



## Afghanistan: The Importance of Political Maneuver in Counterinsurgency Operations

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### Summary

Any commander operating in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment is besieged by the constant need to make numerous and varied decisions critical to the successful execution of a COIN campaign. While all military and political campaigns are challenging due to the “fog of war”, COIN campaigns can prove particularly difficult for military personnel due to a military culture that does not understand how to *politically maneuver* in semi to non-permissive environments.<sup>1</sup> This paper demonstrates the need for military organizations to gain a better understanding of their operational environment before executing *political maneuver* in a full spectrum COIN campaign.

Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 7311 did not originally intend to conduct a full spectrum counterinsurgency (COIN) operation; instead it originally chose to expand Ghazni’s Foreign Internal Defense (FID) efforts as part of a larger joint COIN campaign. The Detachment inherited the Afghan National Police Special Response Team (ANP SRT); a small yet well trained platoon of 19 ethnic Hazarans. While seeking to expand the ANP SRT’s size and capabilities, the Detachment planned to simultaneously execute surgical strike operations against high ranking and mid level Taliban commanders as a means of validating the ANP SRT’s capabilities. An emphasis on Foreign Internal Defense combined with Direct Action was a typical Detachment strategy during 2008 that has gradually shifted to FID and population security with the advent of Village Stability Operations (VSO).<sup>2</sup>

The Detachment’s elation over the successful capture of Taliban commander Mullah Faizoni in late July would transition to frustration over its inability to capture/kill Taliban Intelligence Chief

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<sup>1</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 71. *Political Maneuver* is defined by Dr. Kilcullen as an operational plan that seeks to separate the insurgents from the people by finding local allies amongst the power players, connecting the government to the population, and increasing local governance capacity in order to generate progress across the four principle dimensions of counterinsurgency (security, governance, development, and information).

<sup>2</sup> Village Stability Operations (VSO): Tactical operations executed by SFODAs that seek to secure “early victories” and hence larger operational effects by protecting the population from Taliban influence. VSO is currently being conducted by SFODAs throughout Afghanistan and differs significantly from traditional Afghan operations in that Detachments maintain a permanent presence within a targeted village in order to generate long term effects.

Sher Agha. To reacquire the target, the Detachment conducted limited engagement of Espandi Village in order to generate additional atmospherics. It assessed that a larger COIN operation should be left to the conventional forces and Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) as the battle space owner was the final approving authority for all kinetic operations. Yet, when its limited engagement produced no results, the Detachment realized that in order to obtain long term effects as codified by the SOF imperatives, it needed to conduct a *combined political maneuver*.<sup>3</sup>

The objectives of the *combined political maneuver* were as follows:

- Understanding of the Operational Environment in order to correctly steer the *combined political maneuver*
- Unity of Effort between the coalition on FOB Ghazni
- Unity of Effort between the coalition and the GIROA
- GIROA creates systems for resolving public grievances
- Politically force the hand of the ANA to conduct COIN by establishing a joint ANA/ANP combat outpost in Espandi Village
- Politically force the Tajik Mafia to stop supporting the Taliban
- Espandi Village serves as an example of how to properly conduct COIN at the tactical and operational level

Espandi was the instrument of the Detachment's *combined political maneuver*. While the village was seemingly of minor tactical and operational importance, it served as a point of contention and concentration; coaxing all of the entities into resolving a seemingly simple problem that exposed the complexities of conducting COIN in Afghanistan. Sadly, Afghanistan's endemic corruption and anemic social, political, and economic institutions created a systematic security problem. Coalition forces' and GIROA's difficulty in implementing a unified strategy have only exacerbated the problem as commanders and governors rotate in and out; this reality underscores the need for *combined political maneuver* that ultimately seeks to capture the support of the population. Predictably, most external and internal actors selfishly labor to maximize their personal agendas instead of taking the smallest of steps towards securing and rebuilding a new Afghanistan.

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<sup>3</sup> Note: *Combined Political Maneuver* is a term defined by the author as conducting *Political Maneuver* under a unified and synchronized command. In other words, Unity of Effort + Political Maneuver = *Combined Political Maneuver*. *Political Maneuver* is a term defined by Dr. David Kilcullen and further defined above.

## Introduction

*Police action will therefore be actual operational warfare. It will be methodically pursued until the enemy organization has been entirely annihilated. It will not end until we have organized the population and created an efficient intelligence service to enable it to defend itself.*

--Roger Trinquier

*It's all about the Benjamins.*

--Puff Daddy

“Know your turf...Neglect this knowledge, and it will kill you.”<sup>4</sup> David Kilcullen’s first tenet of counterinsurgency operations (COIN) emphasizes the need to *understand the operational environment* before embarking on long-term COIN. This is vitally important in a complex environment such as Afghanistan where it is critical that coalition forces understand the economic, political, religious, and cultural history of their environment, not just the traditional geographic and enemy disposition. Moreover, this knowledge is essential for coalition forces who seek to conduct effective *political maneuver*. With the decision to surge 37,000 coalition soldiers in Afghanistan, this paper argues that despite a sound strategy, coalition efforts may still fail due to an absence of *combined political maneuver* at the tactical and operational level. This paper will analyze the COIN experience of Special Operations Detachment Alpha (SFODA) 7311 in Ghazni Province from July – December 2008 in order to explain the complexities of Afghanistan’s environment and benefits of employing the above COIN principles.<sup>5</sup>

This paper supports this argument by first discussing the development of how the Detachment unveiled Ghazni Province’s operational environment. It will then transition to a discussion of the essential elements of *combined political maneuver* and how they were applied to the environment. Finally, after discussing the detailed politics of Ghazni Province, it will conclude by offering some over-arching themes and lessons gleaned from the experience.

