Fighting "The Other War"

Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan, 2003-2005

Lieutenant General David W. Barno, U.S. Army, Retired

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Strategy without Tactics is the slowest road to Victory. Tactics without Strategy is the noise before Defeat.
—Sun Tzu

Lieutenant General (Retired) David W. Barno commanded over 20,000 troops in Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan from October 2003 to May 2005. He is a 1976 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and holds an M.A. in National Security Studies from Georgetown University. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College and War College. LTG Barno commanded at all levels, from lieutenant to lieutenant general, and served in combat with Ranger battalions in the Grenada and Panama invasions. He is currently the director of the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, Washington, DC.

PHOTO: The author at TF Phoenix. TF Phoenix was responsible for the training and equipping of the Afghan National Army. Left to right are LTC Lyles, Operations Officer, TF Phoenix; BG Moorhead, Commander, TF Phoenix; MG Weston, Chief, Office of Military Cooperation-Afghanistan; and LTG Barno. TF Phoenix was based in eastern Kabul. (DOD)

AFGHANISTAN IN MID-2003 was at a point of transition—a strategic fork in the road. Major combat operations had ended in 2001, devolving into a long-term pursuit of Taliban and Al-Qaeda remnants, and humanitarian support was beginning to enlarge the nascent reconstruction effort; but Taliban-related activity was increasing in the south and east of the country, while heavily armed militias continued to dominate many areas. Politically, however, optimism across the nation was almost tangible. Plans were underway for a nationwide *loya jirga* (grand council) to draft a new constitution, an effort to begin the democratic process that would move beyond the 2002 jirga, which had appointed Hamid Karzai the leader of a transitional government. Additionally, presidential and parliamentary elections were being planned for 2004.

The Bonn process had organized the overwhelming international sympathy toward Afghanistan with lead nations designated to oversee security sector reform.[1] International support for stabilizing Afghanistan was strong, focused upon the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), which was led by the renowned and influential Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi. A 5500-person International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had transitioned into a NATO-led mission, but remained confined to security duties in Kabul. On balance, however, the nationwide writ of the provisional government in Kabul was tenuous at best, and increasing security concerns threatened to undermine both international support and the nascent political process.

Unfortunately, the U.S.-led military coalition was not well postured to counter the rising threat. Coordination between the military and interagency partners was hampered by a U.S. Embassy and military headquarters separated by over forty kilometers. Unity of effort suffered; the military command and control situation was in flux; our tactical approach was enemy-focused and risked alienating the Afghan people; and the substantial draw of operations in

Iraq had put severe limits on the availability of key military capabilities for Afghanistan. To make matters more difficult, the American military leadership was rotating, and the first U.S. ambassador since 1979 had departed with no replacement. Clearly, without a significant change in course, Afghanistan was at risk.

This article outlines the changes subsequently made to U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. It depicts the approach, begun in October 2003, to create a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in "the other war" that resulted in over two years of relative stability and progress. It also provides a brief assessment of the situation in Afghanistan now, as we move toward the end of 2007.

The Military Situation—Summer 2003

In mid-2003, the U.S.-led coalition embodied over 12,000 troops representing 19 nations. It was led by Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-180, formed in June 2002 as the forward headquarters in Afghanistan and based at the old Soviet airbase at Bagram, a 20-minute helicopter flight north from Kabul.

The U.S. had downsized the original CJTF in the spring of 2003, replacing a powerful and well-resourced three-star-led headquarters (XVIII Airborne Corps) and a subordinate division headquarters (Task Force 82) with a single division-level headquarters (10th Mountain Division).[2] As a result, operational tasks once performed by the corps headquarters and tactical tasks performed by the division headquarters were now assigned to one headquarters struggling to oversee both levels of war for a very large theater of operations.

