

Aligning a Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan

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Of all the challenges that beset Afghanistan, the most dramatic is the lack of an integrated counterinsurgency strategy. Objectively, the coalition and the international community have provided admirable assistance to Afghanistan. Without exaggeration, Afghanistan's political, economic, and social situation has improved exponentially. Nevertheless, three interrelated challenges require resolution before Afghanistan can continue on its forward path—the insurgency, warlordism, and the neglect of the local communities.

As implied, an integrated strategy pursues tangible objectives which solve immediate problems, but it also contributes to the resolution of long-term menaces. Realistically, the Afghan insurgency is not a virulent threat to the government. The various insurgent groups have failed to extend their powerbase beyond their local powerbases and certainly cannot be construed as representing a unified front. Yet, Taliban groups, or those who claim to be Taliban for personal gain, do disrupt the necessary reforms essential to Afghanistan's progress. Similarly, endemic warlordism (local powerbrokers, drug lords, politicians, and other opportunists) resists government authority for the pursuit of personal gains. In the long term, warlordism represents a greater threat to the Afghanistan's liberal democracy. As in the past, the local communities (e.g., the thousands of hamlets, villages, towns, and city neighborhoods) suffer the greatest neglect. As long as the insurgency and warlordism exists, local communities will remain on the fringes of international and government beneficence.

As this article reveals, the principle of Subsidiarity forms the underlying approach to a counterinsurgency strategy for Afghanistan. In essence, Subsidiarity embraces decentralization of governance to the lowest level. Because this form of federalism has a long-standing tradition in Afghanistan (as well as the West), the populace readily accepts the concept. This concept permits the central government to focus on national issues. However, it does not signify neglect. Rather, it permits federal, international, and coalition agencies to empower local communities in a decentralized manner without deleterious intrusion from above. In short, it shifts the counterinsurgency effort to the local communities.

This first part of this article addresses Afghanistan's unique situation and how it forms the essential backdrop for the current challenges, underscoring pertinent historical considerations, the realities affecting the application of military power, and insurgency paradoxes. The second part explores a counterinsurgency operational paradigm as a systematic method for Clear-Hold-Build-Expand. As the article points out, the operational paradigm is the most important element of the counterinsurgency strategy. Ironically, a good strategy cannot compensate for a failure at the operational level. At best, partial success with clear and hold only makes the insurgency

more manageable, but it cannot result in long-term success. The final section covers strategic considerations for the formulation of a counterinsurgency strategy. Many are supplemental initiatives (i.e., icing on the cake), which strengthen the strategy but are not necessarily essential to success.

The implications of a properly aligned counterinsurgency strategy are clear. Security operations are the sine qua non for separating insurgents from the populace, but they are not an end in itself. Instead, their success permits the other elements of power to operate without interference at the lowest level, to the benefit of the entire country over time. In addition, this approach recognizes the natural evolution from which modern, functional states have risen.

Pertinent Historical Considerations

In light of Afghanistan's history, sociopolitical background, and arrested development, a counterinsurgency strategy, which relies on a top-down execution, is likely to falter. A history of weak central governance, frequent political-military upheavals, and endemic tribalism has always been the dominant obstacle.

Promoting a strong central government to pursue strategic goals runs counter to the Afghan experience. Afghanistan is less a state than a collection of tribes and clans occupying the same geographic area. Historically, decentralized governance best describes the political tapestry of Afghanistan with local chieftains and councils (Shuras) providing the essential hierarchical needs to their tribal members.

This sociopolitical reality is partly due to geography and partly due to engrained decentralized governance. First, the majority of local communities are remote from Kabul due to the mountainous terrain and poor transportation networks. Second, with a history of foreign invasions combined with ubiquitous ethnic and religious strife creating socioeconomic and political upheavals, a strong federal government never truly evolved. The civil war of the 1990s destroyed any vestiges of a central government, and the Taliban regime was too short-lived to establish complete totalitarianism. The advent of liberal democratic governance as a result of Operation Enduring Freedom, without concomitant security to the local communities, created anarchy—Afghanistan in short became “The Wild West.” Although Afghanistan will eventually evolve into a functioning state (contingent upon a continued commitment by the international community), it is also quite likely that the reach of the central government vis-à-vis the local communities will remain weak and tribal loyalty to the central government erratic for decades to come.

