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Flawed Doctrine or Flawed Strategy?

Morgan Sheeran

Diversions

The United States and her allies are in trouble in Afghanistan. That's not hard to see. What seems to be taking up all the bandwidth these days is a conversation about how to go about reversing the backwards slide that Afghanistan is in. The Department of Defense notes in its January, 2009 report on Afghanistan, "The Taliban regrouped after its fall from power and has coalesced into a resilient and evolving insurgency." It goes on to state, "Shortfalls limit the Allies' capacity to fulfill all aspects of the COIN strategy." Meanwhile, the military's senior leadership is spending its time discussing such things as the appropriateness of the doctrine developed to fight and succeed in such wars. Some are even excusing failure beforehand. Air Force Major General Charles J. Dunlap, Jr. pointed out in the pages of *Armed Forces Journal* that the United States did not "lose" the Cold War as a result of our failure in Vietnam, thereby implying that failure in Afghanistan would be less than catastrophic and therefore tolerable.

Assessing the acceptability of loss in the central campaign of the Global War on Terror is certainly a diversion from any assessment on how to succeed in a difficult enterprise. It is not the conversation that military leadership should be having at this or any point. While the Army managed to get COIN right just enough to avert a massive failure in Iraq, any self-congratulations are misplaced. The Army has still not wholeheartedly embraced the only doctrine that we possess which is specifically designed for use in counterinsurgency warfare.

Unity of Effort

While the Army dickers over how much COIN is too much, men are in crude places poorly supported and repeatedly countermanded by senior officers. As long as that is the case, any discussion of "has the Army gone too far with this COIN thing?" is pointless. As long as there is dickering at this level, there will be no unity of effort to succeed in America's current wars. Just look at the MITT/ETT program. Is this a program that the Army takes seriously? You can tell where the priorities of the Army truly lie when you look at such a program. Is this the type of "Top Gun" program that a commander sends his most promising officers and senior NCO's to in order to develop the expertise in working with indigenous forces that COIN efforts require? No, clearly not. In fact, until this year it was a waste of a year and a half of an officer's career. It was something to be avoided if at all possible, and the treatment and support of these teams when they operate in another's battlespace tells most of all how much the Army "gets" COIN.

While some units treat advisors operating in their areas as partners in the overall effort, advisor teams are often relegated to resources such as housing that the battlespace owner's unit does not find suitable or has been abandoned. Elsewhere these teams are cast aside and rendered nearly moot.

When former Advisors are asked about the relationship with the Army maneuver forces in whose battlespace they operated, a significant number state that they were treated as "red-headed stepchildren" or worse. Advisors are often distrusted by maneuver units, who fear that the Advisors have potentially "gone native" because of their COIN focus.

Empowering a Distributed Methodology

The Army makes a considerable amount of noise about COIN, but fails in the actual implementation of it. As an embedded advisor in Afghanistan, I was about as far out on the chain as one can be, sometimes the only American within miles. Advisors were thinly resourced and I saw the inefficiency and counterproductive behaviors and practices implemented by some maneuver units. There were certainly those who "got it," while a neighboring battlespace would be under the sway of someone who recoiled at any reference to COIN. I worked with junior leaders, the "strategic Corporals" (rank varied), who had absolutely no training in and very little genuine appreciation for COIN principles.

COIN is a distributed methodology, but the Army does not enable junior leaders to really be strategic Corporals because the Army does not even train them in COIN. I worked with small unit leaders in Afghanistan who were making the most basic of COIN errors on a daily basis because they had absolutely no idea what they were doing from a doctrinal perspective. They were conventionally trained warriors in a COIN fight doing the best that they could without any formal training in the doctrine whatsoever. They had never even heard of Galula. These were Soldiers of elite units, not IRR augmentees ripped from civilian pursuits. COIN is either victory or defeat by a thousand cuts. There are some who are cutting for and some who are cutting against, and it is based on the individual's personal reading list which way they cut. That is unacceptable; there is no other way to put it and that is not firmly stated enough.

