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Counterinsurgency: Falling Short of the Comprehensive Approach in Afghanistan

by Matthew Ince

As we enter into a new year of conflict within Afghanistan, NATO must seek to work alongside its partners to overcome failures in the adoption of the Comprehensive Approach to COIN operations. At present the political and economic pillars of such an approach continue to be overshadowed by their own shortfalls and a disproportionate emphasis on the military dimension of the campaign. If left unaddressed this will critically impact upon the ability of the international community to address key grievances within Afghanistan and will further perpetuate a situation whereby political objectives will become increasingly unattainable.

In all cases, individual conflicts will reflect the unique circumstantial characteristics of the age in which they take place.¹ While contemporary conflicts are similar in many ways with the wars of old, it is not surprising that as wider structural geopolitical shifts resonate throughout the international system, the character of some conflicts have begun to reflect broader alterations in their makeup, scale and levels of complexity. Today's wars will therefore increasingly demand that military forces become adept at conducting activities such as counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism, intelligence and law enforcement operations. Within the current setting, the need to conduct COIN operations in particular, has increasingly required that militaries change their focus from a traditional emphasis on implementing the maximum use of force, to the adoption of new approaches. Such activities include facilitating the creation of legitimate democratically elected governments and winning the support of the local populace in order to deny an insurgency its support base – a tactic commonly referred to as 'winning-hearts-and-minds'.

In contrast to the tradition defence paradigm, where military activity constituted the means by which political objectives were achieved, within many contemporary conflicts, military operations often in fact only serve to create the conditions within which these overarching objectives can then be pursued – particularly as conflicts have become increasingly timeless and take place among and between civilian populations rather than being an exchange between two or more professional armed forces fighting over a set battlefield.² The relative position of strength felt by conventional military powers is therefore becoming increasingly irrelevant as they continue to confront opponents who do not play by the same rules. Furthermore, the interplay of often deep-rooted grievances held by insurgent combatants' means that their will to succeed has the potential to outweigh the political will of state actors who are likely to increasingly feel the financial and human cost of war among electorates at home.

¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Michael Howard and Peter Paret eds. & trans.), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p583.

² Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2006), p269.

Nowhere is the changing character of contemporary warfare more evident than in the present international campaign in Afghanistan – where a combined multinational civil-military effort continues to focus upon defeating and dismantling extremist groups like Al-Qaeda and continuing to deny their operatives safe havens. A key activity in this endeavour is preventing the return of Afghanistan to Taliban control and supporting the training and development of Afghanistan's civil infrastructures and security forces to ensure that it retains a legitimate government and does not again become a sanctuary for radical Islamists and a training ground for further terrorist attacks against the West. However, due to the pervasive nature of insurgent activity within the region and excessive levels of corruption that are deep-rooted within every level of Afghanistan's national infrastructure, the stabilization of the region increasingly demands a concerted COIN effort to secure key population centres and prevent extremist groups from gaining momentum in their attempts to expand their spheres of influence.

It has now been over a year since General Stanley McChrystal's Initial Assessment as COMISAF highlighted the need for a dramatic overhaul of the international community's approach to conducting COIN operations in Afghanistan.³ However, despite McChrystal's strong calls for greater 'unity-of-effort' within the region, his replacement as Commander of the NATO-led mission by General David Petraeus in June 2010 only served to illustrate the residing tensions that continue to resonate between the civil and military dimensions of the campaign. Following recent losses in the US Mid-Terms, it is therefore not unlikely that troop withdrawal from Afghanistan will again rise to the top of the political agenda as the Obama Administration begins to prepare for the forthcoming Presidential elections in 2012.

Nevertheless, despite the need to win over an increasingly disheartened electorate, US policy makers must not lose sight of the fact that a premature withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan would undermine the integrity, reputation and solidarity of NATO, its future ability to conduct out-of-area operations and its vital role within the wider international stabilisation effort in the region. Such a withdrawal could also facilitate irreversible socio-political damage to the Afghan society whose present infrastructural legitimacy, security, accountable legal authority and resilience against insurgent activities is currently bolstered by the presence, support and ongoing levels of training provided in-country by serving military personnel from the US, its NATO partners and their allies.

This argument also applies to the under-resourcing of multinational Armed Forces in theatre, as failure to provide troops with the appropriate levels of equipment, training and logistical support only places unnecessary strains upon the safety of military personnel, their ability to conduct their jobs efficiently, the peace of mind of their families back home, the security of the Afghan people they are trying to protect and the wider long term reputation of the defence capabilities of NATO member states. It would also impact upon the safety and security of the citizens of all Western countries who are faced with the uncertain implications that could stem from Afghanistan again returning to Taliban control and being utilised as a safe haven and training ground by extremist groups who aim to damage Western interests within the Muslim majority world, take out their grievances through the systematic use of terror in Western lands and engender wider systemic change through the pursuit of their global political objectives.

