

Counterinsurgency and Strategic Public Health:
Shifting Paradigms

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The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War has arguably resulted in the United States assuming the role of the world's sole military superpower. Throughout the last two decades, opponents of the United States have sought to offset her military supremacy with asymmetric warfare, and wars against the United States and its allies have evolved into the fight for hearts and minds through ideology and insurgency. Traditionally, the United States has maintained only a small force dedicated to conducting irregular warfare, but the challenges posed by today's insurgent groups are too much for such a small, specialized force. As a result, the United States can and has already begun to reorganize and equip its military to fight counterinsurgencies, notably within Iraq and Afghanistan. However, a more comprehensive approach is needed for victory in counterinsurgency. Strategic public health can counter insurgent tactics by mobilizing and integrating the efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international governmental organizations (IGOs), and private philanthropists. The military's ability to provide local security in contested areas will permit these vast organizational networks to make valuable contributions toward US and allied end states for Iraq and Afghanistan.

JP 3-24 defines the counterinsurgents' primary control avenue as "providing security and governance, and through overt lawful mobilization."¹ It further defines an insurgent "shadow government" as an alternative government which attempts to satisfy local grievances over such issues as food distribution, health care, and security.² In essence, an insurgency depends upon the indigenous population for support and sustainment. If counterinsurgency can seize the initiative by removing popular support, it can decrease the insurgent shadow government's

effectiveness and, thus, its control. Another insight into this dynamic can be seen through the eyes of Abraham Maslow, a prominent humanistic psychologist. Maslow defines a hierarchy of needs which builds a person toward self-actualization. He postulates the most basic of human needs as physiological: “They consist of needs for oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature. *They are the strongest needs because if a person were deprived of all needs, the physiological ones would come first in the person's search for satisfaction.*”(emphasis added) Maslow further postulates that once physiological needs are met, a person progresses to a need for safety, and then to his highest needs for belonging, love and affection.³ This sense of belonging is usually found among those persons who can provide basic needs and security and, thus, contribute to a group identity. Understanding this hierarchy of needs is the key to removing an insurgency’s ability to plant itself within an area. If an insurgency has already festered, this hierarchy defines its strategic center of gravity. Therefore, the vast networks of people ready to improve public health (physiological needs) within the US become a key resource in fighting insurgent ideology. In fact, for counterinsurgent efforts to succeed and true change to occur within a society, security becomes as basic a need as physiological needs in areas without responsible governance or with an active insurgency. Security allows for provision of basic needs like food, clean water, and medical care.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban’s struggle for the support of the people undermines attempts to establish a legitimate central government in Kabul or, if central government is not an attainable benchmark, the Taliban’s “shadow government” does not allow local tribal warlords freedom of action to govern effectively and responsibly. If given an appropriate level of troop strength and force mix, US military forces are capable of countering Taliban actions by providing security through physical presence among the population. In addition, law

enforcement and Afghan military training can be accomplished via US Special Forces in a Foreign Internal Defense (FID) role. However, this aid only addresses the higher need of safety for the Afghan people, and is likely viewed as a temporary fix because US forces will eventually leave. The allegiance of the Afghan people will not shift, and US forces will be unable to leave, until their most basic needs are met. Therefore, the military's security efforts must be complemented by the efforts of NGOs, IGOs, and private philanthropists who have the skills necessary to attack the insurgency at the grassroots level. Likewise, the efforts of NGOs, IGOs, and philanthropists will not bring lasting change without the ability to operate in a safe, secure environment.

In Afghanistan, allied military forces are encountering local Afghans who have needs they are not trained to meet or cannot meet because of cultural divisions. First, special operations forces are all male. While they have the necessary medical training and supplies to help Afghan women with medical problems, they are unable to do so because of cultural taboos. If given the proper security environment in which to function, any number of NGOs can provide for the medical needs of Afghani women through consistent, long-term involvement. A second area US troops are unfamiliar with and unable to affect is domestic animal care. Unlike Americans, Afghans depend upon domestic animals for their wealth and survival. US military forces do not have a recruiting process in place for attracting a veterinary force, nor should they want to develop this type of force because combat capability may become diluted. Nevertheless, the ability to provide for veterinary needs of the people of Afghanistan is already present in the US work force, and only needs to be leveraged properly. Finally, allied military forces usually bring their own water or provide bottles of water to the local population. This solution is not permanent and does not meet this basic need enough to effect change within the insurgent power

base. General Stanley McChrystal, commander of NATO's ISAF forces, illustrated the power of providing clean water in Afghanistan during his speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. He said,

“If you build a well in the wrong place in a village, you may have shifted the basis of power in that village. If you tap into underground water, you give power to the owner of that well that they did not have before, because the traditional irrigation system was community-owned. If you dig a well and contract it to one person or group over another, you make a decision that, perhaps in your ignorance, tips the balance of power, or perception thereof, in that village.”⁴

While the military may be able to dig wells, the military should not be associated with the well being dug. Instead, the government or leader needed to counter the insurgency must be seen as the provider. NGOs are the perfect resource for providing aid which could be associated with a legitimate government's efforts to bolster public support for their cause. However, NGOs face a great deal of insurgent pressure because, intended or not, their altruistic methods will shift power bases. These shifting power bases create an insecure environment for NGO operations, resulting in inefficient or ineffective care for the population. Security provided by DOD agencies is critical to effective NGO operations in Afghanistan. In fact, cooperation between DOD and NGO organizations can allow for exponential impact in counterinsurgent efforts, and increased effectiveness for all agencies.

