# 'Holding' for Companies and Platoons in Counterinsurgency

*by* George R. Dimitriu

In August 2010, the Dutch redeployed their forces after being active in Afghanistan for four years, aiding and abetting ISAF with around 2000 troops each rotation. Initially, the contribution after August had been discussed fiercely, but the collapse of the Netherlands' coalition government in February 2010 meant also the end of the discussion about prolongation of the mission of Task Force Uruzgan; the withdrawal of troops is definite and more or less completed by the time of writing.

In a recently published article about the performance of the Dutch forces in Uruzgan, which I wrote together with Dr. B.A. de Graaf,[1] we considered the efforts, the operations and the lessons learned by analyzing three operations in Uruzgan: operation 'Perth' in July 2006; 'Spin Ghar' (White Mountain) in October 2007; and 'Tura Ghar' (Sabre Mountain) in January 2009, all three of which were conducted in the Baluchi valley in Uruzgan. One of our most important conclusions is that clearing operations had very limited positive effects and mainly negative effects, if carried out on their own. This comes as no surprise as troops throughout Afghanistan were confronted with the same effects when the cleared areas were not hold thereafter. Therefore, I thought it would be worthwhile to look once again, and more deeply, at the complexity of 'holding' areas after 'clearing'. In my view – and views of many others - this is the most crucial phase, but also the one which is the most difficult to execute. Based on the Dutch experiences in Uruzgan I introduce a model for executing the hold-phase. I focus on the tactical level, but otherwise none of the principles I introduce is really new; it is simply a question of interpreting and applying the existing COIN principles.

## *The mission of Task Force Uruzgan*

The Dutch counterinsurgency campaign in Uruzgan was in accordance with the strategy of RC-South. They operated in close coordination with the Australians of the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force (MRTF) that is stationed in the capital of Uruzgan, Tarin Kowt as well. Contrary to some who believe that the Task Force Uruzgan conducted a "Dutch Approach", basically the strategy did not differ significantly from other nations that are active in south-Afghanistan.[2] The current counterinsurgency approach evolved from the ink spot concept to the so-called Shape – Clear – Hold – Build.[3] According to Counterinsurgency doctrine both strategies are actually virtually the same.[4] Shape – Clear – Hold – Build originally was invented

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[1] G.R. Dimitriu and B.A. de Graaf, 'The Dutch COIN approach: three years in Uruzgan, 2006–2009', in: *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 21, nr. 3, september 2010, 429-458

[2] Major-General Mart de Kruif, quoted in Padmini Rienstra and Hans van Potten, '"We praten niet alleen over vrede, we brengen vrede"', in: Koninklijke Landmacht, *Monitor,* no. 3, 2009, 9.

[3] Most doctrines mention only Clear – Hold – Build.

[4] Headquarters Department of the Army, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, FM 3.24.2 86.

by Sir Robert Thompson, who described the method Clear – Hold – Winning – Won in his work *Defeating Communist Insurgency* in 1966.[5]

Major-General De Kruif concluded at the beginning of 2009 that things were going well in Uruzgan. According to him, this was because Uruzgan was not the Taliban's main territory; the province in fact was rather isolated. But, he added, this success was also in part due to the approach of the Dutch troops.[6] Lieutenant Colonel Swillens, commander of the Battlegroup up to March 2009, confirmed this, quoting General David Patraeus: 'it's a question of the long term; it's a marathon, not a sprint'.[7] Unfortunately finishing the job in Uruzgan will have to be fulfilled by other nations. Nevertheless, throughout the years, the Dutch Task Force learned a lot.

One of the most important lessons that the Dutch forces learned from the Uruzgan experience, is that clearing operations have very limited positive effects and mainly negative effects if not followed by effectively holding it. The local population will not be easily won for our cause when troops 'clear and return to base' immediately afterwards. At a COIN conference in New York in November 2009 Thomas Johnson, Professor of Naval postgraduate School, considered this 'early departure' one of the major reasons for lack of success and locals losing faith in GIRoA and Coalition Forces.[8] This corroborates various reports about locals who complain about the unpredictable and non-permanent presence of coalition forces. When we do attempt to hold an area, we need to do it properly. Apart from many other important aspects, holding an area is mainly about a 24 / 7 presence among the population and about protecting them on a full time base. The disadvantage of the relatively small Dutch Task Force was however that it was very difficult to follow up the 'clear' phase with a 'hold' phase. Given the capacity of the TFU, the permanent protection of the local population in the three ADZs was a complete assignment in itself.