## From Capture / Kill to Negotiation

“Cleared HOT!” said the Detachment commander to the JTAC as the CH-47 Chinook attempted to land in the brown-out. The JTAC cleared the AH-64 Apaches in for a gun run that neutralized Mullah Faizoni, the top Taliban commander in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. A month of planning, targeting, and training finally paid off. Mullah Faizoni eluded 19 different coalition kinetic strikes but on 20 July, 2008 he was captured. This high risk mission resulted in the temporary disruption of Taliban command and control during the middle of a very difficult

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<sup>4</sup> David Kilcullen, “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency,” *Small Wars Journal*, Vol 1, No 1 (March 2006), pp. 2.

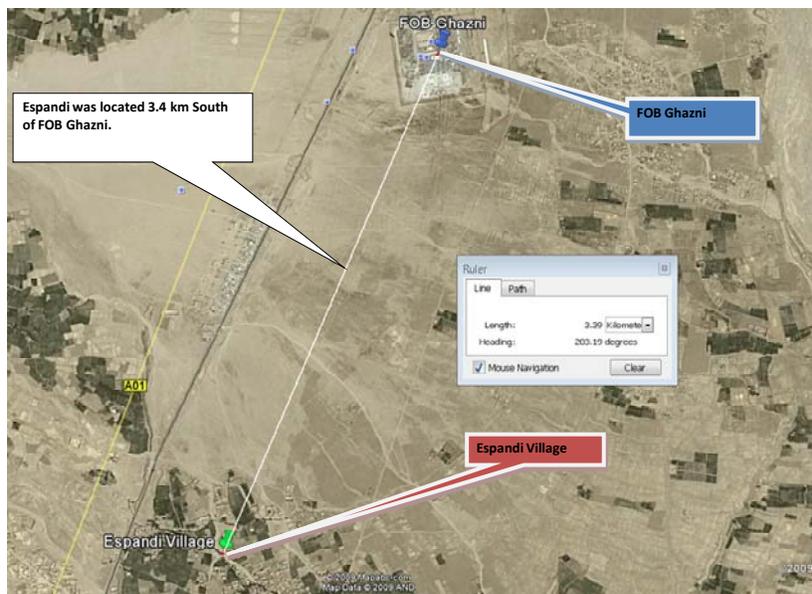
<sup>5</sup> Note: For the purposes of this paper the following resources will be defined as COIN Doctrine: *The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual* (Army Manual FM 3-24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*); *The Accidental Guerilla* by Dr. David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* by Dr. Seth Jones; *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* by LTC David Galula; and *On Guerilla Warfare* by Mao Tse-tung. SOF Doctrine heavily influenced this paper and the 12 SOF Imperatives are found in Appendix 3.

summer for coalition forces. The Taliban's decision to attack critical lines of communication resulted in the coalition reallocating significant CAS/ISR and other security assets in order to keep the supply lines open.<sup>6</sup> The Taliban held the initiative by using tactics similar to those used by Lawrence of Arabia used against the Turks in 1917.<sup>7</sup>

In an effort to regain the initiative, SFODA 7311 attempted to execute surgical strikes against top Taliban commanders throughout the summer of 2008. While initially successful, the tempo began to slow as the Taliban increased their operational security measures. Sher Agha, a top Taliban intelligence operative and former Taliban Minister of Education was elusive, refusing to establish a predictable pattern.

After a month of no results, the Detachment's leadership decided to change tactics by beginning a full spectrum COIN operation centered on Sher Agha's hometown, the Tajik village of Espandi. Espandi Village was visible from 3km South of FOB Ghazni's ramparts.<sup>8</sup> Despite its relative proximity, the population was complicit due to intimidation tactics, and the village provided a staging area for indirect fire attacks, suicide bombings, and the transportation of weapons into northern Wardak Province. Through engagement of the population, the Detachment sought to regain atmospheric on Sher Agha and his insurgent network.<sup>9</sup> What was originally a simple objective would morph to expose a complex and interconnected environment that demonstrates why COIN is holistic and a "thinking man's game", thus requiring an *understanding the operational environment and combined political maneuver*.

**Annex 1, Appendix 1: FOB Ghazni – Espandi Village Map**



<sup>6</sup> Note: Close Air Support (CAS); Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR)

<sup>7</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *In War and Peace* (Mechanicsburg, VA: Greenhill Books, 2005), p. 263. Lawrence was able to keep the Turks unbalanced and bogged down in security positions by unpredictably attacking the Turkish railway.

<sup>8</sup> See Annex 1: Imagery; Appendix 1: Ghazni and Espandi Imagery

<sup>9</sup> Note: The term *atmospherics* refers to any type of intelligence that aids in targeting.

