



## Implementing COIN Doctrine in the Absence of a Legitimate State

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### *Executive Summary*

The failure of ISAF's COIN strategy to achieve its political objectives is the result of a conceptual error in its COIN implementation framework. Though ISAF places meeting the needs of the population at the center of its strategy, attempting to do so through a kleptocratic, illegitimate, and unaccountable Afghan national government (GIROA) will not succeed. This conceptual error is due to a reading of COIN theory that defines "the counterinsurgent" doctrinally as the national government. Thus, while ISAF strategy now claims to adopt a population centric, district-focused COIN strategy, it still tries with predictable results to reach the population top down through the very kleptocratic government that has precipitated the current political crisis.

Alternatively, COIN implementation has also historically been practiced from a village centric, bottom up framework. This COIN framework is better suited to conflicts where the government is considered to be a threat by the population because it directly builds up village capacity for security and self-governance, negating powerbrokers' malign influence. Defining "the counterinsurgent" in terms of natural political communities, as opposed to the national government, offers ISAF greater flexibility in meeting the needs of population and is supported by COIN successes in Malaya, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

A bottom up, village centric COIN implementation framework is appropriate for Afghanistan because it can begin to redress the socio-political imbalance in Afghan society that continues to empower malign actors through extensive government corruption, patronage networks, and narco-trafficking. Afghanistan's population lacks the basic knowledge, resources, and skills for self-governance, making it subservient to powerbrokers and subject to their predations. International financial and political support of powerbrokers working directly for or with GIROA only serves to reinforce the utility of the Taliban to oppressed villages since it represents the only organized resistance to what threatens them.

ISAF's political objectives in Afghanistan can be best achieved by initiating a dual COIN implementation framework designed to increase the political space necessary to grow functioning village level governance and civil society organizations. This can be achieved by building up traditional, village level security, justice, and agricultural development structures to nurture district stability while pushing good governance and anti-corruption reforms through national and provincial level GIROA. Such a framework requires directing all diplomatic, development, governance, and military assets toward the goal of rebalancing Afghan society. By creating local governance structures based around existing political communities, ISAF can restore political legitimacy and relative stability in Afghanistan in a short period of time.

This is the first of two papers that explain how to implement COIN doctrine in the absence of a legitimate state. It establishes the conceptual context of COIN doctrine in Afghanistan, illustrates why ISAF's political objectives have eluded it so far, and briefly describes the blueprint for a village centric COIN framework. The forthcoming second paper lays out in detail the operational and tactical guidelines for implementing a dual COIN implementation framework.

### ***The Problem with the Current COIN Implementation Framework: State-Centric COIN***

The uncomfortable but inescapable truth is that ISAF and the international community are underwriting the Afghan national government's *kleptocracy*, and their current COIN implementation framework contributes to the problem. ISAF and international assistance reinforce a fundamental power imbalance in Afghan society by providing malign actors, many of whom work with or for the national government, with the massive financial resources they use to oppress and extort the population.<sup>1</sup> The inability of the international community to conceptualize a COIN framework that does not place the national government at the center of the strategy only bolsters GIRoA's dysfunctional patronage and powerbroker political system.

Put bluntly, President Karzai's government is illegitimate in the eyes of most Afghans and it has no hope of becoming legitimate in the near term since Karzai's governing strategy is based on powerbroker patronage, not popular consent. GIRoA's legitimacy crisis is now well understood in military and diplomatic circles, but how to conceptualize COIN without working through Afghanistan's national government is not. This is because all the major institutions implementing COIN in Afghanistan are themselves rooted in national level politics. ISAF member embassies, militaries, and international organizations are politically required to work through national level Afghan intermediaries due to the inviolability of state sovereignty. Building up national level government is, from this perspective, a prerequisite for expanding political, economic, and social order for Afghanistan's citizens at the local level. As a result, ISAF and the international community are failing in their attempt to stabilize Afghanistan, but this is more a function of GIRoA's pathology than Taliban capacity.

ISAF's COIN implementation framework must attempt to rebalance Afghan society to reduce the relative power of malign social actors, not just the Taliban and other insurgents. This means COIN doctrine should be implemented from a village-level, bottom up framework, not only its current state-centric, top down framework. Building up Afghan village-level capacity for self-governance and security is the most crucial task for ISAF's COIN strategy. Since the national government's kleptocratic character will prevent it from meeting the needs of the population in the short term, it is critical for ISAF and the international community to leverage all of its resources and political influence to grant villages the political space to develop their own civil-political networks and support mechanisms.