Some definite challenges exist with this approach, the first and foremost being unity of effort. No less than 22 US governmental agencies are involved in different aspects of global public health, ranging from foreign disaster assistance to control of international narcotics and law enforcement.⁵ A large number of NGOs, and several powerful philanthropists like Bill and Melinda Gates, are deeply involved in improving the world's public health. A task force commissioned by the Center for Strategic and International Studies illustrates the desire of

powerful US citizens to tackle the global food crisis. The commission sees this crisis as a “moral and humanitarian threat, developmental threat, and *strategic threat*.”⁶ (emphasis added) It advocates strong US leadership within the context of world organizations, and strengthening organizational capacities to tackle these threats.⁷ The impetus and opportunity to develop new partnerships between military and civil organizations is in place. Now more than ever, the military recognizes the need for strong relations with the grassroots organizations already working within COIN areas. Coordination can be a problem, however. Organizations affiliated with USAID accepting US government money and assistance are amenable to or obligated to cooperate with US government agencies, but other NGO organizations refuse US government funding so they can remain completely neutral in their dealings within a given country. In addition, some NGOs have learned to operate within an illegitimate government’s power structure in order to provide aid. For example, Doctors without Borders advocates a “pragmatic” view as opposed to an “interventionist” view toward humanitarian activity. Dr. Jean-Herve Bradol, President of Doctors Without Borders in France, describes their methods as more modest and realistic in providing the highest quality aid possible with complete independence from governments.⁸ This type of view creates a culture in which ends justify means: frequently, the pragmatic approach involves bribes, which further corrupts any responsible governance. No true change can be instigated if the system of corruption is rewarded. Dialogue between the DOD and NGOs outside of USAID must be established in order to coordinate efforts and potentially allow barriers to be shattered and new ground to be covered to truly benefit a state over the long term. The friction created between DOD forces, working to fundamentally alter a society from the ground up, and NGOs unintentionally rewarding corruption cannot be underestimated.

Without security, many NGOs and IGOs are ineffective because they are forced to retreat in the face of insurgent forces. For example, the murder of five MSF workers in Afghanistan forced Doctors Without Borders to remove all aid workers for fear of their safety. Later, MSF was left frustrated by the lack of follow-through with local law enforcement despite the evidence they gave to “responsible” authorities. They pursued other legal means to bring the killers to justice, but were still unsuccessful.⁹ A strong working relationship between the military and public health organizations within an unstable country can spawn many benefits for both sides. Public health organizations usually have longstanding relations with the local population, and have likely generated the trust necessary to truly understand local politics and needs. Doctors Without Borders was present in Afghanistan for 24 years before leaving in 2004.¹⁰ Proper coordination of DOD forces and NGO elements can avoid misunderstandings and tragedies by developing the indigent military’s ability to provide security for its population. Coordination can also make greater degrees of HUMINT available to identify key leadership within an insurgency. If the DOD can break down the traditional barriers to cooperation between NGOs and counterinsurgency forces, the efforts of both sides can deprive insurgent forces of their power base. Finally, the US military must understand the need for a low-intensity presence within COIN areas. If too many forces are present, they risk the loss of support for US public health organizations and can lead to increased insurgent recruitment. Counterinsurgent forces should be held to the minimal level required to secure an area for safe operation of public health organizations.

In the last decade, the US has become more involved in counterinsurgencies and finds itself strained to meet the demands of such warfare. However, the nature of such warfare is rooted in an understanding of human needs. The US military has a vast capability to provide

training and security in areas contested by insurgents. But, to better do so, the US military must redefine its relationships with IGOs and NGOs to effectively combat insurgency at its source: human physiological and safety needs. The DOD receives the preponderance of money in Afghanistan. Evidence of this can be seen in the disparity of facilities between forward operating base hospitals and police stations versus local civilian hospitals. If DOD worked more closely with civilian IGOs and NGOs, the Afghani people would begin to see the fruits of US involvement in Afghanistan. The military would receive better intelligence by gaining the trust of the populace, IGOs, and NGOs, while civil society would reap the benefits of better infrastructure in conjunction with better training from IGOs and NGOs focused on basic needs. US civil-military relations can foster a powerful partnership with the ability to dramatically impact an area through provision of basic needs while empowering a government to effectively continue to provide those needs. This approach will stabilize an area and suppress the ability of insurgents to plant themselves and their causes in a population by fostering responsible, accountable government while building up civilian capacity for meeting needs.

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¹ US Department of Defense, *JP 3-24 Counterinsurgency Operations*. (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, October 2009), II-22.

² Ibid., II-16.

³ Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/maslow.htm>, accessed 21 October 2009.

⁴ RealClearPolitics – Gen McChrystal's speech on Afghanistan, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/10/01/gen_mcchrystals_address_on_afghanistan_98537.html, accessed 17 November 2009.

⁵ Eugene Bonventre, Kathleen Hicks, and Stacy Okutani, "US National Security and Global Health," (Center for Strategic and International Studies: April 2009), 22-24.

⁶ J. Stephen Morrison and Johanna Nesseth Tuttle, “A Call for a Strategic US approach to the Global Food Crisis”, (Center for Strategic and International Studies: July 2008), 3.

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Ideas & Opinions: Humanitarian Action and Political Action – Don’t Confuse the Two, <http://doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/article.cfm?id=2054&cat=ideas-opinions>, accessed 24 November 2009.

⁹ Main Suspect in Murder of MSF Afghanistan Staff Released, <http://doctorswithoutborders.org/press/release.cfm?id=1869&cat=press-release>, accessed 24 November 2009.

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