Operation Green Chimera, a *targeted cordon and search*, kicked off on 30 August, 2008.<sup>10</sup> It involved a combined force of over 200 soldiers and enablers from the Afghan National Police Special Response Team (ANP SRT), Afghan National Army (ANA), elements from the 101<sup>st</sup> Air Assault Division, Polish Army and a Tactical Human Intelligence Team (THT). These varied units worked together in order to temporarily Clear Espandi.<sup>11</sup> The cordon and search disrupted Sher Agha's network and produced some additional atmospherics but without specific intelligence Sher Agha was not captured. In a classic Maoist tactic, atmospherics would later indicate that he fled to Pakistan in order to wait out the Detachment's aggressive tactics.<sup>12</sup> The Detachment did not expect to capture Sher Agha, instead the main effort of the operation was to conduct a Key Leader Engagement.<sup>13</sup> The Espandi elders and the Detachment met in the local school, where the Detachment gave a strong pitch to the elders. Espandi had a choice; it could aid in Sher Agha's demise by reporting his movements and in exchange the Detachment would reward Espandi with civil affairs projects and agricultural aid from the Texas National Guard's Agricultural Development Team.<sup>14</sup> If not, the Detachment would make life difficult for Espandi, conducting frequent cordon and searches. This was a very forceful pitch and more of a gambit placed to determine the elders' true power in the village than a serious approach to facilitating the capture of Sher Agha.

The elders responded that they did not have any means with which to notify the Detachment. The Detachment responded by placing a free cell phone on one of the desks. One of the elders reached out to take the phone but was immediately rebuked by another, "Idiot! Don't take the phone, the Taliban will cut our heads off!" The elders were nervous and it soon became evident that there was a Taliban minder in the group. Espandi was a typical semi-permissive village for the villagers while being non-permissive for coalition forces.

Additional discussions went on but it was quickly realized that an honest dialogue was impossible without the elders feeling secure. Still as a measure of good faith, the Detachment gave the village a small humanitarian assistance package, primarily consisting of food stuffs. They were quickly absorbed by the desperate villagers. Later that evening, after coalition forces departed, the Detachment learned that the Taliban returned, collected the HA and burned it in a

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<sup>10</sup> Definition from FM 3-24.2, paragraph 5-44: A *cordon and search* operation is conducted to seal (cordon) off an area in order to search it for persons or things such as items, intelligence data, or answers to Primary Intelligence Requirements. It is also one of the techniques used in the "clear" phase of a clear-hold-build operation. In this case *targeted* differentiates the typical cordon and search in that only confirmed insurgent households were searched in order to minimize any negative effects on the neutral/pro-GIROA population.

<sup>11</sup> Definition from FM 3-24.2, paragraph 3-110: *Clear* is a tactical mission task that requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance in an assigned area. The force does this by destroying, capturing or forcing the withdrawal of insurgent combatants and leaders. This task is most effectively initiated by a clear-in-zone or cordon-and-search operation, as well as patrolling, ambushes, and targeted raids.

<sup>12</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Definition from author: a Key Leader Engagement is a deliberately planned and focused meeting that seeks to achieve a desired effect. It is a non-lethal reconnaissance tool used to counter insurgent networks by identifying and targeting friendly social networks for future *political maneuver*.

<sup>14</sup> Texas Agricultural Development Team (ADT): The mission of the ADT is to develop complete market chains that provide the Afghan people with increased economic opportunities. The ADT also seeks to increase agricultural knowledge and output by working with the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture to educate Afghan farmers and install micro power systems for remote areas. See the following article for additional information: <http://www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2009/January/20090123093734dmslahrellek0.2457392.html>

warning to the villagers.<sup>15</sup> This response from the Taliban labeled Espandi as a Taliban controlled village and set the tone for future operations.

While the Clear was moderately successful, the Hold portion was not feasible due to a lack of forces willing to remain in Espandi. The Detachment attempted to maintain the initiative by conducting random joint combat patrols with the ANP SRT, Texas National Guard, and Polish forces.<sup>16</sup> Each of these patrols aided in the Detachment gaining situational awareness of Espandi's geographical and human terrain as it began to build a picture of the operational environment.

In addition to increasing its presence, the Detachment followed David Galula's example of winning the support of the population through its new leaders by encouraging a formal dialogue between the Espandi elders and Ghazni's Governor Usman Usmani.<sup>17</sup> Instead of the Detachment engaging the elders unilaterally, it convinced the governor to intercede and execute his role as a government leader.<sup>18</sup> His natural talents as a political animal were invaluable as he attempted to pin the elders down to make a choice: either choose the side of the new government or those of the Taliban. The elders naturally countered that the government or coalition had to first ensure security.<sup>19</sup>



Image on the left: Ghazni Governor Usman Usmani using his innate political skills to encourage the Espandi Village Elders to reject Taliban influence. The author said very little during this meeting but his presence was still necessary as the local "honest broker". Orchestrating such meetings also encourages local Afghan government officials to resolve local grievances instead of pouring their energies into corruption.

US conventional forces were spread across three provinces and ISAF forces were restricted by national caveats in conducting extended operations outside of their base. The Detachment looked to available Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The ANP were dubious of committing forces as they were already stretched thin and so the eternal problem of who

<sup>15</sup> Note from FM 3-24.2: The Detachment should have incorporated a stay behind element during its withdrawal as recommended in paragraph 5-86.

<sup>16</sup> FM 3-24.2, paragraph 5-181: COIN Patrols

<sup>17</sup> David Galula. *Pacification in Algeria*, (Arlington, Virginia: RAND Cooperation, 2006), 158.

<sup>18</sup> FM 3-24.2, paragraph 7-44: Support to Governance. The coalition has a responsibility to act as the "honest broker" when dealing with governance. In Afghanistan this means that the coalition must push the GIRoA to govern their people by presenting tribal, judicial, and security issues that they can resolve instead of pouring their energies into corruption. In this instance, the Detachment supported the development of local governance when it convinced Governor Usmani to address Espandi's security concerns.