Afghanistan's tumultuous history most certainly undergirded tribalism as people depended on their family and local chieftains for self-preservation and various other needs. In this sense, the status of the central government became irrelevant to the average Afghan as long as the tribal ties remained unaffected. This arrangement also placed the monopoly on violence at the tribal level, resulting in the rise of local militias. In the absence of a strong central government, inter-tribal conflicts led to a predator-prey cycle. That is, the tribes enjoying predominance preyed on weaker tribes, causing the weak to bandwagon as a defensive mechanism or until the roles reversed. Paradoxically, this anarchical environment created mercurial balance of power

arrangements of ever changing alliances. Hence, today's allies could easily become tomorrow's enemies and vice versa.

Military Power Realities

The most common nostrum for COIN is the predominate use of military action to defeat an insurgency. Despite the abysmal history of relying almost solely on the military solution, counterinsurgent governments habitually use it as the first option. This is not to say that there is no need for military power in counterinsurgency.* Successful counterinsurgencies learn to create the conditions for local security forces to protect their communities and only then do they provide greater economic and political development. It therefore appears illogical in Afghanistan's case, to expand the Afghan National Army (ANA) and increase the number of U.S. military forces without a corresponding strategy which addresses the indispensable need for local security. The sheer number of local communities (i.e., hamlets, villages, towns, and cities) in Afghanistan makes it impossible for the ANA and American forces to establish a permanent presence in every community. And an attempt to do so would overextend these forces to the point of zero effectiveness.

Similarly, using military forces to seal off the border with Pakistan would require exorbitant numbers of troops. To provide perspective, the border length, not counting the mountainous terrain, is 1510 miles (2430 km). This length is 1.5 times longer the Eastern Front of World War II (994 miles). Hence, the sheer task of covering every possible infiltration point along the border is beyond any army. Small insurgent teams can effectively infiltrate into Afghanistan and remain inert in local communities (i.e., safe houses) until sufficient teams have accumulated in Afghanistan for operational effect. In such a situation, it becomes irrelevant how many infiltrators the military intercepts because over time, the insurgents can still infiltrate sufficient forces into the country to sustain the insurgency.

Afghanistan's history of decentralized governance has accustomed tribes and chieftains to self-sufficiency, and a concomitant suspicion of central government. Tribes have a long practice of accepting bribes from interventionist great powers in exchange for acquiescence or as a temporary ally against enemies. At best, bribing tribes is a short-term advantage. In the long-term such tactical arrangements militate against extending the authority of the central government and guarantee a resumption of the predatory-prey cycle.

The existence of warlord militias once the Taliban government was ousted were a source of great concern for the United States and was the reason for the disarming of non-government forces (e.g., warlord militias) under the DDR (Disarm, Demobilize, and Reintegrate), which evolved into DIAG (Disarmament of Illegally Armed Groups). Hence, rearming tribal militias willy-nilly would undo years of disarmament and stymie the authority of the central government. An initiative relying on local Shuras to recruit, organize, equip, train and pay local militias may be effective against external Taliban threats. However, the initiative would have little or no

* The shibboleth of soft power (e.g., Hearts and Minds) is not very useful for practitioners of counterinsurgency because it disregards the plight of the populace caught up in an insurgency and disregards the need for establishing security first. Caught in the middle of the conflict, the people's sole thought is self-preservation. Only when that is assured, will their thoughts turn to higher needs.

effect on local warlords and drug lords, who likely overshadow the authority of the Shuras. One can assume these powerbrokers would infiltrate the Shura militias with their own men as a self-protection measure. Moreover, the Shura militia would not likely root out any Taliban indigenous to the local community (e.g., relatives and friends) as long as their activities were directed outside of the community.

Coalition authorities should recognize that individuals and tribes will use coalition military forces to attack their enemies. Hence, human intelligence on “Taliban” forces may be nothing more than personal revenge or the elimination of a tribal or criminal rival. Over time, unintentional military operations against non-insurgents are likely to create greater anti-government sentiment with the affected populace.

