



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

A Tale of Two *Design* Efforts (and why they both failed in Afghanistan)

by Grant Martin

Trying to be a "good neighbor" to the Afghans

One Friday morning not too long ago I sat facing a row of ISAF officers assigned to one of their many information offices. Maybe Strategic Communications (STRATCOM), I wondered. No, I thought, the new director of STRATCOM had changed their name, but to what I could not remember. Maybe they were from the Public Affairs office. On my side of the table a jumbled mix of staff officers from other sections of ISAF talked in low voices waiting for the lead planner to begin the meeting. A brand-new School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) graduate walked in and sat down confidently, his assistant clicking on the ubiquitous power point title slide that begins every gathering in the U.S. Armed Forces today from Washington, D.C. to Kabul, Afghanistan.

"Okay, everybody, we've got a directive from the Chief of Staff to come up with ideas on how to meet the commander's comment on being a better neighbor in Afghanistan," he began. "We will use a *Design*-like framework to first look at our environment, state the problem, and then come up with some solutions," he continued, describing SAMS's process of conducting "*Design*", the U.S. Army's doctrinal take on dealing with complexity.

We then spent the next hour wrestling with what the commander had really meant when he had reportedly said during a meeting that the Coalition needed to be 'better neighbors'. The Public Affairs-types started off dominating the discussion through their higher-ranking representative, a colonel, and her greater number of section representatives. She insisted that the commander had meant that we needed to stop bombing and doing night raids. Although this was something President Karzai seemed to never stop saying, the position seemed a little outdated. Any more efforts along those lines, I thought, would have meant sending all our weapons home in boxes and canceling all air support.

Instead, the alternative (voiced by everyone else in the room) was that the statement had been made in the context of how not to be an "Ugly American". Bombarding ministers' offices with multiple and uncoordinated visits from different NATO commands, driving with our electronic jammers on where there was no associated threat, and wearing body armor at all times and driving in fast-moving convoys of up-armored vehicles were all examples given that had been brought up multiple times recently by various Afghan leaders as being problems.

In the end trying to avoid the "Ugly American" won out. The Public Affairs colonel and most of her staff did not return after the first day and the group ran smoothly through the SAMS-approved process of environment-problem-solution identification to arrive at several recommendations for the Chief of Staff: mandate that visitors to Afghan ministries from NATO

coordinate through one appointed office and require all units to empower subordinates to use their own judgment as to the Force Protection measures needed in their daily activities. This meant that we could end the requirement that everyone wear body armor or even uniforms at all times (especially when the Afghans weren't), do away with the requirement for large convoys of up-armored vehicles in areas where the threat from IEDs were not high, and require that jammers only be used in areas that had an associated threat (jammers interfere with cell phone usage). We concluded by also recommending that leaders stop micromanaging their soldiers' activities: that it shouldn't take the Chief of Staff of a three or four-star command to approve colonels (or others) going to dinner with their Afghan counterparts. Although many of these subjects seemed to only apply to Kabul, this was what many felt the commander's comments were aimed at: ministerial interaction and travel within relatively safe areas like Kabul.

The result of our work was a memorandum to the NATO commands signed by the Chief of Staff recommending all of our "solutions". What that meant was that it effectively changed nothing. Memos signed by the Chief of Staff were usually not even read much less acted upon. And, since they were only "recommendations", there were no repercussions for those leaders or units who ignored them, which everyone did.

I should have been frustrated and discouraged, but at that point in time I just smiled to myself. By then I had started my tenth month in Afghanistan and had recently gotten involved with a colonel and a lieutenant who were also very frustrated with the bureaucracy within the Coalition they had found in their attempts to carry out COMISAF's direct orders. Was it just the natural barriers to change that every established organization finds itself in? How could the Army's new "*Design*" efforts possibly overcome these obstacles, if they even could? Ten months prior I had been energized to give *Design* a try. The following anecdotes are my attempt to capture my experiences with respect to *Design* implementation in Afghanistan in 2010 and offer a few recommendations on how to change how we teach and practice *Design*.

I will attempt to do this by first describing the main two *Design* efforts I participated in while in Afghanistan: one at the ISAF Joint Command (IJC) and the other at the NATO Training Mission- Afghanistan (NTM-A). Along the way I'll offer some insights into why I think our efforts ultimately failed. In addition I hope to inform the wider Armed Forces community as well as those studying and teaching *Design* in our Armed Forces colleges about a few of the early efforts to apply *Design* in theater. Lastly, I would like to share some thoughts on possible ways to improve upon what we did as well as the concept itself. My intention is not to denigrate commands or commanders, and therefore I will be as general as possible in order to focus on the most important takeaways.

Design Explained in Three Paragraphs

I must admit up-front that I do not see myself as a *Design* "advocate". I do think some of the concepts have merit, but I am doubtful the military doctrine on *Design* takes advantage of the philosophy enough to truly give us an edge in complex environments. I am simply an advocate of "what works" and therefore I think the military should experiment with the concepts and philosophy that underpin *Design*, learn about acting creatively in complex environments, and adjust ourselves as we gain experience in order to take advantage of any beneficial concepts we identify. If, in the end, it would be too unsettling to our traditional procedures and identity to usher in the philosophical change *Design* requires, then maybe one day our political masters will realize that the military is not the tool to turn to when objectives are unclear, the environment is

unfamiliar, and novel approaches are required. Most likely, however, the military will continue to be seen as the “least bad” tool to use in those situations and we will still have to “muddle through” towards either a politically acceptable conclusion or organizational frustration in those complex environments in which our politicians choose to involve us.

