Campaign Assessment Afghanistan March 2007

Posted on 15/03/2007 by Bruno Vanasse

[Update - 22 Apr 2011: Towards the end of my deployment to Afghanistan (from Nov 2006 to Apr 2007), I drafted an open-source unclassified report of my views of the conflict, akin to a campaign assessment of how the campaign was unfolding, with recommendations. As it was written in March 2007, I find this an interesting marker to understand the progression of my thinking on the Afghan conflict and my later analyses of competing stabilization strategies. I kept it as it was written then, acronyms, abbreviations and typos. This was my thinking at the time of writing, based on the conditions of the conflict during that period and on my knowledge of it then. This post was put on-line on 22 April 2011, as this intro explains. Enjoy...]

My personal experience in Afghanistan started when I arrived in Kabul in Nov 2006 to work in the Information Operations (IO or Info Ops) Division at Headquarters ISAF (HQ ISAF). Within the first few minutes of arriving in my new office, I was told by the boss that, because all the IO staffs were soon leaving as the end of ISAF X (Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Headquarters HQ ARRC), I would be responsible for the new task of developing the first ISAF Counter-propaganda Plan, which had been top priority for the Commander ISAF (COMISAF, then MGen David Richards, now UK CDS) and a recurring mention during the daily battle update brief.

After doing my mission analysis, talked to all the key players who would have information that could help the development of the plan, and ran several think-tank meetings with all concerned, it became clear that we (ISAF) did not know much about the insurgency, the Taliban, their information activities and the impact on the population. This took me to arrange many meetings with key Pashtun tribal chiefs, many who were also members of parliament, Afghan intelligence officers and former Taliban officials. It took me about a month to complete the plan and present it to COMISAF. However, it was not strictly a Counter-propaganda Plan, but a complete overhaul of NATO strategy for the region. It was well received and I was asked to go to HQ Regional Command South (HQ RC-S) in Kandahar to support COMISAFs main effort over the Winter period, to lead Info Ops plans and pilot elements of the strategy, where I learned much more about the dynamics of the conflict and what was feasible in Afghanistan, especially in the South.

I have to mention that many of the elements discussed in the campaign assessment below are heavily influenced, as some will see, by the the following documents:

- David Kilcullen, 28 Articles, Military Review, May-June 2006.
- Steven Metz and Raymond A. Millen. Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Reconceptualizing Threat and Response. U.S. Army War College, Strategic StudiesInstitute, November 2004.
- Mao Tse-tung and Samuel B. Griffith (trans.). On Guerrilla Warfare. University of Illinois Press, September 2000.
- Kalev Sepp, Best Practices in COIN, Military Review, May-June 2005, 9-12.

The Battlefield Assessment follows

March 2007

1. <u>Disclaimer</u>. This is an after action report – views expressed represent only those of the drafter.

2. <u>Aim</u>. The object of this short paper is to present the Taleban (TB) current campaign, identify their objectives, strategy, CoGs, potential TB COA's for the coming months, and include recommendations for ISAF's counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy, in light of the analysis.

CURRENT TB CAMPAIGN

3.   <u>TB Campaign Strategy.</u> While a single coherent integrated insurgent campaign plan is unlikely at this stage, the TB do have a plan and they execute it rather successfully. We can aggregate TB activities on the ground as the conflict evolved into a conceptual campaign plan, by adapting it to Mao's three phases of insurgency. TB are in the initial steps of phase 2:

- a.   <u>Phase 1 – Survival</u>. The first phase of TB strategy was to establish its movement and ensure its viability after transitioning from AFG to PAK. The aim was to reposition the infrastructure, recruit and train members, establish funding and logistics base safe-haven in PAK, create an intelligence system, and develop a new ideology of resistance and propaganda apparatus to spread the ideology. Initial operational aim was to form insurgency cells in remote rural communities and conduct small-scale attacks designed to test the determination of CF forces and AFG population, and further test and develop their TTP's in action. At this stage, localised intimidation, coercion and propaganda in remote areas are used to achieve local dominance and contest these ungoverned spaces.

- b.   <u>Phase 2 – Expansion</u>. This second phase is characterised with progress from relatively small-scale activities to carefully planned, coordinated and deadlier attacks. Many of these are focused on symbolic, often important human targets. The insurgency grows decentralised, in independent cells, making killing and capturing of key members less significant. Recruitment is strengthened, as for other organisational support systems. Also, the intelligence-gathering capability grows, enabling more sophisticated, frequent and deadly activity. Intimidation, coercion and propaganda at the village level are used to achieve District dominance and replace GoA influence, by eliminating any opposition. The aim is to develop selected areas of influence into regional sanctuaries, and implement shadow governments as an alternative to GoA local influence. The final aim is the isolation and attack of larger population centres in S-E AFG, primarily focusing on Kandahar city and the HWY 1 LOCs.

