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The Fallacy of COIN: One Officer's Frustration

by Scott Dempsey

General Petraeus will be in Washington next week where he continues to extol the progress of counterinsurgency (COIN) in southern Afghanistan, the Taliban's heartland -- and where our war to achieve sufficient stability to enable us to leave will be either won or lost. COIN doctrine argues that with the right combination of security, governance, and development, there will be transformational impact that can marginalize insurgents' control over local populations. Combined with multiple external factors mostly beyond our ability to influence, COIN was indeed part of the transformational improvement in Iraq -- and provided sufficient stability for American troops to withdraw in favor of Iraqi government forces. The Afghanistan surge seeks to create similar results -- which would ultimately create conditions for transfer of authority and responsibility to the Afghan government and security forces. A key component to GEN Petraeus's COIN talking points cites the Nawa District of restive Helmand Province as a "proof of concept" for counterinsurgency dogma, and that the "Nawa model" is durable. However, during my year in Helmand Province, including nine months as the U.S. development lead in Nawa District, I saw a variety of factors that led to Nawa's success -- none of which pass this test. Furthermore, to secure even the most basic degree of Afghan government-led stability will require a seemingly endless commitment to continue to fight and finance this effort.

In July 2009, when 1,200 American Marines relieved a tired and battered 40 British soldiers in July 2009, there was a shift in mission from containment to counterinsurgency. These Marines performed admirably -- separating the insurgents from the populace, and carefully listening to the concerns of the local citizens. Almost instantly, there were visible results. Where Taliban and other malevolent actors had previously roamed freely, they instead shied away from combat or took refuge in neighboring Marjah. Soon thereafter, the provincial governor appointed Abdul Manaf, a former mujahedeen commander who had been fired from his two previous posts for corruption, to serve as the district governor.

District Governor Manaf instantly became a strong ally of the Marines -- and my close friend. He saw American military and financial might as a way to consolidate his power to achieve local hegemony, hoping this could calm the district. In an effort to support the Afghan government, U.S. and British development aid was funneled through local Afghan officials, most notably Manaf and a nascent community council. Central to both parties' responsibility was the allocation of American funding -- usually to Manaf and the council's own political and economic ends. From August 2009 to the present day, approximately \$25 million of development aid has flowed into Nawa via these institutions -- over \$300 per Nawa resident -- in a country where per capita GDP is about \$1,000 annually. At its peak, in a district with at most 20,000 working age males (census numbers are imprecise in southern Afghanistan, but this is a number both Americans and Afghans agree to be about right), 11,000 were employed via U.S. government funding -- each hand-selected by the local government. By channeling U.S. money to local uses,

this new government delivered a very basic level of service to its citizens -- all courtesy of Uncle Sam's almighty dollar.

This patronage system was immensely effective. It spurred an economic boom, and allowed the Marines to patrol around the lush farmland relatively safely. For several months, Nawa became the prime destination for visiting American official delegations, where the narrative that American presence leads to Afghan prosperity became the tagline. And, of course, Manaf was a great host, appreciative of Washington's largesse. After spending, at most, a couple of hours in Nawa, these delegations would return to their helicopters resolving that Afghanistan, even Helmand Province, was winnable.

Nawa's role as a showpiece, however, was more Potemkin Village than anyone wanted to admit. These visits and the positive narrative they spurred masked the overriding long-term problem that the Afghan government's success was based almost entirely on American inputs. Similarly, the local government's ability to keep malevolent actors - insurgents and drug barons both - at bay was and is entirely dependent on sustained U.S. military and logistical support. While this approach clearly succeeded tactically, as a strategy it is fatally flawed. As these hefty U.S. inputs of money and military might inevitably evaporate, the power dynamic will shift away from the local government to other interests - most likely the Taliban and those with the financial backing of the province's still-immense opium trade. The Taliban has shown its ability to command significant influence over populations with few resources via intimidation, and drug traders do not need American money to assert their power. These local power brokers will work against American and Afghan government interests, and will eventually - if not quickly - make Manaf and his nascent government either irrelevant or non-existent.

When praising COIN doctrine, advocates are quick to recite the credo of "clear-hold-build" - the process by which stability is theoretically achieved. Under this criterion, Nawa will continue to be the model district for the foreseeable future, as long as the Western dollars keep coming. However, our current practice of COIN fails to understand that the only meaningful metric for success is a transfer of sustainable sovereignty to the institutions we can easily create, but which the Afghans must learn to run. The U.S. government can quickly and successfully manufacture a misleadingly-robust local government and economy (see Gen. McChrystal's famous "government in a box"). However, without ultimately creating conditions wherein responsible transfer is possible, what we've created shows itself to be illusory. And with every successive input used to build, it further exacerbates this already precarious situation. While a small number of bases have been transferred to the Afghan Army, there are still several hundred U.S. troops in Nawa, thousands more in neighboring Marjah and Garmsir, and millions of dollars flowing - not enough to reverse the inevitable tide.

When I initially arrived in Nawa, Manaf was concerned about our government's commitment to support him. Over time, his fears were allayed as the money flowed and the troops stayed - and as such, he became a powerful leader. With President Obama's July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing troops and the new Congress' mandate to cut spending - especially in foreign aid, despite accounting - these inputs will be scaled back. This will directly correlate to his ability to maintain whatever fragile peace has thus far been attained. In retrospect, he was right to be concerned.

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