Insurgency Paradoxes

The Afghan insurgency is not attempting to compete with the central government for legitimacy. Instead, it has opted to stymie government economic and political development, adhering to a strategy of disruption and destruction. A paradox occurs, because the populace logically should blame the insurgents for causing mayhem. Instead, the populace blames the government for its failure to provide security, and by extension, economic and political development. The populace does not expect the insurgents to mend their ways; rather, it expects the government to expunge society of these societal parasites. And if the government is unwilling or unable to do so, the people demand a political change. Pressure from the people weakens the resolve and consensus of the government, planting the seeds of its own demise. Hence, a government in turmoil cannot help but advance the goals of the insurgency.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to conclude the Afghan insurgency is a zero-sum game. The various anti-government forces which call themselves Taliban cannot fill the political vacuum if the Afghan government falls. If the Taliban enjoy any popularity, it is confined to the single digits and even that is likely splintered among the various insurgent groups. The insurgency, as a political-military movement, has likewise foundered, leaving the insurgents no recourse but to rely on IEDs, suicide bombers, and limited paramilitary activities. If international forces withdrew, the Taliban would not become the uncontested challenger to the Afghan government. Rather, Afghanistan would slowly degenerate into tribal conflicts as the central government becomes increasingly irrelevant.

Whereas the Taliban are inept in the political and military sense, they have proven adept at creating the impression they represent a growing and virulent threat to Afghanistan. This is a partial consequence of journalistic romanticism of insurgents. The media embraces the simplistic notion that if the government cannot destroy the insurgency, the insurgents must be supermen. Second, collateral damage creates propaganda opportunities for the insurgents. Third, insurgents are not obliged to speak the truth, and since propaganda is often their greatest tool for defining reality, especially with no tangible successes, they rely on it profoundly. It would not be an exaggeration to state that if it weren't for the media's obsession with the insurgent mystic, the image of the Taliban would be properly relegated to the dustbin of historical incompetents.

One must bear in mind that the constraints on the government and coalition forces provide an advantage to insurgent propaganda. The media scrutinizes coalition and government statements and actions in search of a scandal. The coalition must investigate operations resulting in collateral damage or claims that targets were non-combatants. While the investigation is on-going, which can take days or weeks, the insurgents capitalize on the opportunity to issue false claims to the media, which accept the information without scrutiny. The results of the coalition investigation do not receive the same attention as the insurgent claims. At times, village officials claim or exaggerate collateral damage in order to receive blood money, that is, financial compensation for wrongful deaths. For the insurgents, it is a win-win situation. They have a platform for recruitment and financial aid from others susceptible to insurgent sympathies. Moreover, the coalition or government may place greater restrictions on the rules of engagement. From the insurgent perspective, any device which fetters coalition firepower simply shifts the correlation of forces in their favor.

The Counterinsurgency Operational Paradigm

The counterinsurgency operational paradigm deserves special attention since it is essential to the success of the counterinsurgency strategy. The paradigm holds as its immutable, primary goal the permanent separation of the insurgents from the population. The paradigm is a systematic approach for gaining and retaining control of local communities, step by step until the entire population is secured. Implementation of the paradigm requires a mutually supporting effort tailored to the unique circumstances of each target area. The selection of target areas and the timing of operations becomes a matter of strategy, which is covered later in this article. Naturally, the target area must be within the capabilities of the tasked unit. For example, a small district would likely be within the capabilities of a battalion; a brigade for a small province.

For Afghanistan, a proper integrated approach comprises four major components: military units, local security training cadre, counter narcotic teams, and construction and development facilitators. All components operate within close proximity both in time and space. Although some sequencing of events is necessary, most of the activities take place almost simultaneously.

The paradigm starts with the initial military sweep, with units occupying all population centers (e.g., hamlets, villages, towns, and cities) in the area of operation. The intent is to drive active guerrilla fighters from these communities and not to kill them per se. To minimize collateral damage, providing an escape route will likely induce guerrillas to flee rather than stand and fight out of desperation. However, the military may establish ambush sites outside of the community for the purpose of intercepting fleeing guerrillas. The remaining guerrillas are dealt with at a later time as this article shall cover.

The military commander makes a proclamation to the community citizens to inform them of the operation, ask for their cooperation with the soldiers, and explain the subsequent planned initiatives. As the initial agent for information operations, the commander informs, reassures, and provides hope to the local population. He also takes the opportunity to rebut insurgent propaganda. He must realize that the local populace is susceptible to propaganda and rumors in the absence of competing information. The goal is to instill in the people hope for the future and self-confidence.