As for defining what *Design* is, I’m afraid there isn’t much agreement within the military. According to an early take on *Design*, “...*Design is a commander-driven process of structured discourse to understand and modify strategic guidance in order to frame the problem and solution for the operational planners*”.¹

According to Joint doctrine, design

*is the conception and construction of the framework that underpins a joint operation plan and its subsequent execution. ...design is the practical extension of the creative process. Together they synthesize the intuition and creativity of the commander with the analytical and logical process of design. The key to operational design essentially involves: (1) understanding the strategic guidance (determining the end state and objectives); (2) identifying the adversary’s principal strengths and weaknesses, and; (3) developing an operational concept that will achieve strategic and operational objectives.*²

According to the U.S. Army, design “*is a methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe complex, ill-structured problems and develop approaches to solve them.*”³

The U.S. Army’s *Student Text on Design*, version 2, describes *Design* by comparing it with COL Gerras’ description of rational decision-making model-based planning:

MDMP and any rational decision making model are typically rooted in several assumptions. First, the model assumes that the problem or goal is clearly definable. Second, the information that is required to make a decision is available or can be acquired. Third, there is an expectation that all options generated can be adequately considered, compared, and evaluated to identify an optimal solution. Fourth, the environment is presumed to be relatively stable and predictable, and finally, there is sufficient time for working through the decision making processes.

The Army’s Counterinsurgency Manual’s description of *Design*’s purpose: “*to achieve a greater understanding, a proposed solution based on that understanding, and a means to learn and adapt.*”⁴

The Student Text goes on to offer selected descriptions of *Design* from the literature:

the design approach acknowledges complexity rather than attempting to rationalize it, and implies a willingness to act in the face of uncertain relationships between causes and effects.” “...Design education places a greater emphasis on learning by doing, supervised by coaches and mentors, rather than the memorization of technical knowledge or the copying of best practices.” “...Leading design challenges the dominant model of power leadership,

¹ Col. Mark Inch, “Systemic Operational Design: Case A Outbrief,” Presentation to Exercise Unified Quest, Carlisle, PA, May 6, 2005.

² U.S. Army Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2006), IV-2.

³ United States, Field Manual 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Final Approved Draft) (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2010), 3-1.

⁴ United States, Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2006), 4-1.

augmenting it with a more facilitative approach tailored to accommodating multiple perspectives in ill-structured problem situations.” “...action in design does not seek to bend reality to fit the idealized form of a design or plan. Instead, interaction always serves a dual purpose. ...action exploits favorable potentials within the operational environment... ..by stimulating the system, action generates information, which provides a learning opportunity to the designers. In design, action is taken both to transform the system and to learn.”⁵

In my mind *Design* is any attempt to reach greater effectiveness when acting in environments that are "truly" complex⁶. This complexity requires one to take novel approaches, which implies first a setting aside of assumptions followed by a willingness to interact with the environment prior to a plan (and, indeed, keep acting without much of a plan), an inclination to restructure one's organization in light of the unknown environment (and keep restructuring as one learns what works), and the institution of a feedback mechanism and a structure (which can constantly change) that enables learning and adaptability. So, to me, *Design* isn't about planning differently, it is about doing *everything* differently. Unfortunately, however, this is not the way the Army has introduced *Design* so far. In the two following examples of headquarters' efforts to execute *Design* in Afghanistan, the Army doctrine was loosely, if not fully, followed. No headquarters that I am aware of used *Design* to change the way they were structured nor the way they approached planning and acting in order to be more effective in the complex environment that is Afghanistan.

Design Effort #1: A New "Hope"

As the Chief of Plans at one of the major commands in Afghanistan was to say once, "Hope isn't a method, but it *is* the name of our plan." We started the planning for the second iteration of the operational HQ's portion of their Operations Order: *Omid II* (*Omid* is "Hope" in Dari) by launching into a formal command-supported *Design* effort prior to the start of the Military Decision Making Process, or "MDMP"- the Army's formal planning process. This was a huge deal in my opinion, as for the first time that I knew a commander was devoting personnel and time to a *Design* effort while in a combat zone.

The leadership of the operational headquarters (HQ) approved the planning staff to gather with representatives of other commands as well as other sections within the HQ in order to follow the doctrinal *Design* process: describe the environment, define the problem, and offer some solutions. The planners would then attempt to use their solutions and the rest of their *Design* products and conclusions to influence their Mission Analysis and the rest of the MDMP on their way to publishing their command's Operations Order. This order would take "the fight" out until the Summer of 2011 (a year from then), but the real focus seemed to be about 6-10 months out.

We met every day over at the operational headquarters. The days were filled with breakout group discussions as well as larger group meetings wherein everyone would present a synopsis of their days' work. At the very beginning we did what I thought was the right thing

⁵ Student Text version 2.0, *Art of Design* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2010), 10-16.