<sup>19</sup> Note: Despite the increased day and night patrols, it was not enough to separate the population from the insurgents. This was evident when the Detachment broke up a Taliban meeting at the village mosque during the height of Ramadan. Hold forces were necessary for long term security and to allow other enablers to support economic and infrastructure development.

conducts the Hold of a Cleared area manifested itself. The ANA had the necessary forces, but were completely against conducting COIN as it would interfere with their ongoing smuggling operations between Ghazni City and Kabul.<sup>20</sup> ANA participation was heavily dependent on developing a close relationship with the ANA battalion commander; yet his deferment of Special Forces sponsored training denied the Detachment its use of Foreign Internal Defense as a means to increase rapport. The governor's and coalition's powerlessness to gain ANA support for village combat outposts elevated the problem of non-involvement to a national level. Governor Usmani addressed this issue with the Ministry of Defense, which in turn denied the ANA from manning any type of village combat outposts in Ghazni Province. The lack of Afghan National Security Forces' (ANSF) support was more than just a local military problem; it exposed the ANA's reluctance to commit itself to protecting the rural population.

Facing multiple obstacles, the Detachment reevaluated the situation. The coalition's and GIRA's efforts were going nowhere. Despite the elimination of Mullah Haroon by Other Coalition Forces on 12 October, the Espandi villagers boycotted a large combined forces Medical Civic Assistance Program (MEDCAP) on 15 October and Humanitarian aid from the Texas ADT out of fear of Taliban retributions.<sup>21</sup> This example confirms how difficult it can be to separate the population from the insurgents, as Roger Trinquier states:<sup>22</sup>

The goal of *modern warfare* is control of the populace, and terrorism is a particularly appropriate weapon, since it aims directly at the inhabitant. In the street, at work, at home, the citizen lives continually under the threat of violent death. In the presence of this permanent danger surrounding him, he has the depressing feeling of being an isolated and defenseless target. The fact that public authority and the police are no longer capable of ensuring his security adds to his distress. He loses confidence in the state whose inherent mission it is to guarantee his safety. He is more and more drawn to the side of the terrorists, who alone are able to protect him.

A proposal to the Espandi elders by the Detachment to aid in establishing an Arbakai security force was rejected by the elders, claiming they did not have enough men or weapons to defend the village.<sup>23</sup> The proposal itself was a bluff as President Karzai was adamant against the renewal of local defense initiatives that might create a threat to his power base.<sup>24</sup> A final proposal of establishing an ANSF combat outpost in the village was similarly rejected due to

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<sup>20</sup> Note: Atmospherics confirmed that the local ANA Battalion Commander was utilizing the ANA's resources to smuggle various goods from Ghazni to Kabul.

<sup>21</sup> Note: Mullah Haroon was the top Taliban commander in Espandi after the departure of Sher Agha. During the month of September and October, he was the Detachment's nemesis as the two traded non-kinetic blows for control of Espandi's population. Mullah Haroon usually held the advantage over the Detachment as he was a resident of Espandi and held significant sway over the population through intimidation.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Mohammed Osman Tariq, "Tribal Security System (Arbakai) in Southeast Afghanistan," (Crisis Research Center, Destin, LSE, Houghton Street, London, December 2008). This paper gives an in depth explanation of the Arbakai system. Arbakai are a traditional form of tribal security typically found in Eastern Afghanistan but the concept is widely known throughout Afghanistan. Tribes pick their most courageous fighters to guard their villages, using Afghan pashtunwali to ensure that they maintain security. Most Arbakai bands number anywhere from 40-100 men.

<sup>24</sup> Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, "Arbakai Aim to Protect Their Villages in Afghanistan," *NPR Web Site*, February 7, 2008, at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18754057>.

cultural concerns.<sup>25</sup> Why was Espandi so resistant to any type of assistance? What did the Detachment not understand about the operational environment, Special Forces' first imperative, that was causing its full spectrum operation to fail and how could it improve its *combined political maneuver*?

After calling a suspension of tactical operations on 30 October, the Detachment began an exhaustive political and human terrain analysis, while training its ANP SRT to take lead in conducting patrols.<sup>26</sup> The Detachment also opened a back channel to Espandi's senior elder through an intermediary. Instead of continuing to meet face-face with the village elders, the Detachment communicated through the intermediary in order to determine how the elders truly felt about security and development projects. This method of communication took longer but was more effective due to eliminating the fear of retribution in their semi-permissive environment. It was the beginning of an intelligence network focused on communicating with the population, developing a parallel to that of the insurgents as proposed by Roger Trinquier.<sup>27</sup> This network worked specifically for the defense and concerns of the population. Trinquier emphasizes that these networks mirror every echelon of society, securing it through quality communication that facilitates the focusing of energy and resources. It compliments intelligence dedicated for kinetic operations, information operations, PSYOPs and is a key capability for executing *combined political maneuver*.

The break in operations signaled to the Tajik Taliban that the Detachment had retreated from the objective of securing Espandi. Ironically, this induced Sher Agha to return from Pakistan as he deemed Espandi to again be a secure Taliban stronghold. While conducting a patrol in Espandi on 14 November, the ANP SRT inadvertently reacquired Sher Agha. Atmospherics confirmed afterwards that the ANP SRT had been within 15 feet of him as they conducted a jirga with the village elders.<sup>28</sup> The local Taliban even mocked the ANP SRT's ignorance by inviting them to a party that evening. After debriefing members from the patrol, the Detachment planned and the ANP SRT executed an operation that captured Sher Agha during that evening's festivities. The successful operation would prove to be a watershed event and forced the Espandi elders to return to the negotiating table as they sponsored the detainee families' call for clemency on November 17. While the village elders wanted Sher Agha to be released, the Detachment used the opportunity to reassert the need for some type of security apparatus to be accepted by Espandi. Repeated refusals and the nervous nature of Espandi's spokesman finally alluded to the true nature of the *operational environment*. Present was "Senator" Maulana Abur Rahman

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<sup>25</sup> Note: The Espandi Elders claimed that ANSF presence especially that of the ANP was not welcome due to the fear of ANP corruption. Even worse, the elders were concerned that the ANP would commit atrocities against their village as had happened in Deh Yak District, Ghazni Province. An ANP Officer sexually harassed a young local girl when she went to collect water at the local well. In this case sexual harassment is defined when an Afghan man "checks out" Afghan women at the well. It is well known that one of the few chances that rural Afghan men have to woe Afghan women outside of their extended family is when a woman retrieves water from the well or river.

