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## Going Outside the Wire: Liaising With Special Operation Forces to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan

by Daniel Miller

*We cannot enter into alliances with neighboring princes until we are acquainted with their designs. We are not fit to lead an army on the march unless we are familiar with the face of the country – its mountains and forests, its pit falls and precipices, its marshes and swamps. We shall be unable to turn natural advantages to account unless we make use of local guides.*

-Sun Tzu, 490 BC

Introducing a paper on agricultural development with a quote from the ancient Chinese war strategist, Sun Tzu, may seem like a novel way to begin, but designing effective rural development programs in the mountains of Afghanistan, where an active Taliban and al-Qa'ida insurgency is still taking place, requires innovative, “out-of-the-box” solutions. Counterinsurgency work must involve not only military operations, but integrated civilian efforts. The civilian efforts include programs sponsored by the host nation, international development/relief and non-governmental organizations, and donor nations.

Since early December 2001, the international development community has supported the reconstruction of Afghanistan and a number of new approaches to working in conflict and post-conflict environments, including with the military, have been developed. One noteworthy example is the use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to support reconstruction and capacity building.

The model for PRTs developed from the early success of U.S. Army Civil Affairs (CA) teams, working with U.S. Army Special Operations Forces (SOF), which includes special forces, Rangers, Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations soldiers, to conduct limited “hearts and minds” reconstruction projects and to work with local Afghan security forces to provide security in an area. Expanding on this experience, in November 2002, the concept of Joint Regional Teams was proposed to assist in stabilizing Afghanistan and to facilitate reconstruction. In January 2003, the name was changed to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

Established as a means to extend the reach and enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Afghan central government into the provinces, the first PRT was established in Gardez, Paktia Province, in February 2003. The primary mission of PRTs is to create stability in an area so that physical, political, economic and social development can take place. Provincial Reconstruction Teams may engage in reconstruction to achieve that goal (just as they may engage in combat operations) but PRTs are neither a combat force nor a development organization. As of the writing of this article, there are 25 PRTs operating in Afghanistan.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are civil-military teams, composed of from 70-100 personnel (Non-US PRTs are actually much larger because they don't have the maneuver elements nearby like the US model. Those can get as large as 500). Each agency involved in a PRT brings different assets to the team. The military provides basic "life support" such as housing, food, medical, communications, transportation and security to ensure all agencies can operate effectively. They also bring skills such as planning, logistics, reporting, intelligence collection and psychological operations. In the case of the US military, they have money to fund small reconstruction projects to win over the population.

The civilian diplomats are crucial to ensuring those in military commands have accurate and timely situational awareness. They can raise key issues to the decision makers often bypassing bureaucracies of partner agencies. The development specialists, and in many places, agricultural experts are critical to overseeing often millions of dollars in reconstruction projects. The development officers are also responsible for ensuring any projects funded by the military component of the PRT are developmentally sound and will do no harm to the community in the long term. The PRTs were designed and organized to adapt to the needs and conditions of the area where they operated and no two PRTs are identical in their number of personnel or stability strategies.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams have played an important role in the stabilization and development of Afghanistan and provide a valuable model for integrating civilian and military capabilities to assist in both improving security and extending the reach of the central government. While encouraging, there is still considerable territory in Afghanistan beyond the reach of the PRTs where development assistance is urgently needed.

The eastern border region of Afghanistan is one example. Here, where counterinsurgency operations are still on-going against al Qaida and Taliban insurgents, U.S. Special Forces (SF) teams, a number of them with civil affairs (CA) elements attached to them, are active. The civil affairs teams attached to these SF teams often focus on hard structures that will be a constant visual reminder of the government such as building schools; constructing health clinics, and implementing other small-scale activities to encourage support for the Afghan government. To date, the development community has done little to integrate their efforts with these SF/CA teams.

In late 2005, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), embarking on an innovative effort to coordinate development assistance with U.S. special operation forces (SOF) teams, placed a development specialist with SOF in Afghanistan. This individual arranged for me to work with a SF/CA team in Paktika province. This paper discusses some of the insights from that experience and highlights approaches that could be taken to better integrate military and civilian operations and to promote agriculture development in Afghanistan in areas where PRTs are not operating. This was a radical shift from the traditional hard-structure type of winning hearts and minds activities SOF was used to.

### ***The Case of Eastern Paktika Province***

Paktika is one of thirty-four provinces of Afghanistan. It is in the south-east of the country and the population is primarily conservative Sunni Pashtun people. It is bordered on the north by Paktia Province and Khost Province on the east, as well as the Pakistan-administered tribal area of South Waziristan. Paktika's southern border is shared with Zabul Province, while

Ghazni Province is on its west. It is one of the most remote provinces in Afghanistan, and experienced considerable devastation during the war with the Soviet Union. The province suffers from a severe lack of critical infrastructure and development assistance. Reconstruction after the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 has been slow in comparison to that of nearby provinces such as Khost and Zabul, in large part due to the remoteness of the area, tribal violence and continued Taliban insurgent activities. This is especially true in the eastern part of Paktika in Barmal and Gomal Districts.