⁶ There is great debate as to what really constitutes "complexity". I hold to the idea that although complexity is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder, in general things are more complex the longer they take, the more open-ended they are, and the more confused everyone is as to the objectives. Therefore, while many things can be termed "complex", there is a sliding scale wherein some things are more complex than others. A 30-day operation to kill ten terrorists is not as complex as a 15-year effort to establish governance, spark development, and gain security.

and began to question all of our underlying assumptions about Afghanistan. There was plenty of resistance to that, however, and I took it to be a combination of the perception of how far our leadership was willing to deviate from the current operational direction and some professional hubris: the same people who had been working under these assumptions found it difficult to have their worldviews questioned.

From the beginning, however, I felt the effort was doomed. Although the commander had authorized for the effort to commence, he never did participate himself. According to what I understood of the *Design* process- the commander *had* to be involved- deeply involved. It was, after all, *his* process. This was *for* him. All the commander got from the effort was a backbrief once the final product was completed. While this was perhaps better than no involvement- it was too little too late: at that point he was already divorced from the logic that had driven us to our solutions. As I was to conclude myself later on, a perhaps greater piece our solutions required was the commanders' mark on them in terms of any logic that was unknown to us: for instance politics that he was privy to, but had not shared with the entire command. These types of insights should play a HUGE role in one's "environment": we have to understand not only what is driving the local people and the "enemy", but we have to understand what is driving *us* as well. Only the commander can impart that kind of knowledge- whether tacitly or through other methods, but this was a piece I felt we were missing.

What was more frustrating was the seeming refusal to question underlying assumptions. In one of the breakout groups, the members came to the conclusion that the people might not really matter, that we were perhaps too focused on "*the people*", as opposed to what had perhaps really traditionally influenced things in Afghanistan as well as what would perhaps better support a short-term timeline (we all assumed December 2010, July 2011, and the year 2014 were marks on the calendar not easily avoided in terms of having to show progress). If we were going to concentrate on something, in other words, it had to be a group that we could quickly show results with as well as something that wouldn't have us attempting to change "the system" too much (at SAMS many of us had studied "the propensity" of a system and how most "systems" tend to resist deviating off of the path they are already on). Our conclusion was not to concentrate on "*the people*" as much as concentrating on "*powerbrokers*". Whether it was a local mullah, a tribal elder, a police chief, a district governor, a warlord, or a drug dealer- we reasoned that we would get more "bang for our buck" if we concentrated on those already in positions of influence within their communities as opposed to trying to force a different system on them.

Opposing this stance was the assumption that the people just needed "good governance", and they would stop supporting insurgent groups that wanted to de-stabilize the government of Afghanistan (and maybe even openly fight the insurgents) if we helped the government provide this governance. This was one of the assumptions that we frequently stated as if it was a fact and the planners in our group were not ready to question that position. Between coming to the conclusion at the breakout group level on powerbrokers and presenting our findings to the entire group, somehow the group's conclusion turned back into "*must concentrate on the people*" and "*must provide them with security*".

The second piece had been troublesome in the breakout group's mind because our position of what "security" meant was that NATO would provide that security and eventually hand it over to Afghan security forces. As most of the breakout group on security noted, what many locales defined as "security" probably had little to do with Afghan security forces and even less to do with NATO forces. But, it would seem the logic that motivates freedom-loving

Americans and Western Europeans was to be applied to most Afghans by our planning group. And that logic said they just wanted to be "free".

In the end, the entire *Design* group came to the conclusion that the environment that existed in Afghanistan was best described as "The Valley". "The Valley" was our metaphor and that metaphor was characterized by cut-off areas that were very different than other areas or "valleys", that had to have their own ways and means applied (to get to the same ends, mind you) in order to bring about "progress" ("freedom!", if you follow Hollywood's view of universal human needs). This concept of "The Valley" was curiously close to the metaphor that the leaders of the *Design* effort had come up with while students at SAMS to describe Afghanistan, except back in the rarefied atmosphere of Fort Leavenworth they had used the term "The Village." A similar concept, but a little more nuanced.

That we were unwilling to address the major assumptions making up our logic underlying the entire campaign and the fact that our description of the environment was eerily similar to that which the group leaders had come up with while at SAMS six months earlier made me think we had failed. But, what solidified that thought in my mind was when Operation *Omid II* came out later on and there were really no major changes to what we were already doing with Operation *Omid I*. I concluded that because the commander had not been involved, our efforts were really never meant to affect anything (or were that way because of a misunderstanding of *Design* and our failure to articulate it well to the command). In addition, because we were guided by our previous assumptions, we ended up just concluding that the way the commander already thought about Afghanistan and how to effect change in Afghanistan must be right. As far as I saw we never questioned whether anything we were doing was wrong, whether our assumptions were wrong and how to find out whether they were or not, or what kinds of pressures from our own political masters were affecting our environment in ways most people were not privy to. In short, although this would have been a perfect opportunity to "*reframe*" (change direction based on invalid assumptions/logic), we decided to pretty much continue with the status quo in terms of our operational focus.

