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Organizing Counterinsurgency Operations in Afghanistan

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The collapse of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001 led to the challenges of creating and then maintaining a stable, safe, and secure environment for the people of that nation. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) and the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) failure to organize and establish the unity of command, unity of purpose, and unity of understanding needed to implement under an effective counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy has resulted in the ISAFs inability to assist the Afghan government to gain and maintain security, prevent a resurgence of the Taliban, and develop an effective infrastructure development plan. This paper uses key counterinsurgency principles to suggest a way to organize NATO and ISAFs political and military effort in order to succeed in Afghanistan.

The Afghans Must Win the Fight

NATO and ISAF can facilitate the Afghan's efforts, but the Afghans must win the counterinsurgency war. In 2009 the Afghan government clearly does not have the capability and capacity to effectively govern and provide security, stability, and safety to the Afghan people. NATO must build this Afghan capability and capacity so NATO can relinquish the role of leading the nation-building effort and assume an advisory or supporting role to the country's new central government. NATO has organized its current forces to conduct combat operations in Afghanistan instead of leading counterinsurgency operations in support of the Afghan government. To lead the counterinsurgency, NATO must develop a balanced COIN strategy, reorganize their COIN force, and consider relocating their bases to conduct internal defense and development (IDAD). President Karzai has informed NATO that more than anything else the Afghans need to rebuild their human capital and their institutions, their army, police force, administrative structure, and judiciary.¹ When this comprehensive rebuilding process is successful, NATO can relinquish the role of leader and then serve as Afghan advisors and supporters.²

There is a right way and a wrong way to approach the reconstruction of the Afghan social culture and institutional structures. The security forces, governmental structures, and infrastructure development must remain consistent with the Afghan culture and their economic capability. It is important that NATO does not create bureaucratic systems and processes and infrastructure that

¹ Mark Sappenfield, "To Fight Taliban, US Eyes Afghan Tribes," October 16, 2008, <http://www.csmonitor.com/20081016/p01s04-wosc.html> (accessed October 16, 2008).

² Glenn, *Counterinsurgency and Capacity Building*, 116.

the Afghans cannot maintain and sustain. This invites corruption and will create an institutional void that will be filled by corrupt village elders or the Taliban. NATO must not facilitate a return to the days of armed warlords and militias. The tribal systems are too complicated and too numerous; and restoring them could re-ignite or exacerbate existing tribal and ethnic rivalries and lead to civil war.³ Historically, warlords and strongmen have been an obstacle to good governance and justice in Afghanistan. To avoid the former fragmentation of authority and a return to a weak political central government the Afghan government must be strong enough to balance the roles and missions of the police and military with those of civilian leaders and to convince tribal leaders that their former strong arm tactics will not jeopardize good governance.

The development of a bottom up Afghan civil defense plan that trains, organizes, and equips the security forces is the most viable option. Working in cooperation with village elders, the government should hire qualified young men to work as auxiliary police at the village level and as police at the district and provincial level. Village elders should advise district and provincial leaders about local issues and problems. All levels of security should be closely linked to maintain security throughout the vast provincial territory. NATO must not build Afghan security forces along western constructs, but instead, must use the strength of the tribal and cultural system to create local Afghan security forces that immediately serve the needs of the people. The system must appeal to the common good and pursue the collective values of nationalism over tribalism.

NATO must let the Afghans carry out as much of this security and nation-building work as possible. Where the Afghans are weak, NATO should supplement their institutions and build capability and capacity. Where they are strong, NATO should advise and assist. ISAF activities must immediately be conducted through, with, and by the host nation's military, government, police, and citizenry. Afghans must stabilize their social structure and build their own government, military, and police. The Afghans know their own people. So to establish its legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, the Afghan government must be seen as leading the political and military effort.⁴

ISAF Must Establish Unity of Command, Unity of Purpose, and Unity of Understanding

Although, adjustments in the command structure has been made at the four-star level more adjustments at all levels of command is required. To be effective, the ISAF commander must command all forces in Afghanistan and all contributing countries must recognize this authority and adhere to one established chain of command. Units in Afghanistan must operate under a single mandate. Operation Enduring Freedom should be dissolved and all units conducting operations in Afghanistan should function under one UN and NATO mandate. Counterterrorism operations and counterinsurgency operations must be integrated under one strategy in order to maximize their complementary effects.

