

## **Getting the Basics Right: A Discussion on Tactical Actions for Strategic Impact in Afghanistan**

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*This paper has been prepared by the Counterinsurgency Training Center – Afghanistan. The purpose of the paper is generate discussion and analysis on whether we are not only doing things right here in Afghanistan, but indeed whether we are doing the right things. This analysis and requisite change is essential if we are to employ additional incoming ISAF units in the most effective manner. Comments/objections/counter-arguments can be sent to [trent.scott@us.army.mil](mailto:trent.scott@us.army.mil) or [john.agolia@us.army.mil](mailto:john.agolia@us.army.mil).*

Events in Afghanistan are not going according to plan. There is a growing perception among local Afghans and within the international community that the insurgency in Afghanistan is growing stronger and more influential by the day. A spate of recent Western media reporting decrying the killing of innocent Afghans and Pakistanis as a result of the alleged over-judicious use of ISAF/OEF-controlled air power, the very public death of nine US soldiers in eastern Afghanistan followed almost immediately by the killing of just under a dozen French soldiers in central Afghanistan, and the widespread public belief that the central Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) under Hamid Karzai is institutionally corrupt, have contributed to the groundswell of local and international voices calling for a radical change to the way things are currently done in Afghanistan. Change is required, it must begin at the tactical level, and it needs to be led by ISAF. This is our war just as much as it is the Afghan's war.

Although there is much to do at the strategic level in Afghanistan, such as developing a comprehensive border strategy, eliminating corruption, developing an effective and functioning government, defining the role of the Afghan National Police (ANP) – the list goes on – it is at the tactical level, at Regional Commands (RC), Task Forces (TF), Battlegroups, Companies and Coalition mentoring teams that the most immediate and tangible change for good can be made. Tactical actions resonate throughout the local communities ISAF troops are supposed to protect and influence audiences across the world. And, because insurgency is a violent political competition, tactical actions can have significant political impact. Conducting comprehensive, best practice operations designed to defeat the insurgency from the grass roots up is imperative if ISAF is to halt the consolidation of the insurgent's influence in rural Afghanistan, establish the

legitimate rule of law, and contribute to the development of a stable Afghanistan. Cumulative success at the tactical level will provide time and space – literally and figuratively – for the key stakeholders at the strategic level to make the necessary institutional changes required to ensure long term stability.

Based on a review of historical lessons learned, FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* lists the following unsuccessful counterinsurgency practices: overemphasize killing and capturing the enemy rather than securing and engaging the people; conduct large scale operations as the norm; concentrate military forces in large bases for protection; focus special forces primarily on raiding; place low priority on assigning quality advisors to host-nation forces; build and train host-nation security forces in the U.S. military's image; ignore peacetime government processes, including legal procedures; and, allow open border, airspace, and coastlines. The last seven years in Afghanistan is evidence we are ignoring this sound doctrinal advice.

This paper recommends a change of mindset is required by ISAF from RC down. It emphasizes the vital need to get the balance consistently right between focusing our efforts on killing and capturing insurgents and focusing on protecting the people. The two are not the same, and effects on the ground indicate overwhelmingly a bias towards the former at the expense of the latter. The paper also emphasizes the specific requirement for tactical ISAF elements to ensure unity of purpose and integrated effort between a wide range of organizations to conduct successful counterinsurgency operations within the context of overarching ISAF campaign plans. As one of the more competent and professional organizations in Afghanistan responsibility for leadership of this united front to defeating the insurgency and creating stability rests squarely with ISAF. Claims that ISAF “only does security” are misguided, confuse units who do not “get it” and ignore the requirements on the ground. Finally, although there are many pockets throughout Afghanistan where coalition forces and their ANSF partners are working hard and well to defeat the insurgency, their successes are not being broadcast successfully to the broader Afghan public or to the international community.

To this end, this paper recommends a number of approaches to the conduct of tactical action in Afghanistan that should be considered, discussed and operationalized as appropriate, especially as more and more coalition forces flow into theater. Before recommending changes to the current courses of action, however, it is important to examine what is not consistently occurring at the tactical level.