Design Effort #2: The "PIG"

Throughout 2010 I found myself a part of some *Design* efforts in my own command, most notably during our work on the command's operations order and subsequent subordinate orders and supporting annexes. Those *Design* efforts were usually small and did not affect much, but they did serve to challenge assumptions and offer a different perspective on the situation that we faced. One of the greatest challenges the entire planning effort faced, not to mention the *Design* efforts, was to secure participation from other commands, agencies, Afghan entities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since my formal *Design* education had drilled into me the necessity for looking at problems and the environment from as many perspectives as possible, it was frustrating to be constantly surrounded by not only American Army officers, but mainly American Army officers assigned to the same HQ.

Other HQs had some participation in our operations order planning, but their input was less than desired. The Operational HQ actually contributed a very capable planner who, during the planning effort, temporarily re-located himself so that he could be closer to the group and give his full attention and participation. From the Afghans we managed to bring an Army colonel over who was responsible for the Ministry of Defense's Counterdrug effort. And to be fair, there were representatives from within our HQ's different sections who were not American

nor U.S. Army: an Australian led the planning effort, the British were represented very well, a Dutch officer participated as did a Canadian, a Turk, two U.S. Air Force officers, and a U.S. Navy officer. But there was no-one from the U.S. Department of State or any other embassy, no representative from the Afghan Ministry of Interior or representing the Afghan police, no-one from any NGOs, no European Police (EUPOL) representation, and no Special Operations Task Force personnel. That there was almost no Afghan participation in our planning efforts was- I was to find- something of the rule throughout the Coalition.

After our initial planning effort was completed, several of us felt that a few key HQ planners from the operations order process were really the most informed about the command in terms of a holistic perspective. We decided to form a *Design* group in order to first learn some *Design* fundamentals and then to offer the group up to the command in order to tackle some complex subjects.

At first the group was more of a “dinner-group” than a *Design* group. We met for about an hour two or three times a week late in the afternoon and then retired to the dining facility for dinner. We passed around papers on *Design*- works by BG (ret) Huba Wass De Czege, Dr. Jacob Kipp, and Dr. Christopher Paparone, talked about and heard presentations on critical and systems thinking, emergence, complexity theory, and different philosophies like post-positivism and the like. Our membership was made up of a Dutch Army officer from the plans section, British Army and Navy officers from the Force Management, Police and Army Advisory Sections, a U.S. Air Force officer from the Intelligence section, an Australian officer from the plans section, and U.S. Army officers from the plans, Force Management, and the Strategic Action Group sections.

After much deliberation we decided to tackle as our first topic the Afghan National Police. At that point it was not a secret that the command was growing more and more concerned with the police and that the police were not at the same level of capability as the army was. We also all agreed that the police were a complex subject: “fixing” them- or at least making them better- was not going to be even a complicated task: many of us were unsure it was even possible, what it would take, or how to organize ourselves to make it happen. We held a few meetings gathering and sharing information about the police, receiving briefings about them from subject matter experts (SMEs), and even hosting Afghan police for dinner and conversation. We toured Afghan police training areas and engaged in conversation with trainees- especially those who had already worked as police prior to their training. We also attended meetings at the Ministry of Interior.

Because we were given a heads-up that *Design* was not exactly a welcome concept by all, we struggled with what to call ourselves. One staffer wanted to call us an Initiatives Group, as he thought the Command's initiatives group's time was taken up with too much of the Action Group's work. We had called ourselves the *Design* Group for a while, but figured that would not work for a formal name if *Design* did not inspire buy-in from everyone. Our sponsor, the plans chief called us the "Planning Initiatives Group", or, as he liked to say: “the PIG”.

The Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP)

We continued studying the ANP for a few more weeks until we received our first tasking from the command: look at the civil order police. The Afghan National Civil Order Police, or “ANCOP”, was a three to five-thousand strong force (no-one really knew how many there were)

of police officers dedicated to handling civil disturbance levels that regular police could not handle. They were modeled loosely after the para-military police forces in Europe and, indeed, were trained by, among others, French gendarmes, Italian Carabinieri, and the Spanish Guardia Civil. The ANCOP were literate (which meant the greatest number of them were Tajiks), trained longer, and were better-equipped than other police.

We set about researching as much as we could about the ANCOP, to include visiting the headquarters, receiving briefings from SMEs, visiting training areas, and talking with those who advised the ANCOP. We also found out as much as we could about our command's sudden interest in ANCOP and the issues the operational HQ had with ANCOP in the field. We concluded with a description of the ANCOP environment: an organization trained longer and equipped better, but partnered the same as other police (not very much); heavily used in combat, but not as protected or capable as the army; suffering from lack of: leadership, equipment accountability, partnering, and operational down-time; made up of a heavy *Tajik* (Northern) population while most of the fighting and assignments were in the *Pashtun* South; and a disagreement between multiple parties on how (and how much) to utilize them. The problem as we saw it was: how to show progress in a short amount of time (the command had been given a short amount of time) while at the same time keeping these short-term efforts from upsetting longer-term efforts (building capability that would enable self-sustainment) AND while attempting to avoid affecting the Coalition's battle plans.

The solutions as we saw them were to 1) institute a cycle wherein they would train, deploy, and then rest; 2) partner them with coalition forces; and 3) pay them more. The first and third solutions would hopefully stem the tide of attrition, which were very high: a goal we thought we could reach in less than a year. The second solution would work on assisting in leadership development, ensure a feedback loop that would allow us to adjust to reality, assist in systems development, and ensure periodic training (something they were sorely lacking in).

