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Tribal Engagement at the Tactical Level

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This short paper is intended to supplement the Tribal Engagement Workshop (TEW) Summary Report by addressing those findings at the tactical level. The information provided here was drawn from the experiences of the members of the tactical working group at the TEW to create a planning framework for community engagement at the tactical level – specifically at the team or company/platoon level – in Afghanistan.

At the tactical level, tribal engagement would best be leveraged as community engagement for reasons outlined in the TEW Summary Report. Community engagement at the tactical level is something that can be done by both special operations forces and general purpose forces – but it depends on what you define as community engagement and where you attempt to do it.

Significant time and effort must be devoted to determining which areas and communities are ripe for engagement (and when) while also determining how engaging those communities would benefit the overarching regional or theater campaign plan. Some communities do not readily lend themselves to engagement, and other communities do not lend themselves to engagement at all times – as any kind of engagement depends first and foremost on buy-in from local authorities.

The resources organic to a Special Forces “A Team” are different from those organic to a light infantry company. In order to do community engagement, though, both require specialist language, cultural, medical, and intelligence assets as well as dedicated air assets and, when possible, a detachment of female soldiers or civilians capable of interacting with the local female population. Without the necessary enablers, either organization would have difficulty in effectively engaging communities.

Like all other military operations, community engagement proceeds by phase. The first phase, at the tactical level, involves a careful reconnaissance of a potential community to determine whether or not local buy-in makes the community ripe for engagement. This phase also includes supporting operations such as allocating the assets identified above, determining the engaging unit’s logistics plans, and initiating the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration plan for any local forces mustered through community engagement.

The second phase can be described as either the “clear” or “secure” phase, dependent on whether or not it takes place in a permissive or non-permissive environment. It must be Afghan-led and tied to existing political structures in the village. Conditions for moving onto the next phase include the establishment of security, the establishment of relationships with community leaders,

some semblance of government, an information operation campaign begun, and the community purged of anti-Afghan forces.

The third phase of the operation – “hold” and “build” – should end with security and governance firmly established, mid-term development projects begun and long-term projects identified, and ongoing shaping operations – to include information operations, key leader engagement, and direct action as necessary. The provision of essential services should be established as necessary to meet critical needs of the population, and security forces should be spread out among the population so as not to be a drain on local markets and resources.

The fourth and final phase of the operation is contingent on locals feeling confident they can provide security and govern on their own. As such, U.S. and allied forces should “test” the ability of local forces to do both. At this phase, there exists a huge risk that U.S. and allied forces will withdraw too early, leading to a collapse in relations between the people and security and the people and their government.

Success in engagement is defined by capable, responsible, and autonomous security and governance apparatuses perceived as legitimate by locals. Security and governance are both linked to higher echelons, and space exists for a peaceful political process to take place.

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