### **The Current Operating Environment**

The current operating environment in Afghanistan is extraordinarily complex, lethal and diverse; it is more than simply an insurgency. The fundamental failure in governance to meet the needs of the population underscores a deteriorating situation that is further exacerbated and complicated by criminal activity, narco-trafficking and spoiling actions by third parties (including most prominently Iran and Pakistan). The insurgency itself is not homogenous and factors that contribute to the continuation of the insurgency vary from region to region and even from district to district. The Taliban remain in strength in

significant areas of the country and are motivated by a number of factors including power, Islamic extremism, profit, frustration and fear. In many parts of the country, especially outside of major population centers, the legitimacy and effectiveness of GIRoA is under considerable threat not only from insurgents but also from widespread corruption and patronage, traditional tribal power structures, a xenophobic society in the south and east, and a lack of tangible, synchronized reconstruction and development.

Current ISAF operations are not consistently focused on rural Afghanistan. Many coalition forces do not actively and consistently patrol their areas of responsibility or, when they do patrol, they sally forth from Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) for a quick-order patrol that has very limited enduring effect due to a lack of reinforcement of “holding” operations and often inflames local tensions rather than creating an atmosphere of progress or stability. Many coalition forces do not understand their operating environment, often mistaking local power struggles or tensions over scarce resources for insurgent actions and vice versa. Only in a select number of areas do coalition forces and their Afghan National Army (ANA) partners dominate the night and actively prevent insurgents from intimidating local populations. In too many cases, the tactical methods employed by coalition forces focus more on self-protection rather than on protecting local communities. Actions such as aggressive driving of up-armored vehicles in built-up areas, defaulting to the use of air-delivered weapons when contacted by enemy forces rather than adopting a more proportional response of dismounted fire and maneuver, and a reluctance to share information or lessons learned with ANA and ANP partners contribute to psychologically separating us from the people we should be protecting. This does not represent best practice counterinsurgency operations.

Coalition force capability varies greatly across the theater of operations and is compounded by the absence of any standardized pre-deployment or in-theater training. There is no uniform understanding of best practice counterinsurgency operations. PRT efforts across the country, and even within regions, are not always aligned with security and governance efforts and, if not approached holistically often have significant negative impact. As well, there is no single training and integration activity that can create a common understanding of the operational conditions, roles and capabilities of all those committed to stabilizing Afghanistan, counterinsurgency best practices, and shared visibility and understanding of key events and activities (elections as an example). Finally, a comprehensive approach to reducing insurgent influence and creating stability in Afghanistan that effectively synergizes security, governance and reconstruction and development efforts does not uniformly exist across the country.

### **Considerations for an Appropriate Tactical Approach**

As more coalition forces are preparing to flow into Afghanistan it is imperative they arrive with the appropriate mindset to conduct best practice counterinsurgency operations relevant to the situation here in Afghanistan and are employed in the most appropriate manner to generate the desired positive effects. More troops, doing much of the same, are likely to be counterproductive. What follows are a number of considerations that should guide the tactical actions of coalition forces. These considerations should not be a

revelation to well-prepared coalition forces; indeed many of them should be self-evident and many are detailed in some length in FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* or in any number of classic treatises on counterinsurgency. Unfortunately at present, tactical actions over the last several years do not appear to have been routinely and consistently influenced by these considerations. Consequently, we are not having the cumulative and consistent success we need at the tactical level across the theater of operations. These considerations are not mutually exclusive and inherently reinforce each other.

**1. Understand your operating environment.** Afghanistan is not Iraq, and there is no template to defeating the insurgency. In essence, there will be local solutions for local problems. What worked in Iraq will not necessarily work here in Afghanistan, and we need to be careful of applying too dogmatically lessons from the past to the problems of the present even if the fundamental principles remain applicable. Because of the diversity and complexity of both the threat and society in Afghanistan, what works in one district or province may have little relevance to the neighboring district or province. This is not to say that lessons learned in one discrete area have no relevance for a unit operating in another location; just do not be surprised when the same tactical approach does not generate the same effects. There are no quick and easy solutions.

Key to understanding the operating environment is both understanding the specific causes of conflicts in your tactical area of operations and understanding exactly what “governance” means to local Afghans. Coalition forces have proven notoriously incapable of differentiating between conflicts involving insurgents, vice local conflicts over scarce resources vice intra- or inter-district struggles over the distribution of power. Related to this, there does not appear to be widespread understanding of the relationship between the informal and formal structures of political power.

