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The Battle for Helmand: Interviews with Professor Theo Farrell and MG Nick Carter

by Octavian Manea

Octavian Manea, Editor of FP Romania, the Romanian edition of Foreign Policy, continues his SWJ interview series. In this exclusive, Octavian asks Professor Theo Farrell and MG Nick Carter to describe their thoughts on the Battle for Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan.

The Battle for Helmand: Interview with Professor Theo Farrell

What was the strategy applied by the British military units in Helmand between 2006 and 2010? To what extent was this influenced by the founding fathers of the British COIN - Briggs, Templer, Thompson or Kitson?

What you find when you look at the campaign is that the differences between the brigades deployed on the ground were quite significant. The British campaign has been conducted by brigades sized task forces that deploy in the theater for 6 month tours. And they are supposed to conduct the campaign in accordance with the ISAF plan and the Helmand Road Map. Thus, the task force commander has got instructions from the national command and from the ISAF command.

What you actually find however, is that the task force commanders have enormous latitude in defining the approach to the campaign and the operations as they see fit. Thus, in each 6 month tour, the task force has tended to take a different approach. And this created a major issue - a lack of continuity of command and campaign approach. From mid-2006 up to late 2007, a series of British brigades attempted to leverage combat power defeat the Taliban in the main population centers. In these first 3 tours there was considerable use of combat power, a focus on the enemy force and the attempt was to cause attrition to the insurgents and thereby create the security conditions for the development of governance. Thus the original British Plan that was to support governance becomes a war. In late 2007 the British approach changes to one more focused on securing the population and developing governance and therefore less focused on combat, and more focused on developing non-kinetic, non-fire power capabilities. From then on, we see a more nuanced approach, where successive brigades put increasing effort into governance, but also in trying to find other ways to use the military instrument for influence. In general militaries are very good at the kinetic stuff, and they have to learn to be better in non-kinetic operations: influence operations, supporting development, having cups of tea with the locals, and so forth.

All this suggest that the British military went into Afghanistan jettisoning the legacy of the British COIN tradition and got very quickly in pretty conventional fight. But if you actually go look at the operational plan of the brigades going in Afghanistan and you look at the operational orders from brigadiers what you actually find is a very clear awareness of counterinsurgency

theory, and the lessons of Malaya and Northern Ireland. When you look at the plans of these first 3 tours that turned out to be combat orientated, you actually find in the plan clear guidance in accordance with the COIN theory. In other words, the brigades went in with the intention to conduct security operations and thereby create the conditions for supporting the development of local governance. However, the intensity of Taliban resistance forced the British to focus on combat operations in 2006-07.

To what extent were the military organizations deployed in the theater optimized for these special skills or special training that COIN required?

It has been noted by critics that the British Army went into Helmand was not prepared for the task; that they lacked the equipment and the skills to conduct a vigorous COIN campaign. To be sure, there were certainly key capability shortfalls. That said, full spectrum militaries like the British and American are essentially designed to deal with most any problem. You can throw them any problem and be able to adapt in the theater to various degrees. Eventually they will learn how to do the job correctly and eventually they will get the equipment that is needed. This is how good militaries work. And in this sense, of developing the required skills and plugging equipment gaps, the British did adapt to the requirements of the Helmand campaign.

Starting from summer 2009 we are witnessing a core development: the coming of the General Stanley McChrystal as the ISAF Commander. To what extent was this pivotal ingredient reflected in the operational mindset applied on the ground in Helmand?

General McChrystal had a profound impact for the overall campaign. To him the conflict was essentially a political struggle rather than a military one, so his campaign plan emphasized the idea that the greatest threat was that from insurgent shadow government. The key to succeed in this campaign was to demonstrate to the Afghan people that their government could protect and provide the needs of the population. He pushed aggressively on key COIN imperatives: protect the population from violence and intimidation, minimizing civilian casualties, partnering with ANSF.

But to what extent do all these elements change the approach to operations in Helmand? The influence of General McChrystal's new command approach, in terms of the tactics and how the British approach COIN, has been only marginal, because the British units were already focused on these things. The British militaries were already focusing on trying to protect population and minimize civilian casualties long before McChrystal's arrival in the Afghan theater. Hence many of things we see later in Operation Moshtarak (the clear of Marjah and Nad-e-Ali, and the first real test of the McChrystal approach) we see really the British applying in late 2007 in the clear of Musa Qala. In many respects the British approach of that time was exactly the kind of things that McChrystal wanted to see across the entire Afghan theater.