³ General Stanley A McChrystal, Commander, United States Forces – Afghanistan/ International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), *Commander's Initial Assessment* (30 August 2009).

Although the emphasis within Afghanistan should be upon strengthening the civilian dimension of the campaign effort, particularly as the balance between the civil and military pillars of any COIN operation ideally sees the military only constituting 20% of the effort while the civilian contribution takes up 80%,⁴ this should not be done at the risk of compromising the successes and developments that have already been achieved in denying groups like Al-Qaeda their previous sanctuary. In this sense it would be unwise for the US to succumb to popular opinion as success will ultimately rest upon its ability to maintain cohesion, sustained commitment, unity-of-effort and the political will to see through its current commitments to the point of resolution.

The NATO community must therefore seek to work alongside its partners to overcome the current failures in the adoption of a comprehensive approach in Afghanistan, where the political and economic pillars of such an approach have been continuously overshadowed by their own shortfalls and a disproportionate emphasis on the military dimension of the campaign. Within this context, a comprehensive approach refers to the need to inter-weave activities in areas of security, reconstruction, governance and law and order so that they mutually reinforce each other like the strands of a rope. A comprehensive approach, in a COIN campaign that involves a diverse spectrum of multinational contributions, should therefore be one that employs a fully encompassing range of civil, military, and economic capabilities, where all participants are coordinated in a unified effort to fulfil the tasks and activities that the campaign requires for success. These include creating a secure and stable environment where political objectives can be achieved. This involves winning over the population, neutralising the insurgency, building infrastructure, civil capabilities, stable government, and enabling host nation capabilities so that they can provide their own security.

A key contributing factor in current failures to adopt such an approach is the increasing trend towards the militarisation of aid where military operations have become the main focus of, and primary vessel for, the implementation of aid initiatives in the region. According to a review conducted by the Afghan Government's Ministry of Finance in 2009, military agencies have committed US\$18.3bn in aid to Afghanistan since 2001, which equates to 40% of the total development aid which has been committed to Afghanistan by the international community within that timeframe. Of this, 91% has been invested in security sector reform which has become an integral part of the military operations being conducted.⁵ This has also been accompanied by the persistent failure of civilian bodies such as the EU and the UN's assistance mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) to meet their commitments in the region. For example, in 2009 the UN only delivered a total disbursement of US\$31.36m in development aid to Afghanistan of the US\$89.2m that it had pledged to commit.⁶ Furthermore, in 2008 the EU only deployed 1,422 out of the 6,050 police officers that it reportedly had ready for operation and 132

⁴ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Praeger, 1964), p89.

⁵ Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Finance (GIRoA MoF), 'Donor Financial Review', Report 1388, November 2009, p15. Available online <http://www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor'sFinancialReview%20ReportNov2009.pdf> (accessed 26/03/10)

⁶ Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Finance (GIRoA MoF), 'Donor Financial Review', Report 1388, November 2009, p46. Available online <http://www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor'sFinancialReview%20ReportNov2009.pdf> (accessed 26/03/10)

out of the 939 rule of law experts that were on stand-by.⁷ In the case of the EU, this is particularly characteristic of the capabilities-expectations gap which it repeatedly demonstrates with regards to its external policies.

Explanations for why and how such prohibiting dynamics have arisen over the last eight years can be understood as the combination of an interconnected set of limitations. First, the civilian aspect of the operation, which largely constitutes the political and economic pillars of the approach, is often restricted by the bureaucratic shortcomings of the range of actors involved. Restrictions include the need of policy makers to occasionally pander to domestic political considerations, the requirement of practitioners to adhere to the varying limitations often imposed by the individual government ministries, agencies and funding bodies to whom they are answerable, and the constraints imposed upon all actors by the framework and protocols of international laws, codes of conduct, and rules of engagement. Such prerequisites therefore restrain growing efforts to adopt a comprehensive approach and force the military to take the lead within COIN – an outcome that inevitably causes military objectives to rise to the top of the international agenda.

Second, the current operating environment within Afghanistan is inevitably a perilous setting for non-military personnel to operate within.⁸ The difficulty of deploying aid workers within the region, particularly within areas of heightened conflict, has therefore contributed towards the growing decline of development professions within the field and led to the retrenchment of civilian personnel to provincial capitals – a tendency that escalates as aid workers increasingly find themselves the victims of insurgent attacks.⁹ As such, there is often no alternative to aid being delivered through military means as the Armed Forces increasingly take on new roles to fill the void created by civilian aid agencies being unprepared to work within the region. The responsibility for conducting the eighty percent non-military contribution of a successful COIN operation has therefore increasingly fallen to ISAF, requiring its military personnel to conduct activities that are often outside of their purview – for which they are often inadequately trained.¹⁰ These limitations therefore indicate that the failure to adopt a comprehensive approach is inexplicitly tied to the lack of an overarching civilian strategy and unwillingness by civilian actors in undertaking the tasks and activities that such an approach demands.

