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Implementing Better Counter-Insurgency Tactics in Afghanistan

Hearts and minds are just the start



Some hearts and minds up for grabs. Photo: Sgt. Rebecca Linder/U.S. Army

NATO's Operation Moshtarak, launched in February 2010 in the Nad Ali district of Helmand province, was the first major deployment after the beginning of the much-debated surge of 30,000 U.S. troops. It was billed as the largest military operation since the invasion of 2001 and was promoted as a decisive attack against one of the "last strongholds of the Taliban." However, improvements in the size and conduct of military operations were undermined by a lack of sufficient, corresponding measures in the corresponding political and humanitarian campaigns.

Now that an end-date for the majority of the international military forces in Afghanistan is looming, with both the U.S. and Canadian troops starting their withdrawal in 2011 and the Dutch having already pulled their troops out, NATO is in the difficult position of being forced to produce quick miracles and defeat the Taliban insurgency in a matter of months.

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To make matters worse, sending in additional troops with a clear withdrawal date has greatly benefited the Taliban insurgency. They can keep a low profile for a year or two and wait for the foreign troops to pull out of Afghanistan. As a much-repeated Taliban dictum goes: "[The international forces] may have the watches, but we have the time." With the military offensive in Kandahar gradually increasing its tempo, it is important to look at the impact of current military tactics in a conflict that requires a political settlement above all.

The rhetoric for the recent operation in Marjah emphasised the needs of the Afghan people, and the importance of winning "hearts and minds" as part of a classic counter-insurgency operation. That, in theory, was a major change from previous military dynamics in southern Afghanistan. However, the reality on the ground did not match the rhetoric. There was a dramatic lack of capacity and preparation in the development and political communities for the humanitarian consequences of Operation Moshtarak. These aspects need to improve drastically in future operations.

In March 2010, in the aftermath of Operation Moshtarak, the International Council on Security

and Development (ICOS) interviewed more than 400 Afghan men from Marjah, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar to shed light on the local perceptions of the military operation. The findings formed the basis of the report, "Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned," released in May 2010. Field research reveals that Operation Moshtarak has contributed to high levels of anger among local Afghans: 61 percent of those interviewed feel more negativity towards NATO forces than before the military offensive.

The areas listed below demonstrate four "lessons learned" that will be critical to the success of the upcoming offensive in Kandahar: tackling Taliban recruitment; refugee support and aid capacity; counter-narcotics policy; and management of the grassroots political dynamics.

1: Tackling Taliban Recruitment

The legitimate grievances of the people of Marjah are being exploited by the Taliban, who will seek to recruit and radicalize the region's so-called "angry young men." Of those interviewed by ICOS, 95 percent believe more young Afghans have joined the Taliban in the last year. Feelings

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of anger amongst the respondents were very high, with 78 percent feeling often or always angry; and 45 percent of this group stating they were angry at what they saw as the negative side effects of the international military forces' mission in Afghanistan: the high number of civilian casualties and intrusive night raids on their properties. When it comes to the Afghan versus Western perception on how to deal with the Taliban, there is an "agreement on ends but not means": the local population does not want the Taliban to return, but they also do not want to endure unnecessary suffering as part of NATO-ISAF's response to the insurgency.

2: Refugee Support and Aid Capacity

Refugee support and aid capacity must be strengthened dramatically. Despite widespread advanced planning and publicity regarding Operation Moshtarak, there was, in the end, very little aid or infrastructure available for people displaced by the fighting. Almost all Afghans (97 percent) interviewed by ICOS said that the operation had led to new flows of internally displaced people. Thousands of people were forced to move to makeshift or overcrowded refugee camps with insufficient food, medical supplies and shelter. Local aid agencies were overwhelmed and in some areas were not present at all. The aerial bombing campaigns and military operations of international forces have, since 2006, caused a major increase of new camps of internally displaced people in Afghanistan — something that can be regarded as the symbolic failure of our "hearts and minds" campaign.

