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Afghanistan Trip Report

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Having recently returned from Afghanistan – thanks to the hospitality of Generals Petraeus and McChrystal - I'd like to share a few thoughts. By way of context, let me state my frame of reference. As a former assistant secretary of defense for international security, I am familiar with Washington dynamics; but I believe COIN is decided at the small unit level, not in national capitals. I was 18 months in Vietnam, have written five books on COIN and made 20 trips to Iraq and Afghanistan. This was my third Afghanistan visit in quick succession (April-May, June-July and October). My observations are based on forty to fifty shuras and patrols – several on extended missions – that included numerous small-arms engagements and fire missions. I talked with about 500 Marines and Afghan security forces of all ranks. The observations below are derived from that sample.

1. The coalition needs a formal, joint mechanism to attack corruption. For seven years, the coalition has relied upon personal relationships to persuade Afghan officials to act against their own selfish interests. We can persist with this failed “handcon” model, gambling that as security improves, Karzai will become as forceful as did Maliki. That's a hope, however, rather than a plan. Let's face it: Karzai wields the total sovereignty we gave him as a shield to rebuff reforms the coalition has recommended to insure that sovereignty can be safeguarded without the coalition.

The alternative is to insist upon an enforcement institution under *joint* coalition-Afghan control dedicated to throwing bums out of office. Karzai will throw a fit, pointing out that Maliki fired his anti-corruption minister. Nonetheless, enforceable institutional measures – similar to the Internal Affairs Division in a police department - are called for.

2. Measure meaningful outputs. The combat foot patrol is the essential tool for controlling the people. Some battalions send out 40 patrols a day, while others send out 15. This variation among units, driven by risk-avoidance at brigade level and above, is too extreme.

Our battalions are simultaneously pursuing two tasks: governance/development and security. These tasks are not the same. The former dedicates most patrols to areas that are relatively secure; the latter sends patrols to the front edge of contact. Every battalion knows where that edge is – where they will be engaged.

A Tactical Directive that provides parameters – not cookie-cutter requirements – for patrolling and other essential tasks would aid the battalions in determining where to allocate time and effort. It also would spark a healthy debate.

Of course one can fudge – walk around the wire and call it a patrol. But that won't be the norm. The purpose is to encourage extended foot patrols. That requires on-call fires, and that will be controversial because it means restoring fires authority to the ground commander.

3. Risk-avoidance regulations from the top are frustrating the rifle companies. A field-grade officer in an Operations Center should not decide a fire mission during a TIC, or withhold fires until a UAV clears the battle-space. Second-guessing and questioning by officers not on the battlefield waste time and diffuse command authority. This imperils both the troops in contact and the larger war effort. Bad decisions by interfering officers off the battlefield risk Abu Ghraib-like publicity and public anger. The “silence as consent” rule served us well in Vietnam, Korea and WWII and should be reinstated.

The McChrystal Assessment stated that units should take risks equivalent to those run by the population. But senior staffs have altered none of the top-down directives installed to minimize risk. Only a four-star can take off his body armor without reprimand. Insisting upon 16 US and four vehicles per trip outside the wire guarantees episodic contact with the people. ETTs are often marooned on their bases. If a platoon wants to conduct a 36-hour patrol, it shouldn't require a power point brief to brigade, etc., etc. Eventually, companies stop trying to evade restrictive rules and settle into status quo routines. In theory, we endorse small-unit initiative; in practice, we prevent it.

Restore authority to the on-scene ground commander, regardless of his rank. If he makes a mistake, it's on him. He's responsible for the battle he's directing.

4. Decrease tour length to nine or fewer months for line battalions. I have asked dozens of Soldiers and Marines about this. There is near-unanimous agreement that deployments on the lines over eight months are too long. Aggressive patrolling decreases as the length of tour increases. The troops wear down. Absences of a year strain families and provoke divorces. Plus, the average mid-tour leave consumes 25 days, requires command attention, causes administrative headaches and diverts lift assets.

This is controversial because many argue that a year is needed to build relationships. This is a recent rationale, however. Since COIN did not burst on the scene until 2007, building relationships was not the determining factor for the first six years of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. Instead, tour length was determined by the flexibility or lack thereof internal to the personnel procedures inside each Service. The Marines went one way, and the Army another.

Most leaders at the battalion level and below do not believe that it takes twelve months to establish “relationships”. SOF units and Marines operate on shorter timelines, and no one is questioning their effectiveness. The ODA teams quickly develop relationships, regardless of tour length, because they are mature. Relationships with Afghan elders require either elderly (ahem, E6 or above!) NCOs and officers, or the coalition's empowerment of squad leaders to commit resources and security pledges. We know the latter is not going to happen.

A year's tour for PRT and brigade staffs is sensible. Every Afghan knows the phrase "PRT". But the vast majority of grunts don't develop relationships and lack the resources to rent friendships or cut deals. Rifle platoons often visit the same village only once every two to four weeks. The elders have seen coalition forces for eight years; they know that coalition troops are both forbearing and lethal and view them as interchangeable. Both the Marines with seven-month battalion tours and the Army with twelve or more months cannot be right. Twelve months is too long for a grunt platoon.

5. Maintain a balance between conducting COIN and shattering enemy morale. For 40 years, I have been a strong proponent of COIN. My book "The Village" describes 485 days of working in one remote village. But due to terrain and troop scarcity, we cannot establish such a continuous presence in most Afghan villages. On maps, the red spots of Taliban control look like measles. We will bump up against the practical limits of the "oil spot COIN", even with 100,000 troops.