From our operations in Uruzgan we learned that counterinsurgency, and especially the holding phase – is mainly conducted at platoon level. The platoon commanders play a central and decisive role in the current mission.[9] It is precisely the units at the lowest levels that have the knowledge of what actually is going on.[10] The platoon comes to every village, should be present day and night and provides trustworthy contacts for the village community.[11] In the end they are

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[5] Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, (London, 1966), 111-115.

[6] Major-General Mart de Kruif in: '3D-concept werkt goed', *Defensiekrant,* 26 March 2009.

[7] 'Commandant Battlegroup: we hebben overal gedomineerd', 29 March 2009, www.defensie.nl; See also: Rupert Smith, *'The Utility of Force, the Art of War in the Modern World'*, (London 2005), 289.

[8] Professor Thomas Johnson argued that ISAF units did 'clear – return to FOB' instead of 'clear- hold-build. Oration during the counterinsurgency conference 'America's Strategic Burden', on 20 November 2009 at the Center on Law and Security in New York.

[9] Lieutenant-Colonel Piet van der Sar,'Kick the enemy where it hurts most, de steun van de lokale bevolking, daar gaat het om,'*Carré*, (2007) (1), pp.10-17, 10; 'De luit in charge in Uruzgan', *Landmacht*, July 2007, 11-12.

[10] Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, *Intelligence Collection, Handling and Analysis Undergo Fundamental Change,* Lecture, Joint Warfare Conference, Arlington, 25-26 November 2006; Lt Col Michael L. Downs, 'Rethinking the Combined Force Air Component Commander's Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Approach to Counterinsurgency', *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spring 2008 and Major-General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, published by the Center for a New American Security, January 2010, 12.

[11] Lieutenant-Colonel Piet van der Sar,'Kick the enemy where it hurts most, de steun van de lokale bevolking, daar gaat het om,'*Carré*, (2007) (1), pp.10-17.

responsible for the area and they know the terrain better than anyone else.[12] To these lowest levels, counterinsurgency still is quite an unknown phenomenon. Apart from Kilcullen's 28 articles, most of the basic principles are unknown to these practitioners while counterinsurgency operations, and specifically the 'hold' phase of these operations, are so complex that they demand the utmost from young platoon commanders. With a theoretical expansion of the tactical 'hold' phase in the COIN operation – the concept of 'Settle, Secure, Understand, Engage' – I try to deliver a different perspective to this process.

## *'Holding' for company and platoon level*

*When you conduct an action, it is always in the interest of the population. [...] There is nothing more damaging to our case, nothing makes our always difficult task even more difficult, than when you find yourself faced with an embittered population.*

-Dutch Instruction *Politiek-Politionele Taak Leger* (VPTL), 1928,[13]

As described above, a 'hold' operation follows the 'clearing' of an area or village. Against the background of the Dutch experience in Uruzgan we therefore look specifically at the phase of the 'hold' operation and detail its working out more specifically, because it is during this phase that the complexity of a COIN operation becomes apparent in all its aspects. The 'hold' phase consists of integrated (joint, combined and interagency) operations conducted by the elements of the Task Force according to the comprehensive approach. We focus here on the lowest level: that of the company, the platoon and the group of the battlegroup or battalion.

The 'holding' of an area is time-consuming and can, even when well executed, in the short term lead to more victims.[14] The insurgent will do all in his power to thwart rapprochement between the counter-insurgents and the local population. Like his adversary, he too needs the people. From them the insurgent gains his information, his shelter and food, and at the same time he merges with the local population and uses them as his cover. Historical experiences in counterinsurgency however suggest that accepting risks by operating among the population will ultimately save lives on the long run.[15] A well executed 'hold' operation in the long term will provide the best chance of stability and sustainable development. I propose to divide the hold-phase into four sub-phases – Settle, Secure, Understand and Engage. Perhaps this is better seen as a quadripartite operation with fours aspects rather than sequential phases, since apart from beginning at different points in time they do not follow each other in a strict chronological order, but rather proceed simultaneously.

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[12] For example, Lt Col Michael L. Downs, 'Rethinking the Combined Force Air Component Commander's Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Approach to Counterinsurgency', *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spring 2008.

[13] 'Voorschrift Politiek-Politionele Taak Leger (VPTL)' (1928), 47.

[14] 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, xxvii; United Kingdom Army, '*British Army Field Manual, Countering Insurgency*', volume 1 part 10, October 2009, 60, cf. 'Loyaliteit is drie keer nee durven zeggen, interview Peter van Uhm', *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 May 2009.

