation (of us from them and them from their government) and short-sighted US force protection policies, the residents of Kabul will have already decided what will happen to the future of their nation, irrespective of our efforts in KTDs.

### ***Policies Creating Diminishing Strategic Returns***

Current Kabul HQ policies (local garrison commands), which should in theory support and implement the commander's guidance, in fact restricts and even countermands command guidance. US forces are little better than defenders of the castle gates, afraid to step beyond the wire into the 'badlands' of the capital city. Furthermore, **current subordinate command policy castrates the very raison d'être for the Afghan Hands program to exist;** most Afghan Hands tied to desks in the Kabul area are no more effective than normal Service-provided Individual Augmentees. This is a waste of assets as well as all the forethought that went into the program and the COIN Guidance.

This issue, however, is much bigger than Afghan Hands alone and, in fact, made exponentially worse by local commanders who apply a *Baghdadesque* policy and mindset in Kabul not realizing the risk to larger strategy. As COMISAF says, Kabul is *not* Baghdad, yet through the interpretation and implementation of his policy one could not tell the difference. The hypothesis presented here is that **our actions in Kabul alienate the very center of gravity being fought for in our counterinsurgency efforts.** Our short-sighted and risk averse attitudes in Kabul are, in turn, more of a threat to GIRoA's survival than religious fundamentalism, ethnic rivalries, or even sub-provincial government corruption in the outlying provinces. Our failure to correctly implement the Commander's COIN Guidance, in Kabul especially, fosters the environment which allows the insurgency to regenerate. Allowing that to occur in GIRoA's COG will be debilitate our efforts. Misutilization of Kabul-based Afghan Hands and the segregation of the wider force from Kabul itself complete the equation.

The new COIN guidance clearly and intuitively spells out how to operationalize PC-COIN in the face of known threats, known government corruption, and known public distrust of our forces. It is what we desperately need and it could change the course of this war, *if* we could implement it according to the commander's intent. However, local policy in Kabul will continue to constrict the new guidance to the point that one wonders why we think we are here to begin with: protect *ourselves* or *win a war* where the COG is the trust of the local population? As the coup de grâce, the *only* reason for Afghan Hands existence in theater and the *most effective* way for COMISAF's counterinsurgency efforts to be effected is a program dead-on-arrival within Kabul. As T.E. Lawrence said, "granted mobility, security, time, and doctrine" the guerrillas would win. In Kabul, we have made ourselves a fixed enemy allowing the guerillas to operate around us "like a gas." **Our doctrine (knee-jerk and hyper forcepro) allows the mobility of the enemy (corruption and disenfranchisement of the COG) to culminate our efforts.**

If there is one thing that should be crystal clear to us after 9 years of this war, it is that the people must trust their government if we are to 'win.' **We cannot win this trust by turning Kabul (or any large Afghan city for that matter) into a strategic hamlet, police-state, or a**

**segregated and garrisoned fortress.** The people will not trust their government when they see us forever hiding behind our hescos and in our MRAPs like timid little prairie-dogs. Yet if they were to see us do exactly what is spelled out in the COIN Guidance, we could again win back that trust and build relationships so critical to our support of the central government; only then will they begin to think their government is doing something right. They know that if we unbutton ourselves it is because we trust the Afghans and that the ANSF-ISAF partnership is working to provide stability and security. The critical “strategic breathing space” we are providing to allow for the growth of the ANSF is being eaten away from within. This, however, is something we have complete power to change.

The Commander’s Guidance illustrates a relationship which might be possible in some of the provinces far, far away from the flagpole in Kabul. But here, not 1 mile from where this guidance was penned, it’s a non sequitur. This is sad because in the end, the boss is right. This argument describes two versions of reality: life in Kabul trying to work with the Afghans and living by the boss’s new guidance to achieve PC-COIN goals, and conversely, working within a Big-Army mentality which disassociates standard procedure from current security realities and strategy. There is a way ahead, however, which will arrest the current path we are leading ourselves down.