In its most basic sense governance is the provision of essential services, such as human security, food, water and shelter, as well as an acceptable degree of conflict resolution and justice for wrongs committed. This basic type of governance has been prevalent in rural Afghan communities for centuries; however, it is under threat today not only by insurgents but also by attempts to overlay a more formal governance structure on top of the informal structures. There has been historically, and it remains today, tension between the informal structures of political power (the mullahs, the mahliks, the tribal shuras) and the imposed, formal structures of political power (District and Provincial Governors, the ANP) at the local level. All politics is local, especially in Afghanistan. Understanding this distribution of local power is vital if we are to promote “legitimacy” of the Government of the Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). Templating a Westernised formal government structure in place of the informal governance that occurs in rural Afghanistan is a recipe for disaster. A suitable political environment must be created to allow the formal and informal/traditional governing structures to coexist and complement each other. ISAF needs to understand this, and facilitate this outcome. And it should not be assumed that ANA or ANP, just because they are Afghans, inherently understand the tensions between the two structures of local governance or that they will be necessarily capable of maintaining a suitable environment of co-existence without substantial prompting, persuading and persistent encouragement.

Comprehensive understanding of the operating environment only comes through *persistent and pervasive interaction with the people who determine the social dynamics of the environment*. This may prove problematic for coalition forces operating in the Pashtun heartlands, where the local populace naturally views foreigners with a degree of xenophobia that makes it more challenging to positively influence their perceptions. In this case, coalition forces need to encourage, persuade and teach ANA and ANP to operate in and amongst the people in order to generate a thorough understanding of the environment. To be effective, this will depend on robust information sharing procedures between coalition forces and the ANSF at the tactical level. It will also be dependent on a prevalent mindset that sees “actionable intelligence” not simply as intelligence that is linked only to the high value target list or to enemy groups. “Actionable intelligence” should be seen more broadly as intelligence that recognizes significant changes in the patterns and routines of the daily life of the people and be able to interpret what these changes mean. This will improve our chances to cue lethal force on to insurgents, and more importantly, it will cue us towards better being able to positively influence the perceptions of the people we are supposed to be protecting.

If it is true that there will be local solutions for local problems, then local tactical coalition force commanders must be assigned and then take responsibility for their “patch of turf.” Superior commanders must devolve responsibility and authority down to the lowest level, and enable subordinate commanders through trust and clear intent to create positive effects at the local level which are required to defeat the insurgency. Coalition force commanders can then partner and teach ANA the actions required to integrate and coordinate tactical effects, across the security, governance and reconstruction and development lines of operation so that, come the appropriate time, ANA can assume responsibility for their own “patch of turf.”

Finally, we can not afford to dogmatically adhere to T.E. Lawrence: “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.” Too often, when things do not go according to plan, the “it is better the Afghans do it ‘just so’ than we do it for them...” becomes an excuse. Corruption, graft and overt patronage is not the “Afghan way.” Centralized control in the ANA and ANP might be the Afghan way for now but it inhibits effective localized response, and if not changed the ANA will take a long time developing the capability to defeat the current insurgency. If we want tangible and consistently positive results at the tactical level ISAF can not afford to be passive in this regard. ISAF must proactively *lead from behind* across all lines of operation, not just security; and ANA must lead ANP.

**2. Adhere to the operational framework.** *Operation Tolo*, the ISAF-led operation during the period 01 Nov 08 to 31 Mar 09 designed to set the conditions for successful presidential elections later in the year, emphasizes the operational framework of Shape in order to Clear in order to Hold in order to Build and Transition (SCHB). Although an approach to operations rather than a strict process, SCHB aims to synchronize the effects of ISAF and its partners across the security, governance and reconstruction and

development lines of operation. SCHB aims to maximize the effect of relatively scarce security assets by focusing effort in select geographic areas to maximize the sense of progress and positively influence the population. SCHB is based on the understanding that *constant clearance operations have little enduring effect*, and only when a locale is held so that security conditions are largely stable, essential services can be provided to the people and informal power structures are functioning alongside the more formal governance structures, are we likely to positively influence the people in our favor. Once a locale is held, effort can then be devoted to building local human capacity to ensure the area remains a legitimately functioning part of Afghanistan. Clearly ANA and ANP have distinct roles in each of the SCHB phases, and will only grow to understand their roles through focused and dedicated mentoring and partnering by the coalition.