[15] General Stanley McChrystal, *Commander ISAF's Initial Assessment*, Kabul, August 2009, 21.
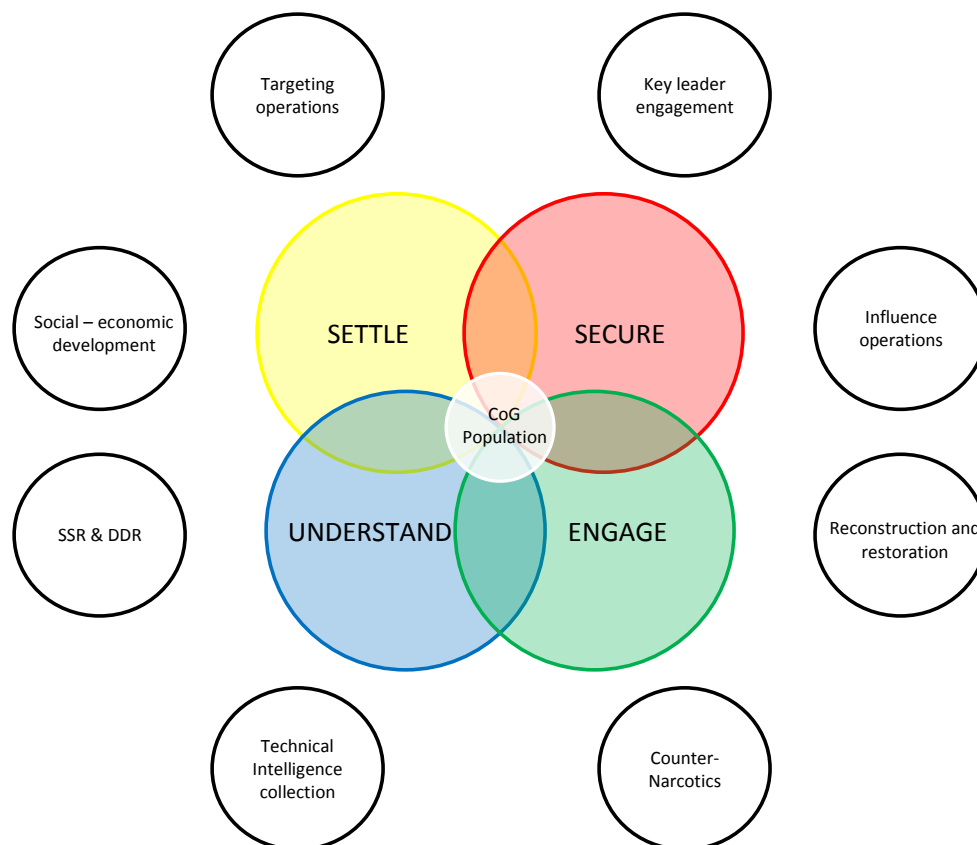
**Figure One. The four core tasks of a platoon or company when holding an area with the local population as the 'centre of gravity'. Surrounding these (not exhaustive) are the tasks with which the units support, but these are mainly carried out by higher levels[16]**

## *Settle*

If you establish persistent presence in the correct places, the enemy has to come to fight you.'

-David Kilcullen[17]

      In the 'settle' phase the unit (company or platoon, supplemented with indigenous security troops) establishes itself at a permanent location in the area of operation. This may be a village, but it can also be in an area with several different communities. Referring to the Dutch experiences, establishing bases just outside the valleys was not sufficient; the Dutch Task Force also had to guarantee a permanent presence in the valley. The 'settle' phase can follow on directly from a 'clear' operation, but may also coincide with rotational changes of successive units, in which case a unit that is rotating out of the area hands on the responsibility to a succeeding unit which will continue the 'hold' operation.

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[16] Model created by George Dimitriu

[17] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 96.

Preferably, the unit moves into a small and accessible patrol base in or next to a village. The point here is that it is not a matter of controlling the high ground but of establishing a presence among the population.[18] Only by living among the population, one gains their confidence. A 'multifunctional quala', such as was realized in 2007 in Deh Rawod, in which both coalition and host nation forces can interact with the local population, tends to be far more effective and is much more in line with the COIN principles.[19]

Bringing the villages and their access routes under control  is more important than controlling the high ground,[20] for in this way the population becomes used to the presence of coalition troops and the soldiers can make the area their own (the importance of this aspect will become apparent in the 'understand' phase). Unfortunately most patrol bases in Uruzgan were almost all situated on the high ground, relatively remote from the population. Moreover, Dutch soldiers were moved fairly often during their period of rotation. For the success of a 'settle', phase however, it is essential that the unit remains in a single area, among the population.  The rotations are already so short that it is scarcely possible to get to know the population and the distinctive features of the terrain of the area. For the local population too it is difficult each time to have to become attached to yet another unit.

