

Putting strategy in communications The Afghan case

Posted on 15/09/2010 by Bruno Vanasse

Following a talk I gave as a guest speaker at the CityForum/UK Land Forces Round-table “[Supporting Land Operations](#)” in London UK on 2 June 2009 on my views on how we should rethink the strategy in Afghanistan, I was invited by CityForum to give another talk at the conference [The role of strategic communications in modern warfare](#). This event took place in London on 15 Sep 2010 and was chaired by the new UK Chief of Defence Staff General David Richards.

Here is the synopsis of my speech Putting strategy in communications, with a focus on the Afghan case:

1. **WINNING SUPPORT AT HOME CREDIBILITY.** *The experience of Afghanistan since 2002 shows that the Canadian population can accept a certain number of casualties, and that they can sustain those only if they think that the mission is worth doing and if the mission is going to be successful. One thing becomes clear, is that communications cannot trump strategy. We must first ascertain if a vital national interest is at stake in a particular conflict (Is it worth doing?) and then craft a sound strategy by correctly assessing the kind of war we are embarking (Can we be successful?).*
2. **WINNING SUPPORT ABROAD LEGITIMACY.** *If we are to get involved in other nations political affairs as opposed to waging decisive conventional combat operations followed with a relatively quick extraction of our military forces, the primary concern should be on legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. The example of Afghanistan, along with many irregular conflicts studied, is that war amongst the people is a struggle over legitimacy. Thus the underlying political strategy of our involvement must focus on that, along with the type of relationship we want to build with the host government or indigenous partner. Legitimacy is firmly linked to sovereignty national sovereignty which rest on the provision of physical security by their own local and national forces. This kind of conflict is best led by locals. We have clearly not heeded these factors in the political strategy for Afghanistan, where we have helped put in place a much centralised political system, overwhelmingly resting on foreign forces and funds, with well intentioned, but feeble and ultimately misguided attempts to modernise the country. The current operational construct of population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) led by foreigners, undermine local political accommodation, local markets and local leadership while critically boosting corruption. Our fight on corruption is a red herring the current posture puts us in a relationship of dependency with both the Afghan and Pakistani Governments (human, material and psychological investment puts us in weak and dependent position logistics/political). In caveman days, if you didnt go out to hunt, you didnt eat and you didnt survive. The same logic, in building the relationship with the host government, should be applied. The political strategy must create political leverage for establishing the direction of the dependency in these types of conflicts our direct involvement should quickly become small and low profile to ensure that indigenous energies are mobilised*

instead of external ones. Our focus in this case should be Al Qaeda. Although Al Qaeda has defeat written in its DNA for lack of a coherent political strategy, it has somewhat adapted and learned from leaning too much directly in local spheres, and instead is now trying to work through local proxies that have political grievances. Ultimately, foreigners must stay in background. It is not about us, its about them. We must be substantially less emotionally, politically and materially involved in indigenous conflict.

3. **PUTTING STRATEGY IN COMMUNICATIONS SOUND STRATEGY REQUIRED.** Only 2 years ago NATO has finally signed on a strategy for Afghanistan, more than five years into the conflict. Obviously we did not come in with a detailed game plan. My implied task when I was in Afghanistan (2006-07) was trying to understand the Afghans point of view in the conflict, from all sides (e.g. Story of Tribal Elder in Kandahar why are you here after almost 6 years?). In the context of Afghanistan, it was both justifiable and sound strategy to attack Al-Qaeda following 9-11 and the Taliban for not releasing Bin Laden. Afghans, especially in rural parts of the South, understand the concept of legitimate military force for retribution and dissuasion. But now Al-Qaeda is basically out of Afghanistan and we have reached that goal sometime ago. While the Afghan Taliban has made a comeback, especially in south and east, their political goals are strictly local and mainly controlled by Pakistan. The evidence is overwhelming on those fronts. The idea that we must be in Afghanistan to ensure stability in nuclear armed Pakistan (i.e. domino theory) does not hold up to scrutiny. Is Pakistan more stable now than 9 years ago? Pakistan will not let go of its own perceived strategic interests (e.g. Pakistan perceived need of strategic depth with India, control of Pashtun leadership, create internal instability via violent Islamist groups to legitimise the role of the army, etc.) and our current relationship of dependency due to our deep involvement in Afghanistan precludes real leverage on Pakistan (i.e. Taliban Quetta Shura, NATO logistic convoys, etc.).

Unfortunately, since the early days 2001-02, our involvement in Afghanistan has morphed into something else, what we call mission creep, into a state-building project, an experiment in social engineering to render Afghanistan inhospitable to terrorism (e.g. Taliban Islamicism). In the context of attempting to devise strategy to contain international Islamist terrorism, the political element of strategy is central. Engaging this threat is best done indirectly as we are in the midst of a cultural and civil war among Afghans, and weve taken sides. Afghanisation, the current operational paradigm to enable an exit, is riddled with problems (ANA recruitment of southern Pashtuns, retention, attempts to raise Tribal militias, lack bureaucratic competency and political cohesion, fair levels of support for the Taliban in Pashtun areas, opium narco-state, etc.), lead me to believe, and most Afghans for many years, that Afghan political accommodation is the solution. The problem is that the current Karzai Government, although designated lead for negotiations with the multi-faceted insurgency, is seen as both illegitimate and untrustworthy, while at the same time Pakistani overtures to steer these negotiations with Afghan Taliban leadership, that are in any case obviously within their borders, have gone unheeded.

4. **CONCLUSION.** While not advocating abandoning Afghanistan like in the 1990s, I recommend (1) veering away from population-centric COIN towards political accommodation in Afghanistan, and (2) for Al Qaeda, the real threat, shift to a long-term policy of containment and deterrence. I have one challenge question for this Roundtable: where is the Afghan Strategy done by and for Afghans?

-

Follow me on Twitter [@brunovanasse](https://twitter.com/brunovanasse)

Disclosure: Although clearance from my chain of command for this activity was received, the views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Canadian Forces or the Canadian Government. Please see full [Disclosure Statement](#).



This entry was posted in [General](#) and tagged [Military](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

Bruno Vanasse .com

Proudly powered by WordPress.