³ Sappenfield, "To Fight Taliban, US Eyes Afghan Tribes."

⁴ Glenn, *Counterinsurgency and Capacity Building*, 77.

Simplification of command relationships to create unity of purpose and establish unity of understanding must be a priority to facilitate an effective COIN strategy.⁵ The United States must work with NATO and all contributing nations to simplify the command structure in Afghanistan. All contributing countries must have a complete understanding of the operational environment and recognize the insurgency and that they are participating in counterinsurgency operations. Establishing this understanding of the operational environment among contributing nations would solve the issue of fractured command structures and disjointed operations in Afghanistan.⁶

Inside Afghanistan, the regional commands should be reconfigured and reduced to RC North and East and RC South and West. All levels of command must be completely integrated with Afghan staff counterparts and intelligence and operations fusion cells to ensure transparency, information sharing, coordination, and synchronization of activities. Command tours must be lengthened to one year and the command responsibility should remain within one country. There must be a continuity of operations plan for incoming rotations to ensure continuity, and pre-mission training must be focused on one strategy and oriented to the incoming units' area of responsibility. To retain continuity every effort must be made to return units to their previous operational area. It is critical that incoming units understand their mission, where they will be located and that their pre-mission training supports a single strategy. Conducting operations one rotation at a time and foregoing continuity, unity of command, effort, and understanding must end.

ISAF Must Develop a Comprehensive Population-Centric COIN Strategy

It is not an exaggeration to state that the Taliban are more effective today than it was in 2002. Poppy production continues to dominate the economy and contribute to instability, and the populace remains alienated from its government. The Karzai government has little control or influence beyond Kabul, the Afghan Army is not effective, and the police forces are corrupt. Nowhere in any NATO document does the organization acknowledge the insurgency or the requirement to operate in a counterinsurgency environment.⁷ NATO's failure to assess properly the operational environment accurately has contributed to its ineffectiveness to organize and administer the political and military effort in Afghanistan. This has resulted in a dysfunctional Afghan government, military, police, and corrupt civil leaders.

NATO must recognize that it is fighting a rural insurgency in Afghanistan and that the Taliban are winning the allegiance of the Afghan people. The Taliban are effectively operating at the village level while NATO tries to defeat them from Kabul and the provincial capitals. NATO must also understand the nature of the operations in Afghanistan. It must acknowledge that in order to achieve its nation-building goals, it must neutralize the insurgent infrastructure to gain and maintain the support of the populace and to legitimize the Afghan government. ISAF must

⁵ Thomas Harding, "General Petraeus Told He 'Must Succeed' in Afghanistan," *Defense Correspondent*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/2990814/General-petraeus-told-must-succeed-in-Afghanistan.html> (accessed September 19, 2008).

⁶ Hope, *The Unity of Command in Afghanistan*, 20.

⁷ "Building Stability in Afghanistan," *NATO Review*, Spring 2006, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2006/issue1/english/art2.html> (accessed September 27, 2008).

balance an enemy-focused and population-centric COIN strategy. Military operations should focus on gaining and maintaining security (sweep, clear, hold, secure, develop) followed quickly with development projects designed to gain popular support.

The centralization of training in Kabul is too expensive, resource intensive, and logistically challenging. A decentralized civil defense force and military training plan must be developed to equip, maintain and sustain operations at the village, district, and provincial levels. A successful political-military strategy will establish a COIN force design and COIN force location; it will specify needed resources to conduct counterinsurgency operations. The strategy must neutralize and control the insurgents by separating them from the populace. The reconstruction and development plan should be a bottom-up village to district plan that strengthens the social structure. This approach will connect the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and the provincial Afghan provincial civil leadership with the village civil leadership. With increased security in the village and districts, the economy will improve, thereby making more resources available for reconstruction and more money in local Afghan hands.