Why was the Marjah Operation so difficult?

There were very high hopes for Marjah. General McChrystal was looking for a 'strategic accelerator', something dramatic that would restore momentum to the ISAF campaign. He was looking in Helmand to inflict a strategic defeat on the Taliban, and to demonstrate the virtue of his new approach to local and home audiences. This explains the ill-advised term that there would be "government in a box" for Marjah, implying that shortly after the Marines pushed in, you would have a government established almost immediately. The Marines were perfectly on board with the idea that they could achieve such quick progress.

When the ISAF pushed in Marjah, they discovered a very different picture. What they expected to find in Marjah was a relatively wealthy population of mostly land owners, many involved in drug trade, but confident people with pretty good economic resources. And as long as you got them on board by demonstrating the virtues of the Afghan governance, they would help keep the Taliban at bay. What ISAF discovered was that those working the land were not owners but down-trodden tenants. Also the local infrastructure was far worse than anticipated. Thus the problem was twofold: first, it was going to take some time to deliver governance and improve infrastructure; second, it was very easy for the Taliban to intimidate the locals. So whilst the Marines cleared Marjah quickly, the hold proved more troublesome. Hence, progress was far slower than hoped and advertised in advance! And if we compare it to what happened in Nad-e-Ali, which was cleared simultaneously with Marjah, British led operation, you find far more rapid progress in Nad-e-Ali: district governance was strengthened, freedom of movement for civilians within the district has dramatically improved; there was excellent local turnout for at the three election *shuras* for the District Community Council. Other key metrics – the number of shops in the bazaar and the number of children attending school—also pointed to improvements in the local security.

But why was the British part of Operation Moshtarak more successful compared to Marjah?

Because the British pushed in Nad-e-Ali 18 months before. The British-led offensive to push the Taliban out of Nad-e-Ali and extend government control started in late 2008. It has been a slow campaign over successive tours. The British have slowly expanded the security bubble and behind that have expanded the governance and slowly built up the infrastructure to support local governance. Nad-e-Ali has demonstrated what any development expert will tell you: development takes time. You cannot do these things quickly. To suggest that you can clear an area of insurgents and quickly establish governance is not realistic. It took the British around eighteen months to stabilize Nad-e-Ali. Progress in Marjah ought to be measured along a similar timeline.

When highlighting the progress in Helmand, the media preferred success story is Nawa. But under the radar, it is another one - Nad-e-Ali. What has worked in Nad-e-Ali? What are the lessons?

Crucially, in Nad-e-Ali, you have got a popular, non-corrupt, and effective governor. He has been a critical partner for ISAF. The security team is also pretty good. Previously you had terrible relations between the Afghan army *kandak* commander and the district chief of police. What we have today is a wholly different picture: a new district chief of police that has a very good relationship with the *kandak* commander. So at the district command level, the Afghan security forces are working together. In the same time the District Community Council, and especially the Development *shura*, is in fact working very well. Previously, the British Stabilization Team was working bilaterally with various stakeholders to develop social infrastructure, but from late 2009 they have pushed all development projects funded by the PRT through the District Community Council. This gets you a double hit for your ‘development dollars’: improvements to infrastructure and services, whilst also strengthening district and local governance. So the development of governance, an effective governor, better and functional partnerships between the Afghan Security Forces—these were the main ingredients of success.

General Nick Carter has defined the metric to judge success in Helmand province as “the extent to which you can connect district governance to the population”. Having this metric in mind, what has changed on the ground in Helmand compared to the fall 2009?

The things are actually pretty good in Helmand. From the start, Helmand was the toughest nut to crack. You had extreme high levels of corruption because of the narco-economy that is so well entrenched in Helmand, a highly corrupt provincial governor, an illiterate population, mostly Pashtun and hostile to outsider interference, and of course a rampant insurgency. Initially only 6 districts were under the control of the Afghan government. Today, GIRoA controls have 11 out of 14 districts. It is definitely a much more improved picture, crucially through the improved quality and capabilities of provincial and district governance, as well as a better resourced and more focused supporting effort from ISAF. Ultimately, in COIN you are as good as the governor you support. This is the key lesson re-learned in Helmand.