Finally, with the building of a permanent location, the troops convey the message that they are there for the long haul. Units should live in their area of operations rather than merely visiting it.[21] They are sooner perceived by the local population to be reliable and as a result they more quickly gain legitimacy. "We want to be present in more areas, among the Afghan population. At present they complain that the Dutch troops come only occasionally, and as a result the enemy has a free hand for much of the time", according to the (then) Lieutenant Colonel Rob Querido, commander of the Battlegroup during TFU-3 in 2007.[22]

Another important side effect of a permanent presence is that the local population gets to know the soldiers personally and is much more easily able to make contact – which often leads to an increased inflow of information. In conclusion, the 'settle' phase thus consists in establishing a permanent presence of troops, putting in sufficient manpower and the demarcation of the area of responsibility, i.e. the extent of the ink spot.

## Secure

*Secure the people where they sleep. Population security is our primary mission. […] Achieving population security promises to be an extremely long-term endeavor – a marathon, not a sprint.*

-General David H. Petraeus[23]

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[18] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 7 and David Galula, *Counterinsurgency warfare*, (New York 1964), 78.

[19] Ralph Coenen, 'Platoonhouse in Uruzgan als middel in counterinsurgency aanpak', *Landmacht*, March 2007, United Kingdom Army, '*British Army Field Manual, Countering Insurgency*', volume 1 part 10, oktober 2009, 178.

[20] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 73-74.

[21] David J. Kilcullen, *Measuring Progress in Afghanistan*, (Kabul December 2009), 15.

[22] George Marlet, 'Nederlandse militairen gaan vaker in gevecht met de Taliban', *Trouw,* 22 April 2007.

[23] General Petraeus quoted in: Col. Dominic J. Carcaccilo en Lt. Col. Andrea L. Thompson, *Achieving victory in Iraq, countering an insurgency,* (Mechanics- burg (PA) 2008), 165-166.

The primary task in the 'secure' phase is to protect the local population. This is *the* central task in counterinsurgency and the essence of the entire 'hold' operation.[24] It is also a permanent task that has to be guaranteed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.[25] Without permanent control there is no way of distinguishing the insurgent from the local population.[26] In the words of General Stanley McChrystal and Sergeant-Major Hall, 'Protecting the people is the mission'. According to Major-General Mart de Kruif, 'it's no use of getting into a village at 8:00 in the morning and then leave that village at 5:00 in the evening.'[27] The insurgents are then able to maintain their grip on the population by means of threats, molestation, intimidation, force, abduction, and also using propaganda and other means of persuasion. As stated by Majeed Khan, a tribal leader in Uruzgan: 'The soldiers [from NATO] come into the area, but then they leave and the Taliban come back. We don't encourage the Taliban, but nor can we stop them.'[28] Where this is the case, no population will readily or openly declare its support for the Afghan government, or sympathize with coalition troops. Ghulam Madin, a farmer who lives on the banks of the Helmand river in Southern Afghanistan once complained: 'Last time you [the foreign soldiers] bought us shoes as gifts, and it made big problems for us. The Taliban came and took them away. This time if we take gifts, the Taliban will finish us for sure.'[29] Like Madin, many Afghans feel caught in the middle:[30] 'The Taliban beat us and ask for food, and then the government beats us for helping the Taliban.'[31] And none of the parties can give them the security they crave for.

Therefore, the first condition for the success of the 'secure' phase is to make available a mixed force of coalition troops and local security troops that is sufficiently large to protect the area and to maintain stability.[32] In this phase, perception plays a key role. People's feeling of security can to a large extent be influenced by the way the unit carries out its duties. It is self-

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[24] Kalev I. Sepp, 'Best Practices in Counterinsurgency', *Military Review* (May-June 2005), 8-12; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 266; Sir Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency, (London 1966), 68; Bruce R. Pirnie, Edward O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)*, RAND Counterinsurgency Study, vol. 2, (Santa Monica 2008), 95; David Galula, *Counterinsurgency warfare,* (New York 1964), viii; Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,* RAND Counterinsurgency Study, vol. 4, (Santa Monica 2008), 93-95; John Nagl in: 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, xix and General Stanley McChrystal, *Commander ISAF's Initial Assessment*, Kabul, August 2009.

[25] For example, see Major-General Mart de Kruif in conversation with the American Colonel Gary Keck of the Department of Defense Press Office, 20 March 2009; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 94, 97, 111-112; 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, 122; Trent Scott and John Agoglia, 'Getting the basics right: a discussion on tactical actions for strategic impact in Afghanistan', www.smallwarsjournal.com, consulted 10 June 2009.

[26] Rupert Smith, *'The Utility of Force, the Art of War in the Modern World'*, (London 2005), 176, 284.