Very little socio-economic development has taken place to date in Barmal and Gomal Districts in eastern Paktika Province. There is also only limited presence of Afghan National Army and Afghan Border Police. What little development work exists has been done primarily by Department of Defense (DoD) Civil Affairs Teams (CAT-A) attached to SF Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) Teams located in Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). These CAT-A initiatives have mainly focused on “winning hearts and minds” by constructing schools and clinics and providing humanitarian assistance (school supplies, blankets, clothing, food, etc.). The CAT-A efforts have also developed strong linkages with many communities that are eager for more agriculture development type of activities.

The Barmal District has considerable agriculture development potential. There are extensive orchards of apple and apricot trees, and where irrigation is sufficient, good crops of wheat are grown (most irrigation is with tubewells owned by individual farmers). After winter wheat is harvested, corn is planted in areas where irrigation is available. There is also dryland wheat production. Although considerable deforestation has taken place, there are still extensive areas along the border covered by cedar trees (*Cedrus deodara*). Much of the livelihood in the region comes from timber related sources (e.g., selling of timber and charcoal). However, there has been little to no agriculture assistance provided to the area in the last 20 years. Orchards are poorly managed and need to be rehabilitated. New varieties of wheat, alfalfa, and other crops need to be provided and the use of fertilizer needs to be expanded to improve crop yields. Technical assistance in orchard management (e.g., pruning of fruit trees) and crop management is also required. Riverbank stabilization and soil erosion control measures are also needed, which could employ villagers, thus earning them valuable cash income.

Rapid rural appraisal surveys and interviews with farmers and local Afghan officials were undertaken to assess agricultural development challenges and opportunities. Assessments indicated that the following type of agriculture and natural resource management activities would be useful starting points for rural development:

1. Horticulture Development
  - Orchard Management (technical assistance, training, study tours)
  - Organizing Farmers Associations
  - Developing Cold Storage Facilities
  - Marketing of Fruit and Crops
2. Crop Production (wheat, alfalfa, corn)
  - Crop Management (technical assistance, training, study tours)
  - Improved seed and fertilizer distribution (perhaps by establishing input dealers)
  - Improved Storage Facilities
3. Riverbank protection/Soil Erosion Control

- Wire Gabions
- Poplar/Willow planting behind gabions
- 4. Animal Health
  - Expand Afghan Veterinary Association's work with Veterinary Field Units
  - A focus on *kuchi* (nomads) flocks around Sharana, the provincial center of Paktika Province
- 5. Farm Forestry
  - Poplar/willow planting on private lands
- 6. Natural Forest Management
  - Forest assessments
  - Community forestry
  - Reforestation
  - Forest protection (forest guards to prevent illegal logging)

### ***Approaches to Agricultural and Rural Development***

In discussions with villagers in Barmal and Gomal Districts, it was determined that farmers could greatly benefit from study tours and trainings that could be conducted by USAID's Rebuilding Agricultural Markets Program (RAMP) in Ghazni and Nangarhar Provinces at the time. Travel and per-diem costs could be paid for by the SF Civil Affairs Team. Farmers could be taken to see agricultural activities undertaken to date in Ghazni and Nangarhar; largely work done by the International Center for Agriculture Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) under the RAMP project. RAMP and ICARDA staff could organize workshops to provide information to farmers from Paktika on the study tour. Of special interest would be work done in orchard management and crop management. Accordingly, arrangements were made for farmers to make this study tour and they benefited from the exposure to development activities.

For the summer growing season, it was determined that there was a need to provide quality corn seed and fertilizer. For the fall, efforts could focus on providing quality wheat seed and fertilizer, followed with trainings on crop and pest management. Funds for the seed and fertilizer could come from Civil Affairs Teams funding or USAID resources and plans were plan to initiate such activities.

Another activity could be constructing riverbank protection structures to control erosion of farmland. Villagers are already constructing traditional log crib structures along a dry streambed to control erosion from flash floods, but better constructed wire gabions would reduce the reliance on scarce timber from the forest, employ people in cash-for-work type of activities to weave the wire gabions and construct the gabion structures. Villagers, however, required some training to learn how to properly construct wire gabions.

Under USAID's RAMP, assistance was provided to communities to establish veterinary field units (VFUs), staffed by trained para-vets throughout Afghanistan. There were already three such VFUs in western Paktika Province, but not in the Districts of Barmal and Gomal. The model of veterinary services already developed and in operation in western Paktika could be extended to these eastern districts.