Afghanistan Must Have Efficient and Effective Afghan Security Forces

One of NATO's imperatives is to ensure that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is properly organized, trained, equipped, and capable of conducting operations. Although NATO has developed ANSF, its effectiveness is limited due to a centralized versus a decentralized organization, lack of funding, equipment, pay problems, retention problems, and corruption. The Afghan security institutions have increased their operational capacity and have trained more personnel, but they have also had problems with retention, staff effectiveness, corruption, and general oversight.⁸

The lack of effective and efficient security forces has a serious impact on the legitimacy of the Afghan government. Afghans are losing trust in their government because of an escalation in violence. Public expectations are not being met and conditions in Afghanistan have deteriorated in all key areas targeted for development. Traditional, informal judicial structures continue to fill the gap for many Afghans. Meanwhile, the formal justice sector remains inaccessible and corrupt. It is unable to confront religious extremism, adjudicate land disputes, unravel criminal networks, or protect the rights of citizens.⁹

The Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) are in desperate need of reorganization, more personnel, weapons, and vehicles. ISAF units are doing an excellent job training the ANSF, but its lack of funding has a negative effect on its overall quality and long-term effectiveness. Further, due to national caveats and partnering problems, many allied trainers cannot accompany their Afghan units in the field to provide advice, assistance, and support.¹⁰ The ISAF operation that began in July 2009 in the Helmand Province is an example of ineffective Afghan security forces, poor security, and a struggling counterinsurgency. After

⁸ Seema Patel and Steven Ross, *Breaking Point Measuring Progress in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2007), 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

seven plus years, the operations should be conducted by 4000 Afghans and a few hundred Marines not the other way around.

Another problem results from centralization of training and ineffective police and military organization. NATO should decentralize its military and police training programs. By recruiting, training, organizing, employing the military and police locally, NATO will develop effective police and military relationships, improve the economy, capitalize on local vested interests, and improve accountability. The military and police structure should be designed around an organizational model that has the capability and capacity to operate effectively and efficiently in a COIN environment. The military units supporting the Afghan government should be small, consisting of security forces, field artillery, engineers, medical personnel, psychological operators, civil affairs officers, communications specialists, intelligence specialists, and logistical specialists, and interagency partners. These units should be based in areas where they can have the most effect on the insurgency and the populace.

The Afghan police structure should have a law enforcement and paramilitary security force capability. The police should be augmented by a civil defense force and auxiliary police at the village level to facilitate security. The police at the village level should operate permanent and roving check points to ensure the security of the roads, which will contribute to an improved Afghan government presence in the countryside. The police at the district level should conduct security patrols beyond the village to ensure security is maintained between villages and to prevent the Taliban from operating from their safe havens. The police should also maintain its law enforcement role to deal with crime to prevent corrupt village elders from supplanting the legitimacy of the Afghan government. Additionally, NATO must resist the idea to develop special military and police units that pull leadership and quality from the existing military and police organizations. There is no need to create the tiers and specialization in the Afghan military and police as found in western military and police organizations.

Lastly, inadequate Afghan government systems at the provincial, district, and village level must be fixed. In their place, militia commanders and corrupt village elders have filled the void, undermining governance and basic rights.¹¹ To remedy this problem, civil servants require training in public administration and should be recruited from the local population. Elected and appointed officials must also be advised, assisted, and trained in public administration.

Interagency Team-Building

NATO's leadership in political-military team building will have significant effect on the success of ISAF and its ability to conduct effective COIN operations. Leaders from top to bottom need to break down barriers among organizations and collaborate. NATO must function as a political leader, team-builder, and capacity-builder. Synchronizing the host nation's interagency assets as well as the contributing countries' interagency assets to improve law enforcement, military operations, and diplomatic enterprises is essential to ensuring all activities are coordinated and mutually supporting.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

An effective strategy that achieves unity of command, unity of purpose, and unity of understanding will overcome many of the planning and communications challenges arising from organizations that come from different agencies, nations, and missions. NATO must ensure that the potential capability and capacity that exists in its diverse interagency team is not lost because of clashes of cultures, societal or organizational.¹²

ISAF Must Reorganize Their Force into Small Security and Development Teams

Closely related to building effective interagency teams is the distribution of civil and military personnel throughout Afghanistan. People bring order in a COIN environment, technology facilitates and enhances the mission, but proper organization puts the right people in the right place at the right time. ISAF must ensure that their forces are distributed appropriately to have the desired effects on the insurgent force and the populace.