To assist the fledgling local security force, soldiers inspect every building, taking an informal census by residence and asking dwellers just two questions: who collects the taxes, and who recruits for insurgents. This information is collected and handed over to the training cadre.

The military commander's designated subordinate produces a sketch of the urban layout using a simple gridding system. In this manner, the military is able to create the foundations for urbanized order (e.g., street names, addresses, and residences). Satellite images of the urban area can be transformed into a sketch drawn-to-scale, which greatly enhances the accuracy of the urban sketch. This early groundwork yields great dividends as the government establishes greater control over the population.

As the military secures and canvases the community, the training cadre meets with the local authorities, either chieftain or Shura, to explain its purpose. The cadre seeks the approval of the local authorities to recruit, organize, equip, train, supply, and provide wages for a local security force. Those services are straightforward, but the real importance of the cadre lies in two essential qualities it provides to the security force: discipline and values. Without these two ingredients, a local security force can degenerate into a death squad, prey upon other communities, or become an oppressor to the community they are supposed to defend. Under the supervision of the cadre, the security force becomes a servant to the community.

U.S. Army Special Forces are the most proficient at training indigenous forces and should be employed in high threat areas whenever possible. American Special Forces have an illustrative and abiding history of training security forces throughout the world and are accustomed to working independently in austere environments. In medium and low threat areas, the military can use military police or contracted police as cadre. Similarly, Allied nations can provide sufficient numbers of cadres (including their own special forces) in their assigned regions without threatening competing requirements or sparking a political firestorm.

After the local security force is established and training begins, the military shifts its operations to the surrounding areas to hunt insurgents lingering in the area. Insurgents are at their weakest in the immediate aftermath of leaving their host community. The logic of this conclusion is clear. Insurgents expend extraordinary time and effort to bring the local population under their control. The community has provided insurgents with shelter, sustenance, money, intelligence, and other resources. Once they are thrust out in the hinterland, insurgents must find succor in base camps or safe houses elsewhere until the military forces depart the host community.

The military conducts small unit operations (squad, platoon, and company) in the surrounding areas for the purpose of discovering and destroying fugitive insurgents, base camps and caches. Gridding is a useful tactical tool for the methodical clearing of the surrounding areas. The principal purpose of these military operations is to keep insurgents away from the population centers during the formative period of establishing local security forces. Again, the ultimate goal is not to kill all the insurgents but to drive them to such despair that they abandon the insurgency and reconcile with the government.

Integral to the military operations is the use of psychological warfare. Prisoners and defectors are treated well with the intent of exploiting their knowledge of base camps, caches, and insurgent leaders. They are used to persuade their former colleagues to surrender through the use of the media, helicopters with their voice recordings, amnesty pamphlets, etc. The consistent message to convey is that the government does not intend to prosecute the rank and file, but only the hardcore leadership of the insurgency.

As the military starts small unit operations, the counter narcotics teams or a specially trained ANA counter narcotics unit begin poppy eradication and destruction of drug labs discovered by the military or already known. A military presence in the area acts as a deterrent against threats to the crop eradication teams. Should deterrence fail, the military eliminates the threats quickly. To accelerate eradication, the eradication teams hire local people to help burn the fields. The counter narcotic teams, in conjunction with the appropriate agencies, provide alternative crop seeds for the next growing season. The teams compensate farmers directly with crop losses, using the fair market value of a local, legitimate local crop (e.g., grain, produce, fruit, etc.) as the basis of payment. The teams issue warnings that failure to grow legitimate crops in the future will result in crop eradication without compensation and probable criminal charges. The team records persons involved in the drug trade for tracking or further investigation.

After a sufficient period of training for the local security forces, the training cadre identifies potential leaders for formal training (e.g., Regional Training Center), who assume leadership positions upon their return. At this point, the training cadres are released for operations in subsequent target areas and are replaced by mentor teams, which continue the process of inoculating the community from insurgent infiltration. Mentor teams can comprise conventional military personnel, international policemen, or trained civilian contractors. The greater abundance of such personnel are needed since Afghanistan will eventually need thousands of mentor teams if every population center is to receive the support needed for recovery.