3: Counter-Narcotics Policy

Another issue causing friction with the local population is the lack of an effective or realistic counter-narcotics strategy. Poppy crop eradication — which took place during and after the operation — and a new policy of paying poppy farmers to eradicate their crops themselves, undermines the local economy without putting sustainable alternatives in place. It is also unpopular amongst locals: eradicating the poppy crop is opposed by 66 percent of Afghans interviewed.

Despite the fact that there are no short- to medium-term solutions for 1.6 million Afghans still directly dependent on illicit poppy crop cultivation, the international community has so far neglected the proposal of "Poppy for Medicine"

which seeks to address both the lack of local economic activities and the opium-Taliban link by introducing a system in which farmers are allowed to cultivate poppies for the local production of essential medicines, such as morphine.

4: Influencing Grassroots Political Dynamics

The effects of the operation in Marjah caused serious resentment amongst local citizens: 96 percent of Afghans interviewed believed that many civilians had been killed, and 97.5 percent stated that the operation had caused new flows of refugees. In addition, many Afghans do not believe that Operation Moshtarak was even successful in its stated objective to rid the district of the insurgency: 59 percent of interviewees believe that the Taliban will return to Marjah. Operation Moshtarak not only failed to win the hearts and minds of the people of Marjah, but it has actually driven them further away from the international community. The offensive has provoked anger, disillusionment and even more hostility. Nearly two-thirds (61 percent) of those interviewed by ICOS stated that the operation has made them feel more negative about the presence and activities of foreign forces.

To address this lack of trust, NATO should implement a coordinated series of "Dramatic Positive Local Actions," which will engage with grassroots communities and prevent another generation of animosity towards the NATO presence and the Afghan government. As part of this series of Dramatic Positive Local Actions, NATO should engage decisively with grassroots communities, to address issues of religious respect and anger due to civilian casualties. This process should include symbolic cultural and political acts linked to public statements of apology; programs such as mosque and shrine restoration; and Quran distribution schemes, all of which push back on Taliban propaganda claims that NATO-ISAF is there to destroy Afghans' religion. These actions will also demonstrate, in a dramatic grassroots political way, commitment to the Afghan people and will build support for the international presence in what has become a hyper-politicized community.

These Dramatic Positive Local Actions should take place in accordance with a new Counter-insurgency Impact Equation developed by ICOS: Balance any negative impact with a positive impact; and ensure that the positive impact is greater than the negative impact. An example

would be the introduction of scientific pilot projects to test the Poppy for Medicine model in areas where illegal poppy cultivation still is ubiquitous.

Adopting this new counter-insurgency equation will prevent Operation Moshtarak, and similar operations in the future, from providing a perfect propaganda tool for Taliban recruitment strategies. The conduct of such operations should be altered to address Afghans' legitimate grievances. For instance, deploying what we call "non-violent security instruments" — tools such as employment, education, marriage allowances, and land titling — will integrate Afghan citizens into legitimate social and economic life. To prevent a repeat of Operation Moshtarak, the international community must deploy a series of short- and long-term initiatives in Kandahar. To tackle Taliban recruitment, marriage and land allowance schemes should be established to tie young Afghans into stable social and economic structures.

To strengthen humanitarian aid capacity, a series of fully resourced aid initiatives should be rolled out, starting with fully-equipped field hospitals and ambulance system. These measures should also include "camps in a box" to provide shelter, food, water and active engagement with displaced people to help them move to the camps or, when possible, to return to their homes. A surge of food aid capacity is needed. Aid agencies should be integrated into military planning processes, and provided with the resources and capacity necessary. NATO-ISAF forces should be mandated to expand their work in relief and aid activities.

To regain its lost credibility amongst the Afghan people, the West should generate positive outcomes by engaging in a series of symbolic political and cultural acts to restore trust and counteract Taliban propaganda before, during and after the Kandahar operation. The international community has made mistakes, particularly in its lack of ferocity in humanitarian and development aid response. Nevertheless, its presence in Afghanistan is not a mistake, and neither is the recent surge of military troops. Learning lessons from Marjah is critical for the success of the current operation in Kandahar. Urgent steps must be taken to dramatically reshape local relationships and to positively engage with the local population. ■