We presented these concepts to the command during a twenty minute discussion with various leaders. We did this as part of a framework that showed the police as an overall effort with the ANCOP being part of a short-term fix, but addressing the greater issues of ISAF's structure and procedures, the Afghan judicial system (or lack thereof), and how to build both quality and a connection to the people.

The command leadership thanked us and commented that they had heard many of our conclusions already, and they were pleased we had confirmed them. We recommended and got approval for taking on the entire police force (ANP) as our next topic.

The results of the ANCOP *Design* effort were hard to measure. The plans chief felt that our ideas, since we were sharing them with various sections and planning efforts, were bubbling up to the chain of command prior to our formal discussion, so he thought we were useful even if the command had already heard our ideas. In addition, we all felt that the command was not getting the same message about long-term concerns as they were from us. The eventual ANCOP effort did not go as planned, however, because we underestimated the importance that the operational command attached to ANCOP participation in current operations. Our command argued for less ANCOP in operations at any given time to fix attrition, yet the operational command said they could fix the attrition problem with partnering. Coalition units, however, were already overloaded with Afghan units they were responsible for partnering with, and ANCOP stayed mostly un-partnered.

Because we did not include outside-command representation in our *Design* group, did not seek out a clearer operational position with respect to ANCOP, did not feel-out other HQs for their positions, and did not understand the issues with police partnering, I submit that we really did not have a very good understanding of the environment with respect to ANCOP. In addition, because we had little actual direct contact with ANCOP, I would submit we couldn't learn and adjust on the fly- something I hold to be very important to affect preferred change in a complex environment. Looking back, having some kind of input from the advisory and partnering experts at the operational HQs and some input from a unit in the field that was currently or about to partner with an ANCOP force would have been much better. In other words, some kind of interaction with the actual forces on the ground and those at the closest level to us would have been preferable. But, the operational command was not subordinate to us, therefore going direct to other units, trying to force participation from other HQs, or contacting actual units assigned to other HQs would have been problematic.

In the end, even before the time limit was up to show progress a new focus had crept up and the command had for the most part shifted focus away from ANCOP.

The Afghan National Police (ANP)

After about a two week break the group re-convened and we re-tackled the ANP. This time we attempted a more doctrinal approach to using *Design*. We took what we had learned over the ANCOP study, gathered more information, and then attempted to describe the environment for the ANP. Our result, our *environmental frame*⁷, if you will, was one that described the “average” policeman. This hypothetical person we saw as being molded by several experiences along the way to becoming a policeman: his up-bringing (culture, religion, tribe, schooling, family, etc.), a recruiting “system” that molded his first perceptions of the ANP and the government, a training system that gave him a foundation, and finally the system at his place of work: whatever atmosphere existed at the police station and the surrounding locale that forced him into certain patterns of behavior.

We then spent a few weeks tackling “the problem” of the ANP. We centered in very quickly on the issue that once a policeman found himself out in the countryside and having to deal with reality- “the system” he found himself in was not very conducive to doing what he had learned in training nor that which would endear him to the people. Our reasoning was that he had no tools or incentives to work within either the government’s judicial system (if there even was one) or the system that was de facto in place. We further reasoned that the judicial system within Afghanistan was growing much slower than the police forces, so that the amount of prisons, prosecutors, and judges were woefully lacking. We initially concluded that there needed to be a two-pronged approach: train police to work within the de facto systems they may find themselves in (district-specific training) and slow the police force growth to match the judicial system’s growth.

We were not allowed to go further into the ANP. As we started to get closer to some conclusions we were asked to take on another topic: the command’s metrics and assessments tools.

⁷ The doctrinal method of *Design* was a 3-step process: describe the environment, define a problem, and come up with solutions.

The group reluctantly shelved the ANP effort a second time. We had really thought the ANP was a complex issue and one that needed serious effort in the right places to help make progress. Most of us, if not all of us, felt the ANP was going in the wrong direction- or at least our development of them at the time. We felt that quantity was being prioritized over quality, that we weren't preparing them for transition (we were doing it all ourselves or using systems that only made sense for us), and that we weren't helping them to be effective in the reality that they would face once they found themselves working out in a police station.

On a final note, some of our ideas influenced the planning efforts for the police under the other efforts of the command at the time: namely the work being done on the police annex to our command's operations order. The major concept that was borrowed: synchronizing the development of the police with both the development of the government's judicial system as well as with the de facto systems in place in certain areas, ended up being ignored. The explanation was that we couldn't even accomplish our own mission- training enough police- at that point. We were not going to take on more until we could graduate enough numbers first. Regardless of the wisdom of the explanation, the fact that the planners and our *Design* team were ignorant as to the priorities of the command and why they were priorities was telling. *Design* efforts without an understanding of "self" were doomed from the start from my perspective.

Metrics and Assessments

After receiving our new subject, we received a more detailed email from the command. The email asked us to be a "red-team" and look at the command's assessment methodology and identify problem metrics and metrics that we might be missing.

