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Winning the War in Afghanistan: An Oil Spot Plus Strategy for Coalition Forces

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While granting that Afghanistan is light years behind Iraq in terms of infrastructure, the central question remains: can Coalition Forces (CF) build on the successes and lessons learned in Iraq and a half century of other counterinsurgency (COIN) wars to emerge victorious over the Taliban and al Qaeda? Or, will we go the way of Great Britain and Russia, who left Afghanistan in defeat? This paper offers a plan for victory that builds on classic COIN—the oil spot or ink spot strategy—customized to address the unique challenges of the Afghan area of operations (AO).

Bottom Line Up Front

- Aside from military defeat by the enemy (unlikely in Afghanistan due to superior CF firepower), history offers two other ways to lose a war against insurgents: (1) fail to win the “hearts and minds” of the local population (the center of gravity) and/or (2) fail to maintain enough support from citizens/politicians/governmental leaders back home to finish the job; the French in Algeria, and the United States in Viet Nam are two notable examples.
- Classic COIN “shape, clear, hold, build” in an oil spot model provides the basic framework for winning, but in itself is insufficient for achieving victory in Afghanistan.
- An “oil spot plus” (OSP) strategy builds on the successes and failures of past COIN, and gives CF commanders in Afghanistan the necessary and sufficient tools for defeating the Taliban, winning hearts and minds of local nationals, and keeping the support of CF citizens/decision makers.
- Central to OSP strategy is a “security first, services second” agreement between villagers and CF that allows development to occur in a safe environment.
- OSP in Afghanistan has the potential to achieve an early tipping point for victory where the Taliban surrenders and reconciles with their neighbors and the national government.

The Current Situation

- The current battle scenario has CF and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) competing with the Taliban to capture the hearts and minds of the local population.
- The Taliban’s advantage lies in knowing the territory and effective use of physical threats and intimidation to keep locals from cooperating with CF; most important, they enjoy tactical efficiency since it takes only sporadic and random acts of violence to have a chilling effect on villager support of CF; every IED detonated reinforces the negative message: “If they can’t even protect themselves, how can they protect us?”
- After seven years in Afghanistan, the best results of CF efforts are seen at the national level (constitution, elected President, legislature and courts in place, Afghan National Army increasing in strength), and the worst results are seen at the local level (villagers living in fear of Taliban threats, stability projects regularly attacked by the enemy). Most telling is the fact that while CF can point to many individual successes in development (schools, wells, clinics, for example), CF is hard pressed to point to model villages that illustrate the end state described in the US Army and Marine doctrine—FM 3.24—on which the COIN initiative is based, where *shape, clear, hold and build* produce villages in which: (a) security works 24/7 to protect villagers from enemy threats; (b) governance reflects the national vision amended to honor local tribal customs; and (c) development yields basic services of health, education, and most important, jobs that pay living wages and allow breadwinners to support their families.
- As a practical matter, the CF strategy of patrolling roads and villages to establish a positive presence means that soldiers daily walk into traps that align with the Taliban information operations (IO) campaign. Unfortunately, the Taliban have no similar vulnerability. The current lay of the land allows them to play a role not unlike the local militia in Colonial America over two hundred years ago, where citizen fighters successfully targeted and attacked a superior “foreign” (and uniformed) British force. The Taliban’s use of IEDs is the modern equivalent of American freedom fighters’ tactic of ambush from behind trees and retreat into the countryside.
- This constellation of facts portends a long battle where, unless the situation changes, American and the other CF home governments may eventually decide to pull the plug on the effort; a headline referring to Afghanistan as “Obama’s Viet Nam” reflects this possibility.

Hopeful Facts

Other variables shed a more hopeful light on this picture:

- US and other CF motives in Afghanistan are different in 2009 than those of the UK and Russia in years past; we are not in Afghanistan to protect colonial interests, nor do we have designs on using Afghanistan as a buffer to protect us against another super power.