How can this be overcome? Currently, "partnering" means Afghan and coalition units share the same battle-space, with no clear supported-supporting command relationship. We need to replace that ambiguity with criteria that determine when a coalition battalion turns its battle-space over to an Afghan battalion or police unit. While counterinsurgency may be 80% non-kinetic, the intent is not that a battalion should spend 80% of its effort on development and governance. That would be equivalent to urging a police force to concentrate 80% of its manpower on community outreach and town hall meetings.

It is not self-evident how winning the hearts of village elders or linking villages to Kabul wins the war. Our Soldiers believe that Afghans accept what we give them without reciprocating by turning against the Taliban. The elders don't raise militias or recruits for the army, or drive out the Taliban. No movie scene like the uprising of the Mexican village in "The Magnificent Seven" has occurred. Instead, villagers - fearing the bombing that we are (rightly) trying to curtail - plead with migratory Taliban gangs to move on. A rural population - no matter how content with its government - cannot stand up to a tough enemy.

Population control means "framework" ops, defined as meetings in villages or districts, combined with thousands of patrols occasionally punctuated by enemy-initiated contact. The enemy fights like Apaches, employing maneuver warfare through his mobility. Local police turn a blind eye to the ubiquitous, subversive watchers ("dickers"). Tribal relationships result in few arrests, allowing the enemy to control his casualties by deciding when to attack.

Voluntary participation in any venomous IED network should result in swift prosecution by Afghan officials and, if convicted, execution as a deterrent. The equivalence of the Lindbergh Law, however, will not be implemented. Instead, there's a tribal dynamic at work, apart from the coalition. In areas like Nawa in Helmand, the watchers fade away when coalition patrolling becomes pervasive. What's happening? According to the sub-governor, many in the farmlands with allegiances to the local Taliban (the "small t" Taliban) simply declare they're no longer part of the seditious movement and go back to farming without informing on coalition movements. (Of course, this means that if the weight of armed power is perceived as shifting back to the

“small t” side - lo and behold! – the dickers will again appear. There is a strong correlation between being recognized as the toughest mother in the valley and not having to fight.

Our SOF has high morale due to a focused kinetic mission and the warrior’s satisfaction in kinetics well applied. A war in which SOF, aviation and Taliban-initiated actions result in most of the enemy losses is of concern. Although his leaders are routinely eliminated by SOF, the enemy does not perceive that he confronts a superior, implacable adversary when he encounters our conventional units. We should change that.

Our SOF is enemy-focused, while our conventional forces are population-focused. Many coalition battalions have red areas where they rarely venture. Unable to maneuver in armor, we respond with firepower when attacked, and await the next event. Spoiling ops are rare. Ambushes in populated valleys should not go without a punishing response. Conventional rifle companies in their respective AOs should supplement the Ranger battalion with raids about once every two months. That would help morale.

Granted, we are overextended in the northeast, we cannot win by leaving the enemy intact inside sanctuaries in Nuristan or elsewhere. This does not mean more extended stays like at Barge Matal; it does mean we must jar the enemy by smashing centers like Marjah in Helmand and Ganjigal in Konar.

In sum, a balance must be maintained between population-centric COIN and blows aimed against Taliban cohesiveness. This is beginning to slip in our conventional units. A set of professionals should examine our conventional war-fighting style and ask if it can be improved, especially how and when to turn over the battle-space to ANSF. That’s the only way our forces can expand outward and, ultimately, out of the country.

Conclusion. General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker changed the course of the Iraq war by exploiting the change in Sunni attitudes. The Pashtun tribes, however, are deeply divided and lack the overall cohesiveness and leadership of the Iraqi Sunni tribal structure. Plus, it’s not their fight as long as the government exploits rather than offers them incentives.

Well-founded doubt about Afghan national cohesiveness and self-reliance pervades all ranks in our military. Gone is the post-9/11 zeal. There is no widely-shared view of victory or definition of what winning means. To the troops, framework ops are a job to be done, while getting home in one piece.

Nonetheless, our military created a capable force in Iraq and, by dint of example and supervision, somewhat dampened the level of corruption in that country. It was the persistence and toughness of the grunts that persuaded the Iraqi Sunnis to come over to us, the strongest tribe. Similarly, the Afghan people understand the decency and the lethality of our riflemen.

The theory of counterinsurgency is that villagers, once given security and services, will inform on the insurgents. In reality, the Pashtun Taliban aren’t oppressing the villagers, and the coalition doesn’t have the troops to provide security in many areas. So villagers hedge their bets-

accepting projects from the coalition while keeping their mouths shut as the Taliban move about in small gangs.

Our grunts practice counterinsurgency. The Afghan army is out there with them. Can it succeed? Much depends on Pakistan and the porous border. Something will break there in the next year or two. An acceptably governed Afghan state can emerge, provided we continue the fight for years. That resolve depends upon our political leadership, not our military. Morale and performance cannot be sustained if the leading politicians do not lead.

Due to a porous border, a strong Afghan security force will remain essential after most internal districts are pacified. We are training Afghan security forces in our image; they wear heavy armor and rely upon our medevacs, fire controllers, ISR and indirect fire assets. So we're probably talking \$20 to \$40 billion for years to come, distinct from the cost of US combat units. That will require the continuous support of Congress – again pointing to the requisite for resolve by US political leaders.

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