The topic of metrics was not unknown to our group. Data went up daily to all kinds of military and political entities. Most of our metrics dealt with numbers: total numbers of soldiers and police in the field. There were other metrics that mattered, such as attrition, retention, casualties, literacy, females in the security forces, and the like, but no-one doubted that overall strength numbers were the most important.

Our HQ's problem, of course, was that many of the metrics that we tracked were outside of our control. Attrition was the easiest example: we were very concerned with attrition numbers because, obviously, it affected the overall end-strength numbers of the ANSF. Since we weren't reporting to Congress numbers of ANSF trained as much as how many total ANSF existed, we had a stake in everything that went into producing endstrength numbers. This put us at odds many times with the operational construct, which was to prioritize operations and address attrition with partnering. During our *Design* group's ANCOP study we discovered that what constituted "partnering" was something that was largely left up to the Coalition unit in the subject Afghan unit's area of operations. Many coalition units made the argument that they were already partnered with several units and couldn't partner with any more. Others argued they were too busy conducting operations. Others didn't honestly know how to partner with police- which was the new requirement our operational HQs were pushing down.

Our group took all of these issues in during a briefing from the assessment folks. We discovered quite quickly that our metrics were measuring short-term progress and not a lot of long-term progress that would enable "transition". In fact, we could not find many metrics at all that gave us a feel for how the Afghans were coming along in terms of taking on more and more responsibility.

We concluded that our metrics were mainly measures of performance and not measures of effectiveness. We further recommended that transition metrics be developed and made the priority of the command. Lastly, we recommended that we team up with the operational HQs and develop metrics and an assessment plan that would test the Afghan's propensity to run things themselves as well as inform us if we were heading down the wrong path- basically telling us if our assumptions were wrong.

Our conclusion on this effort was that our recommendations did not make it to many audiences within the command, but some of our group assumed that our conclusions were not what the command even wanted to hear. First, quantitative assessments were easier to understand for outside audiences. Second, the current metrics had a track record and both the U.S. Congress was used to them and the Operational Research folks were tied to them. The thought process was that any new metrics would take a long time to tell us anything. What they advocated was using the old metrics- which they said had only been around a few years anyway, in order to establish a baseline and start making some conclusions based on the trends that we were only now beginning to be able to spot. Thirdly, there was no political appetite for setbacks- and prioritizing Afghan progress in terms of them taking over operations entailed risk of short-term negative metrics. Lastly, in terms of teaming with the operational HQs, it was thought that they had a very different view than we did on what the priorities needed to be in Afghanistan. Because of those opinions, many in our group thought that our ideas had not met a friendly reception, if they had gotten one at all.

This experience reiterated the requirement for the commander to own the *Design* efforts in his command. That concept was in the doctrine and the literature making up the foundation of *Design* also made that argument. Without buy-in from the top, without the commander leading the effort and giving input all along the way, and without the trust and openness with the staff conducting the *Design* effort, the recommendations were mostly ignorant, flying without radar, making assumptions on top of assumptions. The *Design* Group at this time went into a frustrating and cynical period of time. We were frustrated that we were unable to understand the Coalition's actions vice our words in Afghanistan and that we were unable to get any traction at the higher levels on re-looking our underlying assumptions.

Our HQ's Task Organization

A few of the *Design* group wanted to keep meeting, if only to continue the deep discussions we had been having about our efforts in Afghanistan. They remarked that the *Design* group was the one place they could hear and tell the truth about their experiences, vent without seeming to be defeatist, and not be afraid of sounding like we were against the Coalition's efforts or what was "politically correct". All of us thought we were doing important work: we thought we were coming up with solutions and ideas that would make our efforts in Afghanistan more meaningful and improve the security of our nations in the long run. We decided to meet and decide on a new direction.

At this time we also did some recruiting outside of our command. We managed to attract three U.S. State Department personnel. We also invited a few contractors from our command to the meetings. Because there was a high level of turnover since the metrics effort, we did some

more recruiting and filled out our ranks. We also added the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Liaison Officer of the command to our group.

We decided that our next topic would be either ‘what the Coalition was really doing in Afghanistan- based on our actions and not our rhetoric’, or ‘what we needed to do in order to avoid disaster in Afghanistan’. We voted and chose the latter topic. After a few meetings we had started to talk about the need to prioritize transition efforts, when we got a request from the Planning section: could we apply *Design* to the topic of our command's Task Organization (a unit's structure and how it is organized). The planning section had been involved in an effort to re-organize our HQ and they wanted an outside check on their efforts. We voted and the group unanimously decided to go with the new subject.

We began by turning to the "Wedemeyer" example. Wedemeyer was a staff officer in World War II who had been asked to look into how much equipment it would take to defeat the Axis prior to the war starting. In order to do that, Wedemeyer had to make some very broad assumptions about the war effort. In doing so, he basically, along with the help of many others, drew up the war plans for the U.S. We attempted to do the same.

We decided we had to figure out what we had already been trying to figure out after all: what were we doing in Afghanistan and what we needed to do to avoid disaster. Once we figured that out, we reasoned, then we could decide what our HQs needed to do- and then what we needed to look like in terms of structure.