Community inoculation is a series of measures to advance local government control of the local population. Control measures are tailored to the type of threats (i.e., insurgent, criminal, corruption, etc.) and the extent of threats (i.e., high, medium, or low).

A formal census verifies and expands on the informal census. With the assistance of the local authorities, the mentors issue plastic identification cards with pictures and thumbprints to the residents. Using the urban sketch, the mentors pinpoint each inhabitant's residence, recording it on the ID card. To foster citizen cooperation, ID cards can serve as the basis for rations, labor, medical, and other assistance. To instill a sense of value, the authorities inform the people that the ID card is the only passport for aid and benefits.

A curfew is effective in controlling movement at night. Violators of the curfew are checked for ID card (to check residency) and brought in to the police station for questioning if suspicions are raised. Experience reveals that the vast majority of curfew violators are involved in insurgent or criminal activities. Swift questioning has a greater chance of arresting fellow conspirators before they are aware one of their own has been arrested. Thus, a curfew is a powerful tool for breaking covert insurgent and criminal cells.

The establishment of a neighborhood watch permits the local authorities and security forces to detect insurgent attempts at infiltration as well as criminal activity. Using the gridding system of the urban area, the local authorities designate a neighborhood watch czar at the top of an organizational pyramid. The czar splits the urban area in half and assigns two subordinates to monitor each area, who in turn replicate the process. The bifurcation process continues until a family monitor is responsible for three to five families. The monitor visits the families daily to check on their status and to learn of any changes (i.e., someone new living with them or reports of criminal activity). The family monitor reports changes through the organizational pyramid for situational awareness. If a family has someone new living with them, the family monitor escorts the new inhabitant to the local security authorities for ID cards and questioning.

To supplement the citizen reporting system, a cell phone hotline can permit people to report suspicious activities anonymously. For areas with internet connectivity, an internet website can also be used for reporting activities as well. A community reporting box can also be used for the anonymous passing of tips. Tapping into the community for information is a powerful tool because nothing escapes the scrutiny of the citizens. They just need a way to tip off the authorities without endangering themselves for retribution.

At some point, the local security forces morph into a community police force, complete with national uniforms and badges. Because they come from the community, the local police already have roots in the community and are trusted. Local police are invaluable for creating order in the community and maintaining control of the population. They should also be used for passing intelligence to mentor teams on suspected insurgent operatives and local criminals. However, mentor teams need to remain vigilant of police corruption or any deterioration in this trust. Although it appears easier to fire a suspect policeman, a formal investigation of the allegations is warranted because the accusations may be unsubstantiated (i.e., an attempt by local power brokers to get a troublesome policeman out of the way).

The mentor teams can accelerate the reintegration of society, which is usually rent asunder by insurgent occupation, through community activities. Clubs and sports are positive ways to create healthy interaction among the inhabitants and require little effort to organize and equip. Volleyball seems to be a sport the Afghans readily play and requires fewer people and space than soccer. In many respects, community centers, with a TV or radio room, a room for sewing circles, and a room for board games, etc, are effective centers for critical social interaction.

The mentor teams serve as the community middlemen for development and construction projects. Mentor teams submit their requests for projects to the appropriate Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) office. Projects are best identified by consultations with the local authorities. At times, various organizations have projects which the local communities do not need or want. If the mentors cannot dissuade an organization from building such a project, they should offer advice to the local authorities on alternative uses for the completed project. For instance, a school building may be laudable in broad terms, but without teachers, books, furniture, and supplies, it cannot be used. The mentors could recommend the local authorities turn it into a community center until it can be used as a school.

Construction projects offer great potential for improving the lot of local communities. Ideally, the construction agency builds something the community needs. This is an area which requires higher command scrutiny and influence because construction teams may want to do the projects themselves in order to meet self-imposed deadlines. A plethora of completed projects may brief well in terms of showing progress, but the process does little to advance the local societies.

Construction teams should provide the training, materials, equipment, supervisory expertise, and the salaries for local labor for projects. The payoffs are long-term but enduring. The local inhabitants begin to acquire skills, and the salaries boost the local economy. Nothing instills pride in ownership more than direct community interaction.

The presence of the Provincial Reconstruction Team assures continuity of effort after the military has moved on to other provinces. The PRT serves as the clearing house for construction and development agencies. It provides office space for such agencies (e.g., USAID, Department of State, UNAMA, medical etc.) to provide coordination and tracking of projects within the province. Additionally, the PRT is ideally suited to provide disaster relief assistance in many cases.

