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Afghanistan is scarcely a “forgotten war” but has never received the same level of attention as the fighting in Iraq, and -- when things seem to go well in Afghanistan -- it receives even less. By some standards, things are going well. NATO – or at least Canada, the UK, and US – are on the offensive, and not the Taliban. There so far has been little evidence of the kind of major offensive the Taliban launched in the spring of 2006, and casualties have been relatively limited.

The top command of the Taliban has also taken some serious – if largely symbolic – losses. Mullah Dadullah Lang, the Taliban's best-known military commander, was killed in fighting in Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan on May 14th. He was the third key Taliban leader to be taken down in the last six months: Mullah Osmani was killed in an air strike in late 2006, and Mullah Obaidulla, the number three official in the Taliban and its defense minister, was taken down several months earlier in Pakistan.

Winning Armed Nation Building versus Counterinsurgency

No news, however, is not always good news, and good news is sometimes not good enough. There is growing evidence that Afghans increasingly resent US and NATO military activity, that the Taliban are able to capitalize on the failures of the central government and foreign aid process, and that that US sweeps and air strikes are often seen as directed at Afghan civilians. NATO lacks unity on the battlefield, and the economic aid program reaches far too little of the countryside. The Afghan central government not only is ineffective (and often simply not present), it is corrupt and making little progress in providing services and effective governance.

Afghanistan remains a drug economy, with little other income in rural areas, and where eradication destroys small farmers and does virtually nothing to affect serious dealers and distribution. While the Taliban is not popular in many areas, and is not winning tactically, it is expanding its presence and areas of influence. At the same time, Pakistan increasingly threatens to become a second front. Internal instability is growing and it can (or will) do far too little to secure its tribal and border areas with Afghanistan.

The US, NATO, and the Afghan government still have solid opportunities for victory, but only if they treat the campaign in Afghanistan as a major exercise in armed nation building rather than as a counterinsurgency campaign. Lasting success requires the US and its allies to succeed in every key dimension of armed nation building, not simply in fighting open battles and clashes with the Taliban and other violent Islamists..

Victory requires the funding of the major increases in US aid to the Afghan forces, Afghan economy, and Afghan governance that the Bush Administration requested in the FY2007 supplemental and FY2008 budget request. It requires a more unified NATO and the full participation of “stand aside” forces like those of France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. It also requires a broader and much better coordinated effort in nation building and winning hearts and minds, particularly in the Pashtun areas in the East and South.

The Need for Better Metrics

Providing better measures of progress, and the extent to which the US and NATO are really winning, is only one part of this story. The key need is obviously better programs, effective long-term plans and suitable resources, more unity among the NATO allies, and realistic programs to build up Afghan governance and security capabilities. At the same time, it is all too clear that Afghanistan presents the same broad problems in finding the right kind of metrics to establish progress and priorities that exists in Iraq.

Far too many current measures of progress have little or no value, report meaningless nation-wide data, quantify the unimportant, or are more designed to “spin” immediate success than win real victory over time. The true complexities, uncertainties, and risks involved in dealing with a host of ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and regional problems are downplayed or ignored. The threat is assumed to be unpopular, and the US, NATO, and Afghan government are assumed to have large-scale support.

In short, Afghanistan raises the same broad issues regarding what metrics to use in judging progress in Afghanistan that exists in Iraq. Like Iraq, the answers are complex and involve analysis and judgment down to the local level rather than bean counts at the national level:

- **Measuring the nature and intensity of the fighting:** Counts of the level and type of attack are still useful, particularly if they cover the full range of attacks by type, are broken out at least down to the province level, and are tied to the level of enemy progress or defeat in controlling the countryside. Overt violence, however, is always an uncertain measure of insurgent activity and success.

The Taliban should have learned last year that it cannot succeed by attacking NATO forces in a head-on fight. As is the case in Iraq, destabilizing bombings, suicide attacks, atrocities, and ambushes can create a constant climate of violence – and the image of success – without taking major losses in open battle.

Like other insurgents who failed in initial efforts to take on conventional forces, the Taliban may have learned it has have more to gain from seeking to quietly expand its control over the Afghan population and over areas where NATO and Afghan government forces can “win” but not “hold” or “build.” It has every reason to avoid tactical clashes it might lose – a point that has permeated insurgent literature since Mao, if not Sun Tzu. As was the case in Vietnam, it also will effectively have won if it can operate in a given area at night, successfully intimidate the population, and provide “governance” at the village level.