- The US launched the war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in order to stop Islamic extremists from violently imposing their will on Americans and others around the world. In this the US and CF partners share a common cause with the citizens of Afghanistan. The good news for the Afghan people is that the lead nation in the CF group, the United States, has a track record of providing positive assistance in the aftermath of war—Germany and Japan are cases in point—and this philosophy has been fully integrated into Army and Marine doctrine (FM 3.0 and 3.24) which is now being customized for use by the Afghan National Army.
- As further good news for the Afghan people, albeit a feature that is yet to be fully felt at the local level, this doctrine of irregular warfare or counterinsurgency acknowledges that while force is important, it is only a part of the overall strategy; 80% of the effort is on “non-lethal” stability efforts that bring security, governance and development to men, women and children in local villages.
- Data from Afghan villages reveal a tangible desire for security (safety in homes, villages, schools), services (medical, educational), and economic development (jobs and recovery from the disastrous economic consequences of Soviet destruction of the centuries old karez irrigation system, and seeding of the countryside with land mines). For the purpose of COIN work, there are ample and pervasive human needs to meet in winning hearts and minds.
- In sum, CF has (a) a model (FM 3.0’s full spectrum operations of Offense, Defense, Stability, and FM 3.24 COIN’s shape, clear, hold and build), (b) the resources and, arguably, (c) the moral high ground to win hands down over the Taliban and al Qaeda when it comes to development that meets the needs of the population. CF’s values of education, human rights, and protection of minorities, when customized to honor Islamic values (well within reach, according to scholars) play out better over time than the Taliban’s approach of oppressive laws, public executions, and beatings in the service of women staying in their traditional roles. CF injuries to the population have been inadvertent and accidental. In the parlance of American sports, given these differences between CF and the Taliban, and the potential overwhelming Information Operations (IO) and Public Affairs (PA) advantage of CF, the hearts and minds part of COIN is “ours to lose.”

An Oil Spot Plus (OSP) for Afghanistan

So how does CF mobilize its considerable strengths and capitalize on Taliban weaknesses to achieve victory in Afghanistan? A reading of history suggests that CF can win if it uses the COIN oil spot strategy as a foundation, and then customizes and enhances the model to address the unique challenges of the human and physical terrain in Afghanistan.

Foundation: Traditional Oil Spot Strategy. The oil spot (OS) COIN strategy draws on the analogy of a cheese cloth representing a country. Drops of oil, one at a time and over time, eventually cover the entire cloth. The process begins with establishing a 100% secure perimeter, accomplished by CF in the first instance, and then transferred to local military in a particular

village or other area of operation, and then, within this safe environment, launching stability initiatives, including services, governance and development. With one OS functioning and under the protection of local army and police, CF partners with the Afghan Security Forces (AFS) to launch other OS villages. The advantages of this approach lie in the discrete gains that can be protected (as in *shape, clear, hold, and build* [FM 3.24]), and most important, each oil spot is a visible manifestation of the desired end state for the entire war. Any friend, foe, or fence sitter can see what CF is up to by looking at security protected and services rendered within the oil spot village/town/city.

To win in Afghanistan—in a way that will both support the local population, and destabilize and ultimately lead to capitulation of the Taliban as we now know it—we must build on this basic structure, and add key features that have heretofore not been associated with the classic model.

The guiding principle underlying the list below is that the absence of one or more of the “necessary and sufficient conditions” for success will derail efforts, and the inclusion of an Afghan version of all of them will lead to victory. While applied here to Afghanistan in 2009, the list provides a framework for OSP in other countries as well.

OSP in Practice

1. **Begin** with the end in mind.

For each and every constituency—from the families whose lives are disrupted by the war, to village leaders who are being asked to disclose intelligence on Taliban activities, to citizens in CF countries who must, through their elected representatives, fund the war—success begins with a clear, credible and readily communicated statement of the mission, and why each constituency should support it. The communications core message must be customized for each listening audience (for example, visual and oral for rural villagers in a country where only 15% are literate).

“What’s in it for me” for the key players must be apparent from the start. Recognizing that the final message will be framed and promulgated at the national level in each coalition country and that, clearly, not all elements of the message will be used in each communication event, nonetheless, the following points should appear on the list:

- a. We envision an end state in Afghanistan where the government is both stable and protective of individual and group rights. (See Natan Sharansky’s definition of democracy . . . a community where one can speak one’s mind in the town square and not be shot or jailed for doing so.)
- b. This will be “democracy their way,” customized for local culture, not a model unique to Western culture, imposed from without, though it will draw on certain *universal* rights (“life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” for example, customized for culture).