A maneuver battalion is the ideal security force to serve as a quick reaction force and to provide security for construction and development projects as well as medical assistance events. This security requirement may seem unnecessary to American sectors because of the presence of brigade combat teams, but for the majority of allies in Afghanistan, a robust security element is sorely needed.

The potential of PRTs are limited only to the vision of the counterinsurgency commanders: a safe place for the holding of local police salaries and other funds; warehouses for disaster relief or humanitarian assistance surges; a refuge and amenities for mentor teams on a regular basis; a communications node for mentor team radios; clinics and medical civil assistance programs (MEDCAP); maintenance facilities and personnel when needed; and a first response to insurgent or criminal threats. Because of these diverse responsibilities, PRT commanders should be experienced maneuver commanders.

As explained in this section, the operational paradigm establishes the mechanism for clearing an area of insurgent and criminal elements in addition to holding the area for economic and social development. Without this paradigm, any counterinsurgency strategy will only make limited progress and require extensive time at that. Nevertheless, the counterinsurgency commander must give due consideration to strategy in order to provide coherency to the moving parts.

Counterinsurgency Strategic Considerations

The first consideration and initial effort must be given to securing strategic bases, such as Kabul, Kandahar, Gardez, and Ghazni.[†] They serve as the starting points for the oil spot strategy.

[†] Mazar e Sharif and Herat are strategic centers in the relatively stable northern and western regions. In terms of strategy, they are economy of force areas, not requiring the same intensive focus as the southern and eastern regions. Nonetheless, the ISAF allies can begin implementing a security strategy with corresponding reinforcements aligned with the counterinsurgency strategy.

Because cities serve as the main theatrical stage for insurgent propaganda (hence their attraction for insurgent attacks), they must be denied insurgent access. In terms of the exigent threat elsewhere, the northern and western regions do not require urgent counterinsurgency action, but the allies in these regions could improve their level of activity as this article suggests.

The timing and sequencing of areas to clear thereafter become a matter of strategy. Nesting the counterinsurgency strategy to the operational paradigm, the intent is to push insurgents and criminal organizations progressively farther from population centers: cities, towns, villages, and hamlets. This slow squeeze enervates the insurgents over time as their access to population centers becomes increasingly restricted. As access to food, clean water, shelter, people, money, and other resources becomes limited, the ranks of the insurgency shrink accordingly. Additionally, without access to safe houses, the sophistication of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombs deteriorates as well. Although the goal is to push the insurgents to the border region, the secondary effects of the process is to create a sense of hopelessness in the insurgent ranks, increasing their rate of desertion.

The proposed increase of U.S. forces from 20,000 to 30,000 provides an opportunity to use the operational paradigm as a surge effort. However, if these reinforcements are reserved only for clearing operations, their added value to the counterinsurgency will remain limited. The influx of troops will require extensive engineering assets for construction or expansion of Forward Operating Bases, which will likely adversely affect construction timetables for the ANA expansion as well as construction projects for local communities. To compensate, the United States may need to deploy more construction assets than earlier anticipated.

Similarly, the expansion of the ANA to 122,000 makes strategic sense if the rationale is to devote more units to the operational paradigm. If the expansion solely leads to military clearing operations, there is little added value. Similarly, a counterinsurgency strategy which attempts to place garrisons in local communities rapidly leads to an overextension of the military and exorbitant budgets due to overhead costs. More importantly, the 122k-expansion must not set precedence for subsequent expansions. There comes a point where the size of the ANA assumes an offensive capability, creating a potential security dilemma in the region. Increased threat perceptions among neighboring countries can easily lead to regional instability. Assurances of current intent are no insurance against potential future aggression. Hence, as the conflict winds down and as a mollification of its neighbors, Afghanistan should adopt a national security policy to convert selected units into the reserves, in the form of round-out brigades.

To bolster the operational paradigm, the ANA could station ANA units in high threat areas, thereby providing operational reserves in response to insurgent threats that are beyond the capabilities of the local police forces and PRT quick reaction forces. More importantly, they can increase public confidence through periodic anti-insurgent and counter narcotic operations. ANA units can also increase public confidence and insurgent dismay by frequent visits to the local communities. Hence, the greatest expression of government authority is the presence of ANA soldiers in the local communities.