Every leader in the Army needs to be adequately trained in counterinsurgency theory and practice. It is possible for the Army to retain its institutional knowledge and abilities as a conventional force while winning the war that it find itself actually engaged in; a war that leaders not even seem to take seriously enough to buckle down and train towards the only doctrine we possess that is applicable in its prosecution.

Senior officers most often do not buy into the distributed application, pushing O-5 and O-6 control to the squad level instead of decentralizing the way proper application of COIN doctrine demands. There was recently an acknowledgment by a Command Sergeant Major that he used surveillance assets to monitor the wear of the uniform in remote locations. Recently an embedded advisor wrote of a battlespace owner who *knew* where the insurgents that they were looking for in the dark were. Did the commander use his assets to push down the intelligence to the guy who could use it? No. He used it to deny illumination that would have revealed the insurgents to the Afghan National Army troops only meters away and by the time he got around

to sharing intelligence it was no longer actionable. Four Taliban who should be dead or in custody escaped to rocket their Forward Operating Base another day. Is that good application of COIN or of any distributed system?

The military is fielding the best sensors that the world has ever seen, eclipsing the “gee-whiz” gadgetry of the Gulf War in sophistication. This should be used to empower and inform the Soldier on the ground downrange, not be another level of control for an O-5 in a well heated or air-conditioned TOC. As implementers of a distributed methodology the Army is an abject failure on the whole. Far too much central command and control is being exerted by battlespace owners. Even the strategic Captains who do get it are frequently disabled by central decisions.

Fearful of any mistakes occurring on their watch, battlespace owners clutch the reins tightly and all too often struggle not to lose ground instead of making progress. That is part of why the Coalition is not winning in Afghanistan. Battlespace owners need to become hubs for providing the man on the ground with as many multipliers and implementation enablers as possible instead of trying to run the show in detail. Learn to fight the distributed war and empower junior leaders to apply what can be provided to them. They will know how to use it because the Army has uncompromisingly trained them in the doctrine. The Army will have given them the skill set to use the tools leaders can provide.

The Army cannot claim that its junior leaders are uncompromisingly trained in the doctrine of FM 3-24. COIN is not consistently trained in the Non-Commissioned Officer Education System. When an organization is over seven years into a war and the NCOES does not reflect the most current doctrine of that war, that doctrine has not achieved saturation. In fact, the Army, as an institution, is resisting it.

Another indication that military leadership is not embracing COIN is demonstrated in the disjointed approach American efforts are taking. COIN is not only distributed, it is holistic. America is failing to adequately integrate efforts such as host nation governance, economic development, and security. While many Army units are doing good work in their battlespace, relationships with Army elements engaged in mentoring host nation forces are inconsistent.

Efforts at mentoring governance are disconnected from military efforts at best and nonexistent at worst. Economic development efforts are completely separated from military and governance efforts. America is phoning in its economic development efforts and is getting commensurate results. The Army is not partnering with these efforts effectively; it doesn't even partner well with its own elements. Stories of well-integrated efforts with Provincial Reconstruction Teams, host nation forces with Coalition mentors and especially host nation forces without Coalition mentors are few. Stories of those integrated efforts combined with successful development efforts in close partnership with non-military agencies are rarer still, yet in effective COIN operations, they would be the rule and not the rarity.

Flawed Doctrine, or Flawed Execution?

Making the assumption that the Army has a firm grasp of FM 3-24, some, such as Colonel Gian Gentile, call for reevaluating the doctrine. The Army is actually only in the early stages of

learning it. The doctrine has not reached down to the operator level for much of the Army, though those same people are keys to implementing the distributed application COIN doctrine requires. This doctrine is applicable any time a leader finds himself presented with scenarios in the real world that have elements of insurgency or the potential to develop into one. In short; any time America's military forces come in contact with ungoverned or under-governed populations where there are armed, organized sub-state groups. This may or may not occur in the presence of other types of combat. One can be sure that it will occur in any situation where the military is directed to remove a sitting government. Having the doctrine and those who can rapidly transition between modes of operation and who can figure out how to blend them to achieve the desired results will be most advantageous. Calls for modification of the doctrine distract from a relentless emphasis on ensuring that the troops actually understand and internalize it.