The consequence is an increased divergence from efforts to achieve another key dimension of the comprehensive approach, namely, unity of effort and command amongst the multiple dimensions of international contributions within the campaign. A notable contributor to the unity of effort dilemma is the PRT concept implemented within Afghanistan as a means of enabling both burden-sharing amongst troop contributing nations and to ensure that COIN is specifically tailored to the requirements of its differing regions. However, in an attempt to be region-specific, PRTs - of which there are 26 currently operating in Afghanistan, of varying size, composition and leadership structure - have inadvertently fragmented the overall unity of effort

⁷ Daniel Korski, 'British Civil-Military Integration', *RUSI Journal*, 154: 6, (2009), p21.

⁸ Des Browne, 'Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Approach To Current Challenges', *The RUSI Journal*, 151: 5, (2006), p12.

⁹ Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), "Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: 2009 Update" (New York: HPG, 2009), p6.

¹⁰ Lt Gen David Barno, 'Fighting the Other War: Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan 2003-2005', *Military Review* (September –October 2007), p43.

and command in the campaign as they lack any coherent centralized planning to manage their collective activities.¹¹ This political weakness undermines the coherence of ISAF operations as the lack of a clear strategy and guidance on the civil-military division of labour becomes increasingly exacerbated by the proliferation of actors cluttering the same space.¹²

Unity of effort in achieving a comprehensive approach is also hindered by inconsistencies in the solidarity of both the political will and commitment of those involved. This weakness in commitment is particularly evident within President Obama's renewed AfPak strategy which set a date for troop withdrawal to begin irrespective of achievements being made on the ground - a dimension to his strategy which further illustrates the restrictions held over policy makers by the need to adhere to tangible domestic political considerations. Attempts to achieve unity of effort are further hindered as NATO Allies are still not in agreement over what the comprehensive approach means in practice, as for many European governments it has had little effect on the way in which they choose to conduct military operations, while for the US the term has just become another, perhaps more EU-friendly, way of describing their general approach to COIN operations.¹³ As such, until a universally agreed definition is formulated describing what this approach practically entails, hopes for achieving unity of effort in its execution will remain fragmented as the array of actors involved continue to work towards a diverging set of interests, timeframes and agendas - a paradox that will inevitably continue to plague international efforts within the region as individual actors will remain motivated and influenced by a broad set of threat perceptions about both the nature and importance of the campaign at large.

Too much is therefore being conducted by military means and set against an agenda of military priorities - a trend that blurs the distinction between military personnel and civilian aid workers operating on the ground, increases the number of civilian deaths in theatre, places larger financial strains on military budgets, demands higher numbers of trained military personnel to be operating in country and contributes towards the difficulty of deploying development professionals within the field. Such imbalances in coordination and levels of civil-military contribution have hindered the full adoption of a comprehensive approach to the COIN operation and are thus intrinsically linked to the lack of an overarching civilian strategy. The US should, in conjunction with its partners and allies, therefore aspire to focus its military efforts upon more narrowly defined tasks such as training the Afghan National Army. Furthermore, the US should use its position of influence within the UN, the EU and NATO to actively encourage its partner countries and organisations such as UNAMA to uphold their fair share of obligations within the campaign. This will guarantee that the costs of present operations are more evenly spread across participating nations; while ensuring that the most effective COIN strategy has been employed in the region - an approach that is likely to engender a more timely resolution to the current campaign and thus enable all troop contributing nations to make greater financial savings in the long term.

The emphasis must therefore be increasingly placed upon the political effort as the continued asymmetric focus upon the military dimension will create further fragility, instability

¹¹ Barbara Stapleton, 'A Means to What End? Why PRTs Are Peripheral to the Bigger Political Challenges in Afghanistan', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (Autumn 2007), p40.

¹² Edward Burke 'Leaving the Civilians Behind: The "Soldier-diplomat" in Afghanistan and Iraq', *Prism* Vol.1 No.2. (2009), p42.

¹³ Daniel Korski, 'British Civil-Military Integration', *RUSI Journal*, 154: 6, (2009), p21.

and insecurity. Furthermore, a politically unified front must be maintained where the military effort is but one of multiple efforts under an overall coordinated and unified command. Otherwise, shortcomings in the adoption of a comprehensive approach will continue to have significant repercussions which will further hinder regional stabilization. This will further impact upon the ability of the international community to address key grievances within Afghanistan and ensure that legitimate governance is maintained, as well as its ability to successfully train Afghan security forces and enable Afghanistan to provide security to its citizens and overcome the excessive levels of corruption that are deep rooted within every level of Afghanistan's national infrastructure.

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