[27] Major-General Mart de Kruif in conversation with the American Colonel Gary Keck of the Department of Defense Press Office, 20 March 2009, see also: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Counterinsurgency (COIN)*, AJP 3.4.4, Ratification Draft 1, 2009, 130.

[28] Andrew Purvis, 'NATO: Alliance of the Unwilling', in: *Time*, 26 March 2008; Allan Orr, 'Recasting Afghan Strategy', in: *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 1 (March 2009), 95.

[29] Aryn Baker, 'Afghanistan: A War That's Still Not Won', in: *Time*, 26 June 2008.

[30] Martine van Bijlert, 'Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan', in: Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the new Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, (London, 2009), 162 and Rory Callinan 'Mission: Difficult', in: *Time*, 24 January 2008.

[31] Anup Kumar Datta, 'Post-Taliban Afghanistan', in: V. Krishnappa, Shantie Mariet D'Souza and Priyanka Singh (ed.), *Saving Afghanistan*, New Delhi 2009, 132.

[32] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 97.

evident that foot-patrols, where soldiers talk with the local people, create a very different impression from that created by a caravan of military units hidden behind armour plating. In this context, the IED tactics of the insurgents, aimed at forcing the coalition troops to adopt heavier armored protection, are particularly damaging and successful. The insurgents recognize the importance of perception better than anyone else. They realize that the real extent of security is less important than the local population's feeling of security.[33] They do not only focus on hitting against the coalition troops themselves, but also aim to disrupt their contacts with the population.[34] This tactic moreover stimulates coalition forces to divert their attention to more force protection, which in turn distances them – both physically and psychologically – from the people they seek to protect even further.[35]

Protecting the local population consequently consists overwhelmingly of defensive activities, although this does not mean that offensive activities are always avoided.[36] But it should be taken into account that the use of violence sometimes can sometimes create more enemies than it eliminates.[37] 'Kill one Pashtun tribesman and you make three more your sworn enemy' according to a colonel of the American Special Forces.[38] Certainly, when it comes to collateral damage, there is an extremely high probability of creating ever more enemies. Outrage about civilian casualties, combined with a culture of vengeance, has delivered the insurgents plenty of support within the population and lots of new recruits.[39] In the U.S. Counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24, this is sometimes expressed as: 'sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is.'[40] In short, it alienates the population and reduces the confidence in the coalition troops.[41]

The insurgents play this very cleverly by deliberately promoting civilian casualties because they know that this will have major repercussions for the ISAF. Nor do they shrink from killing civilians themselves and blaming the ISAF.[42] Sometimes the best option can even be to do absolutely nothing.[43] It is not uncommon for insurgents to elicit an over-reaction that they can

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[33] Speech by Air Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, 1 December 2008, www.rusi.org/events, consulted 15 April 2009.

[34] Lieutenant-Colonel Dr. David Kilcullen 'United States Counterinsurgency, an Australian view', PPT-Presentatie, http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents australianview.pdf (undated, consulted 26 June 2009).

[35] General Stanley McChrystal, *Commander ISAF's Initial Assessment*, Kabul, August 2009, 6-7.

[36] 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, 39.

[37] Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, (London 1966), 35 and 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, xxv.

[38] John Barry and Evan Thomas, 'Obama's Vietnam' *Newsweek*, 9 February 2009, 33.

[39] Nigel Aylwin-Foster, 'Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations', in: *Military Review*, November – December 2005, 2-15. see also: Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'Taking Stock of the Afghan Conflict', V. Krishnappa, Shantie Mariet D'Souza and Priyanka Singh (ed.), *Saving Afghanistan*, New Delhi 2009, 123-124.

[40] 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, 49.

[41] For instance, see Carlotta Gall, 'From Hospital, Afghans rebut U.S. account', *New York Times*, 25 January 2009 and Rory Callinan.'Mission: Difficult', in: *Time*, 24 January 2008.

[42] Speech by Air Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, 1 December 2008, 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, xxvii.

[43] 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, 39.

then exploit for propaganda purposes.[44] Drinking a cup of tea with the locals may perhaps seem less heroic than patrolling in armored vehicles but in many cases it is more effective.[45]

In this context the 'secure' phase of the hold operation involves the following elements: protection of the population on a '24/7' base, restricting access to secure area, conducting (foot) patrols, guarding the main access roads and essential locations (for example, the food distribution points and hospitals) and setting up mobile checkpoints and/or (temporary) roadblocks.