ISAF must organize Afghan forces, Afghan government agencies, non-governmental agencies, interagency partners, special operations forces, and conventional forces to conduct COIN operations. In a rural insurgency, there should be adequate forces in the urban areas to protect critical infrastructure but firebases must be located in key rural areas to influence the populace and negatively affect the enemy's influence in the villages and districts. Check points must be established in key areas to keep roads open and safe. The idea is to control the lines of communication with check points, drive the insurgents out of the villages into the remote areas and attack them causing minimal collateral damage. A small, effective and efficient combined, interagency, counterinsurgent force must occupy the key villages and districts. This type of COIN force (in addition to the host nation forces and assets) may consist of NATO personnel, U.S. State Department or counterpart personnel, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) personnel, personnel from other agencies (e.g., doctors, civil engineers, irrigation, experts, energy experts, agricultural experts, and veterinarians that support socioeconomic development), U.N. personnel, special operations forces, conventional forces, and measures of effectiveness assessment teams.¹³

This tailored COIN force will advise, assist, and support the Afghan government and forces to gain and maintain the security needed to conduct nation-building operations and thereby, support the populace. Security also facilitates good governance and justice; it enhances the development of infrastructure and economic growth. Once security is established, the counterinsurgent force can then advise and support the local village elders to stabilize the social infrastructure, sustain newly established security, mitigate the amount of corruption, and bring quality-of-life improvements to the populace.

This versatile counterinsurgent force can also focus on the enemy by operating from a secure base and expand security outwardly, the so-called oil spot approach. The populace then perceives the base as a place of support. More importantly, it is a place from which the Afghan populace can go for assistance and the Afghan government can launch efforts and leverage

¹² Russell W. Glenn, "The Tale of Two Countries: Counterinsurgency and Capacity Building in the Pacific," *Small War Journal Online*, February 2008, <http://www.smallwarjournal.com> (accessed September 21, 2008).

¹³ Thomas H. Johnson and Chris Mason, "All Counterinsurgency Is Local," *Atlantic Monthly Online*, October 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200808u/Afghanistan-base> (accessed September 21, 2008).

resources to implement its reconstruction and development plan that connects villages to district and provincial centers, that legitimizes the Afghan government and that helps set the conditions for on-going security and stability.

NATO Must Improve Its Strategic Communications

Recognizing that people are the strategic center of gravity in a COIN environment and the insurgents' critical vulnerability, it is important that an aggressive information operations and public affairs plan is developed to influence all strata of society. Achieving this starts with something as simple as base location, force placement, and task organization. Getting these fundamentals right, the first time (and being prepared to adjust when a miscalculation occurs) is critical for achieving the desired effect on the enemy, for positively influencing the populace, and for legitimizing the government.

The Taliban is more effective at information warfare than NATO and ISAF because they are decentralized and are in the villages to influence the populace.¹⁴ NATO must develop an information operations system that assists the Afghans in being more effective in influencing the populace. NATO must provide the support required to the Afghans to disseminate the messages through all types of media to counter this insurgent strength.

NATO Must Control External Support

Pakistan's and Iran's external support to the Taliban is contributing to the declining security situation in Afghanistan. No surge or additional amount of troops will fix this external support problem. The border between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran is too vast and too rugged to seal off. The solution is primarily diplomatic. It will be solved by old-fashioned, hard-nosed diplomacy based on a sound regional strategy that supports the security interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and India, which differ tremendously.