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<sup>1</sup> Giustozzi, Antonio. "'Good' State versus 'Bad' Warlord? A Critique of State-Building Strategies in Afghanistan." *Working Paper #51, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, Development Studies Institute*. (October 2004).; van Grieken, D.D. *Collaborating Warlords in Afghanistan's Political Reconstruction Process*. (Utrecht: Center for Conflict Studies, 2005), Chapter 4.

## *Recent COIN Doctrine Interpretation (Top Down)*

ISAF's Afghanistan strategy has changed over nine years from counterterrorism operations to counter-network COIN<sup>2</sup> to population-centric COIN. The one constant is the expectation that GIRoA will be the main conduit for implementing ISAF's strategy in order to allow international forces to draw down over time. ISAF and the international community have been operating on the assumption that building up the capacity of the Afghan national government, Afghan National Security Forces in particular,<sup>3</sup> is the key to political stability in the country.<sup>4</sup> Accomplishing this objective will, the theory goes, reduce the relative influence of regional powerbrokers, mitigate the centrifugal forces<sup>5</sup> threatening to pull the country apart, and ensure the sovereign authority of the Afghan state. A functioning national government will be able, with continued international assistance, to advance reconstruction and development for the population's benefit through the national government's bureaucracy in what amounts to a trickle-down effect of government order.

That ISAF's population-centric COIN framework continues to place the Afghan national government at the center of the implementation framework is consistent with recent interpretations of COIN doctrine. Modern COIN doctrine is based heavily on the work of David Galula, a French counterinsurgency expert.<sup>6</sup> Galula posited that "control over the population is the key to success. Only by gaining and keeping control of the population can the counterinsurgent establish the secure environment in which those who support the counterinsurgent and his cause can come forward to organize for their own governance and eventual self-protection."<sup>7</sup>

Recent interpretations of Galula's insights have defined "the counterinsurgent" to be the national government since insurgents seek to undermine it first and foremost. For instance, in the preface of the 2006 edition of Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, John Nagl writes, "An insurgency is a competition between insurgent and government for the support of the civilian population, which provides the sea in which the insurgent swims."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in the US Military's Counterinsurgency Manual (FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5), Gen. David Petraeus *et al* place the "Host Nation" at the center of all counterinsurgency activity. The manual's overarching requirements for successful COIN operations include:

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<sup>2</sup> Barno, LTG (Ret.) David W. "Fighting 'The Other War': Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan, 2003-2005." *Military Review*. (September-October 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Seth A. Jones (2008, p.111) of the RAND Corporation suggests that the US military needs to improve in the following COIN areas: police, border security, ground combat, air strike and air mobility, intelligence, command and control, information operations, and civil-military activities. While Dr. Jones recognizes the importance of local legitimacy, his recommendations continue to focus on the national government as the main political referent for COIN activity.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Jones, Dr. Seth A. *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*. (Arlington: RAND Corporation, 2008), Chapters 5-7., and Amend, Kurt. "Counterinsurgency for the Diplomat." *Small Wars Journal*. (2008)., [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com).

<sup>5</sup> Centrifugal forces on Afghanistan encompass internal factors like tribalism, ethnic chauvinism, narco-trafficking, and warlordism, while external forces include Iranian and Pakistani political influence and international terrorist organizations.

<sup>6</sup> Marlowe, Anne. "David Galula: His Life and Intellectual Context." *Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, US Army War College*. (August 2010), p.2-4.

<sup>7</sup> Citation in Daly, Terence J. "Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice" *Military Review*, (Sept-Oct, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Galula, David. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), p.viii.; see also Fick, Nathaniel C. and John A. Nagl. "Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition." *Foreign Policy*. (January/February 2009), p.3., [www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4587&print=1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&print=1)

- “U.S. and [Host Nation] HN military commanders and the HN government together must devise the plan for attacking the insurgents’ strategy and focusing the collective effort to bolster or restore government legitimacy;
- HN forces and other counterinsurgents must establish control of one or more areas from which to operate [and] HN forces must secure the people continuously within these areas;
- The host nation must retain or regain control of the major population centers to stabilize the situation, secure the government’s support base, and maintain the government’s legitimacy;
- Regaining control of insurgent areas requires the HN government to expand operations to secure and support the population...”<sup>9</sup>

Gen. Petraeus apparently applies this state-centric understanding of COIN in the Afghanistan context as well. For instance, he noted in a 2009 *Foreign Policy* interview on COIN in Afghanistan that, “In Iraq, frankly, it was necessary for the coalition to take the lead in some areas where there was no Iraqi government or security presence.”<sup>10</sup> This statement indicates that working with regional actors, like the Anbar Awakening, was a secondary necessity whereas working through the national government would have been preferable.