- c. During the shape phase of CF COIN work, CF representatives will partner with local people to frame a vision of what the end state might look like in this village; the joint vision of “stability” for the village (security, governance, education, medical and other services and jobs) will be the local version of the national vision of life in Afghanistan under the new democratic government, and will show itself at each stage of COIN work (shape, clear, hold and build).
 - d. While CF may have a military presence in the short term (a matter of years), we expect to be supportive partners in all aspects of stability for the long term (a matter of generations). On the temporal dimension, the analogies of Japan and Germany are apropos; following their defeat by us in WWII, we launched a development/stability effort that continued for generations and ended with trading and cultural partners in countries that once were mortal enemies. Most important for the people of Afghanistan, including villagers with a fresh memory of the Russian occupation and ultimate retreat, the differentiating IO message is that we are in this for the long haul, and this means that we will strive for continuity as one brigade/regiment is replaced by another; we have no intention of becoming an occupying country.
 - e. We are here to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, and, as described below, this may involve their elimination as a fighting force, at one end of the continuum, or reconciliation, at the other end, or some point in between.
 - f. We will articulate and promulgate this defined end state in its short form (“elevator spiel”) as well as lengthier versions (academic papers, covenants, legislation) for audiences ranging from scholars to illiterate villagers; furthermore, we will amend it as needed, in consultation with our host nation and coalition partners, and use it as a guide for all activities in the AO; we will use it in dialogues and debates as a way to keep from being misunderstood and therefore slowed on our path to the ultimate goal.
2. **Select** ”oil spot villages” based on their felt need for security and services; **strike a deal** with each where services are launched if, and only if, the villagers cooperate in helping CF achieve a 100% secure environment in their village. Defer development in all other areas of operations.

Instead of trying to establish a presence in unsecure areas where we are vulnerable to attacks that support Taliban IO, we can devote our resources to villages that have a felt need for security and services (not hard to find), and also a willingness to strike a “security for services” deal. This *first things first* approach of security and then services means that some projects will be deferred until the environment is safe enough to begin and complete them. It will motivate villagers to participate in partnerships for development. The day of throwing money at the problem by digging a well, building a school, or opening a clinic—without first establishing a secure perimeter in cooperation with villagers—should end. The old model is too risky, since an IED or other attack can

turn the effort to naught in an instant, further demoralizing villagers, CF, and ultimately, the sponsors of the effort, the citizens back home.

In sum, the new approach should be: help us with security—your part is to report Taliban pressure on you in the night, and our part is to follow the leads to their ultimate end—and we will then launch services that will last.

Additional features of the *strike a deal* model include: customization of a services list as a joint project of CF, villagers and other partners such as NGOs to insure that services fit the needs of villagers; visits from residents of other villages in Afghanistan to see the benefits of oil spot status; expectation that recipients of new services will eventually assist in helping other villages to develop their own security first/services second model (using the Habitat for Humanity model where the new homeowner helps build the home of the next family in line).

By being selective in where we invest resources for oil spot development, we achieve several goals. We quickly have model towns to showcase for friends, foes, and fence sitters. We give immediate relief to specific villages. We lay the groundwork—with the other points listed below—for reaching a tipping point in the war against the insurgents.

3. **De-emphasize** CF patrols outside the new oil spot villages, thereby denying the enemy IED/suicide bomber opportunities; **replace** these patrols with search and destroy missions to take the fight to the Taliban.

Stop playing to Taliban strengths that are now aimed at our weakness (vulnerability of patrols on roads). Turn the tables on the Taliban by launching attacks from our own secure FOBs, at times and places of our choosing. These missions will aim to keep the enemy in a perpetual state of imbalance and continued deterioration of fighting capability.

Following the counsel of COIN strategist David Kilcullen (2006) and political anthropologist Richard Holt (2008), we extend our influence through the locals own networks:

Go with, not against, the grain of local society: first win the confidence of a few villages, and then see who they trade, intermarry or do business with. Now win these people over. Soon enough the showdown with the insurgents will come. But now you have local allies, a mobilized population and a trusted network at your back (D. Kilcullen, 2006, p.32).