**3. Protect the people.** If SCHB is to work, it is vital coalition forces (and by default the ANA) achieve the right balance between “hunting insurgents” to disrupt, and protecting the population and contributing to building human capacity. The former - killing and capturing insurgents - does not always contribute positively to the need to protect the people and build capacity and in our attempts to kill or capture we often sacrifice longer term enduring positive effects for short term tactical effects. This distinction between being population centric in our operations, which should be the main effort, vice being enemy centric, which is a supporting effort and a means to the end, sets the tone for the way we conduct operations, the way we interact with the people, and the way we relate to ANA, ANP and other GIRoA agencies. We do not have the balance consistently right across Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is currently fighting a largely rural insurgency, where insurgent groups are gaining succor and freedom of movement from rural Afghans. This means that if we are to protect the people the coalition and ANA must be persistent and pervasive. The people need to be reassured that if they support us and do not support the insurgent they will not be targets of retribution once our transient patrols leave the area to return to the safety of our FOBs. This demands we patrol dismounted, in and among the people, for extended periods, by day and night, to create the time and space necessary to develop the ANA and ANP to take over this responsibility. If the perceptions and allegiances of the people are the decisive terrain, this also demands any use of lethal force on our part is discriminate and proportional (COMISAF Tactical Directive of 2 Sep 08 emphasizes this point as well as providing additional direction to ISAF soldiers on how they are to behave in the execution of their duties).

**4. Build ANSF capacity and capability.** In the rush to create ANA and ANP we need to ensure we do not sacrifice quality for quantity, and we should be prepared at times to hasten slowly. In generating the force and building both capability and capacity of the ANSF, coalition force mentors in the field and in ANA/ANP training institutions need to focus on the intangible qualities that make an army or police force professional just as much as focusing on the more tangible aspects such as equipping the force or building knowledge of the right processes. Such intangibles as officer qualities, officer-enlisted relationships, junior leadership, empowerment of subordinates (but checking that things are done correctly as well), mission command and the like are the heart and soul of a

professional army that we tend to take for granted but are foreign to an embryonic force like the contemporary ANA or ANP. It is the mentor's responsibility to inculcate this professionalism into their mentee, and this should be accelerated as coalition forces move to truly partner their ANA counterparts. As the insurgency is a 24/7 problem here in Afghanistan, it should go without saying that mentoring and partnering is a 24/7 job.

In building capability we need to constantly question whether we are teaching the right things (just as we should question whether we are teaching things right). Teaching a formal MDMP process that is conventionally oriented, or having core doctrine based on the US 1987 AirLand Battle doctrine, serves a purpose, but it is hardly relevant in light of the immediate threat to the stability of Afghanistan. Having a KANDAK capable of conducting a successful company or battalion attack is good. The ability to prevail at close combat is an essential capability of an army because it enables the army to gain proximity to the people and influence their perceptions and allegiances. But having a KANDAK capable of integrating tactical actions across security, governance and reconstruction and development lines of operation; promoting the informal structures of governance while accommodating the formal structures of governance; facilitating local development and building local human capacity; and coordinating and integrating its effects with the ANP is what is required to defeat the current insurgency. Being able to conduct a successful attack is only a means to an end, and if the KANDAK can not do all of the other more vital tasks, then what?

Afghanistan is a country where relationships are built on personal contact, over time. Without persistent personal contact, over time, with the very people we are attempting to positively influence we have little hope of convincing them that supporting GIRoA vice an insurgent group is in their best interests. The same goes for mentoring teams who must take pride and ownership in the qualitative development of their ANA or ANP Kandaks. A considerable investment of time and energy into personal contact at all levels that conveys a consistent message patiently and persuasively over time is what is needed to develop the institutional skills and professionalism required for the ANA and ANP to develop the capacity and capability required in the short and longer term.