In the case of counter narcotics, the ANA counter narcotics battalion could provide an effective capability for poppy eradication, destruction of drug labs, and arrest of local drug lords.[‡] The counter narcotics battalion commander must initiate operations in coordination with ANA corps, regional Afghan National Police, and the provincial governors, rather than waiting for a request beforehand.

Because insurgent and criminal activities represent a civil threat rather than a military threat, the Afghan National Police (ANP) should take precedence over the ANA in the counterinsurgency. What this means in effect is that the ANP should be the first responders to insurgent and criminal activity rather than the ANA. This also implies that the local police forces should eventually fold into Afghan law enforcement institutions. Keeping the local police forces under the watchful eye of mentor teams will underscore the need for discipline and values, staving off the petty corruption that currently plagues the ANP. As the first line of defense for their communities, the local police force is in the best position to mitigate predatory practices on the population. In this regard, mentors can alert the central office at the PRT of warlord predatory incidents or government malfeasance for investigation.

To keep the insurgents off balance, deep raids into insurgent enclaves are necessary. These strategic thrusts keep insurgent enclaves in a weakened state and easier to clear later. Attempting to eliminate the insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan are currently not worth the risk of escalation. In this sense, the cure is worse than the disease. If the insurgents are confined to conducting operations from their sanctuaries in Pakistan, the conflict is confined to the border region without affecting the population centers. Again, without this access, the insurgency in Afghanistan withers. The use of coalition air power, armed UAVs, artillery, and infantry operations provides a distinct edge in the interception of insurgent infiltrations without the risk of collateral damage.

With the local communities inoculated from insurgent access, insurgent infiltrators successfully passing through the border region soon find themselves in dire straits as their supplies dwindle. Forced to attack local communities in order to gain access, insurgents are susceptible to air power and artillery. This situation significantly reduces the amount of collateral damage, thereby robbing the insurgents of their greatest propaganda device. Even if they do gain access, the quick reaction forces would quickly expel insurgents before they can fortify or exploit their gains. And once expelled, they need to make the long trek back to their Pakistani sanctuaries.

Coalition SOF and Afghan commando battalions provide a lethal threat to key insurgent leaders, to include al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan. In this regard, killing and capturing the top al Qaeda and Taliban leadership are important goals, but just as important, keeping them pre-occupied with their own survival rather than planning and coordinating attacks serves national security purposes.

[‡] Currently, the Afghan counter narcotics battalion does not conduct counter narcotics operations. It loosely belongs to the ANA, but the ANA resists any direct involvement in counter narcotics operations. Potentially, the battalion could fall under the ANP as a specialized paramilitary police unit. As it stands, the battalion remains fallow. Until its roles and responsibilities are established, the brunt of counter narcotics will remain with the international community.

The reconciliation program, which Afghanistan started several years ago, should continue with the promise of amnesty for insurgents, payment for weapons, payment for information, and reintegration into society. A reconciliation office in each PRT provides an immediate vehicle for insurgents to surrender.

Strategic Communications requires continual review and adaptation. The medium used for Strategic Communications must have entertainment value first and foremost in order to gain and maintain an audience. Afghan entertainers (e.g., musicians, comedians, actors, etc.) must be employed for this cause. Although the Coalition can provide assistance and recommendations for Strategic Communications operations, only the Afghans provide the essential cultural and linguistic knowledge for the listening audience. Strategic Communications themes and messages are interwoven into the entertainment. Reconciled insurgents can contribute to the effort by informing insurgents of the reconciliation program and exposing insurgent propaganda techniques. To this end, the local community centers with TVs or radios assume paramount importance. Of course, news programs are an important part of this medium, and the government must issue statements through the news agencies to refute insurgent propaganda as well as informing the public of government development and construction programs. Lastly, the Coalition must integrate combat cameras into every operation so as to videotape targets and the extent of collateral damage. Because insurgent propaganda issues immediate claims of civilian casualties after each Coalition attack, the coalition command can counter these claims immediately through the release of film footage. The command can then conduct investigations without the suspicion of a cover-up.