After much debate we concluded that at this point in time the Coalition was not involved in Afghanistan for a simplistic reason. What we were doing in Afghanistan at that point had more to do with accidental emergence and mission creep (and a lack of a strategy to begin with, outside of “overthrow the Taliban”) than anything prescriptive. We had gone in, overthrown the Taliban, and were looking for Osama Bin Laden when our military was diverted to Iraq. Afghanistan just kind of stayed on our plates as a default action.

Our narrative continued: we had to leave Afghanistan, but it couldn't fall back into a Civil War right away and Al Qaeda couldn't be offered a safe haven. To that end, the Taliban could not take over the whole country or even the major cities. So, we had to build up a system that we could support with money and advisers, and to do that we had to build up forces as fast as possible in order to show “progress” to the political masters back home: progress that was easily understood by the people and hard to poke holes in by the media. That way the politicians could relatively easily continue to support the effort until the ANSF was at sufficient numbers for the Coalition to draw down to a mostly advisory role. We also, however, had to get the ANSF to a point of self-sufficiency as soon as possible, in order for us to transition.

We then concluded that we needed to transition as soon as possible- that if we could articulate to the media and politicians the need to accept some downturn in our metrics in the short-term in order to enable transition, that that would be a better objective than simply growing the ANSF. We had to have an ANSF capable of leading themselves as soon as possible.

To that end, we further concluded that we needed to move the majority of our operations and work over to the ministries and have the ministries start taking on our work. All sections would start to be measured on how much work the Afghans were willing to do in their lane and how little the Coalition was having to do over time. Everyone would be expected to be working

their way out of a job and the best evaluations would be for those who were able to transition sooner than expected, assuming a minimum level of competence on the Afghan's part.

In addition, we concluded that all of the systems we had in place had to be re-looked at in terms of how the Afghans viewed the systems and whether they could sustain them with a minimum level of support from us, with the long-term goal of no support from us (on that particular system).

Our Task Organization was thus affected greatly. We decided to recommend that our command empower the lower levels out in the regions and task them with managing and transitioning the Afghan forces themselves, instead of trying to run everything from Kabul. Our concept put all of the training centers and schools under the regional subordinates, put a lot of our general officer slots out there instead of in Kabul, and tasked those still in Kabul mainly with just advising in the ministries. The real work would be transferred out to the regional teams.

Interestingly enough, the same course of action, albeit with a few minor differences, was the conclusion of the planning team led by the planning section. And, interestingly enough, the recommendations were rejected outright. The feedback we got was that the command did not see a reason to change that much. Of course, politics and bureaucratic inertia got in the way during this entire effort. The *Design* team never briefed anyone outside of the lead planner. The lead planner didn't get to brief anyone outside of a principal staff member, instead the principal staff member briefed the command and was easily swayed to recommend against change. At the end of the day, our HQs saw no reason to change after a year of new direction. That we saw a reason to change after the recent shift in focus to Afghanistan should not have surprised anyone, but the articulation effort of the need to change was not sufficient.

The conclusions the *Design* team took from the Task Organization effort were that, again, a lack of communication with the commander on assumptions and political realities- on what was really driving our train- made our efforts almost impossible. We also came to the conclusion that even though what we faced was most likely a complex subject- our own command and political structure and pressures made it even more complex, as some would say: "wickedly complex". We took something very complex to begin with and overlaid our own complexity on top of it. That this was frustrating to many was an understatement, but it hit the *Design* team especially hard. We felt like we didn't really understand our efforts in Afghanistan, unless they were explained through a very cynical prism. And we were not sure we were going in the right direction.

Conclusions

I wanted to write this narrative, not to criticize specific commanders or commands in terms of their efforts, decisions or priorities. This narrative gives as honest a description of what some staffers thought about and concluded during several *Design* efforts. Some of it can be used to attack the strategy or the operations of the commands, and some of that might be warranted. But the real value, in my opinion, would be to take this as some feedback on a few *Design* efforts that were attempted in theater.

The first lesson, and the most important one, in my opinion, is that the leader has to be involved- and involved in a personal way. It has to be his *Design* effort. He has to lead it and give it support and direction. Only the commander can clue his staff in to the missing pieces of

the politics, the priorities and the hidden logic behind the command's actions and efforts. Only the commander can make conclusions turn into action.

The second lesson that we took away is that we can't do *Design*- a full *Design* effort- from a headquarters. We were truly banging around in the dark. Even if we had understood what the commander knew, we would not have been able to come up with even a 50% solution. Even though we had access to folks who had worked outside of Kabul, even though we took trips ourselves and interacted with Afghans on a daily basis, even though we brought in Afghans themselves to talk to us, at the end of the day none of us were involved with doing anything that we were dreaming up. We were making just as many assumptions as the command was. In order to do a real *Design* effort we would have had to have brought in some practitioners and asked them for input (as well as become practitioners to some extent ourselves- and put practitioners on our *Design* team), then asked them to go out and try a few of our ideas, shaped some kind of feedback mechanism, and then re-shaped our views and future activities based on those mechanisms. And we would have had to be constantly adapting both our own structure as well as recommending changes to the command's structure and the structure of the teams we were sending out. In other words, a "full" *Design* effort would have meant *action*- not just "planning".

