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Afghan Village Militia: A People-Centric Strategy to Win

Ronald L. Holt

"We've got a situation in Afghanistan where clearly there have been trends headed in the wrong direction," Petraeus said. "Military action is absolutely necessary but it is not sufficient."

"Political, economic and diplomatic activity is critical to capitalize on gains in the security arena," he said.

--Associated Press, 9/15/2008

"The war on terror started in this region. It must end there," Gates told the committee. Violence has mounted for more than two years in Afghanistan from an increasingly sophisticated and brazen insurgency, one fueled by havens in Pakistan. As a result, the war is exacting a worsening toll on coalition forces, with the number of U.S. troops who died there so far this year -- 109 -- projected to surpass last year's high of 117. U.S. and NATO troops remain hampered by manpower shortages, a lack of helicopters and a disjointed chain of command. "Frankly, we are running out of time," Mullen said, and stressed that not sending U.S. reinforcements to Afghanistan is "too great a risk to ignore."

--Washington Post, 9/11/2008

The evidence is clear that what we are doing in Afghanistan is not working. Our credibility with the average Afghan is deteriorating along with popular confidence in the Karzai government (Ackeman, 2008). Counterinsurgency can only buy time and ultimately success depends on government reform and the effective delivery of services. There is little hope of this happening under a Karzai government.

Our methods are too clumsy, too alien, and we depend too much on airpower for the Afghan civilians to tolerate the current situation. We need to inculcate a new attitude of leveraging culture, as it is, not trying to change it into a centrally-organized nation mimicking US or NATO models. We are too focused on risk-aversion, careerism and force protection to make significant changes in the way we operate easily. If you keep doing the same thing the same way you generally get the same results.¹ More troops will help, but will not be sufficient if they are used in the same way as the troop already in Afghanistan. In fact, more troops used the same way tactically, will leave a bigger Coalition Force (CF) footprint and, could potentially do more harm

than good. Even with three new brigades we will still be running an economy of force operation and the force to space ratio is still going to be insufficient to provide the local population with security. This is particularly true if most of the increased troops spend most of their time on the FOBs and are road-bound targets of IEDs. We get a passing grade at “clear” but we are failing completely at “hold.”

I propose a synthesis drawing on several COIN models: 1. the classic Thompson/Briggs [Nagl, 2002: 28-29; 70-71] politics first/the population is the center of gravity approach; 2. the village militia of the Marine Corps Combined Action Program/Platoons in Vietnam, 3. culture as a key “force-multiplier, 4. basic lessons learned from the Philippine Insurrection to the Present as noted in FM 3-24, 5. the “inkspot approach” of Galula and others, and 6. the need for a unified military and civilian structure similar to CORDS [Civil Operations and Rural Development Support] system that included 7000 advisors by 1969. This paper emphasizes the first three aspects but the other three are also needed.

All the literature and practical experience of COIN tells us that the center of gravity of an insurgency is the population. The population’s interests must be the first consideration in all decisions made by the CFs and should be the prism through which all decisions are considered. And often, it should be the *only* consideration if we intend to achieve victory. The Thompson model of COIN underscores the need to secure the population and separate the insurgents from the population. Currently, there is little routine interaction between CFs and the local population in settings common and comfortable for the Afghans. If a CF patrol, other than ODA, stays more than an hour in a village they get “antsy” expecting to be attacked. Our conventional tactics might work against a threat that is external to Afghanistan, but not against a threat that is mostly indigenous and only supported ideologically and materially from across the Durand Line. The Afghan insurgency is inspired and supplied by outside forces and many suicide bombers are outsiders, but the majority of the fighters are Afghans [my guesstimate is 80%].²

The Afghans have been through 30 years of war and are practical people who will gravitate to the perceived winner. Given the declining image of the central government due to its corruption, impotence and failure to provide tangible benefits, the population is moving to the side of the insurgents or is being neutralized by fear (Lamb, 2008). Rising prices for food and fuel, hard winters and drought have not helped the people’s perception of the ability of the Kabul government to improve living conditions. The current tactics of the CF are too kinetic and are increasingly alienating a population seeking security and stability. Sources suggest that the Taliban have a presence in 54% of Afghanistan and control 50% of Wardak just 45 minutes by road from Kabul [Asia Times, 2008]. We are not winning the IO war either as the population is informed by rumor, radio and radical sermons.