This is one region in the world where terrorism, extremist Islamic ideology, traditional nation-state conflicts, and confirmed weapons of mass destruction all come together. Given the overriding imperative to keep dangerous weapons out of the hands of terrorists, NATO and the United States must identify their common strategic interests with these regional players and then craft the necessary bargains to protect those interests. NATO and U.S. leaders must understand that stability in Afghanistan runs through Tehran, Islamabad, Delhi, and Kabul.¹⁵

The increase of well-trained foreign fighters in Afghanistan from Pakistan is strengthening the Taliban insurgency and gravely threatening for the Afghan government. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are embroiled in an insurgency that crosses their common border. The Pakistani government's negotiations with the Taliban, al Qaeda, and HIG are ineffective, so NATO must work closely with President Karzai and the international community to exert more pressure on Pakistan to impede the insurgents' freedom of movement, disrupt their training camps, and eliminate their sanctuaries.

¹⁴ Constable, "A Modernized Taliban in Afghanistan."

¹⁵ Vikram J. Singh and Nathaniel C. Vick, "Surging Statecraft to Save Afghanistan," October 2, 2008, <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com.html> (accessed October 3, 2008).

Lastly, Iran is a key factor. It seeks to defy U.S. influence by supporting the Taliban with weapons and bomb-making materials.¹⁶ Iran's dominance in western Afghanistan is due to a lack of an Afghan political identity in western Afghanistan. Instead, its alienated citizens view Iran's society as free, its infrastructure as stable, and its opportunities as attractive. Iran's materiel support to the Taliban must be stopped.

Requirements for an Effective Afghan Reconciliation Program

All counterinsurgency strategies have a reconciliation program. These programs are prudent; they provide an open, democratic process to resolve security issues. They can serve as an effective political tool for gaining the support of the populace. The intent of the program is to offer insurgents, former insurgents, and other supporters of the insurgency the opportunity to renounce violence and peacefully join with the government. Reconciliation programs are not designed as a get-out-of-jail-free card or as vehicle for bargaining or negotiating with the insurgents. Instead, reconciliation requires the capitulation, assimilation, and a denunciation of insurgent ideology. Bargaining and negotiating do not require capitulation, assimilation, and a denunciation of insurgent ideology. Until the Afghan government is in a position of power and influence and the insurgency has been thoroughly discredited, there can be no reconciliation. An effective reconciliation plan can be instrumental in restoring stability. The Afghan reconciliation plan is called "The Program Takhim-E Solh," which translates to the "Strengthening Peace Program." The Afghan reconciliation program has produced mixed results because of the fluctuating security environment and because coalition forces misrepresented the reconciliation program. Further, the Afghans have not led the program, and NATO has confused negotiations with reconciliation.¹⁷

To conduct an effective reconciliation program NATO must ensure the following conditions are met: First, the Afghan government must lead the program. Second, the program cannot be launched until effective civil government, supported by Afghan Security Forces, has been established at the village, district, and provincial level. Third, a strategic communications plan must be executed in support of the reconciliation program. Fourth, reconciliation must be a goal of a balanced COIN strategy that creates a security environment supported by the populace that is inhospitable to the insurgent that they refuse to operate in it. Fifth, the reconciliation plan must be coordinated with Pakistan in order to allow cross-border insurgents to participate in it. NATO alone cannot navigate the maze of Afghanistan's ethnic politics. Only the Afghans can do this effectively, but their current capability is limited by a lack of security and a government that is perceived as weaker than the Taliban. NATO must not allow a reconciliation program to devolve into bargaining and negotiating with the Taliban. The reconciliation program must be

¹⁶ The author of this paper commanded Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) 31 in Southern and Western Afghanistan from June 2005-March 2006 and August 2006-April 2007 and his units interdicted numerous caches that linked Iranian support of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

¹⁷ The author of this paper commanded Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) 31 in Southern and Western Afghanistan from June 2005-March 2006 and August 2006-April 2007 and he observed coalition units leading reconciliation deals instead of the ANSF and bargaining and negotiating deals with the Taliban outside of the Afghan government purview.

closely monitored and judiciously administered until the afore-mentioned conditions mentioned above are met.¹⁸