The third lesson was that as hard as it was- somehow the *Design* group had to be able to question underlying assumptions and that questioning had to be able to permeate out to the rest of the command. Underlying assumptions like questioning the motivations of those you are working with, why they are doing what they are doing, and why they aren't doing what you want them to. Assumptions like why we are there and what we are driving at. Assumptions like what "success" will look like, what our people will support, and what our politicians will accept. And assumptions about what drives people or groups of people to do what they do. We can't accept doctrine or popular psychology as dogma. We can't be attracted to the conventional wisdom of the day. We have to constantly question "why" we think something is the way it is.

The fourth lesson is that- as hard as it is- the *Design* group has to be as diverse as possible. If I could do things over again we would have had at least one Afghan, one non-command member, one contractor, one non ISAF member, and one non-military Coalition member. Amazingly, even in the Green Zone where all of these entities could walk to visit each other, getting all of these folks together more than once a week was very difficult due to schedules and security policies. But, I think it would have been worth the pain and worth going slower.

The fifth lesson is that the right people have to make up the *Design* group. They must be dedicated to come to the meetings. They have to be dedicated to learn and be open to new ideas. They can't be "know-it-alls" or those who stifle debate. They have to be intellectually curious. And they have to be trustworthy.

The sixth lesson is that the facilitator of the group has to be more comfortable managing the meeting than inserting his or her own opinions. I found my own role when I was the facilitator as one of asking questions, taking the devil's advocate position, keeping the group from going down rat-holes for too long or jumping too far ahead. I had to quickly put a stop to those wishing to shut-down debate very quickly and I had to find ways to sooth egos without appearing to defend or protect people or ideas. I also thought that it was important for the facilitator- or someone in the group- to have some sort of influence within the command that

would allow the group's ideas to see the light of day. Although many of our ideas did get to see the light of day, we either did not articulate them well enough or they lacked merit, and thus we perceived a steady loss of what little influence we did have. Looking back, we should have attempted to cultivate other sources of influence for the group outside of the inner command group.

In terms of how *Design* doctrine can be improved, I think the doctrine has to give practical direction for how staffs and commanders can incorporate it into their processes. Even in the operational command example, where the commander was happy to give personnel and time for a *Design* effort, it was unclear to many people how that effort's conclusions were supposed to be incorporated into operations. Even though the commander was reportedly excited about hearing the *Design* effort's conclusions, we missed the boat on incorporating the conclusions into actual efforts on the ground. Of course, one could argue that not having the buy-in or participation of the Regional Commands was partly responsible for that, and I would agree, but I also think the doctrine and instruction on how to incorporate *Design* conclusions into operations is weak and should be re-looked.

In terms of how *Design* practice can be improved, I think the second lesson above says it all: we have to turn *Design* into action more than just planning or an addendum to planning. *Design* should be more about how to act in a complex environment than plan in one, if there is a planning effort at all. If our HQs really wanted a *Design* effort put towards ANCOP, we could have set up six separate teams to partner with six different ANCOP *kandaks*⁸- each given the mission to figure out how to cut ANCOP attrition while still working within the Coalition's operational constraints. Each team could have been encouraged to try different things with the *kandak* in order to address attrition and operational effectiveness. At the end of three months, each team could send a representative to a broader *Design* group that would cull the various experiences, frame a narrative around ANCOP attrition and ANCOP in general (as well as specific ANCOP *kandaks*), make some adjustments- to include structure of the teams- and deploy more teams to more *kandaks* with a little more means to address this complex subject.

Lastly, in terms of how *Design* preparation and training could be improved, I would recommend SAMS seminars and planners in units spend their prep time attempting to interact and learn from a localized complex environment. This could be a SAMS seminar studying and attempting to affect poverty in Leavenworth, Kansas. It could be a conventional division's planners attempting to address obesity in military families of the division. The key isn't to study a complex environment half a world away, but to interact and learn from a complex environment period- and to interact and attempt to affect it for the better means it has to be local. As teams get better at interacting in complex environments they should be able to do better in them- no matter the context. They will be more comfortable with the concept- and that will mean more than being more knowledgeable about a specific area like Afghanistan that has already changed by the time they read the first word in whatever literature they have.

Hopefully these anecdotes add to the corporate history of *Design* and give some of the theorists better insight into the issues with incorporating *Design* today into the contemporary military and the practitioners into the issues with incorporating *Design* into operations. I do believe that *Design* efforts- even limited to our doctrine- could help us in complex environments. I further believe that *Design* efforts- following the collective literature and not just our, at-this-

⁸ Afghan unit most closely related to a battalion-size force.

point-immature doctrinal concepts can make us much more effective in complex situations. But, I also believe that if we turn to the entire body of literature that underpins *Design* theory as well as study other disciplines' attempts to address complexity that the end result would be very different than anything we can imagine today. It could affect the way we look at conflict, peace, and military operations, and how we structure, educate, train, and deploy ourselves- and even how we define ourselves as members of the armed services.

Major Grant Martin is a U.S. Army Special Forces officer. He recently returned from Afghanistan where he worked as a planner in the CJ5 at NTM-A/CSTC-A. He is currently assigned to the U.S. Army JFK Special Warfare Center and School (Airborne). The comments in this article are the author's own and do not constitute the position of NTM-A/CSTC-A, ISAF, the U.S. Army, DoD, or USAJFKSWCS(A).

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2011, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.



Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).