- **“Mapping” control of the population and area:** Last year, the Taliban won in terms of population and area even though it lost virtually every tactical encounter. This year, it is still too early to tell, at least from unclassified reporting. No one, however, should forget the famous exchange between the late Harry Summers and a Vietnamese officer after the war in Vietnam. Summers argued that the US had won every major tactical clash. The Vietnamese officer replied, “Yes, but it was irrelevant.”

The battle for control of the population and space makes a different kind of metric more important. Are the Taliban and other hostile elements winning or losing control of towns, tribal areas, and given parts of the country? Who actually governs and provides security in given areas, and who can pass the Creighton Abrams test developed in Vietnam? (The side that controls an area at night is the real winner.)

Mapping control, security, and Taliban activity down to the local and village level, reporting by area of combat rather than nationally, and making judgments about the relative level of Taliban or other hostile control versus friendly local control is far more relevant than numbers of attacks or casualties. Oscar Wilde may have said that it was cynics that, “knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.” The history of counterinsurgency, however, indicates that it is governments that “know how to quantify success but cannot analyze the risk of failure.”

- **The governance and services test:** A related metric that is critical in armed nation building is to analyze and map whom actually governs where and what services do they provide. In broad terms, in a conflict like this, every area where the government does not actually govern or provide key services at best is vulnerable and often should be counted as lost. This is particularly true in Afghanistan, where central government has always tended to be distant, ineffective and corrupt. Even if the Taliban or some hostile element is not actively in charge, those who live in such areas have no reason to be loyal and good reason to see themselves as excluded.

It is equally critical to be able to trace whether there is an effective hierarchy of governance from the national to the regional to local government. Far too often, the focus is on national government and particularly on high-level political and legislative activity. It is regional and local governments, however, that provide key services in threatened areas, whose quality of governance determines loyalty, and whose actions underpin security. In general, the day-to-day presence and quality of governance at the local level is vastly more important indicator of true legitimacy, than how a government is chosen and whether it is “democratic.”

The same, however, is still true of governance at the regional and national level. Even popular elections do little to create popular governments. Election metrics are often a far better warning of sectarian and ethnic divisions than a sign of national unity. What does count is how effective given ministries, services, and functions of the national government are in both the capital and in reaching out to provincial governments in the field.

As is the case in Iraq, this kind of reporting also provides key warnings about the inability of the national government to function, critical failures and corruption in given areas of government activity, and real-world priorities for aid and political pressure to improve governance. Other forms of reporting, particularly spending on aid programs without evaluations of the result, are little more than vacuous spin.

- **Aid coverage, aid activity, and actual useful help:** This raises a critical failing in both Afghanistan and Iraq: The almost total lack of honest and meaningful metrics and reporting by USAID, the Corps of Engineer, and similar actions by allied countries. Spending has never been a meaningful metric. Neither has reporting on projects completed without breakouts of the level of services provided by region relative to need.

Completing showpiece and demonstration projects and aid efforts do not win hearts and minds; they lose them by telling those who are excluded that they lost and someone else won. This is particularly true in a country that is 85% rural, tribal, and deeply divided both geographically and ethnically. It is compounded in many areas by drought, wartime damage, civil disruption, and narcotics. People in true need inevitably see a lack of aid and government presence and services (often accompanied by local corruption) as effectively hostile.

One key metric is the economic status of ordinary people at the local level. Macroeconomic data on GDP, per capita income, inflation, unemployment, etc. have little meaning in understanding the pressures that must be dealt with in troubled or combat areas. Traditional economic development reporting had uncertain value at the best of times, and is little more than statistical rubbish in cases of armed nation building.

Figures that ignore national, regional, and local income distribution and equity disguise the forces that encourage insurgency and national divisions. The same is true of numbers that ignore the profiteering impact of wartime spending or the fact that GDP and per capita incomes often rise in nation building efforts simply because a failed state is now getting funds.

What counts is credible analysis of the economic conditions and services available to real people at a level of reporting where it is clear what the key priorities are for action, and what problems can drive civil violence, anger against the government, and support for insurgents.