The Coalition Forces in Afghanistan are in need of a new strategic vision that first provides security of the urban and rural population, and also interdicts the border with Pakistan, creates more trust in the government’s ability to provide services and deals effectively with rampant corruption and deals effectively with rampant corruption, and finally dislodges the “Taliban” shadow government. In September of 2008 we find that our clearing or movement to contact operations may kill 10 to 15,000 insurgents per year [and create a revenge relationship with their fathers, brothers, and cousins] but they often alienate the Afghan people and they fail to really

clear or hold territory. Most importantly, they do not create a population that feels safe and secure. Ultimately they are losing tactics and our strategy of building the ANA and ANP, while making slow progress, is a strategy that is not going to produce a viable nationwide COIN ability any time soon.

An Alternative Strategy

A classic solution to an economy of force situation is the use of tribal auxiliaries. This practice can be traced back to the early civilizations including the Romans and the Persian Empire of Cyrus. While the use of tribal militia has been tried in Afghanistan with mixed results and, at first glance, it seems in opposition of our goal of empowering the Kabul government, it is one key ingredient in a workable solution to our current problems. The trick is to utilize Afghan tribal militia in such a manner as to ultimately enhance the legitimacy of the central government. The institution of tribal militia is common in Afghanistan but most important in the form of Pushtun Arbaki in the eastern areas. While there are similar entities in other areas, these other entities were never co-opted and mobilized by past governments AND against past governments to the degree that the Arbaki have been. Historically, the government of Afghanistan has based much of its power on alliances with the Pushtun tribes. There are historical Afghan precedents for this during the times of Nader Shah, Amanullah and Ahmed Shah; when arbaki were paid by the government and structured like a militia.

The “Iron Amir” King Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) built the modern Afghan state apparatus. In addition to his regular army, he made use of numerous tribal auxiliaries, which were predominantly Pushtun. Harpviken [1997:275] notes that “Abdur Rahman was able to exploit existing, or “traditional,” organization in the service of a modernizing state.” This is exactly what I will propose later in the paper. The Central Afghan state began to have a broader influence throughout the “country” beginning in the 1950s. Although the bribes’ influence and power was inversely proportional to the growing power of the state, the tradition of local tribal exceptions to policies remained. For example, The Zadran tribe was exempted from the draft. After the Soviet invasion some 7000 tribal militia from Shinwari, Mohamand, Tani, Mangal and Jaji tribes were raised to work against the Islamic resistance. While the official policy of the Karzai government has been to strengthen the central administration and not recognize tribal militias, they have been used by the weak central government since 2002 in order to protect forests and for road and election security during the 2004 and 2005 elections. Arbaki helped make up for inadequate state security infrastructure and limited government reach outside major cities.

The Marine CAP Approach

In 1965 when faced with an ‘economy of force’ situation in I Corps during the Vietnam War, Marine Capt. John Mullen “suggested combining Marine squads with indigenous Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) platoons within the villages around Phu Bai.” This idea was the beginning of the highly successful Combined Action Program/Platoons.

These “Platoons” consisted of 14 Marines and a navy corpsman and a Vietnamese militia platoon consisting of about 35 men. They lived and operated with the Vietnamese village Militia called the Popular Forces.

According to Klyman [1986:16] “the early objectives focused on security, counter-intelligence, and obtaining the good will of the people.” By 1970 they had grown to 114 platoons and about 2500 men. The CAP marines were all volunteers with 2 to 4 months in country and at least 6 months remaining on their tour, and they had to be nominated by their battalion commander and pass a board. Before deploying to a village, they attended a two-week CAP school that centered on Vietnamese culture and language, intelligence and small unit tactics. The CAPs had their own reporting structure and operated independently of the local U.S. maneuver forces. They were very successful on many levels: 68% of CAP Marines extended their tours compared to 15% of U.S. forces in Vietnam; their kill ratio was equal to that of a conventional infantry battalion. The CAPs were seen as so successful that they became a significant part of the Marine effort. By July of 1967 the CAP SOPs included: (1) destroying the communist infrastructure in the AOR, (2) maintain law and order (3) organize local intelligence nets, (4) civic action and conduct propaganda, (5) motivate and instill pride, patriotism, and aggressiveness in the militia and conduct training [Thompson 1969:32].

The downside of the CAPs was that they acted in an environment of no overall vision or strategy that might have integrated all efforts towards clear political objectives.

Also as they grew in number the quality, language abilities and motivation of individuals apparently declined [see Arnold 2009: 203-11]. The CORDS initiative came the closest to providing Civil-Military integration but the initiative remained in the hands of the North Vietnamese. The emphasis on large conventional operations by General Westmoreland meant that resources and manpower remained focused on search and destroy instead of clear and securing the population.

