



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

August 3, 2010

Thai Village Security Lessons for Afghanistan

by Jeff Moore

As General David Petraeus takes over military command in Afghanistan, a major point of contention has arisen regarding village security forces – are they to be, or not to be? Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his supporters are weary, saying village security forces will become tools of warlords and undermine central authority. General Petraeus and his subordinates think they are valuable to their COIN strategy.¹ A hyper-political debate, full of miss direction, is likely to follow as both sides maneuver to control the issue. Village security, however, is essential to separating the people from insurgents, no matter what the war. Examples from Thailand’s COIN successes can help show the way forward.

Without village security, Taliban control over the population will be difficult or impossible to stomp out. An October 2009 “60 Minutes” special titled, *Afghanistan: Golf Company*, proves the point. As men of the 2d Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment and Afghan forces fought their way around Koshtay village, Helmand Province, they asked villagers to reject the Taliban and said a medical center was soon coming to them. Village leaders bristled at the offer, clamoring instead for security.

The basic message was, *You Marines come, we cooperate, you leave, and then the Taliban comes and kills us*. They moreover complained the Marine force was too small to protect the area. Said one elder, “You cannot hide the sun with two fingers. The Taliban are everywhere.”² Another said, “When we’re assured of our security, we will cooperate with the Afghan Army.”³ More, “60 Minutes” reported the Taliban paid the villagers 10 dollars for every pressure plate mine they planted, mines that had caused scores of Marine casualties.⁴

Village security can help ease these threats. An armed force, well trained and led – and that is key – can help keep the Taliban out of the villages where medical clinics and other essential services can operate. Safe from Taliban intimidation, villagers are less likely to deploy IEDs that kill and injure security forces. Village security can also physically separate the villagers from the Taliban, which, in turn, will dramatically lessen collateral damage to the civilian population. The latter has been a sore point of contention between the allies and Kabul since the war escalated in 2006. The benefits of such forces can go even deeper, however, as demonstrated by Thailand’s village security units that proved successful against guerrillas from the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) during the Cold War.

¹ “U.S. and Afghanistan Debate More Village Forces,” *New York Times*, 12 July 2010.

² *Afghanistan: Golf Company*, CBS, “60 Minutes,” produced by Henry Schuster, three-week field interview with the 2d Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, interview by Scott Pelley, 11 October 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=5377315n&tag=dsGoogleModule>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Thailand's villages have a history of self-defense and self-policing; government services have not always extended to all areas of the country. This was especially true in the 1800-1900s. Outside insurgents, local threats were typically bandit gangs and petty crime. Village headmen were in charge of security, and their fighters were usually poorly armed and trained. They were, however, the only semblance of law and order in Thailand's hinterlands.⁵

When the CPT launched a Maoist guerrilla war in 1965 to overthrow Bangkok, the Thai naturally turned to village security teams (VSTs) to separate the people from the insurgents. (They had scores of different types, but the most common was the "VST.") Early attempts to professionalize VSTs failed, but as the war progressed, the Thai learned from their mistakes and increased their efficiency. The combination of VSTs and the government's other COIN programs such as military and police operations, political reform, and economic aid helped "break the back" of the insurgency, says Dr. Thomas Marks, expert on Thai COIN operations and head of National Defense University's Irregular Warfare Department.

What was the purpose of these forces? What did the Thai do wrong, and what did they do right regarding their deployment? More, can Thai strategies and tactics be applied to Afghanistan?

Thai VSTs had six purposes. First, they helped physically separate the villagers from the insurgents. CPT guerrillas infiltrated villages both by ideology and force. Villagers who wanted the CPT out could do nothing about it, being on the business end of AK-47s and aggressive Maoist diatribe. Once trained, armed, and effectively led, VSTs turned the tables on the CPT and forced them out.

Second, they provided defense against political revenge attacks by CPT forces angry over being kicked out of villages. Likewise, they protected villages never touched by the CPT from forced entry operations. Such defense required, however, a QRF system of police and military (to be discussed later.)

Third, VSTs served as force multipliers for the Royal Thai Army and Thai National Police (RTA and TNP) that were too few in number to simultaneously patrol both Thailand's vast terrain and thousands of villages – especially in the mountainous and jungle areas of the north and northeast. Relieved of village security, the military and police could pursue the CPT unhindered. A handful of police stayed with VSTs, however.