The key test of both wartime aid and development is whether aid and development activity is actually funded, actually in progress, and actually succeeding in meeting key needs in ways that help a given area. Far too often, this metric quickly reveals no activity or plans that may take months or years to begin. In many others, it is quickly apparent that the level of aid is too small to have a major impact, is not focused on meeting immediate short term needs, or is being planned and executed without any serious analysis of local perceptions and needs.

Another key metric is whether relevant aid activity is actually underway and can actually be sustained. While it should be obvious, a subtest is whether aid teams can operate without a military escort, and the level of security required; a key variation on the Creighton Abrams test. Even the simplest mapping efforts often show that aid money goes where it is safe to spend it, or is tied to efforts that only have mid to long-term benefits for a nation that somehow becomes stable and well governed.

Armed nation building succeeds by recognizing that threatened peoples, and areas in contention, have immediate needs. In wartime, even more than peace, “people do not live in the dawn of tomorrow, they live in the noon of today.” Most Afghans need simple aid efforts like water projects and light roads *now!*

The past underfunding of aid efforts, and confusion between showpieces and progress, has hurt almost as much as the lack of governance. This is a problem that the US FY2007 Supplemental and FY2008 budget requests tried to address, but which remains critically underfunded. As for other NATO countries, there is far too much emphasis on a few “feel good” efforts, and limited PRT efforts, with little broad coverage of the population.

- **Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, and Afghan National Auxiliary Police development and presence:** There are several different elements involved. As is the case in Iraq, the least important metric is how many people in each service have been trained and equipped. This effort is a vital means to an end, but success consists of having actual forces active in the field. In general, whenever the US government or Coalition authorities issue estimates of the number of people who *should* be there, this is really a confession of failure.

Even at this level of reporting, the key test is how many men in each service are actually present. Such reporting has little value, however, without reliable reporting on whether individual unit elements and posts are properly paid, equipped, and facilitated, and is there a convincing reporting system to prove this. Only hard, reliable reporting of actual strength and capability is reliable enough to be relevant.

One of the most damaging aspects of US intelligence and advisory reporting is the tendency to focus on orders of battle which at best show manning levels and sometimes major equipment. This says little about unit progress and activity. What counts is what units do, how active they are, and how well they are led in actual operations. This is partly a legacy of the Cold War, and the need to focus on the massive and largely unknown capabilities of the overall FSU and Warsaw Pact force structure. It is also partly a result of a tendency to exclude the intelligence community from detailed data on advisory efforts, and net assessments of friendly and threat forces.

In the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, however, such problems are easy to correct. All that are really required are convincing and reliable activity reports or unit “diaries.” Quantifying readiness indicators, and summary readiness measurements, are almost always unreliable or hollow. Convincing reports of effective activity, describing what has actually been done, and unit history down to the battalion level actually measures something.

- In the case of military forces, it consists of the portion of the order of the battle actively in the fight and the kind of fighting a given unit actually does.
- In the case of the police force, it consists of regional and local elements that actually do effective police work, and what portion of such forces are tied to

effective governance and something approaching a structure court and justice system.

At the same time, the creation of effective Afghan Army and National Police forces illustrates the importance of having meaningful long-term plans, programs, and budgets as a metric. The President's FY2008 budget submission for Iraqi and Afghan security forces showed a massive leap from \$4.9 billion in FY2006 to \$12.7 billion in FY2007 and then back to \$4.7 billion in FY2008.

It is hard to take any aspect of a strategy seriously that has a budget for the overall war in Afghanistan and Iraq that assumes no cuts in the cost of US operations, but assumes that a one year surge can somehow create the Afghan and Iraqi forces the US needs. This lack of meaningful planning and budgeting is even more apparent in the foreign aid program.

- **The local authority and militia test:** That said, the Afghan government is at least 3-5 years away from a mix of governance, military, and police capabilities that can bring security to much of the country. In the interim, is there a *friendly* local authority and security force? Is it really effective? Is it really *friendly*?

Analyses of "gray" local forces are as important as the analysis of openly hostile "red forces" or official "blue" forces. Once again, what such forces actually do is also far more important than creating formal orders of battle or estimates of strength.

- **Local perceptions:** Polls are only one metric, but they are a critical one. If properly conducted, they show local loyalties and concerns. They correct the tendency to assume that enemies like the Taliban do not have strong popular followings in some areas, that NATO military action is not seen as hostile or a threat, and that people support a government that is not active simply because it was elected.