David Kilcullen’s response to a globalized insurgency and its resulting “accidental guerillas” also places government-to-government assistance at the core of his COIN conception. He writes, “The essential strategic problem for Western intervention in Afghanistan is therefore less about directly defeating the Taliban and more about building an Afghan state that can handle the Taliban, among many other problems, without permanent large-scale international assistance.”<sup>11</sup> While Kilcullen recognizes that district and local governance will be essential to defeating the Taliban, he still makes the national government the primary service provider. What Kilcullen and other state-centric COIN theorists cannot account for, though, is how to implement COIN when the national government is itself considered a threat by parts of the population.

While Galula recognizes the goal of linking protected communities back to the national government, his writings do not mandate that the national government be the only counterinsurgent entity. Rather, this is a constraint imposed upon his work based on recent interpretations of his writing. As population-centric COIN was rediscovered, it was assumed that Galula automatically established a dichotomy between insurgent and national government. However, a close reading suggests that Galula recognizes that the threat to the community can come from multiple sources, including insurgents, terrorists, narco-traffickers, and even the government.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Petraeus, LTG David and LTG James F. Amos. “Counterinsurgency Field Manual.” *Headquarters, Department of the Army. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5*. (December 15, 2006), Section 5-1.

<sup>10</sup> “Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition, The FP Interview with Gen. David H. Petraeus.” *Foreign Policy*. (January/February 2009), p.6., [www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4587&print=1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&print=1)

<sup>11</sup> Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of the Big One*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.46-47.

<sup>12</sup> Galula is intentionally vague in his description of the population’s concerns in a counterinsurgency situation: “...the population’s attitude in the middle stage of the war is dictated not so much by the relative popularity and merits of the opponents as by the more primitive concern for safety. Which side gives the best protection, which side threatens the most, which one is likely to win; these are the criteria governing the population’s stand (*emphasis added*).”<sup>12</sup>

The COIN implementation framework derived from a state-centric perspective is significantly different from one in which the national government itself is a potential enemy to the community. The theoretical mistake of interpreting COIN doctrine solely in terms of an insurgent-state dichotomy has, therefore, led to a policy error of extending the authority of the state whether or not the population views it as legitimate. The failure of ISAF's COIN implementation to achieve its political objectives in Afghanistan is entirely comprehensible given the character of the Afghan national government.

### ***Comparative COIN Alternatives (Bottom Up)***

State-centric COIN, while doctrinally sound under certain circumstances, is wholly inappropriate when the central government is incapable of meeting the needs of all of its citizens. This problem is not unique to Afghanistan. Rather, it is a common condition of developing states and indicative of the challenges facing counterterrorism activities in Phase 0 countries across the globe. Fortunately, COIN doctrine is not wedded solely to a top-down, central government-oriented implementation framework. COIN doctrine and practice can also be implemented from a bottom up, village-centric framework, achieving strategic gains by applying force, diplomacy, and development at the tactical level.

As with state-centric COIN, village-centric COIN operations historically relied on military operations as the backbone for meeting the population's needs. These operations combined socio-political initiatives with kinetic and non-kinetic action and robust information operations to separate the insurgents from the population. What made them effective was the ability of military forces to meld with the community and meet local needs as members of the community. In other words, by focusing on securing and enhancing the village and its environs, the military was able to turn what appeared to be discreet, local successes into strategic gains with lasting effects.

Current ISAF COIN operations in Afghanistan are eerily familiar in time and application to the mistakes of the British in Malaya, the US in Vietnam, the Russians in Afghanistan, and, most recently, the US in Iraq. Yet each of these countries experienced a reversal of fortune (though too late in some cases) when bottom up COIN principles were adopted. For instance, the British COIN effort in Malaya failed to pacify the country for years until it "empowered the indigenous police forces...with the [British] army in a supporting role, and launched a sophisticated propaganda campaign to explain their policies to the people and to undermine the will of the insurgents."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the US experienced great success with a similar approach in Vietnam (see Box 1). Pickett notes, "The [Combined Action Program] CAP (1965-1971) embedded Marines in Vietnamese villages, and Marine squads lived alongside Vietnamese soldiers, providing them training and security... It enabled a small force to establish a presence over a vast amount of terrain."<sup>14</sup> Also, by the closing years of the Afghan War, the Russians learned to leverage the tribes as opposed to solely trying to extend the Soviet-backed government's authority,<sup>15</sup> though this occurred too late to reverse the situation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond A. Millen "Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife." *Parameters*. Vol. 34, #3. (29 Sep, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Pickett, M. Shands. "The Village Engagement Center: Stabilizing One Village at a Time." *Small Wars Journal*. (September 30, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Doohovskoy (2009, p.24) writes that "...many aspects of the Soviet strategy corresponded to the general advice outlined by experts in counterinsurgency. However, lack of coordination between the various players in the Soviet effort, disjointed

