Thoughts from Garmser and Kabul

By Octavian Manea

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Interview with Carter Malkasian, the author of “War Comes to Garmser. Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier” (Oxford University Press, 2013). He was the political advisor to General Joseph Dunford, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan from March 2013 to August 2014. From August 2009 to July 2011, he was a political officer for the Department of State in Afghanistan, leading a district support team (DST) in Garmser district, Helmand province, Afghanistan.

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SWJ: Did COIN work in Afghanistan? What does Garmser tell us about COIN in Afghanistan?

Carter Malkasian: To say that counterinsurgency didn’t work is not a fair assessment. If you look at a variety of places in Iraq and Afghanistan you can see that counterinsurgency tactics—particularly the ones related to the use of military force, patrolling, advising, and small projects—worked in pushing insurgents out of a specific area. From a tactical perspective, counterinsurgency worked.

The argument that counterinsurgency didn’t work has more weight from a strategic perspective. The Afghan surge ended with the government in control of more territory than any time since 2005 and in possession of large and competent security forces. As a result, the government may yet succeed. Nevertheless, the Afghan surge did not end with Afghanistan stabilized or the government ready to stand on its own. On top of that, counterinsurgency was expensive and demanded thousands for troops, facts that will always darken its story in Afghanistan.

These are things that American strategists will have to ponder as they debate the future of counterinsurgency and interventions in war-torn states. In my view, counterinsurgency remains the best tactical method for fighting insurgents—preferably by local people or a host country rather than Americans. Yet in any circumstance fighting insurgents is very likely to be a long process. We should keep that in mind whenever we confront a war amongst the people.

SWJ: You talked about the costs associated with waging a COIN campaign. As the history of counterinsurgency shows, it seems that the governance, the administrative, civilian component, building host nation institutional infrastructure matters. Can this costly state-building component be avoided?

When I look back at counterinsurgency from 2007 to 2010, I worry that we became too enamored with the idea that we had to fix the whole country. I heard so many arguments that we had to do state-building, fix governance, improve the economy, eradicate poppy, etc. I do not think these subjects can be ignored but I also think we should investigate which things matter and which things don’t, which things we can fix and which things we can’t. There is no easy answer. Unfortunately, there is a natural tendency to try to fix
everything. I can’t count how many people told me: “We are doing ‘Afghan good enough.’ We are not creating an Afghan Switzerland.” But if you look at statements from 2010, building an Afghan Switzerland was exactly what we were trying to do.

SWJ: In a nutshell we need to be selective, pragmatic and able to prioritize what matters most. We need to be strategic.

Yes. We only have so much money and only so much time. I suggest prioritizing effort toward those governance and development issues that most directly affect security and violence.

SWJ: What transformed Garmser in the end?

Our troops, the Marines. They were the necessary condition. Afghan leadership made also a big difference. They were willing to stand up and fight for their villages. We tried to listen to them and let them guide us in ways to move forward—while also trying to make sure we were aware of complex local politics and did not inadvertently harm the people.

SWJ: To what extent, did good governance (effective institutions capable of delivering reasonable public services) matter in stabilizing Garmser?

The absence of good governance, especially a framework to manage the problems associated with land issues, helped the Taliban come back to Garmser in 2005 and 2006. During our time in Garmser, we tried to build better institutions, with, I think, some success. But the security that arrived there had less to do with good governance than the other factors I mentioned above. Hopefully, those institutions help in some way in preventing the insurgency from re-appearing.

SWJ: General John Allen used to say about the Al-Anbar Awakening that “we needed a tribal confederation to stabilize the province. Al Qaeda couldn’t conquer the tribes once they banded together.” Having in mind the central role played by tribal leaders, was this also the core logic of the template to stabilize Garmser?

Winning over the tribal leaders was crucial in Garmser. Tribal leaders are very important because they have a formal link with the local population. Bringing them together is a way to help stabilize the district. We just have to remember that working with the tribal system doesn’t mean a tribal confederation is a permanent thing. There are fractions and divisions within the Afghan society that haven’t healed or changed since the 1970s. The fact that the government and certain tribes were able to balance the Taliban when we were there, doesn’t mean that they will still be able to do that now that we are gone. We changed the system. As we leave, the system may change again.

SWJ: What are the leadership traits that make civilians suited for expeditionary COIN operations?

As civilian working out in the field for a government agency should, first of all, want to build relationships with the local people. A civilian should become close with them and deal with them regularly. Second, a civilian should also learn the language. Third, a civilian should be patient. When arriving in a new place, he or she should develop relationships and get an idea of local dynamics before deciding what to do. Fourth, a civilian should cooperate with any military partners. Working as a team is important. The best way not to clash with the military is to show them that are you are very capable at getting things done and that you are generally moving in the same direction as them. Military commanders know that the more effective people they have working beside them, the more likely they are to achieve their mission.
SWJ: Iraq and Afghanistan may not be the last time when we engage in such operations. Which are the big lessons that we should keep in mind as we move forward?

First, we should make sure the host country has enough police or soldiers made up of its own citizens to defend itself. Second, if our goal is to enable the country to stabilize itself, we may need to be willing to be there for a long time, hopefully with fewer troops rather than more. Third, once we go in, it is very hard to get out.

About the Author

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Octavian Manea was a Fulbright Junior Scholar at Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs (Syracuse University) where he received an MA in International Relations and a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Security Studies.

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