Fourth, VSTs provided intelligence on CPT personnel and military movements. Once trained and armed, they no longer feared the CPT and their village sympathizers, so they ratted them out, which included telling the military and police – especially Special Branch – everything about the enemy in their AORs. This included not just names of CPT leadership, but their daily habits, their level of dedication to Maoist ideology, their family and personal associations, their geographic reach, their intelligence and military prowess, etc. Afterward, Thai police could effectively put APBs out on such personnel and force them to remain on the run – eventually capturing or killing them. Other CPT simply quit and surreptitiously rejoined society on their own.

Fifth, some VSTs helped guide military and police through unfamiliar territory during major offensive operations. Their local knowledge of terrain, CPT hiding places, and enemy

⁵ Counterinsurgency in Thailand, 211.

ratlines proved invaluable. Without them, the RTA and TNP would have fumbled lost around the countryside.

Sixth, VSTs had an intangible political effect – nation bonding. Before village security programs, remote villagers in Thailand knew they were Thai based on food, language, and other cultural factors such as allegiance to a beloved king, but they had neither ideological nor physical bond to the central government. Most had no idea of Bangkok’s governing process, the laws it passed, or why or how they should be a part of the nation state. For the non-ethnic Thai hill tribes in the north such as the Hmong, feelings of independence went much further. To them, the government was frequently the enemy because it opposed the Hmongs’ nomadic slash and burn agricultural lifestyle, which harmed the environment and hurt lowland agriculture. Being on a VST, however, changed a lot of these negative feelings.

Specifically, joining a VST went far beyond being a member of a simple security force. It meant joining a political cause at the behest of the government, including the highly revered king. When security team members picked up rifles, they became part of something important – defending Thailand from Chinese and Vietnamese communists and their Thai proxies. Pride and a sense of ownership followed. Nationalism gradually followed that.

More, the government recruited, trained, and paid the teams. And most of the time, police left a few officers with the teams to lead them, tactically. In short, the VSTs became a branch of the government in the villages. They supported the government’s institutions, its ideology, its causes, and its laws. This wedded the teams to Bangkok, which, in turn, helped bond the villages the central government.⁶ So while the VSTs were for sure security tools, they were also political tools.

There are several things the Thai did wrong in first assembling VSTs when the war began. They struggled for years to find the best formula and went through scores of variations before they found success. Here is an encapsulated list of what went wrong:⁷

- Too few men: 5-12 men in CPT hot zones were too few to fend off communist fighters
- Poor screening – CPT spies infiltrated village security teams and gave them away to the communists
- Poor quality firearms
- Poor training – two weeks of paramilitary training and one week of civics training were neither sufficient for defense, offense, nor nation bonding
- Low pay – 230-530 baht a month (\$7.00 to \$16.00 a month by today’s exchange rate)
- Late pay – 40 percent of village security forces were not paid on time
- Poor motivation – resulted from ineffective indoctrination, lackadaisical draftees, and poor leadership
- Passive tactics – largely static guard duty; kept VSTs in fear of the unknown beyond the wire, produced no intelligence, pressured CPT forces not at all, set VSTs up like sitting ducks

⁶ Donald M Weller, “Counterinsurgency in Thailand: Volume IV: Appendixes, The Insurgent Threat, and the RTG Counterinsurgency Effort” (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses and the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group,) June 1968, 211-217.

⁷ Ibid

- Central government rivalries – Ministry of Interior, TNP, and RTA programs competed against each other for resources and did not cooperate in the field

By 1968, the Thai had improved their VSTs from when the war started. But it took until 1980 for them to turn VSTs into an effective, countrywide program. Ineffective VST coordination resulted from internal political wrangling and turf battles. It took a benign dictatorship to correct these issues. Here is an encapsulated list of what the Thai did right regarding VSTs:⁸