In addition one can think of the following activities: introducing a curfew, limiting movements by the local population, searching houses for weapons and explosive materials (cordon & search), the registration of weapons, registration of the population and the introduction of an identification (ID) system with the help of ID cards. This last element does not only allow the forces to identify people from outside the area but makes it also possible to map the local population. The latter brings us to the next phase, the understanding of the people and their culture.

## Understand

*We cannot defeat the insurgency unless we understand what drives it.*

-David Kilcullen[46]

Understanding the local population and the culture is an aspect that should be dealt with during the preparatory period before the troops are sent out. The British understood this during the conflict in Northern Ireland in the latter part of the last century. The training of units that were to be sent to Northern Ireland was extremely thorough and specifically focused on the terms of engagement and area of responsibility of the unit concerned.[47] Sir Rupert Smith wrote that: 'To understand the operation among the people, and to capture their will we must first understand the people.[48] On the initiative of Lieutenant Colonel Piet van der Sar, the Dutch military are given lessons in the Afghan culture during their preparatory training before being sent out.[49]

In-depth insight into the operational environment is the basis of every plan in a counterinsurgency campaign.[50] When the platoon or company is ignorant of the terrain, of demographic factors, of the possible *root causes* and other threat factors in the area of responsibility they run the serious risk of missing indicators of underlying, hidden conflicts. Understanding the complex human terrain is however even more crucial than mapping the geographic area, since the conflict in Afghanistan will be won by persuading the population, not

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[44] 'A new architecture, counter-insurgency approach for Afghanistan', (2009), www.icosgroup.net, consulted 15 March 2009; Frank Kitson, *Low intensity operations, Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (Harrisburg (PA) 1971), 200.

[45] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., 'How to Win in Iraq', *Foreign Affairs* vol. 84 (September-October 2005), no. 5.

[46] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009)*,* 114.

[47] Kolonel Richar Iron, 'Britain's longest war, Northern Ireland 1967 — 2007', in: Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (eds.), *Counterinsurgency in modern warfare*, (Oxford 2008), 18 and John A.Nagl, *Learning to eat soup with a knife. Counter-insurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago 2005), 204-205.

[48] Rupert Smith, *'The Utility of Force, the Art of War in the Modern World'*, (London 2005), 279.

[49] Gielt Algra, 'Tips om misverstanden te voorkomen', *Checkpoint,* (July-August 2006), no. 6, 10.

[50] Martijn Kitzen, 'Westerse militaire cultuur en counter-insurgency, een tegenstrijdige realiteit,' *Militaire Spectator,* vol. 177 (2008) (3), 132; 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, 40.

by destroying the enemy (or its country).[51] Good contacts with the civilians in the area of operation also contribute to a higher level of security; they, after all, have the greater awareness of the situation in the area where they live.[52]

It is also essential to have some understanding of the local population before the unit goes over to such non-kinetic activities as reconstruction, influence operations and the building of certain basic facilities.[53] Not knowing enough about the village or society that one intents to help, can produce opposite effects, as explained by Major-General Flynn, Captain Mark Pottinger and Paul Batchelor in January 2010 in their paper 'Fixing Intel'.[54] The importance of cultural knowledge was already acknowledged before the Dutch mission began and explicitly articulated by the government. On 31 January 2006 Dutch ministers stated in answer to the Chamber committee[s] that 'reconstruction is impossible without adequate insight into clan and family structures, into possible sources of conflict and of conflicts of loyalties'. Without a thorough knowledge of these backgrounds, according to the ministers, the situation in Uruzgan could even 'destabilize'.[55]

In the past it has repeatedly happened that one tribe has felt aggrieved because the activities of a PRT appeared to be centered on the interests of another competing tribe. Knowledge of the area and the people prevents the development of activities being seen as a provocation to (a part of) the local population and consequently capable of being exploited for propaganda purposes by the insurgents.

Unlike conventional operations, the intelligence process in counterinsurgency is much more a bottom up process. It is precisely the units at the lowest levels that have the knowledge of what actually is going on.[56] As Kilcullen wrote in the first of his *Twenty-eight articles*: "Know every village, road, field, population group, tribal leader, and ancient grievance. Your task is to become the world expert on your district".[57] In other words, become part of the population and live among them. The need for platoons to be assigned their own area has already been emphasized in our discussion of the 'settle' phase, but for a successful completion of the 'understand' phase it is crucially important that, during the rotation, a unit should not be changed or given some other tasks, but should be able to focus on the area assigned to it. Without constant presence and a keen attention to all the factors mentioned above, it is simply not feasible to gain the necessary insight into the people, the adversary and the terrain. With a good transfer of the

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[51] Stanley A. McChrystal and Michael Hall, ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance', (HQ ISAF), 2.