Assistance with expanding farm forestry plantations to individual farmers would also be worthwhile activities. Farmers already plant willow and poplar around their farmsteads and these plantings could be greatly expanded, providing poles for construction and firewood. Farmers visiting Ghazni and Nangarhar Provinces on the study tour mentioned above were able to see farm forestry work in those provinces and learn about new techniques for growing trees in and around their farmsteads.

The above listed activities provided immediate benefits to farmers and in the process of organizing farmers for the work, and especially with the riverbank protection activities, much more information would be obtained on village dynamics and traditional power and governance structures. Such information would be needed to work on natural forest management programs that would take considerable village dialogue to determine appropriate community forestry models.

An initial emphasis on initiating small scale village-based agricultural development activities, that would employ villagers in cash-for-work type of activities such as repairing roads, rehabilitating irrigation systems, and building riverbank protection measures to prevent erosion of agricultural lands would provide immediate benefits to villagers. They would get a sense that the Government of Afghanistan is concerned about their welfare and that development efforts were coming their way, thus helping to win “hearts and minds.” These types of cash-for-work activities have already proven very effective in USAID’s Alternative Livelihoods Program in Helmand, Nangarhar and Uruzgan Provinces. While undertaking these initial activities, it would be possible to also gain a better understanding of village tribal dynamics and power structures that could be used to design community forestry activities and other development activities that require greater community mobilization and cooperation.

### ***Future Considerations***

It is widely recognized that special operations forces (SOF) are especially valuable in counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan because of their specialized capabilities in civil affairs, intelligence, psychological operations, language skills and region-specific knowledge. Providing light, agile, high-capability teams, SOF is able to operate independently and discreetly in local communities. What is not yet widely embraced is the pivotal role SOF could play in providing a platform for better integrating the activities of civilian organizations for reconstruction in areas beyond the reach of PRTs, especially with respect to facilitating agricultural development. In Afghanistan, where 80 percent of the population secures its livelihood from agriculture, either directly or indirectly, reconstructing local economies requires more emphasis on rebuilding agriculture.

Integration of civilian and military efforts is critical to successful stability and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and while SOF is well-poised for its role, the position of the civilian element is still a weak link. To advance agricultural development in the border regions of Afghanistan, experienced agriculture development specialists are needed to liaise with and work with SOF teams. However, it takes more than civilians with just agriculture expertise.

First, it requires individuals willing and able to work with SOF teams. While prior military experience is valuable, it is not necessary. What is needed is the ability to work with the military and to understand their culture and to become an effective civilian member of a SOF team. For this, quickly becoming familiar with the recent literature on counterinsurgency is

imperative. Reviewing articles in the journal, *Parameters* and reviewing the recently published manual, *Counterinsurgency* published by the U.S. Department of the Army is a must to be able to speak the language of the SOF teams.

Second, it requires agriculturists experienced in international development and knowledgeable about designing and implementing agricultural development projects. Specialists that can quickly “read” the landscape and the farming systems and to be able to determine appropriate small, scale practical interventions that can have an immediate impact for villagers. For this, prior experience in the Himalayas and Hindu-Kush mountain regions or the countries of Central Asia, where the ecosystems and farming systems are similar to those found in Afghanistan could be extremely valuable. A soil scientist from Iowa, or any State in the United States, who has never worked overseas is going to have a hard time quickly adjusting to the realities on the ground in Afghanistan.

Third, it requires flexibility among donor agencies so they can react quickly to provide funding and support to the efforts on the ground. Time is of the essence in counterinsurgency efforts. The reality is that the operator needs a rucksack with cash in it to immediately start implementing projects and putting people to work. You can’t wait for months for approval and funding from headquarters before going back to villagers after discussing their needs with them.

Fourth, it requires persons with practical, generalist experience in agriculture and rural societies and communities. Perhaps the best-equipped people for such assignments would be locally-based (county) extension agents from areas of similar ecoregional areas in the United States. For instance, an extension agent with experience in high-elevation semi-arid rangelands in New Mexico or Arizona would bring valuable talent to Afghanistan. There is little need in the development stages for personnel with research or teaching pedigrees, or with line and staff experience in federal agencies - the demands and needs of Afghans are quite simply, too urgent and too diverse.

General Peter Schoomaker, the former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and an ex-SOF operative, got it about right when talking about counterinsurgency said, “This is a game of wits and will. You’ve got to be learning and adapting constantly to survive.” The military has proven its ability to learn and adapt. Now, it is time for the civilian development community to realize it is a brave new world out there and step up to the plate and contribute their skills and expertise with much more flexible and agile approaches to development in environments like the mountains of eastern Afghanistan where counterinsurgency efforts are going on.

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