For illustrative purposes, see the Sample Security/Services Agreement to highlight the model in practice.

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Sample Security/Services Agreement

• **CF will:**

- Establish a secure perimeter of the village until ASF can take it over.
- Train and partner with ASF on how to maintain the secure perimeter.
- Commit to services plan: security first, then services from agreed upon list created jointly by CF and Villagers.
- Partner with ASF to give 24/7 police protection within the OS village.
- Conduct search and destroy missions against insurgents outside perimeter, and follow leads from local population to punish enemy threats against citizens.

• **Village leaders and people will:**

- Report all leads about insurgent activity, IEDs and security threats to CF Intel.
- Work with NGOs in land mine clearing project.
- Report all threats by Taliban against citizens and extended family in and outside oil spot to CF.
- Create other ways to support CF and ASF in maintaining security.
- Participate via representatives on Joint Committee for new services in the village.

• **Both CF and village leaders agree that:**

- There will be no work on services list until CF and ASF declare perimeter secure and village is free of land mines.
- With security jointly affirmed, joint steering committee will launch and oversee jobs project, and services list.
- To support CF's long term commitment to this plan after current brigade leaves AO, CF will assign two Human Terrain Team (HTT) members to be a part of joint steering committee to facilitate continuation with each subsequent brigade in AO.
- Joint committee will regularly evaluate progress and lessons learned, capturing metrics about security incidences (or lack thereof), as well as services list benchmarks, for dissemination both within village and in other towns in AO.
- To leverage gains in AO, village leaders and CF will assist other towns in launching similar agreements when they are ready (the "Habitat for Humanity" model where, once a home is built, the new owner assists in building a home for the next family in line).

4. **Engage** CF citizen groups back home to participate in their country's "war on terror" by helping their counterparts in oil spot towns.

Once security is established in villages, invite citizens in CF countries to volunteer time and resources to support soldiers and NGOs as they work in OS villages. This could be farmers donating seed and expertise to a partner OS village, a law enforcement group sending delegates to help an OS village's new police force, or college students assisting with educational projects. Open the door as well for military personnel currently in the war theatre to use their skills and talent from their civilian lives to strengthen specific OS village development projects.

The idea is to create a surge of services in the OS towns only that will complement the surge of troops to secure OS towns and conduct search and destroy. The day of bumper stickers as the primary way for citizens to show support should be over. It is time to mobilize the deep reservoir of back home citizen concern and good will by giving them concrete ways to support troops through stability efforts in Afghan oil spot towns.

5. **Integrate evaluation metrics into** CF Information Operations (IO) and Public Affairs (PA) activities, publicizing the benefits to the Afghan people from the OS partnerships, thereby attracting new villages and building support for the war effort from CF citizens and governments.

Critical metrics include both process and outcome variables. Under the former, address the number of villages that partner for OS status, the specific features of the security and services agreement, the completion dates of items on the security and services lists, and lessons learned among the partners at each step of the way. Outcome variables will include: the number reports of Taliban threats that are reported to the local security officers, the number successfully followed and resolved, the number of potential IED attacks that are thwarted because they were reported by villager contacts to the local authorities, the frequency of IED/suicide bomber attacks, plus the full range of stability outcomes associated with development, such as the number of students (child and adult) who complete various levels of education, jobs created, and other such measures.

The IO campaign uses these data to address friends, neutrals, fence sitters, and enemies. It charts progress in the OS towns, linking these gains to the originally defined end state. Central themes in messages are: (a) separate this war from wars past (colonial, Great Game, Afghanistan as buffer, and others), (b) show the next round of OS villagers the benefits for enrolling in the same deal as the OS towns (services tied to security), and (c) advance the international agenda of CF in the iterations of this war against Islamic extremism in other countries.

Most important for the credibility and morale of all parties, acknowledge in periodic IO messages that we see this as a long term process. Warfare will eventually be transformed into ongoing educational and economic partnerships that extend across generations.