## **Box 1. Marine COIN Implementation in Vietnam**

Marine LTG (Ret.) Victor Krulak's (2005-2007) description of his first COIN experience in Vietnam parallels well ISAF experiences in Afghanistan:

"To secure the Danang air base from guerrilla attack from the northwest, it was necessary to cover the broad valley of the Cue De River. They learned quickly that Le My, a village of about seven hundred people, comprising eight hamlets, only six miles from the main airstrip, was truly enemy country. Two guerrilla platoons--about forty men--lived in the village where they had constructed an extensive cave and tunnel system. They moved in and out at will, extorting the people's rice and money, coercing their youth to join the insurgency, and threatening the village officials. Because of the Vietcong oppression, Le My was sick unto death. There was little government, little agriculture, little commerce, no security, no public services, and no schools. The Vietnamese Army and regional troops had made a few feeble passes at chasing the Vietcong away, but the enemy retained control of the area, its resources, and its people. Further complicating the situation was the fact that some of the active guerrillas had relatives in the village, from whom [*sic*] they received food, sanctuary, and information. Nevertheless, the people at large were dispondent [*sic*] and terrified. Even the village chief spent many of his nights in Danang because of his fear of assassination or capture...

Eventually, however, the insurgents were rooted out of the caves and tunnels, and killed, captured, or driven away. The people's confidence was slowly restored by the security provided by the Marine units as well as by local militia, which resurfaced as the Marine influence grew. By ministering to the villagers' health, by supporting them in construction projects, and by helping them to dig wells and reestablish schools and markets, the Marines brought the villagers level of stability unseen in a decade. Concurrently, the Marines encouraged and assisted the local militia, training them, repairing their weapons, and helping them construct strong defensive positions around the village."

Most recently, the US recognized in Anbar Province, Iraq that the Sunni population needed security from two potential enemies, Al Qaeda and the Shi'ite dominated government. This was a significant realization because the US military's COIN implementation shifted to provide the Sunni population a sense of security in its own territory and over time empowered it to negotiate with the government on better terms. Lindsay and Long conclude, "In Anbar, however, alliances between US forces and sub-national groups and the activities of irregular tribal militias were key to the turnaround."<sup>17</sup>

Conventional military forces moved out of FOBs and into areas where the population lived, created a sense of mutual protection, and established meaningful pockets of security for the population. This effort would not have been successful without the local population taking up arms and protecting itself. It is also interesting that, according to Gen. Petraeus' *Foreign Policy* interview, the success the US experienced with the Sunni communities insulated from the dominance of the national government was a happenstance, not a planned aspect of the engagement strategy. Why this community-centric COIN implementation succeeded in Anbar Province when COIN doctrine fails to advocate this method has direct implications for the situation in Afghanistan.

In all these cases, the population perceived the government to be a threat to the community, so securing it from repression was critical to eliminating the utility of the insurgents. In the Afghanistan context, the population perceives GIROA to be a corrupt, unresponsive, and

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execution, and differing visions of the conflict, the mission and the strategy led to ineffectiveness despite the promise of many Soviet initiatives."

<sup>16</sup> Doohovskoy, Andrei A. "Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Soviet Afghan War Revisited: Analyzing the Effective Aspects of the Counterinsurgency Effort." *A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Regional Studies – Russia, Eastern Europe, & Central Asia, Harvard University*. (September 2009), p.24.; Gusinov, Timothy. "Soviet Experience in Afghanistan." *Unpublished Presentation*. (2009).

<sup>17</sup> Lindsay, Jon and Austin Long. "Counterinsurgency Theory and the Stabilization of Iraq's Anbar Province." *Unpublished Manuscript*. (October 7, 2009), p.38-41., <http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/ocvprogram/papers/COINAnbar090820.pdf>

predatory institution against which it has little protection. After nine years, the US is learning again the positive lessons of bottom up COIN, especially with its Village Stability Operations (VSO) led by Special Forces. With this type of COIN implementation, ISAF is recognizing that protecting Afghanistan's local, legitimate political communities (see Box 2) is ultimately the key to broader stability, just as the British and US learned previously. Conceptually, this means the state should no longer doctrinally be considered "the counterinsurgent." Rather, the *political community* (or political communities) should be conceptualized as "the counterinsurgent," though determining who it is (or they are and how they interrelate) will be a preliminary strategic undertaking.