### ***Cognitive Dissonance vs. COIN Guidance Redux***

As the guidance correctly states, the people are the key, the center of gravity. We must earn their trust, we must walk among them, see things from their eyes, relate to them as fellow humans if we are to truly partner with them which is so essential in PC-COIN theory. These words define an effective and appropriate mindset for dealing with a population unsure of our motives or our abilities and faced with the tough choice of becoming passive supporters for the insurgency or backing a central government without an effective precedent. In other words, the strategy is suitable, feasible, and acceptable. Through local implementation, these words and guidance are also unfortunately hollow. In Kabul, we do everything possible to ignore what the basic theory says, as proven by our actions. As much as the previous COMISAF wanted to get away from fighting this war one year at a time, factors such as current force protection policies, ignorance of what type of war we’re fighting, and a fear to step out of our comfort zones and assume risk will cripple any success. The intellectual environment into which the new COIN guidance was introduced precludes implementation because it’s utility within the specific security environments thought to be unique in the larger context are not seen.

The people don’t trust us when we speed around town in up armored SUVs; they deride us when we walk between NKC and the Green Zone in full IBA (literally, around the corner from the “Red” Zone to the Green Zone); they feel we don’t trust any of them when we walk into their civilian ministries for meetings in ACUs with weapons and helmets. In direct opposition to the commander’s intent, **we cede all the tenets of PC-COIN for a little force protection by those who think tactical safety outweighs strategic gain.** What is worse is that we don’t make the connection to begin with. In the grand scheme of things, the benefits of properly-implemented COIN guidance will far outweigh any cost attributed to tactical force protection policies. Of course risk is involved. Of course threats remain. And of course soldiers will probably be targeted. But **these risks must be addressed by the theory of PC-COIN that says we will generate long-term stability for both ISAF and GIRoA** by following the new guidance. We, unfortunately, are doing the reverse.

And there is the reality. The reality of a command climate which knows what success looks like, knows, theoretically how to get there from here, but cannot take the first step to achieving it; in fact, knowingly retrogrades from metrics of success out of fear of stepping from conventional military paradigms.

### ***COIN Guidance Disparities***

There are definite reasons why this war has lasted 9 unnecessary years; it's because genuinely well thought-out and common-sense approaches to winning are crippled by risk-aversion, blind adherence to standard policy, and a failure to really understand what this country needs from us. This failure of COIN implementation starts not at the tactical level where the LTs and CPTs are trying to do their best and what they know is right; rather, it starts at the strategic level, at the HQs and the FOBs and radiates down the chain of command like a cancer.

Tactics never won a war and they won't win this one. The Commander's "new" COIN guidance is unfortunately stillborn in Kabul, as are the Afghan Hands assigned here. The best guidance to come out of 9 years of this war is falling on a Big Army mentality which cannot adapt from OIF standard operating procedure. The resultant risks to our own strategy are either dismissed or are incapable of being understood. In either case we *have not* and *are not* implementing required paths to success for PC-COIN.

### ***What Must Change***

Kabul was once full of foreigners and the residents here, even now, would think nothing of it at the sight of us going to restaurants in civvies, sightseeing, or enjoying R&R time downtown with our Afghan friends and coworkers. I know this for a fact because unlike the intel analysts, supervisors, and forcepro gurus who develop and implement current policy, some of us have walked around Kabul in civvies without weapon and IBA, taken a local taxi back and forth, and spoken and enjoyed time with Kabul residents on their own terms in their own environment. And this is appreciated. They see me as a representative of a country who is willing to trust them and their government. This has the reciprocal effect of allowing *them* to trust me and, in turn, *their* government. Common-sense policies and personal risk avoidance/mitigation strategies are much more effective than blanket forcepro edicts developed behind the desk of someone whom has never walked down an Afghan market or actually talked to people on the street. The sniper screens keeping outsiders from looking in also do a pretty darn good job of prohibiting us from seeing the reality outside.

This is, however, fully within our grasp to change. We must see the forest through the trees and realize both propositions of zero risk/100% force protection along with effective population-centric counterinsurgency cannot logically be true at the same time. This growing dilemma in Kabul, if not addressed to align local policies to the intent of the Commander's new guidance, will have a much further-reaching effect on GIRoA's viability than local commands realize.