- c.   <u>Phase 3 – Mass mobilisation</u>. The sought end-state for this last phase of the TB campaign is the return to the domination of AFG by a TB radical Islamist government. This third phase is likely to be characterised by the consolidation of separate safe havens, the psychological dominance of larger population centres in S-E AFG, focusing on Kandahar city, and further infiltrate and conduct attacks in and towards Kabul. At this point, the insurgency has grown large enough with enough of a popular support base to achieve population dominance in key strategic areas, to pressure foreign forces in staying in garrisons and preparing for an exit from AFG before the GoA can secure and sustain stability in AFG. A mass mobilisation is unlikely to be using a conventional approach while ISAF/CF are in Afghanistan, because of the asymmetry in firepower, airpower and target acquisition technology between the TB and ISAF/CF, but would take shape in dramatic increase in unconventional attacks and domination of population support in key areas.

4.   TB Objectives and Tactics. To achieve its strategy by moving from lower to higher phases of the insurgency, TB will use several tactics and seek objectives concurrently and throughout, mainly to achieve the effect of securing local support in S-E AFG:

- a.   Behavioural-based influence. The insurgents are using intimidation and assassination, as well as direct communication and engagement, including poppy/opium trade inducements, financial and other resources, at the local and regional levels with Tribal Elders, Mullahs and locals in villages and Mosques. Insurgents have an effective propaganda campaign, as their promises and threats are backed with action on the ground. Opposition is severely punished and publicised for better effect.

- b.   Provocation. This tactic is one of provocation towards GoA/CF/ISAF, where attacks are purposefully carried out to seek specific reactions from GoA/CF/ISAF, IOT reflect them as the external brutal oppressor (foreign troops, alien ANSF, overwhelming force and firepower, destruction, collateral damage, force escalations, etc.), to make cause for recruitment, gain local tacit support, nourish regional and international funding, supported by a Info Ops campaign at the local, national, regional and international level.

- c.   Erode GoA governance and influence in S-E AFG. Both in terms of the capability and will to govern (assassination, intimidation or corruption of GoA officials) the objective is to deny the belief in the GoA in the minds of Afghans. A robust IO campaign at the local level using traditional communication by exploiting cultural and religious channels (face-to-face, in the bazaars, in the Mosques by ideologically-friendly and/or hired Mullahs, through tribal elders of sympathetic tribes, etc.) highlighting GoA corruption and incompetence, tribal favouritism, ethnic nationalism against Northern influence, puppet regime under the hold of a occupying and abusive infidel foreign armies that are there to subjugate the Pashtuns and Afghans, subversion of the true Islamic faith by the GoA and claims of conversion to Christianity by foreign influence, lack of morality and attack of traditional Pashtu culture and Islamic faith. Finally, parallel local shadow governments are established to create a pervasive TB influence in the lives of the local population and ultimately show that the TB are the real power that the locals should align with. In this area, the TB is winning the influence game in most of the rural areas they have focused their attention to, not necessarily because they are inherently popular, but because there is no other credible alternative in the minds of the population.

- d.   Leverage the Narco-Economy. The TB are involved with both the poppy growers and the drug traffickers, IOT to influence the local farmers and tribes, gain alliance with drug power brokers, exploit financial gain from the drugs trade, undermine GoA authority with this huge black market in which several officials are party to, discredit the GoA and international community in its CN efforts by effectively putting the local farmers on its side and against the GoA. Insurgent support is usually based on intimidation, as TB is not a natural outgrowth of the Pashtu tribal system, but a competing power system. In many respects, Pashtu tribal system has been undermined and weakened by the insurgency. Outright tribal support in many cases comes down to the narcotics business.

- e.   Flexible posture and response. The TB will likely conduct their ops in the near future based on GoA/CF/ISAF forces deployments, tactics and CONOPS, local and provincial leadership dynamics, narcotics trafficking and CN activities, as they will try to take advantage of perceived weaknesses or try to counteract perceived successes on our part. This is done for achieving IO objectives as the insurgents are prepared to lose tactical engagements in compensating every tactical loss by exploiting the wide recruitment base they have in and out of their AOO.