Afghans Must Develop an Effective Drug Trade Policy

Poppy production is one of the most pressing domestic issues in Afghanistan. Afghan government officials recognize that the drug trade finances the Taliban insurgency, which then hinders the stability and security of many provinces. Afghanistan's enormous poppy production also casts the country as narco-state.¹⁹ Directly destroying the sprawling poppy crop seems to be an obvious solution. Successful poppy eradication, however, must be executed in secure locations with a sound security situation. Additionally, replacement crops and financial compensation are crucial components of the eradication process. Farmers rely on their crops to earn a living and feed their families and tribes; destruction of poppy without compensating the farmers for their loss will enable the Taliban to recruit many of these farmers to become fighters.²⁰ The Taliban have successfully organized resistance towards Afghan government and coalition poppy eradication in areas where they have a strong presence and freedom of movement. This resistance has caused Afghan casualties, and provided a public relations victory for the enemy thereby boosting their recruiting in the area.²¹

Poppy eradication also must be applied fairly and uniformly. Otherwise the Taliban will exploit perceptions of tribal favoritism. Poppy eradication should be conducted exclusively by the Afghan government. Poppy eradication, however, must be a lower priority than gaining security, and neutralizing and controlling the insurgency. It cannot be accomplished until the Afghan government promotes an alternative crop or develops an economic compensation plan for the farmers.²² NATO's role in poppy eradication should be one of sharing alternative crop technology and resources, providing intelligence, providing logistical support to Afghan counter-narcotics teams, and assisting with an effective counter-narcotics information campaign.

NATO Must Develop a Sensible Measures of Effectiveness Assessment Tool (MEAT)

NATO must develop a standard assessment tool to determine progress. It is very difficult to develop a mathematical formula to determine success in a COIN environment.²³ Measuring effectiveness in a COIN environment requires conditions- and event-based assessments that determine whether an area has a permissive or non-permissive security environment. The assessment tool combines standard questions with personal judgments and intuition; it should be based on the perspectives of the assessment team members that have had long-term presence in the area and contact with the populace.²⁴

¹⁸ COL Joseph J. Collins (Ret.), "To Further Afghan Reconciliation: Fight Harder," October 31, 2008, <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com.html> (accessed October 31, 2008).

¹⁹ CPT Michael Erwin, "The Taliban and the Drug Trade," Memorandum for the RC South Commander, Kandahar, Afghanistan, October 8, 2006, 1.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid., 3.

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ Ibid., 104.

²⁴ Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, (Colorado: West View Press, 1995), 95.

The assessment tool must be a NATO approved report to standardize data on the status of security and nation-building in every province, district, and village. All ISAF units should have an imbedded assessment team that uses the same assessment tool and follows the same reporting procedures. An assessment team composed of a Special Forces officer and noncommissioned officer as the team leaders, Psychological Operations advisor, Civil Affairs advisor, a U.S. State Department representative, and a USAID representative, must be permanently located at each base and augmented by Afghan civil authorities, Afghan military and police representatives, Mullahs, village elders, and NGO representatives operating in the area. The assessment team would use a checklist and questionnaire to determine the political, social, educational, and demographic structure; the local economy, the attitude of the populace, the strengths and effectiveness of the insurgents as well as the strength and effectiveness of the civilian leaders, military units, and police units. NATO must be able to correlate the assessment data on the security situation and the effectiveness of the nation-building effort within each province to determine where the Afghan government is being effective or ineffective in relation to the insurgent and the populace.²⁵

Conclusion

The Taliban is adapting to the post-invasion environment and changing its organization and tactics while NATO remains bounded by an ineffective command construct that lacks strategic direction, unity of command, unity of purpose, and unity of understanding. To correct this situation, NATO and ISAF must put together a comprehensive COIN strategy that enables the Afghan government to win.²⁶ If NATO is politically weak, and ISAF's military effort is ineffective and its actions create an alliance between the Taliban and the populace, NATO will lose.²⁷ NATO has not developed an effective political strategy and ISAF has not conducted successful security operations and nation-building and the Taliban has taken advantage of the lack of security. Countering these negative trends requires assisting the Afghans to build a sustainable system of governance that provides security, stability, and safety to the Afghan people.

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²⁵ Ibid., 96.

²⁶ John Ferris, "Invading Afghanistan, 1838-2006: Politics and Pacification," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 31.

²⁷ Ibid.

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