## ***Recommendations for Immediate Consideration***

As J.B. Bartholomees Jr. said, counterinsurgency forces must be attuned to the environment.<sup>1</sup> In Kabul, we are not. We know there will be sporadic violence. And we know random attacks will be socially and psychologically effective by creating fear, anxiety, and feelings of vulnerability amongst the populace. **We can ensure this does not happen only if we stand “shohna-ba-shohna” with the residents of Kabul when it really matters.** By segregating ourselves from them, we do allow it. As such:

- Study the British Army forcepro model in Belfast, Northern Ireland regarding *Normalization*
- Begin a phased rescinding of local Movement Control Policy (and most references contained therein) and replace with realistic threat- and environment-specific policies commensurate with PC-COIN theory; first for Afghan Hands, then to the wider force
- Except for few key positions remove Afghan Hand billets from Kabul subordinate commands (USACE, IJC, CSTC-A/NTM-A) and realign to ISAF Strategic Partnering and Stability
- Begin limited, at first, controlled group trips (in civvies) to known Afghan marketplaces and restaurants around the Green Zone, MoI, Babur Gardens, Kabul City Center, Shar-e Now, etc; implement a walking ‘town patrol’ to maintain a visible security presence
- Instead of using solely uparmored SUVs to speed around town, begin contracts with vetted local taxi companies (TTL, Afghan Logistics & Tours) for short trips to ministries and agencies; the taxi fares can be negotiated paid in advance (since it’s a flat rate within the city) through the contract with accounting based on pickups/trips made over time; I’ve used both of these companies around town problem-free...and feel much safer (and inconspicuous) in civvies in a local taxi than in a 2-or more vehicle convoy in full IBA
- Ensure meetings at civilian ministries occur in civilian clothes, without IBA/weapons
- Allow walking (in groups) to MoI from ISAF or CSTC-A HQs

## ***Conclusion***

The current command environment forces Afghan Hands to drink coffee at Green Beans with other Americans rather than chai with Afghan coworkers in a downtown restaurant. This is antithetical to any PC-COIN-based strategy. GEN Petraeus is the second commander of USFOR-A/ISAF to issue COIN Guidance that *could* have a positive net effect to our overall strategy. If it is properly implemented, it *will* be the underlying factor that allows us to build-up the sovereign capacities of an Afghan government and security forces to ensure the people can place enough of their trust in the system, their economy, and their future. But this will never occur as long as COMISAF’s instructions are being watered-down in lieu of dogmatic and incoherent force protection procedure. **Cognitive dissonance regarding the fundamental doctrine of PC-COIN will continue the graduated trend towards losing the trust of the people and as such, the COG of the host nation.** By doing this, *we* define the future course of the war for the worse. We are not here to protect ourselves. We are here to enable a secure and stable GIRoA to connect to

---

<sup>1</sup> “A SURVEY OF THE THEORY OF STRATEGY,” Bartholomees, J. Boone, Jr., U.S. Army War College Guide To National Security Issues, Vol I: Theory Of War And Strategy, 3rd Edition, 2008

the people from Kabul and provide for their governance, security, and economic development to leave Afghanistan a better place than we found it. If used properly, Afghan Hands and a redefined command climate to allow for the proper implementation of guidance will see this through.

*Major Jeremy Kotkin is a Functional Area-59, Strategist, and assigned to ISAF through USFOR-A. In 2009, he was selected to become a member of CJCS's Afghan Hands Program, attended Dari language training, and subsequently deployed with the first rotation of Afghan Hands in theater. He is currently embedded full-time in GIRoA's Office of the National Security Council in Kabul. Previously, he published Is the War in Afghanistan in the Interests of the United States and its Allies? and R.I.P. Mr. Charles Wilson, Father of the Taliban for Small Wars Journal.*

*The comments and opinions are the author's own and do not constitute the position of ISAF, the US Army, or DoD*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).  
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.



Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).