5.   TB CoG's. Usually we portray the CoG in a single element, but for the purpose of this paper, we shall list them in order of priority, as follows:

- a. <u>Population support</u>. Evidently, if we had to list only one, this would be it. The support of the people, both of free will and coercion is the TB main CoG. This is why their strategy and tactics are all based on the psychological effects on the population. Their physical and psychological activities to influence, the ability to erode the GOA's ability to govern, both by direct action and by the use of IO in exploiting the political grievances of the local population that is translating in population support in many parts of the Pashtu belt is key to the insurgency.
- b. <u>Ability to blend with the population</u>. The fact that the TB can easily blend with the population due to the lack of intelligence and population control measures, enables the TB to effectively choose where, when and how they conducts their Ops.
- c. <u>PAK Sanctuary</u>. Sanctuary for TB leadership, recruitment and indoctrination in PAK Madrassas and refugee camps is an important TB CoG in the short and mid-term, until they achieve enough of a population sp base in AFG.
- d. <u>Open borders</u>. This CoG is heavily linked to the previous one. As long as the TB leadership can leverage the sympathy of Pashtu population in their PAK sanctuary, both resident and refugee, and enjoy FoM all along the AFG border, they will be able to sustain the insurgency in AFG.
- e. <u>Narcotics</u>. Continued access to narco-influence and narco-revenues are becoming important elements of TB long-term viability.

TB COAs

6. The TB will likely pursue in 2007 its strategy as it did in 2006, with the aim to further the implementation of Phase 2 of their campaign by aggressively seeking the previously laid out objectives.

ISAF COIN CAMPAIGN ASSESSMENT

> *"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish…the kind of war upon which they are embarking"*
> *Clausewitz*

7. <u>Assumptions</u>. The GoA and ISAF/CF are clearly facing an insurgency in Afghanistan. Fully embracing this fact and taking the necessary adaptive measures are key in winning the COIN campaign in the long-term.

8. <u>Assessment</u>. Below is an assessment of the current ISAF COIN campaign in light of known COIN best practices. ISAF is placed in parentheses showing on which side I subjectively assess where we generally stand on the issues in S-E AFG, where the ISAF COIN fight is primarily taking place:

Ineffective COIN Practices (red)	Effective COIN Practices (blue)
Governance	

Ineffective COIN Practices (red)	Effective COIN Practices (blue)
-Primacy of military direction of COIN (ISAF). -Peacetime governance processes (ISAF). -Government corruption and ineffectiveness not checked (ISAF). -Foreign assistance large and pervasive, being sucked in a lengthy military commitment of large and mainly military forces, thus providing insurgents valuable propaganda opportunities (ISAF).	-Emphasis on political rather than military solutions. -Dynamic leader as single authority for COIN. -Joint and interagency planning and conduct of all available means, political, economic, informational and security activities at the local level. -Rule of law is a main effort for all agencies. -Effective programs for enabling demobilization, amnesty, reconciliation and rehabilitation of insurgents; victory defined as disarming and reintegrating most insurgents into society. -Emphasis on patient development of relationships with local population and empowerment of their leaders, for long-term effects by dealing effectively with legitimate grievances.
Development	
-CIMIC organisations resourced and focused for conventional operations where the aim is to clear the battlefield of civilians, and not for war amongst the people.	-Extensive Joint CIMIC efforts for local development tightly coupled to local security arrangements. -Development coordinated and focused on local needs enabling local empowerment, through local employment and local governance.
Security	

Ineffective COIN Practices (red)	Effective COIN Practices (blue)
-Priority to kill/capture enemy (ISAF, partly).	-Focus on population, their needs and security (ISAF, partially).
-Battalion-size Ops as the norm (ISAF).	-Emphasis on intelligence, Police INTEL and HUMINT from the local population.
-Military units concentrated on large bases for protection (ISAF, mostly).	-Secure areas established and expanded, by methodical clear and hold (ISAF, partially).
-Special Forces focused on raiding, coordination of firepower and support of conventional operations (ISAF).	-Insurgents isolated from population through population control measures.
-Advisor effort a low priority in personnel assignments (ISAF).	-Effective and pervasive PSYOPS campaigns.
-Development and training of indigenous forces on conventional warfare concept (ISAF).	-Rewards campaign for double agents, defections and actionable intelligence.
-Open and uncontrolled borders (ISAF).	-Indigenous police in the lead, military in support primarily outside of urban areas.
-Unhindered access to illegal and black market economy by insurgency (ISAF).	-Special Forces employed in Unconventional Warfare mode; embedded in indigenous forces, HUMINT focused, blending with the locals.
-Emphasis on deploying more and massing of conventional forces, relying on superior technology and firepower, in order to achieve 'decisive' outcomes on the ground (ISAF).	-Economy of force by not taking the bait on provocations and exercise restraint (ISAF, partially).
-Emphasis on force protection limiting contacts with local population and relying on superior firepower for intimidation (ISAF).	
-Inadequate level of resources for indigenous security forces compared to foreign security organisations (ISAF).	
-Foreign military forces not fully integrated with indigenous forces (ISAF, partially).	
-Military campaign focused on attrition of insurgent forces that can be replaced as fast or faster than the coalition can kill these (ISAF).	
Capabilities and Enablers	