<sup>26</sup> Note: The Detachment began to handover regular tactical patrols to the ANP SRT in order for them to gain unilateral capabilities. In order to improve their chances of success, the Detachment gave them up-armored vehicles and secured A-10 Close Air Support in order to build confidence and bluff the Taliban into thinking that ANSF now had the same capabilities as US forces.

<sup>27</sup> Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, p. 28.

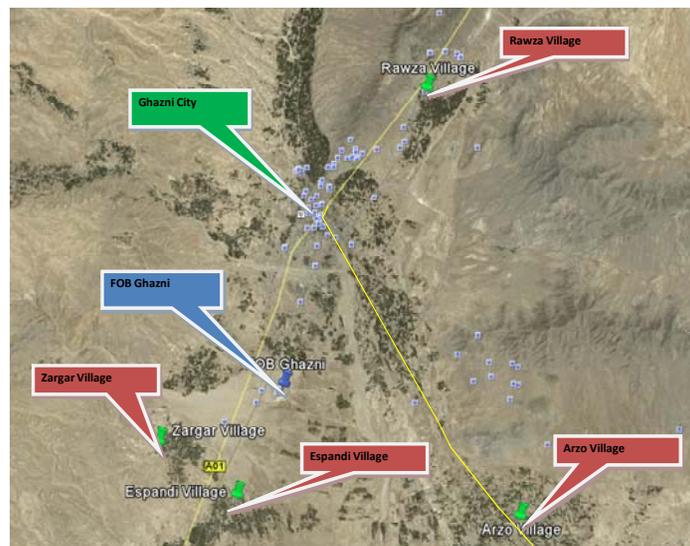
<sup>28</sup> Note: The ANP SRT did not know that they were that close to Sher Agha as no one had a picture of the target and hence could not readily positively identify him.

Sayaff, a key Tajik Leader and President Karzai's Special Federal Representative. Unofficially, he was the Tajik Mafia's figurehead and was there to preserve the status quo.

## The Operational Environment and Political Maneuver

Ghazni is a complex province due to its multi-ethnic makeup of Tajik, Pashtu, and Hazaran populations, which are in competition over reconstruction contracts, drugs, and chromite.<sup>29</sup> The current status quo consisted of a system of "grey" alliances led by the Tajik Mafia and was composed of ethnically diverse GIRoA officials that included former Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) members, local power brokers, and the local Taliban commanders in order to facilitate their legal and illegal business activities. When the Detachment pushed for several different security solutions for Espandi Village, Maulana Abdur Rahman stated that coalition forces should not be concerned with security in Espandi or any of the other "74" villages that he controlled. When asked which villages, the Senator responded by listing several villages under Taliban influence that were also staging areas for tactical attacks on coalition forces and logistical convoys.<sup>30</sup> It was evident that the Ghazni Tajiks had no intentions to bring "real" security to Ghazni Province or to the areas that they "controlled", instead the Detachment suspected that they wished to maintain a certain level of violence in order to continue their established status quo.<sup>31</sup>

Annex 1, Appendix 2: Ghazni District Village Map



<sup>29</sup> Thomas Schweich, "Is Afghanistan a Narco-State," *The New York Times Online*, December 14, 2008, at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9404E5D7153FF934A15754C0A96E9C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>; Richard Oppel, "Corruption Undercuts Hopes for Afghan Police," *The New York Times Online*, April 8, 2009, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/09/world/asia/09ghazni.html?pagewanted=all>, Note: sources report each truck of chromite is worth \$60,000.

<sup>30</sup> Note: The villages included Zargar, Espandi, Qarabaghi, and Arzo. All of these villages are known staging areas and thoroughfares for Ghazni Taliban. Espandi and Arzo are particularly notorious for being staging points for attacks on MSR Ohio (Espandi) and MSR Florida (Arzo). See Annex 1: Imagery; Appendix 2: Ghazni District Imagery

<sup>31</sup> Note: It should be noted that several of the Tajik Elders are well respected by members of the Tajik population or by Ghazni City's cross ethnic population. The Ghazni Tajiks are dedicated businessmen who are often involved in conflict resolution for the local people, especially among the "guilds" that are located in Ghazni City.