[52] P. Mollema, and Colonel C.J. Matthijssen, 'Uruzgan: Op de goede weg, civiel-militaire samenwerking in een complexe Counter-insurgency operatie', Militaire Spectator 178 (July/August 2009), 405.

[53] Inspectie Ontwikkelingssamenwerking en Beleidsevaluatie (IOB), *Dutch Humanitarian Assistance: an evaluation,* Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, no. 303 (2006); Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,* RAND Counterinsurgency Study, vol. 4, (Santa Monica 2008), 129.

[54] Major-General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, published by the Center for a New American Security, January 2010, 20.

[55] Kamerstuk 2005-2006, 27925, no. 201, Tweede Kamer, see also: United Kingdom Army, '*British Army Field Manual, Countering Insurgency*', volume 1 part 10, oktober 2009, 53-54.

[56] Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby, *Intelligence Collection, Handling and Analysis Undergo Fundamental Change,* Lecture, Joint Warfare Conference, Arlington, 25-26 November 2006; and Major-General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, published by the Center for a New American Security, January 2010, 12.

[57] Lieutenant-Colonel David Kilcullen, 'Twenty-eight articles, fundamentals of company-level counterinsurgency', *Military Review,* (May-June 2006), p.103.

area and all the relevant information, successive rotations do not need to 'reinvent the wheel' each time.[58]

Finally, the gathering of good basic intelligence assists the process of distinguishing the insurgent from the general population. In contrast to conventional operations, the problem for the counter-insurgent lies not so much in the physical elimination of the adversary, but rather in the challenge to find that adversary at all.[59] 'The Taliban' are after all not often recognizable as such.[60] Most of the insurgents in Afghanistan are not men with a trans-national agenda or a dream of global jihad, but rather homegrown insurgents who are expressing their concerns or defending their local interests and values against outside influences.[61] They are men who fight without armour, out of dissatisfaction with their current situation, out of revenge, fear or family interests, out of boredom or a combination of any of these factors.[62] One moment they are normal farmers harvesting their papayas, the next moment they are fighting again.[63]

The insurgents are moreover closely interwoven with the general population.[64] They wear civilian dress, take refuge behind women, use children as 'spotters' and hide their weapons in schools and hospitals.[65] Basic intelligence, which at this level is mainly obtained through (overt) surveillance, reconnaissance, observation and low level human intelligence (Humint), produces leads for high value intelligence sensors. Without intelligence only the enemy visible on the surface would be neutralized, while the insurgency and its structure would continue to exist.[66]

In line with the points outlined above, the 'understand' phase should consist of the following activities: gathering intelligence by moving as much as possible among the population and by patrolling; meeting with different groups and tribes and conducting different forms of reconnaissance and observation. Each soldier can in this regard be employed as a sensor. An essential condition for this is that the troops chart the demographic composition of the area and in particular identify the mutual relations between the key players. This is possible by means of some kind of census, setting up a social network analysis or link analysis data-base in which are registered the 'local quasi-official rulers', criminals, local government functionaries, (illegal) sources of funding and their relations with leaders of insurgency.[67] In this way the people's grievances and the alleged root causes of the insurgency (in as far they exist) can be identified.

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[58] P.B. Soldaat et al., 'Observaties rond operaties in Afghanistan (II)', in: *Militaire Spectator*, vol. 178 (2009), no.6, 344.

[59] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 60.

[60] Martine van Bijlert, 'Unruly Commanders and Violent Power Struggles: Taliban Networks in Uruzgan', in: Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the new Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, (London, 2009), 171, 174 and Bette Dam, *Expeditie Uruzgan, De weg van Hamid Karzai naar het paleis*, (Amsterdam 2009), 55-59, 88-89.

[61] Fareed Zakaria, 'A turnaround strategy, we're better at creating enemies in Afghanistan than friends. Here's how to fix that – and the war, too', *Newsweek,* 9 February 2009, 36.

[62] For instance, see: Dr. Daniel Marston, 'Lessons in 21st counterinsurgency, Afghanistan 2001-07', in: Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in modern warfare*, (Oxford 2008), 220-240.

[63] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 38-41. Zie ook: Hans van Griensven, 'It's all about the Afghan people' en: Sir Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency (London, 1966), 34.

[64] Kamerstuk 2005-2006, 27925, no. 201, Tweede Kamer.

[65] 'The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual', FM 3-24, xxvii..

[66] Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, (London 1966), 119; Rupert Smith, *'The Utility of Force, the Art of War in the Modern World'*, (London 2005), 284

[67] P.B. Soldaat et al., 'Observaties rond operaties in Afghanistan (I)', in: *Militaire Spectator* vol. 178 (2009) (5), 262-263.