Strategically, PRTs offer a politically palatable way for allies to increase their contributions to the Afghan conflict. Unlike the laissez faire approach with existing PRTs, a standardized contingent package is required. The package should approximate the size and capabilities of the PRT as discussed earlier. Allies also need to provide training teams and/or mentor teams for the creation and maintenance of local police forces in their assigned areas. Because of the existing stability in the north and west, the need for accompanying military operations preceding the insertion of training teams is predicated on the threat. The north serves as a rest and rehabilitation for Taliban elements in certain enclaves, such as Kunduz and Sar e Pol, so denying them to the Taliban is an important goal. Likewise, greater efforts against criminal organizations in the north and west warrant the use of the operational paradigm.

Major Afghan cities require greater attention because they are dense population centers and in need of urban renewal. PRTs dedicated to cities would provide that welcome relief. Another initiative with great potential is the adoption of sister cities, which the United States and Europe adopted in the aftermath of World War II. Since many modern cities in the world have a plentitude of excess resources, Afghan cities could use the donations and other benefits which mayors can offer to their sister cities. This initiative might be a suitable mission for the Department of State to manage.

The issue of free-riding among some ISAF partners requires a policy resolution. Basically, free-riding concerns the subtle practice of contributing governments shifting security burdens to other countries. A long-standing practice in NATO, partner governments employ various stratagems to sub-optimize contributions: not following through with stated promises; claiming their forces

are already overstretched; and shifting attention to other governments' free-riding. Because of its status as a superpower, the United States has and will continue to shoulder the greater burden in most conflicts. That reality comes with the territory. However, the countries, which have shouldered a greater burden in Afghanistan, (e.g., United Kingdom, Netherlands, Australia, and Canada), should rotate to the northern and western regions. Accordingly, the affected partners in the north and west would shift their PRTs to the southern region. In the long-term, the benefits of keeping active partners engaged in Afghanistan far outweigh the status quo arrangements. Again, this is a policy decision, but its impact on counterinsurgency strategy is profound.

The time has come for UN Assistance Mission—Afghanistan (UNAMA) to manage the various construction and development activities in Afghanistan. As this represents a momentous task, the UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan should lay the foundation of establishing a Reconstruction and Development Agency for the purpose of eliminating redundant projects, harmonizing efforts among the various organizations, and reducing fraud, waste and abuse (e.g., fraudulent NGOs, corrupt contractors, and power broker patronage). Working through the PRTs, the assistance effort can acquire greater coherency and effectiveness.

Ultimately, a counterinsurgency strategy seeks to balance available resources, the realities on the ground, and the expectations of the beleaguered populace. It follows then that a measurement of success entails the number of population centers inoculated from insurgent infiltration rather than the nebulous shibboleth of “hearts and minds.”

Conclusions

No easy solutions exist in Afghanistan for defeating the insurgency while conducting state building. The operational paradigm and strategic considerations as outlined in this article seek to separate insurgents, criminal organizations, and corrupt power brokers from local communities in a systematic manner.

Heretofore, the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan has predominately focused on clearing insurgents from local communities but has been unable to prevent insurgents from infiltrating back. Even though a blanket policy of rearming local militias may lead to a short-term solution of separating insurgents from the local communities, in the long term, warlord militias will undercut the authority of the central government and reverse the previous militia disarmament programs.

Under the operational paradigm, the local community police, ANP, ANA and coalition forces provide the necessary security sphere for society to prosper. Without the security component, all other lofty programs—capacity building, development, and reforms—become irrelevant in terms of building citizen trust and loyalty to the government, in addition to instilling self-confidence and hope for the future.

Since 2006, Afghan insurgents have shown an amazing capacity of incompetence. Despite ample opportunities and the support of Islamic extremist sympathizers, the insurgency has been unable to gain any momentum. Thus far, the counterinsurgency effort has focused more on state building, in the mistaken belief they trump basic security needs. As long as this imbalance

between security and development remains, the various insurgent and criminal groups will continue to survive. And in an insurgency, survival counts for much in the end.

Counterinsurgencies do not require large numbers of conventional troops, leading to the creation of a garrison state. Nor do they require multiple, large headquarters coordinating complex operations. Insurgencies do not have the operational tempo to warrant that need. In reality, insurgency/counterinsurgency requires finesse not firepower, with the victor being the one who best achieves control over the population.

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