Towards and Afghan CAP

Today in Afghanistan, large conventional operations require units to leave their FOBs only for a few hours or days and then return to the relative isolation of their bases. The very presence of CF within villages combined with active patrolling in the surrounding area would help seize the initiative from the insurgents. It would also provide the Local Nationals (LN) with an opportunity to interact and learn about Americans up close, increase our IO abilities, allow us to counter rumors and improve grass-roots intelligence gathering.

Renting Arbaki, as in the past, will also create more long term problems for the extension of government sovereignty. Any attempt by the Kabul Government to displace Pushtunwali and traditional cultural institutions and replace them with imposed institutions that do not operate quickly and effectively (and do not meet with Pushtun notions of justice) will end in rejection of the government. We need individuals with traditional Special Forces and Human Terrain Team training to serve as mediators, trainers and role models in the village setting.

In order to bridge the gap between the government and the rural people, a new vision and version of tribal Arbaki is required. An alternative is to integrate the folk Pushtun cultural institutions into a more hybrid version of security operations. Arbaki are a Pushtun cultural method of self defense that most of the village elders I interviewed have repeatedly asked to be given government sanction. They are traditionally raised to defend their village and adjacent areas.

However, instead of being controlled by the village/tribal elders, a new version of the Arbaki could be sanctioned by the elders and directed by the ANA and CF mentors. The “Arbaki” would be confined at first to the provinces bordering on Pakistan and they would be part of a national “Afghan Self-Defense Force [ASDF].” The ASDF would stay in their home villages and be paid a salary less than the ANA but still a significant salary given the Afghan economy. They would be led by embedded ANA and attached CF personnel. There should be a future ability to integrate them into the national forces as individuals or groups. Villages would be selected along the border to form an interlocking grid, each within supporting distance of the next in order to form an “ink-blot grid.” Several skilled teams of cultural negotiators, along the lines of the Human Terrain Teams, would meet with tribal/village elders and request their participation in the program. Each participating village would be eligible for a development project as well as the salaries of those joining the militia. Efforts would be made to ensure that no one tribe received more than their necessary share of ASDF slots. The ASDF would patrol on foot [perhaps supplemented by mules] and engage and participate in the daily lives of the local population. In addition to defending the village and interdicting ratlines from Pakistan, the CAPS would target AAF political/economic networks since they enable the AAF to operate and regenerate. Relationships with the local population will lead to much better understanding of the AAF infrastructure.

Mixed teams of US and ANA soldiers would train together for 3 months prior to deploying into the villages. The CF contingent would be drawn from SOF, CA and volunteers from other branches with a mix of civilian contractors.⁵ Their training would be in eastern Afghanistan and consist of language training, cultural training, and a light infantry tactics review. The teams would be 15 Americans plus a medic and 10 ANA Pashto-speaking volunteers. The goal would be to field a platoon to company sized Arbaki force. A tasked engineering unit would build a mini-COP in the selected villages and the teams would live in the villages. The CF/ANA cadre would form the organizational and operational core of the militia until they can stand alone. Of course friendly units in the nearby village mini-COPS and the superior firepower of the maneuver battalions would be available quickly to react to an AAF attempt to overrun a village mini-COP.

Brigade Linkages

For CAPs to be successful they need to be the main effort in no uncertain terms. The Brigades would be the logistical lifeline for the ASDF. Brigades in Afghanistan are spread thin in a country much larger, and with tougher terrain, than Iraq. Logistical support for several hundred mini-COPs would be a major problem especially in the winter.

However, the maneuver units’ number one function should be to secure the population, and to support the CAPS, not kill, AAF. ⁴ Since continuity is critical in COIN, the CAPS would need to be part of each brigade commanders Lines of Operations and they would be nested in the brigades. To facilitate this unity of effort, each division should be allotted a permanent area of operations and each division should rotate their brigades within the division’s battle space. This would create more unity of command and an institutional memory of the human and geographic terrain. Brigades should RIP-TOA during the winter months when conflict traditionally ebbs so they understand their population and battle space by the time of the snowmelt and the fighting

season. The ASDF CF/ANA cadre would rotate on an individual basis so that there is a permanent cadre of individual Afghans in each team. They would help maintain continuity as the brigades rotated.

While the regular troops won't generally live in the villages (although it would be ideal) like the CAPs, they should be a sustained presence in the villages and countryside. Ideally the same units should return to the same villages and meet with the local Afghans until they know them by name.