### ***Stabilizing Legitimate Political Communities***

The legitimacy of the state, especially the nation-state, in the Western mindset depends upon the national government's ability to be a meaningful entity in the lives of its citizens, a conception that joins it with state-centric COIN doctrine. However, developing countries like Afghanistan have the least efficacious national governments and are the most likely to distribute resources based on ethno-religious patronage networks.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Afghanistan is exactly the type of country where the national government is least capable of building broad based political legitimacy, especially in light of its decentralized political history and culture.<sup>19</sup> Augmenting a corrupt and unresponsive national government's reach and authority actually undermines ISAF's COIN objectives since the effort fails to take into consideration that, to Afghans, the legitimate political community stills lies at the local level, not the national level.

#### **Box 2. Defining the "Political Community"**

(U) In sociological terms, any human grouping beyond the village level is considered an "imagined community" because direct knowledge of one another is either impossible to achieve or based overwhelmingly on reports, not interaction. Being bound to one another is a function of imaging the bond based on some trait rather than an immediate survival imperative. While villagers rely upon one another for food, marriage, security, and are consequently obligated to one another in terms of identity and norms of behavior, broader groupings become more tenuously linked to one another.

(U) The decision by broader groupings to act in unison becomes a political decision based on interests other than just community and identity obligations. "Political communities" join together multiple villages or towns into larger entities, such as districts, provinces, states, and international organizations based on perceived security, economic, or political advantages. In the modern Western conception, the nation-state is considered the ideal, most legitimate political community.

Political legitimacy in society is generally easier to achieve the more decisions are taken locally, especially when the territory of a state encompasses multiple ethnicities and religious sects. This is because the ethics, norms of behavior, identity constructs of self and other, and

<sup>18</sup> In the developing world, state borders are usually the result of colonial administration and typically cross political communities instead of representing them as in the nation-state ideal. The tribes, ethnic groups, or religious groups favored during the colonial administration usually gained control of the national governments and utilized their power to extract benefits for themselves at the expense of others. Lacking internal political legitimacy, many regimes have been propped up with international development and military assistance, but once the assistance – and the patronage networks supported by it – disappears, the regimes implode, resulting in failed states, such as Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo), Somalia, Haiti, Liberia, etc. Afghanistan's history mimics this phenomenon and has been described by M. Nazif Shahrani (2000) as an example of "internal colonialism."

<sup>19</sup> Shahrani, M. Nazif. "Resisting the Taliban and Talibanism in Afghanistan: Legacies of a Century of Internal Colonialism and Cold War Politics in a Buffer State." *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*. Vol. 4. (2000).

politico-economic organizing principles that bind groups together typically generate political preferences and interests that are difficult to reconcile.

Since most developing countries' governments are rooted in an economy of extraction<sup>20</sup> and built upon patronage politics that benefit some groups in society at the expense of others, it is uncommon for the national government to become the legitimate political community of all citizens. Instead, it is more common for developing countries to have one or a few groups that view the state as a legitimate political community while others for whom the national government is an instrument of oppression view it as an illegitimate entity. These groups tend to organize their political communities around another, sub-state identity element, such as ethnicity or religion or tribe, as a means of coping or resisting.

The conceptual failure of ISAF and the international community in Afghanistan has been in making the national government the *only* political referent in society. In their rush to build an artificial macro-level political community, i.e. GIROA, ISAF and the international community have effectively ignored building the capacity of its natural, more localized political communities. As a result, Afghans have little to no ability to meet their local community needs and reconcile their differences outside of GIROA's institutions. Afghan perceptions of the value in investing legitimacy in GIROA are entirely dependent upon a national government that is completely immune to local accountability.

The national government's legitimacy crisis must be interpreted as a result of ISAF's misunderstanding about how to build an Afghan political community as much as it is a result of Afghanistan's post-conflict political economy. Fears of empowering regional powerbrokers, militias, and ethno-religious chauvinists at the expense of a coherent sovereign national government were well founded when GIROA was formed, but they led the international community to exacerbate a fundamental imbalance in Afghan society. Powerbrokers and warlords gained control during Afghanistan's 30 years of conflict by instituting a feudal political economy that enriched and armed them, but left the population even more weak and impoverished than before.<sup>21</sup> The Taliban phenomenon was very much a reaction to this political structure.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, President Karzai co-opted into the national government the very powerbrokers the international community sought to marginalize with the international community's own financial backing.

### ***Sovereignty as a Function of Control (Top Down) & Legitimacy (Bottom Up)***

President Karzai's governing strategy actually requires the population to be subservient to local powerbrokers because an empowered citizenry can threaten the feudal economy that provides powerbrokers with their wealth and influence. Without legitimacy, a national government's cost of governing rises. Rather than citizens voluntarily contributing to the government's success, an illegitimate government must forcibly extract the resources it needs to survive. Sovereign authority becomes a function of force and control instead of consent and legitimacy.