- Volunteers only – the Thai took only the most motivated
- Strict selection and screening – out of 20 volunteers, in some cases, only 10 were selected, and CPT spies were mostly rooted out
- Effective training – extended to eight weeks, including classes on paramilitary tactics (marksmanship, fire and maneuver, essentials of the offense and defense, land navigation, intelligence, communications) and civics lessons; the latter was essential for nation bonding
- Arrest authority – team members had, under the direct supervision of village heads, power to apprehend and arrest CPT suspects
- Aggressive tactics – they went beyond static duty to include patrolling and engaging CPT fighters when appropriate
- Deployed in areas not subject to large CPT formations – the RTA handled these more dangerous areas
- Increased formation size – depended on the size of the village, but it grew to multiple platoon strength where necessary as the war progressed
- Integration into the TNP and RTA chain of command

This last point was critical. Here, the Thai usually left one or two TNP or paramilitary Border Patrol Police (BPP) in tactical charge of VSTs. The village head supervised the force, but the TNP or BPP ran tactical operations. The military ran some VSTs, too. Having professional security forces leading VSTs insured tactical efficiency. If a firefight began to overwhelm a VST, it could call on a TNP or BPP QRF stationed nearby. Such forces were not only nearby for emergencies; they also performed standard patrol and population control duties that helped alleviate CPT pressure from the villages. If the CPT attacked in force that threatened a VST and police QRF, a nearby RTA QRF could then respond with heavier forces, including heliborne troops, artillery, and tactical air support. Like the police, the nearby RTA force also patrolled to pressure the CPT. A communications network linked the entire chain, which, when functioning ideally, kept the CPT off balance by reducing their abilities to move and communicate.

While many of the intricacies of Afghanistan's human terrain and threat profile differ from Thailand's, at the very least, the broad issues are the same. A light guerrilla force has entrenched itself in Afghanistan's villages and/or threatens them, the villages have no special loyalty to the central government, and the enemy is highly motivated by an inflexible, disciplined ideology. To separate the "insurgent fish" from the "popular water," VSTs are necessary along

⁸Ibid

with the requisite training, equipping, compensation, motivation, and leadership – all easier said than done in Afghanistan, for sure.

As for the central government's worry over local forces growing beyond its control, it has a right to be worried. Afghanistan has a history of warlords and private armies that have contributed to its fracture. But President Karzai has to secure the villages to secure Afghanistan – there's no way around it. And Karzai also has to bond the nation together into some semblance of a nation state that can resist Taliban, Pakistani, and Iranian control. Otherwise, it will remain a failed state, just like its detractors want it to be.

So instead of shrinking from VSTs, Karzai should vigorously embrace them, training them as the Thai did not only in kinetics but also citizenship. He could use village security forces to serve as the backbone of a nation bonding program where such personnel achieve basic literacy, learn ethics, embrace rudimentary rule of law, and train in nation state civics. As in Thailand, Afghan VSTs can be both security and political tools.

This need not be a highly refined program run only by low density, high demand ODA teams. Rough and ready early on – again with effective leadership – is better than nothing. To liberally paraphrase Patton, under the current circumstances in Afghanistan, a good VST deployed in two months is better than a perfect VST deployed in four months. Advanced military and civics training can occur on the job or later as the program matures and the countryside stabilizes. U.S. QRF would be critical for success.

Indeed, Karzai, with U.S. help, could seize what has traditionally fractured Afghanistan and reverse engineer it to the state's advantage. He can use it to build up the country. The main question now is, how to convince Karzai to “Get in place that which is correct, get in place that which is sustainable, and play for the breaks,” according to COIN expert Sir Robert Thompson, and do it right now.

Jeff Moore is an assistant professor at National Defense University's Irregular Warfare Department. He is latter stage PhD candidate at the University of Exeter. His subject is Thai COIN strategies and tactics. Moore's work experience includes executive protection details and protective intelligence, corporate security in Southeast Asia, and defense contracting for various government entities, including the U.S. Army G-3 in the Pentagon. He is author of the Naval Institute Press book, Spies for Nimitz, which depicts America's first modern intelligence agency (www.milintelligence.com), and upwards of 30 articles on defense, security, and industry. Mr. Moore has personal experience with terrorism (9-11, Pentagon, Wedge 3D450) and has time in 10 countries, mostly in Southeast Asia. Mr. Moore's PhD is titled, “The Thai Way of Counterinsurgency: A Three-War Analysis.” It analyzes lessons learned from Thailand's past successful and current COIN campaigns to reveal patterns on how the Thai strategize and execute counterinsurgency.

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