6. **Define** the conditions for the enemy to lay down arms, be reconciled to their neighbors, and rejoin villages as members of communities where governance is characterized by respect for human rights and protection of minorities. The Taliban, for all the havoc they have wreaked on their neighbors, are still Afghan and Pakistani neighbors to the local population in the AO. They will not go away.

As Afghan Ambassador Said T. Jawad (2009) has pointed out, there are three distinct ideological groups within the Taliban, only one of which (the “capital T” leaders affiliated with al Qaeda) is “irreconcilable and will not rest until their main objectives of eliminating the West and its allies are met”. The mid-Taliban commanders (mercenaries) and the foot soldiers (largest group) have been recruited based on their experience of having been antagonized by NATO or US military operations, or mistreated by Afghan government officials. These fighters are the targets of reconciliation that will draw on a customized list of standard solutions (Slaikeu, 1996) for re-entry into the new Afghanistan: acknowledgement of past wrongs (a variation on the theme of Truth and Reconciliation in post Apartheid South Africa), restitution, a new plan for the future (governance in the Islamic state of Afghanistan, integrating democratic principles with Islamic law), and forgiveness framed in the context of cultural considerations such as Pashtunwali Code.

The Tipping Point

With the landscape increasingly populated with model OS villages where citizens have no fear that the Taliban will enter their homes in the night to intimidate, with services launched that address the peoples’ most pressing needs, with other villages hearing—word of mouth, face to face, radio—the news of what is possible through cooperation of local leaders and CF, with the Taliban on their heels as a result of effective search and destroy—never sleeping a peaceful night—with the door to reconciliation with neighbors open wide and with continued military losses for the Taliban, then it is only a matter of time until the enemy does a cost benefit analysis that leads to the conclusion: “Let’s talk”.

By any definition of the term, this will be the tipping point for victory in this war. It will have begun with a visible manifestation of the end state, rumor that in ABC village they have a new well, a school, a medical clinic with a training program for midwives, a dental clinic, and new jobs. Some villagers will work for a new security firm, an Afghan contractor, others for the police department, others in farming, where CF has subsidized new crops to give the farmers more money than they now get for growing poppy. The rumors will have led to new applications for villages to become OS towns (“We too could use a new well, and a clinic and a school”). The number of towns will grow. The eventual peace talks will build on the work already accomplished, and will turn to the reconciliation already envisioned. While no one knows when it will occur, if the conditions above are met, it will likely occur far sooner than any one now imagines.

Yes, but . . .

1. It sounds like this means denying development to the rest of the Afghanistan while we focus on OS villages. True?

Yes. *Benign neglect* is the guiding concept. “We can’t help you unless you first agree to help us by partnering for the security you have said you want. Only then can we do the deal.”

2. How is OSP similar to and different from the FM 3.24 phases of shape, clear, hold and build?

The security/services deal is framed and negotiated with villagers during the Shape phase, and then advanced in each subsequent stage. The critical difference between OSP and current FM 3.24 is that development is not undertaken until and unless there is an agreement with the village to help CF meet the security requirements.

3. How is this different from what the Russians did, which failed?

While Russia launched stability projects, the military’s use of land mines against the population, and explosives in toys to get rid of the next generation, were far from the humane values of the OSP strategy.

4. How do we know that the villages will use the new services?

We must spend time talking to villagers about what they want and need and the conditions that best allow them to integrate services into local culture. In one instance, a school will head the list. In another, training for midwives will be the top priority. In another, the partnership will involve a CF university helping Afghan farmers increase crop production. HTTs and others can facilitate conversations with villagers that will: (a) create the specific services list for each OS town and (b) make sure that the project management part is complete (e.g., don’t start to build the school until we know we have the materials and teachers to go along with it).

Conclusion

The stakes are high in Afghanistan. The Obama Administration’s commitment of lives, money and time in order to defeat religious extremists will be the second such American administration to set out on such a course since 9/11. We can build on successes in Iraq and correct for past mistakes by customizing our approach to address the most unique feature of Afghan culture, namely, the fact that the country is centuries behind the rest of the world in education, health care, and economic development. A true partnership with the Afghan people, one village at a time, can bring the security and services that they desire, and at the same time, lead to victory over enemies, some of whom will fight to the death, and others of whom (or their children and grandchildren) will eventually become our new partners.

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