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<sup>20</sup> Ellis, Dr. David C. and LCDR James Sisko. "Rural Development Initiative: A Strategy for Augmenting Family/Village Wealth & Political Opportunity." *CFSOCC-A J2 Assessment*. (August 2010), p.6.

<sup>21</sup> Giustozzi, Antonio. "'Good' State versus 'Bad' Warlord? A Critique fo State-Building Strategies in Afghanistan." *Working Paper #51, Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, Development Studies Institute*. (October 2004).; van Grieken, D.D. *Collaborating Warlords in Afghanistan's Political Reconstruction Process*. (Utrecht: Center for Conflict Studies, 2005), Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> Rashid, Ahmad. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).



Karzai's patronage-based governing strategy is oriented toward providing powerbrokers with the freedom to extract wealth from international assistance and the populations under their control.<sup>23</sup> This type of governing strategy is quite common in developing countries. Sovereign national governments utilize the military and bureaucracy to control the population in order to maintain patronage networks and willingly sacrifice popular consent and any pretense of developing a broad-based political community in the process.<sup>24</sup> In effect, the national government becomes a predator on the population in this type of environment.

The population has little choice but to seek protection from the national government and responds politically by trying to develop alternative organizations to insulate it from the predatory behavior. It forms a competing political community around some other factor, usually along a unifying identity construct, such as ethnicity, tribe, or religion. Because the political community is dedicated to protecting group members, it enjoys a higher degree of legitimacy than the national government, even if the main unifying factor is opposition to the national government. Security and stability result from the legitimacy of the political community as group members try to establish some semblance of order for themselves.

Since the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime, the population of Afghanistan has been too poor and disorganized to organically resist the authority of the country's malign actors, making the formation of indigenous, legitimate, and strong political communities problematic. The foreign resourced and supported Taliban found itself in a position to become the representative of a religiously-oriented, rural, mostly Pashtun political community in the mid-1990s in response to the predations of mujahidin powerbrokers. Despite its initial religious legitimacy, even the Taliban quickly lost favor with the Pashtun population because its governing strategy was foreign to traditional Afghan norms and values. It has been trying to position itself similarly against GIRoA since it was dethroned in 2001. The Taliban's "shadow government" is specifically directed at providing the population with a competing justice and law provider, and even its brutality does not dissuade Afghans from accessing it because GIRoA's own institutions are so corrupt and inefficient. Sadly, for much of the Afghan population, GIRoA's current governing character is less attractive than the Taliban's. Nevertheless, neither represents the legitimate political community of the people.

### ***Sovereignty & the Security of Political Communities***

Though it is counterintuitive, Afghanistan's sovereign authority will grow stronger if the influence of powerbrokers associated with the national government recedes from its current extent. Stronger localized political communities will be able to protect themselves from predatory actors, such as the Taliban, local malign actors, and corrupt government officials.<sup>25</sup> More secure, self-sustaining villages will create broader stability and predictability for

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<sup>23</sup> Ellis, Dr. David C. and LCDR James Sisko. "Karzai's Power Sharing Strategy: Leveraging Taliban Reconciliation." *Unpublished Manuscript*. (September 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Smith, Brian C. *Understanding Third World Politics: Theories of Political Change and Development*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> LTG (Ret.) Krulak (2005-2007) writes about the Marines' CAP in Vietnam, "The Combined Action idea was an effective answer to the problem, helping to free the people to act, speak, and live without fear. It was a multiplier, where the final product had combatant value many times the sum of its individual components. There were hundreds of skirmishes and many casualties, but two extraordinary statistics reveal that the unique organization arrangement paid off: no village protected by a Combined Action unit was ever repossessed by the Vietcong; and 60 of the Marines serving the Combined Action units volunteered to stay on with their Marine and Vietnamese companions for an additional six months when they could have returned to the United States."

themselves,<sup>26</sup> which in turn will lead to more stable districts, then provinces, and finally a more stable country.<sup>27</sup> As the volume of security incidents decreases, the cost of governing will decline and GIRoA will be better able to direct its limited resources where they are needed most.

The village-centric COIN operations in Malaya, Vietnam, and Iraq all built upon the security of localized political communities. They created a new political referent for the people through which the population could cohere and feel protected. In Malaya and Vietnam, it was the village or hamlet. In Iraq, it was a series of tribes coalescing under the names, Anbar Awakening and Sons of Iraq. The political community is a matter of identity, interest, and perception. The key to security is to build up the governing capacity of Afghanistan's legitimate political communities, reduce the cost of governance, insulate the population from social predators, link the population institutionally together through line ministries that advance common interests and needs, and enable political communities to credibly negotiate their relationships with the national government.