Now that the Detachment understood *the operational environment* was dominated by the “grey”, it needed to adjust its *combined political maneuver* in order to break the Tajik Mafia’s dominance over its own people. First, the Detachment relooked at how it could force the ANA’s hand in establishing a 25 man combat outpost in Espandi so that Espandi could serve as a small victory in a larger COIN campaign.<sup>32</sup> A solution lay with using Governor Usmani’s desire to gain influence over the Tajiks. After convincing him that emplacing a checkpoint in Espandi was necessary, the Detachment used the governor’s influence to obtain ANP backing and together pushed the new Hazaran ANA Brigade commander into participating. While the initiative seemed to be a tactical move, in reality it was a strategic maneuver as it painted the ANA into a political corner. The Detachment’s indirect approach also forced the people of Espandi to make a choice. They could no longer sit on the fence as the presence of the checkpoint mandated they support either the Taliban or the GIRoA. It took over a month to establish the checkpoint.<sup>33</sup> 36 hours after its establishment, the ANA pulled out, receiving orders from the ANA 203rd Corps that they could not provide the required 10 men.<sup>34</sup> Three days after its establishment, the Taliban attacked the checkpoint. The coalition and GIRoA had regained the initiative not through a specific kinetic operation but by denying the Taliban access to the population. Despite the checkpoint being a tactically defensive position, its establishment served as an operationally offensive maneuver. The local Taliban had to attack the checkpoint or else they would suffer a loss of honor or *nang* by being denied a traditional safe haven. It allowed the Detachment to engage the Taliban discriminately through the ANSF while at the same time manipulate the Taliban’s psychological need to save face.



**SFC Brad Bohle stands in front of the Espandi Combat Outpost during its construction in December of 2008.**

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<sup>32</sup> Note: The Espandi Checkpoint was designed to contain up to 25 personnel and be composed of a mixture of ANP and ANA, with the ANA having overriding authority due to the people’s trust in them. Joint patrols would have been the ideal, with the ANP taking lead on engaging the populace and the ANA providing heavy weapons support.

<sup>33</sup> Note: The checkpoint came to fruition through the combined efforts of the Detachment, Governor Osmani, ANP/PMT, ANA, and PRT support.

<sup>34</sup> Note: After the departure of the ANA from the combat outpost, the ANA Battalion Commander took a verbal beating at the next security meeting from Governor Osmani and COL Andrejzek, the Polish Battle Group Commander, for the checkpoints impending failure due to a lack of ANA participation.

## Ghazni Politics

Espandi being semi-secured, the next larger issue at stake was the influence of the Tajik Mafia. The Tajik Mafia or “Badmash” maintained significant power in Ghazni Province’s security, political, and economic spheres of influence.<sup>35</sup> Despite being only 3% of Ghazni’s population, the Tajiks managed to formulate a strong power base within Ghazni City, which allowed them to control strategic lines of communications such as Highway 1 and routes leading east to Pakistan. By controlling these key corridors of transportation, the Ghazni Tajiks established an environment that favored their political and economic position. They built their wealth by winning Provincial Reconstruction Team contracts that are sometimes worth millions of dollars.<sup>36</sup> In order to keep the contracts flowing, the Ghazni Tajiks assumed that they must maintain a certain level of instability within Ghazni Province and thus support the local Taliban by paying them up to \$150,000/month or \$1.8 million/year.<sup>37</sup>

This is why the Detachment could not make any progress in Espandi. It was not just fighting the Taliban, but a corrupt system endemic throughout the province that was primarily concerned with maximizing profit margins. Coalition forces were inadvertently funding their own insurgency by awarding contracts to individuals who in turn had to pay a “tax” to the Taliban commanders. The practice was reported to occur widely throughout Afghanistan, with the “tax” percentages ranging from 10-40% for development projects and 10-25% for logistical convoys moving through Taliban controlled areas like Ghazni’s Andar and Qarabagh districts that border Highway 1.<sup>38</sup> In addition to an established and efficient kidnapping ring, these financial activities are creating roadblocks for future security measures.<sup>39</sup> Mao Tse-tung would define the Ghazni Taliban as a mixture of the fourth and seventh type of guerillas or foreign fighters mixed with local Taliban supported by thieves and bandits.<sup>40</sup>

The source of the Ghazni Tajik economic prosperity originated from the harvesting and sale of antiques from the Ghaznavid Empire.<sup>41</sup> Ghazni Tajik’s are “based” out of the Rowzah Village,

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<sup>35</sup> Note: Badmash is a derogatory name for Afghan Mafia organizations. The Ghazni Tajik Mafia is currently involved in legal and illegal business activities.

<sup>36</sup> Note: Total “burn” rate for just road construction projects in districts controlled by the Taliban in January of 2008 was approximately \$50 million. A conservative 5% tax would equal \$5.0 million being funneled to the Ghazni Taliban.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ghazni Governor Usman Usmani, Nov 2008. The \$150,000 (12 million Pakistani Rupees) figure was given to the detachment from Governor Usman Usmani who is suspected to be in competition over political and economic power with the Ghazni Tajiks. Other sources have reported that the Ghazni Tajiks make payments to the local Taliban but did not state specific figures.

<sup>38</sup> Tom Coghlan, “Taleban Tax: allied supply convoys pay their enemies for safe passage,” *Times Online*, December 12, 2008, at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article5327683.ece>.

<sup>39</sup> BBC, “Taleban release S Korean hostages,” *BBC Online*, August 29, 2007, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6968179.stm>.

<sup>40</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 73-76. Mao defines the *fourth* type of guerilla organization as the merger between small regular detachments (conventional army, in this case professional foreign fighters) and local guerilla units. The *seventh* type of guerilla organization is that formed from bands of bandits and brigands.

<sup>41</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 314-315. The Ghaznavid or Yamini Dynasty existed from 977-1186 A.D. Yamin ad-Dawlah Mahmud was its famous emperor who built an empire that initiated one the great renaissances of the Early Islamic Period. In the process he looted several wealthy Indian Hindu temples. Post World War II excavations by the Germans and Italians uncovered thousands of objects of archeological value. The Tajiks continue to loot the site for

which is located approximately 3km north of Ghazni City. Incidentally, between these two locations one can find the historical site of the Ghazniavid Capital. Ten years ago, Rowzah was an economically depressed village, but upon their entrance into the antique smuggling business they grew into one of the most prosperous villages. Like any competent investor, the Ghazni Tajiks have diversified their capital into several other businesses.