Professor Theo Farrell is Professor of War in the Modern World in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. He has published numerous books including most recently, as co-editor, A Transatlantic Gap: American Innovations and European Military Change (Stanford University Press, 2010). He has previously conducted a performance review of the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team for the UK Stabilisation Unit (Oct-Nov. 2009), of Operation Moshtarak for the British Army (May-June 2010), and a theatre-wide assessment of ISAF Joint Command (IJC) for COMIJC (Oct. 2010). He further acted as advisor to COMISAF's Strategic Advisory Group in Kabul (Jan. 2010).

Lessons From the Field: Interview with Major General Nick Carter

What does Afghanistan tell us about the character of insurgency and how should COIN theorists adapt?

Counterinsurgency is essentially a political issue. The most important lesson is to understand that if you are going to prevail in a counterinsurgency campaign it is about winning the argument for the minds of the population on behalf of the government, against the insurgency. In essence that means you have to understand that everything is there for that battle - for the minds of the people - which means essentially it is about influence; about influencing a range of different audiences and constituencies. That is not simply those inside the country in which the insurgency is being competed for; it is those outside who are contributing to the wider problem. As a military officer your first task is to understand what the political objectives are, to understand what the political context and the strategy are, and thereafter to work out how you command the various audiences and constituencies using all the tools available, whether it would be coercion/kinetic, at one end of a spectrum, or something more softer at the other.

It is usually stated that the COIN effort is 20% military and 80% political. What metric or set of metrics do you have in mind in judging the strategic success/the strategic impact/output of the operations you coordinated as Commander of RC-South?

To my mind counterinsurgency is 100% political. That doesn't mean that military force won't be used from time to time during the course of the political campaign. The bottom line is that it should always be used in the support of an idea. The metrics you would apply in such context are inevitably metrics that are determined by the attitude of the population rather than the amount

of the insurgents that you might try to kill or capture. What you are looking for is to see whether or not the population is becoming less intimidated and becoming more positive towards its government. You are looking for metrics that indicate therefore the extent to which they are supportive; the extent to which the economy is flourishing; the extent to which there is freedom of movement on their highways; and those sorts of tangential aspects that give you the indication as to whether or not things are moving towards a political direction. We have to look at how effective we are at building a connection between the people and government of Afghanistan. The bottom line is that counterinsurgency is essentially a political problem and it is about persuading a population to devote itself one way rather than the other. What you are trying to do is to persuade the population that it is better off supporting the policies of its government than it is supporting the rebellion. The population is the 'key ground' that you are competing for. If you lose the population then the rebellion will prevail.

Why is Nawa considered the textbook role model in executing COIN in Afghanistan? What has worked in Nawa that could be pointed out as a successful outcome?

Nawa is a small district in Central Helmand. It is a district that back in 2009, when General McChrystal was formulating his population-centric approach which now has been applied throughout Southern Afghanistan, was one that was more advanced than the others. It was therefore used as an example that the rest of Afghanistan could follow. I think it is simply a question of timing. If you go to the district of Nad Ali or Arghandab you will find that they are increasingly advanced as well. The bottom line is that in Nawa there is an understanding that it is about governance operating in tandem with security which provides you with the necessary stability and the necessary inclusive structures to allow the population to be represented with the elders providing the leadership. This is the essence of the Afghan rural society. Our hope and indeed expectation is that by developing these representative structures from the bottom up that we would be able to stabilize Southern Afghanistan.

Starting from summer 2009 we see an intensive COIN campaign to regain the momentum in the Taliban heartland - both Helmand (Nawa, Garmser, Marja, Nad Ali) and Kandahar. Which is the attitude of the local population today?

The attitude moved on. The combination of the significant uplift in US resources, with some Romanian and Afghan resources as well, has made a difference because it allowed the coalition, in support of the Afghan government, to put more forces in support of the population. As a result the population has been protected to a much better extent. That means the insurgency has been squeezed out of some of the most populated areas in a way that has created space for some of the causes of the insurgency to be addressed. This is a long, slow process because the critical issue in Southern Afghanistan is Afghan human capacity - the extent to which you have the civil servants that you need to administer the education, health, rule of law issues that need to be attended to. Nevertheless the last 18 months have seen a significant movement forward in terms of the security environment.

To what extent is the freedom of movement sustainable in Helmand and Kandahar?