Real world application of the doctrine will demonstrate further need for revision and additions. Doctrine cannot evolve unless it is truly tested. Some argue that this doctrine has not been truly tested and any debate of weak spots in it is almost purely hypothetical. Many doctrinal publications are altered by experience, the emergence of new capabilities (both friendly and enemy) and other factors. It can and probably will evolve. Right now the Army as an institution is a poor practitioner – this requires getting the basics right across the board before attempting to reexamine COIN doctrine.

Central to this line of reasoning is the argument that FM 3-24 is designed for an insurgency of a type that is not found in the Global War on Terror. FM 3-24 is referred to derisively as “Galula on steroids.” Galula's experience is discredited as being born of the Maoist insurgencies of the last century, as if there are no similarities to the current campaigns. This argument is meant to deflect the proof that our current position in Afghanistan is a failure to even adequately practice the doctrine, assuming instead good practice of a flawed doctrine.

Yet the insurgency in Afghanistan bears many of the earmarks that Galula described, and has progressed to the point of shadow governance providing services to the populace in areas in which they are strong enough to do so, as Galula described. The Taliban may not be Maoist in ideology, but they are following the recipe pretty well. If “Maoist” may be used as a description of insurgent tactics and strategy rather than communist ideology, then Afghanistan is dealing with a Maoist insurgency. They certainly know what they are doing and if they learned their lessons from Mao so be it.

The point is that Galula painted an accurate picture of the Taliban insurgency and his work accurately models the very things that we are now seeing. If his work is to be the subject of derision or dismissal then how can one so easily see the insurgent activities he described overlaid as if by template on the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan? Is it possible that Galula's templates for counterinsurgency may be just as applicable? Can anyone claim with a straight face that the Army is implementing those strategies and tactics even adequately in Afghanistan?

COL Gentile, the de facto spokesman for those who resist further institutionalization of COIN doctrine, argues that we must be prepared to fight the next large peer-to-peer conflict. This is echoed in Maj. Gen. Dunlap's concept that loss in Afghanistan is less than catastrophic and therefore acceptable. He suggests that a loss in World War III would be catastrophic and so

therefore it is honorable to lose the small war in order to be ready for the hypothetical big war, even if that big war appears far from imminent. Dunlap's assertions indicate that some number within the U.S. military's senior officer corps question whether this war is worthy of the military's best efforts since it is so unlike the mythical Great War that the military would prefer to fight. Since the Global War on Terror does not appear to rise to that level the commitment to success in this war wavers and the doctrine to win it comes into question; especially since it seems to be useless in a peer-to-peer conflict. It is argued that dedication to learning and training subordinates in the effective execution of COIN degrades conventional capability. But the lack of a real conventional threat at this point provides no excuse for failing to prosecute the current war with all of a leader's professional capabilities.

Results speak for themselves. The worsening situation in Afghanistan is conveniently blamed on various factors including manning levels, the sanctuary of the FATA in Pakistan, the Afghans themselves, ancient ethnic rivalries, other governmental and non-governmental agencies, and so on, ad nauseam. The fact is that the Coalition is not winning in Afghanistan because Americans and the allies are spotty practitioners of their own COIN doctrine. The opponents of COIN point to outside factors as being responsible for the relative success in Iraq, eliminating any credit to the doctrine in success. Leaders must not accept factors beyond control as being excusatory when the Army is not expertly and relentlessly applying the doctrine that it has been given for just such an occasion. Military leadership must not be lured by the siren song of factors outside of its control being responsible for success as well as failure for these is the contentions upon which excuses are built. It is time to throw out the excuses and the assumptions that are used in the arguments that support them.

Afghanistan is in jeopardy because of the Army's failure to fully grasp COIN as an organization from top to bottom. It is proof that the Army has not gone too far with COIN but not far enough.

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