Conclusion

The "coin of the realm" in COIN is human relationships. Vital relationships need to be built between the CF and the Afghan Security Forces and Government; and, more importantly the Afghan people. While we must have a growing Afghan face on everything, we must also build security first. Many fear the retribution of the "Taliban" after an American withdrawal. Certainly the AAF see their present struggle as a re-enactment of the Muj fight against the Soviet Union. As the Government is seen as more effective, legitimate and actually present on the roads and in the towns and villages, a "Taliban" victory will seem less likely and more tribes, villages and citizens will turn against them and their brutal methods.

While it goes against our cultural norms, time drinking chai is never wasted. This is particularly true if we actually listen to what the average Afghans, not just the English-speaking power-brokers, are saying. We need to invest our time and not just our money with the ANA, the ANP, the ABP and the villagers and town dwellers of Afghanistan. We need to ask their advice and learn how their culture solves problems. If we stick to our current heavy-handed methods, we will only build sand castles in Kabul that will be washed away by a sea of popular disgust.

Dr. Ronald Holt is a tenured Political Anthropologist and a Fulbright scholar with field experience in various Middle Eastern countries.. He teaches Radical Islam and the West, Anthropology of War, Strategic Studies and other anthropology courses at Weber State University. In 2008 he deployed in Afghanistan with the Human Terrain Team, AF-1 with 4-101 Air Assault (ABN) at FOB Salerno.

This paper does not reflect the official position of anyone or any organization. It is a thought piece and a first draft.

Notes

1. Corruption is the 1000 lb gorilla in Afghanistan. The government has weak to no authority in regions outside Kabul and it is viewed as increasingly less legitimate. Government legitimacy will grow as the government is seen as less corrupt and more effective at creating security. Currently in Paktika, few tribal members use the government courts as they are seen to take months or years, require multiple bribes and increase conflict between the parties. They prefer the tribal elders to solve problems quickly, without bribes and creating minimum conflict. Unfortunately, in today's environment, some of the new generation tribal elders are also seen as corrupt. Taliban justice is also often seen as superior to that of the current government. One way

to lessen corruption is to get away from contracting projects and when possible to contract directly with a village and have it build the school or irrigation system. Then it has ownership of the structure.

Another serious issue is the ANP. “We are afraid of the ANP, they come into the village and beat us,” said more than one villager. The ANP is described as being corrupt on every level. Jingle truck drivers say that corruption is being condoned by the “Americans” since it is seen as being fixable by the “Americans” if they really wanted to fix it. Only about one in five jingle truck drivers have gone through the expense and bureaucracy to get a driver’s license. When they do have one, the ANP will sometimes take it and charge them up to \$66 to return it. Bribes are the norm and drivers are disgusted as their profits are reduced at most checkpoints. Trucks crossing the Afghan-Pakistan border from Peshawar have to pay a \$108 bribe at Torkham. In other areas, the ANP will sometimes beat-up drivers who refused to pay or simply make them wait for hours before they are allowed to proceed. The low pay of the ANP was sometimes blamed for their corruption, “their salary isn’t enough to buy cigarettes.”

2. The tragic truck-bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad may have pushed the Pakistani government into its current operations in Swat and to do more against the growing political Islamist Militant threat in FATA and elsewhere.

3. Militia are controlled by the central government and paid regularly whereas traditional arbaki were a pre-existing entity of tribal people working for the tribe’s security, [manning checkpoints] and welfare and received direction from tribal elders. Other groups include: A Chigha is more like a posse formed of all able-bodied men called to fight. Badraga are formed to escort something or someone through the tribe’s territory.

4. Innovation in tactics needs to be rewarded and not stifled in the cause of force protection. Pathfinders and snipers need to be extensively used particularly along the Pakistan border and in rugged areas. There may be times in mountainous terrain where only the point element should wear IBA/IOTV and they can be rotated to move faster. We need to think more creatively how we can avoid the roads. We should consider using all-terrain vehicles and motorcycles more, and mules to carry water, ammo and provisions: perhaps the MLRS system for border interdiction. Air assault should become more common. If we need to go light into the mountains to track down the AAF and destroy their camps, then the mules can carry our IBA and other equipment. During the Rhodesian Bush Conflict one group of the Rhodesian Light Infantry made 5 combat jumps in one day landing astride the routes of retreat of the terrorists. While airpower can be used more in rural, unpopulated areas, we need too view airstrikes as the last resort in urban areas. To avoid the need for airpower, troops should be equipped with the FMG-148 Javelins and/or similar ordinance to deal with kalats and other buildings.

5. Volunteers might be screened for such skills as: small engine mechanics, farmers, engineers, ranchers, electricians, well-diggers and carpenters. When not on patrol these individuals could quickly gain rapport and do a lot of good with the villagers in need of practical help and education above all.

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