When we worked out how we were going to use the additional resources that we knew that we were going to receive when we planned this, back in the summer 2009, it was our view that we needed to focus on the significant population centers and economize in terms of our use of force elsewhere. As part of that strategy we entirely appreciated that the freedom of movement between these population centers was critical. That is why places like Zabul are important as

well, because Zabul provides us with a key connection in linking Kandahar with Kabul. What will happen over time is that Highway 1 will become an area which we will put a great deal of effort into. What we want to do is to go back to the situation in 2004 when you could drive from Kandahar to Kabul in 5 hours.

We know that Marjah was cleared in February 2010. Having in mind the sequences of clear-hold-build, where is Marjah today?

You have missed out a very important sequence in the *clear-hold-build* paradigm which is *shape*. The *shape* is really important because it is politics at the tip of the spear which will set-up the circumstances for success when you go through the *clear* and ultimately the *hold* phase. To my mind in Marjah, and more broader in Nad Ali, which is its larger neighbor, we are at the stage of holding and beginning to build, particularly in Nad Ali. It is the *hold* and *build* which are the decisive phases, because those are the phases in which you allow the politics to have its pad. In these phases we should still expect to see some insurgent activity, because the insurgents will adjust their tactics and will become more asymmetric in their approach. The insurgency simply changes its tactics with respect to the force densities that it finds on the ground.

How important and where are we today in creating local defense initiatives?

This has been a journey. We started some time ago with the Afghan Public Protection Programme. This has boosted the so-called 'local defense initiatives'. Now we have something called Afghan Local Police. This is an important initiative because in the rural society, where 80% of the Afghans are living, it is the villages and the leadership provided in these villages by the elders and the tribal leaders which provides the glue that holds society together. The Insurgent is a ruthless and intelligent opponent and they worked out several years ago that the way to get control of the population was to intimidate and assassinate the tribal leadership and kick them out of the villages so that the population could become pliable and able to be influenced. What the Afghan Local Police provides is essentially a form of neighborhood watch which provides confidence to the elders that they can return to their villages sure in the knowledge that these are people they can trust and support in keeping the insurgency out of their villages. To my mind the ALP is a very important initiative and one that affords the presence of the right leadership in a rural society.

How would you assess the effectiveness of the HTS (Human Terrain Teams) in providing advice for the military on the ground?

I think that there is no better form of advice for the military on the ground than the Afghans themselves. I would far prefer to get my advice from my Afghan partners. Ultimately it is the Afghans who step up to the plate and solve these problems for us, not the Human Terrain Teams.

Where is the Afghan face in this campaign of regaining the momentum in the Taliban heartland?

I think the key aspect here is the acknowledgement and the recognition that it is an Afghan problem which needs to be solved; and one that as a result needs to be handed over to the Afghans to solve for us. Ultimately the Afghans have a much better understanding of the nature of the problem than we as the international community do. Therefore, in all of the operations under the banner of Moshtarak during the course of 2010, the Afghans were entirely involved and in the lead. This meant that they were intimately involved in the planning (at all levels) and

in the issuing of orders and instructions to the forces. The bottom line is that they are the tip of the spear. It is something that they will solve; we are there to support them in trying to solve it.

How sustainable are today the governance structures in both Helmand and Kandahar?

I think that it's slightly more advanced in Helmand than it is in Kandahar. This is an area where the improved security situation during 2010 has created the space to allow greater work to be put into it. We should be in no doubt that it is the development of an administrative system, civil servants and the rule of law that support the education and health care which will remove many of the causes of the insurgency. This is the key challenge that we confront in Southern Afghanistan over the next 18 months or 2 years.

Major General Nick Carter was ISAF Regional Commander South until November 2010. He assumed command of 6th United Kingdom Division in January 2009 and was responsible for the preparation and training of the Task Forces deploying on Operation Herrick. The Division then became a CJTF and assumed responsibility for RC-South in November 0f 2009. He commanded 20 Armoured Brigade, based in Germany, from January 2004 until December 2005, including a tour in Iraq in command of British Forces in Basra. After completing Term 1 of Royal College of Defence Studies, he assumed the appointment of Director of Army Resources and Plans in the Ministry of Defence. He was appointed a Member of The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1995, an Officer in 2000 and a Commander in 2003. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in March 2011.

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