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The Men Who Would Govern Marjah

William S. McCallister

I've learned much from reading history books and watching movies. John Huston's movie adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's story "The Man Who Would Be King" is a case in point. The story revolves around two British adventurers seeking their fame and fortune in Kafiristan. Upon entering Kafiristan, Danny Dravot and Peachy Carnehan are presented with an opportunity near the village of Er-Heb. After defending the village of Er-Heb against a hostile raiding party, Danny and Peachy parley with Ootah, the Er-Heb village chief while Billy Fish, a former Gurkha soldier translates.

BILLY FISH: Him (Ootah the village chief) want to know—are you gods?

CARNEHAN: Not gods—Englishmen, which is the next best thing.

BILLY FISH: I oftentimes tell Ootah about Englishmans... How they shave chins each morning... and give names to dogs. And take off hat to womans... and how they march, left right, left right into battle with firesticks on shoulders...

DRAVOT: . . . Bringing enlightenment to the darker regions of the earth—like Kafiristan.

CARNEHAN: No, we aren't gods, exactly, but we are Heaven-sent... to deliver you from your enemies.

Ootah, responds.

BILLY FISH translates: Enemies all around. The Bashkai are worst. All town come out and pisses downstream when we go bathing.

CARNEHAN: Shocking!

Ootah continues to air his woes.

BILLY FISH: And them always stealing our womans—putting on masks—so Er-Heb chappies thinking them devils and running like bloody hell away.

CARNEHAN: (*simulating outrage*) War—red war we'll give 'em!

BILLY FISH: Ootah say he pay two goats for each Bashkai mans you killing, one goat for womans and childs.

CARNEHAN: A handsome offer—but rather than knocking them over one at a time, we'd prefer to do the job in one fell swoop—serve him up a proper victory—storm Bashka —take the city!

Ootah frowns, murmurs suspiciously.

BILLY FISH: How much for that?

CARNEHAN: Only the joyful prospect of leading the brave men of Er-Heb into battle—plus whatever we may fancy in the way of souvenirs...

CARNEHAN: Bashkai is only a beginning. We hopes to go on from victory to victory until you run out of enemies...

DRAVOT: . . . and are monarch of all you survey.

What can the Er-Heb exchange tell us about Operation Mushtarak and the battle for Marjah? For one thing, Danny and Peachy's strategy to win fame and fortune in Kafiristan and the nuts and bolts of Operation Mushtarak are kindred spirits. The goal for both operations is to develop and empower local allies to fight against an opponent by exploiting the tendency of weaker forces and fence sitters to bandwagon with the stronger. In Peachy's words, Operation Mushtarak seeks to deliver the village chiefs of Marjah from their foes and to go from victory to victory until they run out of enemies and like Ootah, become monarchs of all they survey.

Initial reports are optimistic. The combined Afghan and Coalition forces have successfully penetrated into the Taliban heartland and are well on their way toward securing a key population center. Taliban resistance is weak and disorganized. The local market-place has been liberated from the poppy-mafia. The Afghan national flag flies once again over Marjah.

The popular press describes the battle for Marjah in simple cause and effect narratives. The Taliban, disorganized and weak have quit the town. Civil administrators stand ready to assume the reigns of governance and to initiate economic reforms. Economic development projects will attract the local population to the central government. Enhanced security will encourage the locals to pledge their loyalty to the Karzai regime.

Reshaping the political economy of Marjah is a critical task in winning Afghanistan's population centric counterinsurgency. Afghan forces must be able to compel law and order, impose taxes and draft manpower. They must build new schools, set up health clinics, upgrade the irrigation system, fix the roads and convince farmers and merchants to cultivate and sell something other than poppies and opium. The premise is simple: secure the market-place, fix, upgrade and adapt the infrastructure, administer market commodities and you command the population.

While simple cause and effect narratives make for good reading, cultural complexity is inseparable from the study of cause and effect, especially in a place like Marjah. We continually espouse what we believe ought to happen but rarely how a given political or economic initiative might actually play itself out within a given cultural context. What might the Afghan approach to gaining a foothold in Marjah look like? How might the landowners, merchants and farmers, civil administrators, leaders of the Afghan National Army (ANA), local police, local fighters, and allies of the Taliban interact with one another? How might the imposition of government authority in Marjah play itself out? How might elements of the ANA and police support government administrators in imposing a central authority?

ANA and government administrators posted to Marjah are themselves outsiders and like the Taliban require local allies to administer the town. The first thing civil administrators and military commanders will need are local allies. Local allies will be recruited by means of patronage dispensed via a judicious mix of carrot and stick. Government officials and military commanders are unlikely to base their outreach program on Galula's premise that there exists a