**5. Comprehensive and integrated approach at the tactical level.** Insurgency, like all other types of war, is a clash of wills using both violent and non-violent means, between multiple diverse actors and influences competing for control over the perceptions, behavior and allegiances of human societies. Control of populations and perceptions is therefore central and decisive. Fundamental to positively influencing people's perceptions is ensuring essential services are available, basic local governance is corruption-free and equitable, and that human security is provided. This is recognized explicitly in both the Afghan National Development Strategy and in the overarching ISAF campaign plan which directs ISAF to conduct actions along three lines of operation: security, governance, and reconstruction and development. The trick for ISAF is understanding the requirement to lead (both pull and push) in all three lines of operation at the tactical level. Claims that ISAF only does "security" have no place here in Afghanistan at this juncture.

Integrating and coordinating actions across the three lines in a holistic and comprehensive manner is increasingly required at the grass roots level. A comprehensive and integrated focused district development that encompasses actions across the security, governance and reconstruction and development lines of operation, led by ISAF, is required. This is especially relevant as other GIROA agencies, international aid donors and developers are finding it increasingly difficult to generate the personnel and resources required to penetrate into the countryside. ISAF battlegroup commanders and below need to step into the void created by an absence of these other agencies and as a minimum focus on setting the conditions for their presence, and proactively pushing and pulling these agencies into the areas required. And ISAF and ANSF can not leave these other agencies to fend for themselves, but must continue to create the security conditions and integration and coordination of processes between the people and central government and its interlocutors necessary to facilitate enduring capacity building and development.

The comprehensive and integrated approach at the tactical level requires a single-minded purpose focused on positively protecting the people and influencing their perceptions. It aims to sway allegiances through tangibly demonstrating the effectiveness of the legitimate government and its various ministries and agencies. It means that ISAF needs to conduct joint and combined planning with a variety of agencies and organizations, and it means showing ANA and ANP how to play their own vitally important roles in this process. It also means sharing information not just with ANA and ANP, but also with other GIROA agencies. A tactical fusion and targeting cell, led by ISAF in each province, needs to have a dedicated function of collecting, fusing and disseminating intelligence and information to ANSF and GIROA. Such a function is a vital component of building ANSF/GIROA capacity to defeat the insurgency. And, because it is the most professional and capable organization here in Afghanistan at the present time, ISAF needs to lead the comprehensive approach. From behind if necessary; persuading, encouraging, cajoling and dissuading, but nevertheless acting as the catalyst and providing the oversight necessary to achieve the enduring tactical effects required.

**6. Prepare for the long term.** Most insurgencies are protracted affairs. Declared coalition force operations have been going on in Afghanistan for seven plus years now, and they are likely to continue for many years still. To ensure enduring success tactical commanders (Battlegroup and above) must adopt a campaigning mindset that fundamentally acknowledges victory is not going to occur on this watch, but will occur someday in the future if we can only build on our successes in a cumulative manner, and avoid the mistakes of the past. Fighting this war 12 months at a time, which is happening in the east, or six or seven months at a time, as is occurring in other parts of the country, is an entirely inappropriate approach. Longer term campaign plans – two to three years – are required at the tactical level. They must, of course, be nested with superior longer term plans, and their aim should be to describe the conditions desired in the environment and possible pathways to create these conditions, without becoming too prescriptive or non-adaptable.

Acknowledging the implications of a protracted war at the tactical level also means understanding the importance of a comprehensive hand-over between incoming and out-



going units. Arguably, one of the most important tasks of a unit, after implementing the comprehensive and integrated approach at the tactical level, is handing over responsibility for the battlespace to the replacement unit so they can build on the SCHB operational framework, sustain progress already made and prevent regression. This will depend on the thorough passing of lessons learned (which can occur in the pre-deployment phase for the incoming unit) and most importantly, the maintenance of the aim. A mindset that builds on the successes of our predecessors and prepares our successors for continued success is vital in this complex environment and depends on consistent and effective knowledge management.

**7. Adaptability.** To paraphrase Bernard Fall, if it works, especially in revolutionary war, it is probably already obsolete. We intuitively understand the enemy is adaptive, more than willing and readily able to change tactics, techniques and procedures in response to our own operating procedures. But adaption in Afghanistan also means being able to adapt not just to a changing enemy but to a *changing environment*. The mosaic that is contemporary Afghanistan society is like a kaleidoscope, changing rapidly at the local, district and provincial levels as the distribution of political power ebbs and flows, as development occurs or does not, as ANA and ANP presence is amplified or reduced. ISAF needs to inculcate an adaptive mindset into all of its forces, and into ANA and ANP as well.