Ineffective COIN Practices (red)	Effective COIN Practices (blue)
-Inability to seek and adopt Unconventional Warfare approaches to COIN operations, due to internal resistance to change and a conservative organisational culture, for organisational structure, capabilities, training, deployment and use of armed forces (ISAF).	-Conventional forces re-organised and trained for COIN operations; small-unit mobile tactics, village as patrol base for rest area and not as a fortress, culturally aware, tightly integrated with local security and governance organisations, intelligence-led operations, focused on winning local population support. -Truly independent organisation assesses the progress of COIN campaign and makes relevant recommendations.

9.   While there are positive signs in a few areas that some ISAF TFs are using compatible approaches to a successful COIN, this assessment is an overall general view of our performance on the ground. The previous assessment of ISAF COIN in light of successful/unsuccessful practices is a testament to the fact the we haven't really done our homework in learning the lessons of military history and applying them in AFG. As for those very few best practices identified that ISAF is pursuing, these have been belatedly introduced and not fully followed through. In summary, the fight is taking place in the minds of the local population in key Pashtu rural areas and villages, and there the TB campaign is proving successful and ISAF's approach is disconnected from this reality. ISAF needs to refocus its forces and strategy to adapt to the enemy's strategy and tactics, otherwise the mission will be a long stalemate and, eventually, a failure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10.   Priority Tasks. ISAF needs to attack the TB CoG's IOT to win the COIN. I recommend that ISAF radically seek to implement these priority tasks:

- a.   Achieve Legitimate District Representation. Convince GoA to announce and conduct District elections (and later potentially amend process of appointment of provincial governors and replace this process with direct elections), as the GoA seems to have indefinitely postponed these elections to the detriment of local legitimacy. Representative District political leadership, supported by a representative District Assembly, is key to dealing with the political grievances of the local population, instead of resorting to military measures.
- b.   Enable Joint District Coordination Centres. Since the TB is concentrating its effort at the rural and village level, we need to actively pursue the decentralisation, integration and capability development at the District level, for all means of power and influence (Political, Economic, Military and Informational). This should be supported with IO enablers, such as local radio stations in rural areas and villages. ANSF/ISAF deployment, employment and coordination should be in support of this effort.
- c.   Tightly link Development to Security. When planning and approaching development projects, we need to mobilise Tribal Elders, by contracting R&D locally, village by village, tribe by tribe, to provide local jobs and create joint long-term ownership of infrastructure, while holding the locals responsible for security and intelligence on local insurgency elements.

- d. <u>Enable ANP leadership for security in the towns and villages</u>. This has recently been recognized as an important deficiency. Pay, training, equipment, support and intelligence are seriously lacking. ANA/ISAF should be only in support of ANP in the towns and villages, while focusing their main effort in outside of them.

- e. <u>Emphasise Intelligence at the local level</u>. Current force protection, force disposition, force employment, ANSF orientation and intelligence capabilities are not conducive to get close to the population and enable HUMINT collection. Change in these, all in mind to try to capture population support IOT to gather HUMINT is THE key element for COIN success.

- f. <u>Methodical Clear, Hold and Build, Ink Spot Strategy</u>. ISAF, with current ops and the ADZ concept, has started to step in this direction. However, the reality on the ground is another thing as a real Clear and Hold has been mostly an elusive proposition, as priorities and operations shift from one area to another without proper resources for the Hold and Build parts, and lack of intelligence for the Clear part.

- g. <u>Instate Population Control Measures</u>. The census, identification and other control measures (movement, economic, etc.) of the local population are key to be able to separate the insurgents from the local population, and serve Police intelligence activities.