Since Afghanistan's political culture historically resists centralized control, it is clear that legitimate political communities exist at the sub-state level, not the national level. The sovereign authority of the national government can still be ensured, but as a function of the consent of the governed based on negotiated rights between political communities.<sup>28</sup> In the absence of a national identity, the mutual dependence of political communities is sufficient to maintain a country's sovereignty. In Afghanistan, this means connecting village level governance institutions with service ministries, such as MAIL, DAIL, and MRRD, to approximate the benefits of national governance. Channeling financial resources through the local governance institutions creates a much higher degree of accountability than is possible working through the line ministries. Leveraging norms of honor and community obligation inherent in Pashtunwali<sup>29</sup> at the local level will mitigate much of the corruption inherent in Afghan politics because the political community will hold its members accountable for stealing its limited resources.

Making the agents or affiliates of the national government, who are unaccountable to Afghanistan's local political communities, less impactful on Afghan villages can provide them the space necessary to grow their own organic and inherently legitimate governance systems. From a growing position of influence, the political communities will be able to negotiate demands from GIRoA rather than interact with it from a position of dependency. Building capacity at the village level will, additionally, allow local leaders to rise up within the community based on performance and eventually fill district government Tashkil positions. In concert with a bold reform effort directed at cleaning up the national government, sufficient political legitimacy ensuring Afghanistan's sovereignty can be achieved in a short period of time.

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<sup>26</sup> Fick, Nathaniel C. and John A. Nagl. "Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition." *Foreign Policy*. (January/February 2009), p.2. [www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=4587&print=1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&print=1)

<sup>27</sup> Fick and Nagl note that it is a fallacy to assert that the lack of central government capacity prevents Afghanistan's porous borders from being governable. To the contrary, border tribes historically controlled their territory against those they considered intruders, aiding the national government's sovereign control over its territory.

<sup>28</sup> The Afghan Constitution in principle represents this negotiated consent, but the national government's failure to live up to the bargain erodes the consent and increases resistance to its rule.

<sup>29</sup> While Pashtunwali is principally a Pashtun cultural phenomenon, other ethnic groups in Afghanistan have adopted similar norms and values relative to honor, face, and community responsibility.

## ***COIN, Stability, and Building Legitimacy from the Bottom Up***

ISAF and the international community can create the political space to build legitimacy in the Afghan state, but it requires creating another political referent in society other than the national government. ISAF COIN efforts will in large part need to redress the socio-political imbalance in Afghan society. Presently, Afghan villages and civil society are still too weak to effect change or build capacity on their own. They lack the positive political and civil society networks, resources, and human capital to rise above the subsistence level and the influence of malign actors. ISAF and international resources will, therefore, be critical in providing the villages with the capacity for policing and creating sustainable local institutions.

Identifying and empowering local political communities, whether through constitutional or extra-constitutional bodies, can immediately infuse political legitimacy in the Afghan system. By underwriting constitutionally-mandated District Councils or IDLG sponsored District Development Councils or Village Shuras with international financial resources and skills training, legitimate and accountable Afghan governance institutions can be developed relatively quickly.

Of course, President Karzai and the national government will view empowering the villages with suspicion and some degree of concern about the possibility of losing sovereign control over the territory to regional influences. Again, this concern is in some ways legitimate, but not debilitating to GIRoA if Afghans receive benefits from working with the national government. Iran, Pakistan, and the Northern “Stans” have barriers in place against absorbing Afghans and their products, so the centrifugal forces in Afghan society can be offset with functioning, market enhancing, ministerial services that produce a centripetal effect. Over a few years, the sovereignty of Afghanistan will transition from being based on top down control to being based on bottom up legitimacy or, at the very least, consent.

### ***A Blueprint for Empowering Afghan Political Communities***

ISAF’s COIN implementation framework must break the political structures that prevent the population from benefitting from international and ministerial assistance. The problem is that nine years of international support for these structures has firmly entrenched malign actors in the sovereign national government. ISAF must adopt a multi-year political strategy to rebalance Afghan society that directs all of its military, diplomatic, development, and governance assets toward the goal of expanding the political space for village level governance to reassert itself. This political strategy erodes the relative power of malign actors in society to give the people of Afghanistan the opportunity to establish legitimate political institutions that serve their needs.

### ***Diplomacy***

The diplomatic component of the implementation framework is crucially important. Its principle task is to expand the ability of ISAF, the international community, and NGOs to work directly with and fund sub-national governance institutions. As it stands, GIRoA has monopolized virtually all government services in Afghanistan, and President Karzai has failed to follow through on the constitutional provisions for local elections. The national government can easily prevent ISAF from empowering the village level governance institutions with this arrangement. Loosening the legal impediments to building village level governance requires: (A) Village Governance Institutions and District Level Elections, (B) Preventing Palace

Interference with Local Initiatives, (C) Augmenting Ministries with Village Level Operations, and (D) Reform & Anti-Corruption Initiatives.