Next year there will be a Presidential election, and the following year there will be parliamentary elections, events that have the potential to significantly alter the local and national political landscape. Force element commanders and mentors must critically question whether they understand the environment well enough to identify potential political changes based on the outcomes of these major political events. If they do not, they will be reacting to events rather than proactively helping to shape them. ISAF, and ANA and ANP, need to be asking such questions as: what are the implications of impending social, political and economic changes, good and bad, at the district and provincial level, and what are the implications for how we operate?

An adaptive mindset needs to continuously challenge our understanding and perceptions of the environment as well as the enemy. We need to learn how to learn in this environment, and we need to know when to change. And we need to bring ANA and ANP along with us. Indeed, the ANSF can help ISAF identify the indicators of change, and ISAF can help the ANSF adapt appropriately to the changing environment. The current lessons learned process within ISAF does not work, and it needs to. Similarly, the ANA and ANP lessons learned processes, still embryonic, needs a significant investment of energy and time by mentors at all levels in order to promote adaptability.

**8. Winning the competition for influence.** Communications lie at the core of the insurgent's actions. For insurgents such as Taliban, HiG, the Haqqani Network et al, information objectives tend to drive lethal operations. Virtually every lethal operation they undertake is specifically designed to influence, either directly or through a cumulative effect, attitudes and perceptions of the local Afghans, of GIRoA, of ISAF and ultimately of the domestic audiences of each of the coalition contributing nations.

Unfortunately, coalition forces tend to view information operations and the competition to influence as supplementing lethal operations. Despite all of the hard work and tactical successes we have had here in Afghanistan, coalition forces are not consistently winning the perception battle with regard to Afghan domestic, international and coalition domestic audiences.

The ability to inform and shape the perceptions, attitudes, behavior and understanding of targeted population groups to reinforce effects in any of the lines of operation is predicated on four basic requirements: the ability to understand the social, cultural and values framework of the target population; the ability to effectively plan and integrate effort across the multiple stakeholders who should all be working towards to a common goal; the capacity to disseminate key information messages to target population groups in a consistent and timely manner; and, the ability to measure the effectiveness of the message and adapt if required.

Coalition forces and their ANSF partners must inherently understand that every action sends a message and therefore every action should be underpinned by an informational objective. It is vital, if we are to win the competition for influence at the tactical level, that every coalition force member is imbued with a sense of the fundamental importance of perception management so that, in thousands of daily interactions, their actions support the mission by avoiding dissonant actions and seize every opportunity to advance informational objectives.

## **Conclusion**

Successful, cumulative and enduring tactical action will provide the time and space at the strategic level to address many of the conditions that contribute to these unsuccessful practices. ISAF must proactively take the lead, even if “from behind,” in generating positive effects consistently at the tactical level. It is imperative ISAF understands the complex operating environment at the tactical level, and inculcates a similar inquisitive and understanding mindset into the ANA and ANP. To do so, ISAF must be prepared to persistently and pervasively interact with the people, and have ANA and ANP do the same. This requires getting out of the FOB, both day and night. It also means focusing our main effort on securing the people, not on killing or capturing insurgents (which is still a necessary but supporting effort). Understanding the environment, and the enemy, will contribute to our adaptability more than anything else. ISAF must enable its tactical commanders to take ownership and responsibility of their battlespace and coordinate and integrate a comprehensive approach towards positively influencing the people in that battlespace through mutually reinforcing tactical actions across the security, governance, and reconstruction and development lines of operation and within the SCHB operational framework. Similarly, ISAF mentoring elements must build both capacity and capability of the ANSF, and must invest time and energy into enhancing the quality of the ANSF by focusing on the intangibles that contribute to building a professional and competent force as well as investing effort in the more obvious tangible outputs. Finally, ISAF tactical units must realize that victory is unlikely on their watch and instead focus on creating the

foundation on which their successors can build and improve. All of this demands a change to the tactical status quo.

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