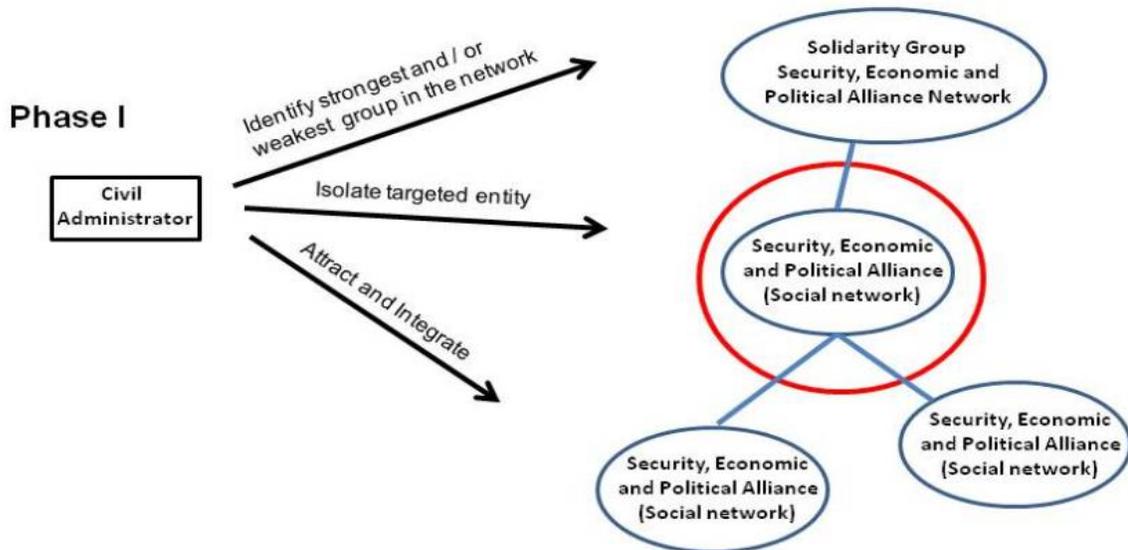
minority in Marjah that is for the cause, a neutral majority, and an active minority against the cause. There are no neutrals.

As a matter of general strategy, civil administrators will set up their own alliance networks with Marjah's landowners and merchants. Military and police commanders are likely to strike deals with local fighters who have changed sides or will initiate talks to encourage others to change sides. These efforts are calculated to disrupt alliance networks and to actively transform the existing power relationships in Marjah.

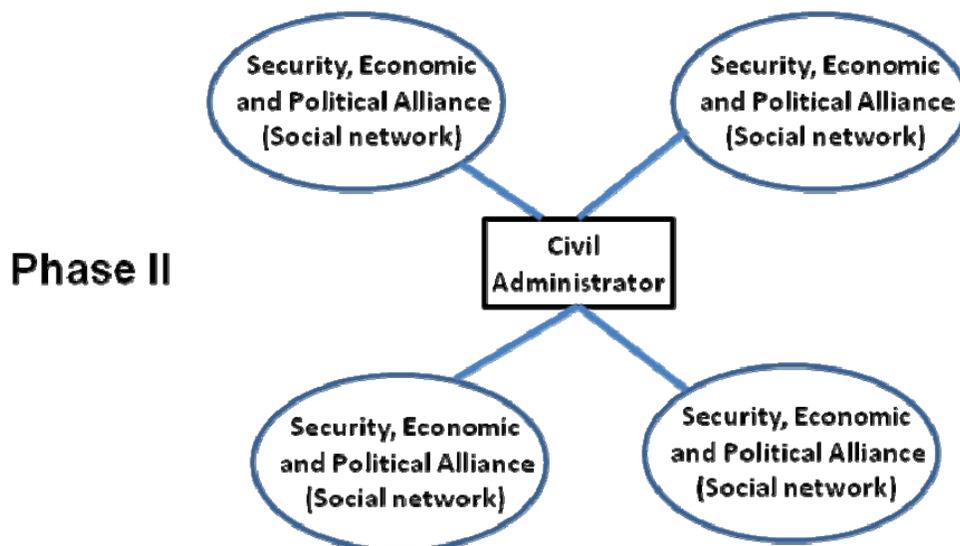
The civil administrators and/or military commanders are likely to first identify the strongest and weakest solidarity groups in the Marjah community. After identifying key landowners, merchants, farmers and fighters and assessing their relative strengths and sources of social power, one strategy will be to attract the "dominant" group and embed or integrate within this alliance network. A second strategy might attract the "weakest" group and jointly challenge the dominant group. A third strategy might be to challenge the dominant group directly without local allies. These initial shaping operations are intended to weaken and isolate the targeted solidarity groups in the area.

Afghan society is fragmented and highly competitive. All conquerors in Afghanistan trying to pacify the countryside require strategies to gain allies. They also wish to exploit the tendency of weaker communities and fence-sitters to bandwagon with the stronger. Rivals may be managed in different ways. In exchange for an opponent's loyalty, a weakened rival may be allowed to maintain a semblance of autonomy and control over local territory and resources. Other rivals may receive direct compensation for surrendering their autonomy while still others might be eliminated outright.

Phasing: Weaken, Isolate, Attract and Integrate



As a matter of course, these strategies do not normally seek to eliminate or destroy a rival outright but only to weaken him sufficiently so as to shift local power to one's favor. This is done by isolating opponents and attracting allies. Upon successfully isolating rivals, the government integrates itself into the local community with the civil administrator and/or military commander at its center.



The Afghan approach to gaining a foothold and maintaining control of Marjah differs significantly from our own. It seeks to exploit resources to establish and sustain quid pro quo associations. These associations are maintained as long as all parties adhere to the agreement that

established these relationships in the first place. An opponent such as the Taliban will do its best to disrupt these associations. Danny Dravot and Peachy Carnehan's strategy to conquer Bashka succeeded but only time will tell if the Afghan government is able to do the same in Marjah. Success will require that the central government establish sustainable associations with local sources of power and to protect the same against Taliban retaliation that is sure to follow.

William S. McCallister is a retired military officer. He has worked extensively in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. While on active duty, McCallister served in numerous infantry and special operations assignments specializing in civil-military, psychological and information operations. He is a published author in military affairs and tribal warfare and has guest lectured at Johns Hopkins University and presented numerous papers at academic and government sponsored conferences such as the Watson Institute, Brown University, Department of the Navy Science and Technology, DARPA, and the Central Intelligence Agency. He has also appeared as a guest on National Public Radio (NPR). McCallister is currently employed as a senior consultant for Applied Knowledge International (AKI). He continues to study current events in Iraq and Afghanistan in tribal terms, including the tribal art of war and peace, tribal mediation processes, development of tribal centers of power, and tribal influence in political developments.

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