### ***Development***

The development component is designed to provide villages with the resources to govern themselves. The overall goal is to raise villages above the subsistence level, help them establish the financial and administrative means for local taxation, and improve their access to markets and increasingly productive technologies. Given the extraordinarily debilitated state of most Afghan villages, it will take a coordinated effort to help them rise to self-sufficiency. International assistance will need to subsidize some degree of village capacity-building in many areas, and support from service-oriented line ministries can help to bridge the gap between the population and GIRoA. Necessary activities include: (A) a Rural Development Initiative,<sup>30</sup> (B) Market Enhancement, (C) Building Service Line Ministry Capacity, (D) Business Training (Soil Testing, Fertilizer Mixing, Karez Cleaning), and (D) Infrastructure Enhancement for Markets.

### ***Governance***

The governance component is the means of actually creating security and stability at the village level. While “good governance” is typically a line of effort aimed at the national government,<sup>31</sup> this orientation will produce few benefits for the population when the state is kleptocratic and based on patronage politics. Governance in Afghanistan begins, therefore, at the village level, but most villages are currently devoid of governance knowledge, resources, and capacity. Governance programs in a village centric COIN framework must: (A) Train Villages in Shura Processes, (B) Build the Capacity of CDCs, (C) Train Village Security Forces and Police, (D) Train Villages in Traditional Justice, and (E) Establish the Procedures for Village and District Elections.

### ***Military***

ISAF’s military role in Afghanistan is twofold. First, it must degrade the insurgent networks that threaten the viability of the Afghan state. Second, it must where possible insulate the population from the predation of malign actors and powerbrokers, especially those affiliated with Afghan security forces and government offices. Both efforts are directed toward the same effect: creating the political space to allow local governance institutions to germinate and mature.

To date, only the first line of operation has been part of ISAF military planning with the consequence that powerbrokers affiliated with GIRoA go unpunished for their crimes against the population. This COIN implementation has aligned with the Counterinsurgency Manual which advocates large-scale conventional forces protecting the population from and training host-nation security forces to combat the insurgency, not corrupt government officials.<sup>32</sup> Yet it is the powerbrokers and corrupt government officials who prey on the population. Against this enemy,

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<sup>30</sup> Ellis, Dr. David C. and LCDR James Sisko. “Rural Development Initiative: A Strategy for Augmenting Family/Village Wealth & Political Opportunity.” *CFSOCC-A J2 Assessment*. (August 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Seth A. Jones (2008, p.132) is representative of the state-centric COIN perspective, writing, “Good governance involves the provision of essential services to the population by a central authority in a timely manner...[the U.S. military] should play a critical role in encouraging good governance by helping the indigenous authorities deal with corruption, improve the criminal justice system, and disarm militias.”

<sup>32</sup> Petraeus, LTG David and LTG James F. Amos. “Counterinsurgency Field Manual.” *Headquarters, Department of the Army. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5*. (December 15, 2006), Section 5-1.

the military has been ill-suited since the national government of Afghanistan has been insulated from military pressure.

Creating fissures between the malign actors and the population creates the political space required to successfully implement the dual COIN strategy. Implementing the basic tenants of COIN at the tactical and operational levels via a series of small initiatives will have a cascading effect on the overall campaign plan. These initiatives, combined with a series of covert operations directed toward divesting malign actors of their power base, can quickly turn the tide. Additionally, destabilizing the entrenched power structures develops the foundation for increased village security and governance so long as other positive structures are prepared to replace them. This, in turn, allows COIN implementation to be more effective, creating increased political legitimacy, a fairer distribution of resources, and increased security. Under these conditions, the Taliban cease to be a useful competitor to the Afghan state.

## ***Conclusion***

COIN implementation in Afghanistan must insulate villages from the predatory behavior of both powerbrokers working with or for GIROA and the Taliban. It is the nature of the Afghan national government that drives insecurity and instability, not the Taliban *per se*. ISAF must recognize the deleterious effects its state-centric COIN implementation has on the power imbalance in Afghan society and alter its COIN framework to rebalance society in order to introduce accountability into the political system. A dual COIN implementation framework that prioritizes village centric, bottom up governance and development initiatives while pressing reforms at the national and provincial levels is the only means of restoring legitimacy in the Afghan government. In concert with military operations that move forces off of FOBs and into villages to secure the populations, ISAF and the international community can in a short period of time establish security momentum and restore stability to much of Afghanistan.

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