Last year's poll results showed a distinct drop in support for NATO, little faith in the national government, the feeling aid and services were usually lacking, and a rise in support for the Taliban. This year's trends are unclear.

It also is critical to break out results at the local level and distinguish sectarian and ethnic opinion. National poll results have little meaning in fragmented nations, and ones where much of the fighting, as well as aid activity and governance, are highly regionalized. National results are particularly meaningless when they are cherry picked to produce favorable results or provide a given view of events. As is the case in virtually every aspect of such reporting, providing full coverage of possible opinions and reporting the full results is essential to establishing credibility.

- **NATO effort by NATO country by region affected.** No set of metrics is more useless in counterinsurgency and nation building than national totals and national averages. This is particularly true in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, where regional and local differences are critical, and Coalition partners take different approaches to fighting and aid.

The situation is still worse in Afghanistan, where there are still “stand aside” forces, and civil activity by given counties often has little more than token impact. At this point, the only reporting on NATO activity that really matters has to be by a NATO country, and in a form that shows how much of given peoples and areas in Afghanistan are affected.

- **Losing by Winning Metrics:** There are several additional areas where the US and NATO need to be far more sensitive to the negative impacts of their own actions can careful measure such impacts through field reporting, public opinion polls, and other tests that are not linked to those actually planning and implementing such operations. These include:
 - **Nature and location of air strikes and NATO military action:** There is often a tendency to confuse NATO military action with success. This is true when military activity hits targets that the local population sees as valid targets and their enemies. It is not when they do not. In broad terms, mapping air strikes that lead to serious claims of civilian casualties and collateral damage, and mapping broad sweep or search activity without solid supporting intelligence, will also map growing Afghan hostility.
 - **Long time or unvalidated detentions:** There is no iron rule that says a new enemy is bred for every detainee, any more than one is bred for every enemy casualty. In broad terms, however, large-scale detentions and random sweeps almost always breed more enemies that they find. Like military activity, they help map the seriousness of the security problem and are a warning sign.
 - **The drug eradication test:** Drug eradication does nothing to address the profiteering top of the drug problem and much to aid the Taliban. In broad terms, anywhere that eradication is taking place is likely to be hostile.

Honesty, Complexity, and Transparency as the Price of Victory

There is no easy way to win in armed nation building, particularly in seriously “broken” states like Afghanistan, where an insurgency is only part of the problem, where sectarian and ethnic differences are often at least as important, and where the political structure, system of governance, and economy cannot begin to meet popular needs.

The only way to win is to have effective, enduring, and well-resourced efforts that deal with all of these issues, and honest measures of success in each area. Honesty and complexity are key tools in achieving any meaningful form of victory. Losing is much easier, as Iraq now threatens to demonstrate.

It follows almost inevitably when the US and its allies focus on largely meaningless metrics of violence and casualties, macroeconomic statistics, government and aid spending, projects complete and the size of friendly forces “trained and equipped.” It is to ignore the true character of enemy and friendly activity simply because the results are potentially embarrassing and involve judgment-driven narratives.

If the US and NATO are to win in Afghanistan, which seems eminently possible, they need to establish valid ways of measuring both success and failure. They also need to transform these into detailed long-term plans for action, rather than try to rush success or

get it on the cheap. NATO may already be making real progress in Afghanistan at the military level, but it needs more realistic “metrics” than have yet been reported.

Such metrics also need to look beyond combat and provide much better pictures of success in nation building. Both the US and its NATO allies have badly under-resourced their efforts in developing governance, economic stability, Afghan force development, and the other key aspects of armed nation building, in the past. Like Iraq, many such activities cannot be rushed and are years away from success. Current failures cannot be blamed on the central government. It is going to take patience, persistence, and resources to fix this situation, as well as honest and meaningful measures of progress.

There also is an equal need for transparency, and for unclassified reporting of what may often be bad news. Spinning events and promising instant victory relies on sheer luck for success. The practical result, however, is to create impossible expectations, under resource the efforts underway, fail to make credible long-term plans, prepare for problems and failures, and build credibility. Trust is built on a foundation of frankness and honesty, and so is legislative and popular support for sacrifice and sustained efforts. One can endlessly debate the nuances of leadership, but it is almost axiomatic that no one follows where no one leads.