Politically, the Ghazni Tajiks have significant influence due to Maulana Abdur Rahman Sayyaf's status as the President's special representative. He is the ethnic Tajik check against Governor Usmani, a Pashtun Alokozai from Kandahar and "cousin" to President Karzai. President Karzai emplaced Governor Usmani in order to ensure his reelection.<sup>42</sup> Governor Usmani's appointment is also a political gesture so as to placate the Alokozais who are the Pashtu warrior tribe in Kandahar. It is Usmani's chance to display his political aptitude and talent for corruption. Governor Usmani hopes to gain a significant power base by manipulating the traditional power brokers, coalition forces, and the local population. It can be perceived that Governor Usmani and the local Tajik power brokers behave like two mafia gangs that are attempting to assert their power over Ghazni City due to its importance as a hub for commerce. The group that controls the trade routes, gains the ability to tax legal goods from the many logistical convoys that run up and down Highway 1. It also allows the dominant faction to control the illegal opium trade that runs from Kandahar to Tajikistan-Russia-Western Europe and the illegal chromite trade that moves into Pakistan.<sup>43</sup>

A local incident provides an example of how Governor Usmani and the Ghazni Tajiks are involved in an ongoing political power struggle. The Ghazni Tajiks from Rowzah Village wished to build a new mosque in order to expand their village to the South. While this is traditionally done to expand a village, the real reason for the construction of the mosque was to allow the illegal harvesting of antiques from this historical area. Governor Usmani either did not receive his cut of the antique smuggling profits or decided to make a power move by bulldozing the new mosque. The Rowzeh villagers in turn began to riot, burning tires on Highway 1, and disrupting the flow of traffic. Governor Usmani asked Senator Maulana to speak to Raees Hachem, the senior Tajik elder, in order to quell the riot peacefully.<sup>44</sup> When he was unable to do so, he sent in the Ghazni City ANP to quell the riot by force. This was a political victory for Governor

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profit on the archeological smuggling circuit.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Governor Usmani. Governor Usmani would personally tell the author and other coalition elements this fact; Afghanistan Analysts Network, *Polling Day Fraud in the Afghan Elections* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network Press, 2009), p. 3. Ghazni turned out to be one of the biggest violators of election fraud, stuffing ballots with votes for "King" Karzai.

<sup>43</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: RAND Cooperation, 2008), p. 47-48. Dr. Jones explains how criminal groups and Taliban are merging their overlapping interests and highlights the drug trade with Tajikistan-Russia; not just the more commonly known drug trade with Iran. This situation is reminiscent of Colombia's FARC shifting gradually into a narco-insurgency.

<sup>44</sup> Note: Raees Hachem, "the Godfather", cousin of Maulana Abdur Rahman, is known to be one of the most powerful men in Ghazni Province. He owns Qalandri Construction Company, a gravel company, and a transportation company. His son was a regular face on FOB Ghazni and coordinated the delivery of all gravel trucks for the Polish Battle Group and also held the snow plowing contract from the US Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Some locals claim that the Ghazni Tajiks are simply hard working people who have prospered by taking advantage of economic opportunities. While this was admirable example in capitalistic entrepreneurship, their special relationship with the Ghazni Taliban was having negative effects on COIN operations.

Usmani because it demonstrated his power over Senator Maulana and the Ghazni Tajiks. It also humbled the Ghazni Tajiks, although the extent of their loyalty and respect to Governor Usmani remains unknown.

Coalition forces in conjunction with senior GIRoA players have certain options they can use in order to confront or manipulate the Ghazni Tajiks into stopping their corruptive support of Taliban networks. One option is to confront the Tajiks with this information and threaten them into compliance by potentially denying all PRT contracts. Cutting off one of their largest funding streams would deny the Taliban some of their operational funds. A second option would be to publically broadcast the story through the media in order to publically humiliate the Tajiks into submission. A third option would have the GIRoA detain the senior Ghazni Tajik leaders in an effort to send a message that corruption will not be tolerated.

A hybrid of these three courses of action would be ideal: leaking a limited version of the story to the local media, detaining a lower level Tajik financier and maintaining pressure on the local Taliban would send a strong signal. Specific actions can be gradually elevated or downplayed in order to discontinue Ghazni Tajik financial support of Taliban operations while simultaneously pushing for reconciliation. Any of these options have the potential to be met with some type of counteraction from the targeted parties.

Coalition efforts to reduce the corruption of reconstruction resources could result in the Tajik population slide into insurgency as the Tajik Mafia convinces their people to join the Taliban or resist coalition efforts by withdrawing contractor support. The coalition can reduce these risks by tapping alternate contractors and executing a pre-planned I/O campaign highlighting Tajik Mafia transgressions. Assassination of public officials is a common insurgent tactic that the Taliban would tap in order to disrupt coalition planning. The security of key leaders would have to be hardened while local surgical strike operations would continue in order to disrupt the Taliban's chain of command.