- h. <u>Initiate Border Security</u>. This task is related to the previous one – since we have no reach in TB PAK sanctuaries, we need to pursue an effective Border Security and movement control with PAK. More effective coordination with PAK authorities at every level will be required, but this has started to be implemented. However, current ABP organisation and ISAF deployment are totally ineffective at the border, and current/future plans will not address the issue.

- i. <u>Reconfigure and train ANSF/ISAF/CF for COIN Ops</u>. Conventional forces need to be re-organised and trained for COIN operations; small-unit mobile tactics, village as patrol base for rest area and not as a fortress, culturally aware, tightly integrated with local security and governance organisations at the District and village level, intelligence-led operations, focused on winning local population support through all means available, with emphasis on CIMIC, PSYOPS, AFG mentoring and training activities. Current CIMIC and PSYOPS capabilities deployed are organised and resourced for conventional operations. The ISAF operation should be mainly a CIMIC/PSYOPS operation, supported by security elements, not the other way around. The current capabilities cannot even support the current conventional campaign approach. A successful Unconventional Warfare approach would require even more of these capabilities than is currently the case.

- j. <u>Exploit traditional cultural and religious influence channels</u>. Identify and fund 'moderate' Mullahs and Mosques, while training, certifying and provide theologically sound sermons for Mullahs by moderate Hanefi scholars. Although this has been initiated, there clearly is a need to step up efforts to fund and provide ideological support of current and creation of free regional/local Madrassas for boys and young men by moderate Mullahs. High-level respected religious figures should be engaged and influenced in supporting the GOA, by highlighting that TB is no less corrupt and far less capable than the central government to have a positive influence in the AFG people's lives.

- k. <u>Drive a wedge between narco-traffickers and TB</u>. By systematically targeting safe havens shared by traffickers and TB, kinetic and non-kinetic, we can have the opportunity to drive traffickers away from their TB protectors, impeding TB access to significant financial and material resources.

- l. <u>Undermine TB leadership from within</u>. Identification and exploitation of rivals, internal disputes, inequities within the insurgency need to be done, both overtly and covertly. Engaging with influential former TB figures and facilitators may help in trying to demobilise and reintegrate in legitimate political process some convertible elements of the TB insurgency. Same process can be used in trying to untie links between TB and AQ.

- m. <u>Target PAK safe havens</u>. While it is unlikely that PAK will deliver on our requests to arrest and turn over multiple senior TB leaders or take steps to undermine the TB long-term viability, every effort has to be made to target this TB CoG: a major Op in Waziristan and Baluchistan, particularly Quetta, by PAK authorities would force the TB to focus on force protection in PAK, undermining their efforts in AFG. Reform of and control of PAK religious schools (Madrassas) could slow the pace of recruitment by TB, along with a joint IO campaign with PAK in the important border cities (Quetta, Peshawar and Miram Shah).
- n. <u>Effectively deal with GOA corruption and focus on Rule of Law</u>. As long as TB propaganda on GoA corruption remains widely true of the GoA, efforts to keep or bring population support will prove elusive, as with the ineffective implementation of Rule of Law at the Provincial and District levels.
- o. <u>Establish a truly independent campaign assessment organisation</u>. The organisations tasked to conduct the COIN Campaign have a vested interest in the assessment of the progress of the campaign, in seeking, analysis and reporting information. Also, organisational culture resistance to change is another problem to be encountered. This is why a truly independent organisation to conduct the assessment of the campaign and related recommendations is required. This organisation should be made of experts and analysts from different fields, both military and civilian, which have no vested interest in portraying the campaign progress in a positive light.

11. <u>Conclusion</u>. While the stated task was to present an IO paper, I firmly believe that incremental steps in ameliorating ISAF IO activities, based on messaging, are to have little effect, as the current employment of the Force does not have proper utility and in good part prevents further effective implementation of IO plans to achieve our long–term strategic objectives. The focus has been on the overall ISAF Strategy as is actually implemented on the ground, since it is so intricate to our IO efforts. Also, we are likely to see more of the same from the insurgents in 2007, both in kinetic and non-kinetic efforts, as the TB will likely seek to continue to effectively exploit current ISAF/CF/GoA weaknesses, but in a more focused and coordinated fashion. The essential message of this document is that this war will be won or lost at the village level. Fully embracing the implications of the true nature of the conflict is the only way NATO can achieve its strategic objectives, and that will require a significant psychological, organisational and material shift from ISAF/CF.

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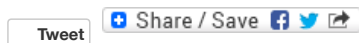
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