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Gaining the Initiative in Afghanistan

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A very recent article in the *Washington Post* says that the enemy in Afghanistan has improved its tactical fighting abilities when confronting American forces there. The article stated that the enemy has figured out “gaps” in the current American tactical and operational approach of population centric counterinsurgency. And the article added the tactical improvement on the part of the enemy in Afghanistan, according to “American military officials,” has taken us by “surprise.” This means in effect that the enemy has the initiative.

Afghanistan is war, right? In war there has to be fighting or the threat of fighting for it to be war, right? If there is no fighting or threat of fighting then it cannot be war, right?

The answer to this tactical problem in Afghanistan provided by the Counterinsurgency Experts is better population centric Coin tactics and operations; just try harder at building schools, roads, local security forces, establishing government legitimacy, and population security through dispersion of forces to protect them. Once we get better at these processes and try just a bit harder, with a just a few more troops, then voila (just like we think happened in Iraq) victory is achieved, triumph is at hand. But where in this formulation of scientific processes are the enemy and the killing of them?

Perhaps the way ahead in Afghanistan, at least the immediate way ahead to stabilize the situation is to not focus on hearts and minds but in killing the enemy. This is not so radical of an idea, mind you. Earlier this year two infantry lieutenants and one of their sergeants, fresh from hard combat experience in Afghanistan, made the argument that the American Army was losing its ability in Afghanistan to conduct basic infantry combined arms warfare. Their solution was not better population centric counterinsurgency tactics and processes but improving infantry platoons and companies ability to close with and kill the enemy through fire and maneuver. What they were calling for was a reinvention of the American Army’s approach in Afghanistan in order to regain the initiative. And in war, whether it is counterinsurgency war, conventional war, hybrid war, whatever, the INITIATIVE is everything. In Afghanistan we have lost the initiative because population centric counterinsurgency is basically a symmetrical, reactive tactical and operational measure.

History shows that focusing on killing the enemy works in a counterinsurgency campaign. The British in Malaya for example (what follows is radically contrary to conventional knowledge about Malaya that has been built by a bevy of counterinsurgency experts and zealots since the

end of American involvement in the Vietnam War but is supported by current historical scholarship) broke the back of the insurgency there by brute military force from 1951 to 1952, and not as is so commonly believed through the hearts and minds campaign conducted by General Templer from 1952 to 1954.

It is time for the United States Army to get off of its Counterinsurgency addiction. Counterinsurgency as an intellectual mechanism for change has had its place for the American Army and at least from 2003 to 2007 it did bring about fresh thinking in the force. But it has become an addiction, and it has become so powerful in its addictive effects that it clouds our ability to see war as it is and how to fight it.

Sun Tzu said that “speed is the essence of war.” Population Centric Coin is the antithesis of speed. There might be times to use such a tactical and operational method based on policy goals and national interest, but if we had a strategy that realistically linked tactics and operations to policy goals in place for Afghanistan today it would demand an alternative military approach.

The Author is a serving Army Colonel. He commanded a Cavalry Squadron in West Baghdad in 2006.

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