Whatever type of action the coalition initiates, it would pincer the Tajik Mafia between the Taliban and the coalition. These initiatives are offensive in nature and do not attempt to lure "fence sitters" to the GIRoA by offering better incentives, hence they carry risks in that it pushes the coalition to become an active political player. While international forces attempt to hold a neutral stance in conflict resolution so as to first do "no harm", this perspective is pointless as their mere presence has upset the previous status quo. The international community's efforts to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan force it to first understand the operational environment, and then actively participate as a political player in conjunction with their partners so as to bring about the ultimate goal: stability and security.

## **Conclusion**

*Combined political maneuver* seeks to unify disparate coalition entities in creating an operational plan that turns self-interested power brokers into allies in a bid to separate insurgents from the population and connect the people to a legitimate government that can provide and sustain the

four dimensions of counterinsurgency: security, governance, development, and information.<sup>45</sup> This long definition raises the questions of how do we accomplish these tasks and who executes them?

The GIRoA and coalition forces know what to do but often remain convoluted or show no motivation in how to accomplish these challenging tasks. Most parties agree that whatever course of action is taken, the effort must be unified under a joint plan, physically executed by GIRoA and ANSF with coalition forces acting as mentors and honest brokers. Certain GIRoA and ANSF players do not have a strong understanding of how to properly execute COIN along military lines but can excel politically due to their knowledge of the political landscape.

Coalition forces must advise and mentor their Afghan partners, compensating for their weaknesses, by designing an operational COIN plan tailored to their area. The coalition must make *political maneuver* their main effort with traditional tactical maneuver in support.

Special Forces Detachments are a key element in developing a coordinated operational COIN plan as they possess unique tools that allow them to transcend cultural boundaries and create unity of effort. Their support of larger conventional forces is maximized when they are allowed to conduct Foreign Internal Defense in support of indigenous forces while simultaneously utilizing their talents to uncover the operational environment. Their superior situational awareness can properly focus a joint GIRoA, ANSF and coalition effort in connecting to the population.

SFODA 7311's *combined political maneuver's* success can be measured by which objectives were accomplished by the end of the Detachment's deployment. The Detachment did increase its understanding of the operational environment as it learned the local players' economic and political agendas were dominated by graft. Corruption continues to pervade all aspects of Afghan society due to a scarcity of resources and the belief that the international community will inevitably leave; causing a return to civil war at best or a Taliban government at worst.

Progress was made in creating systems that unified FOB Ghazni and GIRoA agendas, but competing operational and strategic visions outlived the original joint vision of securing one village against Taliban influence due to the lack of commitment to a joint plan. Governor Usmani and the ANP did witness and acknowledge the benefits of small scale enduring combat outposts, but due to a lack ANA support this initiative could not expand beyond Espandi. Finally, relieving Espandi from the yoke of the Tajik Mafia and Taliban showed promise as the

#### SOF Imperatives

- Understand the operational environment
- Recognize political implications
- Facilitate interagency activities
- Engage the threat discriminately
- Consider long-term effects
- Ensure legitimacy and credibility of Special Operations
- Anticipate and control psychological effects
- Apply capabilities indirectly
- Develop multiple options
- Ensure long-term sustainment
- Provide sufficient intelligence
- Balance security and synchronization

<sup>45</sup> Dr. David Kilcullen's definition of *political maneuver*. The author simply wishes to highlight unity of effort. See Footnote #1.

Detachment was leaving. Governor Usmani signaled his desire to make this a reality due to his quest for greater political power.

In retrospect, the Detachment should have jointly manned the outpost with the ANSF or chosen a village that did not necessitate direct coalition support. It was not as Dr. Kilcullen states, “an early victory” and the Detachment paid for it by expending an incredible amount of energy.<sup>46</sup> Eventual success would have had exponential political, organizational and military benefits but it required greater commitment from coalition partners.

Still, Espandi demonstrated that *combined political maneuver* guided by superior *understanding of the operational environment* could be the beginning of an effective COIN campaign, but tragically a lack of continuity limited or eliminated many of the gains. The unresolved issue of continuity will undermine coalition efforts in Afghanistan until operational COIN plans are mandated and approved at the strategic level. Only a sustained and cohesive implementation of COIN doctrine will yield victory in this long war.

### **Special Note in reference to updated Special Forces Operations as of July 2009 – present:**

As of the publishing of this paper, Special Forces Detachments are executing these types of operations under the name of Village Stability Operations (VSO) with the desired end state of gaining that “small victory” along the way to spreading long term security. Yet, it must be emphasized that site selection must be critically evaluated before committing operational assets to securing a tactical piece of terrain. While a Detachment can easily secure a village with their Afghan partners, commanders must realize that such tactical tasks can rapidly reduce a Detachment’s ability to operationally affect its area of operations if it is isolated to one village. Regardless, such operations do set the example not just for our Afghan partners but also for our coalition partners. VSO is proving critical as it purges the Taliban from key villages, fosters local alliances and leaders among solidarity groups and attempts to connect or transform these alliances and leaders to a local, legitimate and functioning government.

*About the Detachment: ODA 7311 has deployed to Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedoms VIII, XII, XIV and is set to return for OEF XVI. It was my privilege to have served with them during OEF XII as their Detachment Commander. This article was written in their honor and is especially dedicated to SFC Bradley S. Bohle, SFC Shawn P. McCloskey and SSG Joshua M. Mills who were KIA on 15 September, 2009 while conducting combat operations in Nimruz Province, Afghanistan. The author can be contacted at [john.kendall1@us.army.mil](mailto:john.kendall1@us.army.mil). De Oppresso Liber.*

*Disclaimer: Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, United States Army Special Forces Command, United States Army Special Operations Command, the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or any other US government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.*

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<sup>46</sup> Kilcullen, “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency,” p. 6.

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