The information obtained can also be used to set up a system of tip lines that can function as an early warning system. This brings us to the last phase, engaging the population in operations.

## *Engage*

*If the great mass of the population knows it will be protected by a strong, just government, it has no reason to cooperate with the guerrillas.*[68]

Engaging the population in the operation in fact comes down to influencing the inhabitants and neutralizing any hostile elements in the area through various channels. ISAF is involved in a struggle with the Taliban for the support of the population, and opinion has become the 'battlefield' on which this contest is being fought.[69] Influence operations are predominantly executed on higher levels but as actions speak louder than words, the influence operations have most effect when the people actually see that the troops on the ground send the same message with their actions and behavior.

Meticulously planned influence operations to shape the local population can take place via the key leaders, who have already been identified in the 'understand' phase. In Afghanistan these leaders determine the choice of the entire collective. The leader has a decisive influence over the rest of the population. The members of his group respect and follow his decision.[70] Other instruments that have a role to play in influencing the people include, for example, psychological operations (Psyops), projects for the reconstruction of essential facilities and cash-for-work projects. The messages communicated by upper military echelons and Psyops units ultimately face a reality test at ground level. The activities of the troops on the ground are the key in shaping the perceptions, since virtually every action, message and decision of a force bears on the opinion of the indigenous population – wittingly or unwittingly.[71] The behavior of a single soldier is as strong a message as any information operation. Therefore, the grass root level activities of the units need to be continuously monitored and synchronized with the overall narrative and executed in a way that respects the Afghan culture and religion.

The 'engage' phase already provides some forms of reconstruction and basic provision, especially with the so-called Quick Impact Projects – small projects that can be realized with relatively few resources. These can sometimes form the basis for subsequent larger projects in the 'build' phase – projects of a much more extensive and more durable nature.

For the company and platoon level the following activities are essential during the 'engage' phase: supporting influence operations (such as key leader engagement), setting up Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP), assist in Psyops and media operations and assisting PRT-operations in providing social and economic reconstruction and basic administrative institutions. Attention must also be given to the compensation or repair of damage caused by either coalition troops or insurgents. The maintenance of a permanent presence and security are perhaps even more important in this phase than in previous phases.

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[68] Frederik Wilkins, quoted in: John A.Nagl, *Learning to eat soup with a knife. Counter-insurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago 2005), 25.

[69] P.B. Soldaat et al., 'Observaties rond operaties in Afghanistan (I)', in: *Militaire Spectator* vol. 178 (2009) (5), 253.

[70] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One,* (Oxford 2009), 68.

[71] Todd. C. Helmus, Christopher Paul, Russel W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue, The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation*, RAND corporation, (Santa Monica 2007), 2.

It is also of the greatest importance that the remains of the insurgency and its associated infrastructure – for example, locations used for the production of IED's – are tracked down and eliminated. To do this, the ISAF-troops must train and operate alongside local security troops. They must build a relationship with local leaders and engage them in operations, regardless of whether they may have had connections with the insurgency in the past. After all, cooperation and reconciliation with the local population reduce the chance that the area will fall back into the insurgents' sphere of influence.[72] It is essential to prevent the local population to behave as 'fence-sitters' only; they should be involved as active participants in the ongoing efforts instead.[73] At the same time, the Afghans must be given support and encouraged to choose their own local leaders and to develop the activities themselves for mediating tribal, water or land conflicts

## *Conclusion*

The performance of the lowest level is decisive for the success of a COIN approach. At this level, however, the 'hold' phase has so far produced the most problems. The main problem lay in its complexity and the interplay of military, policing, administrative and humanitarian aspects. This complexity demands more than the short-lived cleansing of an area. Without the intention to stay for the long haul an operation only has influence in the short term. A permanent presence, however, demands much greater manpower, well-trained and equipped local security troops and civil capacities (both personnel and financial) than the TFU currently has at its disposal.

Furthermore, such COIN operations, and specifically the 'hold' phase of these operations, are so complex that they demand the utmost from young platoon commanders. It is therefore essential to ensure that precisely these executive levels get sufficient instruction and training in such relatively unknown and complex material as the COIN strategy. This has been my intention: with the theoretical expansion of the tactical 'hold' phase in the COIN operation – the concept of 'Settle, Secure, Understand, Engage' – I have tried to give an impetus to this process.

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[72] P. Mollema, and Colonel C.J. Matthijssen, 'Uruzgan: Op de goede weg, civiel-militaire samenwerking in een complexe Counter-insurgency operatie', Militaire Spectator 178 (July/August 2009), 406.
[73] Stanley A. McChrystal and Michael Hall, ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance', (HQ ISAF).