In Kabul, an Office of Military Cooperation (OMC) had been formed in mid-2002 to take on the mission of building the Afghan National Army (ANA), and de facto a number of political- military tasks as well.[3] The focus of the U.S. military effort in the aftermath of the December 2001 fall of the Taliban had been two-fold: to hunt down the remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban across the rugged landscape of southern and eastern Afghanistan, and to build the ANA. "Nation-building" was explicitly *not* part of the formula.[4]

Despite the presence of a large U.S.-led combined and joint civil-military operations task force (CJCMOTF) then based in Kabul, the military focus on reconstruction was limited. Four provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) had been created—two American teams at Gardez and Konduz, a British effort at Mazar-e-Sharif, and a New Zealand mission in Bamian. All four were in relatively quiet areas. There was no PRT presence in the more volatile south and only one in the east (at Gardez), although an expansion of four more PRTs had been planned for the spring of 2004.

Overall, the military span of control in Afghanistan was vast: one division-size joint task force headquarters (with a series of temporary commanders in the summer of 2003) supported over 10,000 soldiers of a multinational force conducting security and reconstruction efforts across a nation the size of Texas with a population of 31 million. (Afghanistan is nearly 50 percent larger than Iraq and has 4 million more people).[5]

Of even greater concern, only one ground maneuver brigade had tactical responsibility for this immense battlespace. To complicate matters, Special Forces, civil-military operations, aviation, and logistics commands operated throughout the battlespace, but reported individually to the CJTF-180 headquarters in Bagram—not to the ground brigade commander.[6]

The primary approach on the ground was enemy-centric. Conventional units operated out of sizeable bases such as Bagram or Kandahar or smaller forward operating bases such as Shkin or Orgun-e. They gathered intelligence, planned operations, and sortied on "raids," which could be small, prolonged patrols of some days' duration or battalion-size operations lasting several weeks (e.g., Operation Mountain Lion). Underlying these actions was the concept that intelligence drives operations; as a result, tactical operations inevitably remained focused on the enemy.

This "raid strategy" combined with the small number of troops had the effect of largely separating coalition forces from the Afghan people. The tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) units used often worsened this separation. "Tossing" whole villages in a cordon-and-search operation based on an intelligence tip, regardless of its accuracy, could quickly alienate a neutral or even friendly populace.

At the time, the U.S. military had not published COIN doctrine since Vietnam, and units had relatively little training in COIN before their arrival

in country. There was much "learning by doing" and even disagreement as to whether the fight in Afghanistan was a COIN fight at all. In fact, unit commanders were forbidden from using the word "counterinsurgency" in describing their operations—they were executing a "counterterrorist" mission in keeping with U.S. strategic guidance and an operational focus on the enemy.[7]

In view of this situation, the commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) recognized the need for a different headquarters configuration. In October 2003, he ordered a new three-star coalition headquarters to stand up in Kabul and focus on political-military efforts, permitting the two-star JTF headquarters at Bagram to focus more fully on tactical operations.[8] This initiative represented a distinct break from the previous belief that the overall military headquarters should be somewhat removed from the capital, in part to avoid entanglement in the political complexities of a city of three million Afghans. Kabul was interlaced with all manner of international embassies, special envoys, NATO ISAF units, UNAMA, and a plethora of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), all working to bring a better future to Afghanistan—but in a free-wheeling, confusing, and sometimes counterproductive mix. "Kabul will consume you," warned one senior U.S. commander who had served in Bagram.[9]

A Counterinsurgency Strategy

Although the story of how we created a three-star operational headquarters with no existing core staff (and from a start point of six members!) in an ongoing operational environment holds important lessons of its own, the centerpiece of this article is the evolution of a COIN strategy for Afghanistan.[10] The latter story began shortly after my arrival in country, when Lakhdar Brahimi asked us to develop an approach to address the deteriorating security situation in the south and east of the country. The UN had responsibility for devising and implementing a plan to hold Afghan presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004, and it was becoming clear that the organization would be unable to extend its reach into significant parts of the Pashtun southern half of Afghanistan if the security situation continued to remain dangerous there. Moreover, a strong Taliban offensive was expected in the spring of 2004, which would further threaten the elections and thus undermine the "roadmap" set forth by the international community in the Bonn Process.

After 10 days of intense staff work led by my talented director of planning, a British colonel whose 22-man J5 (future plans) shop now comprised over two-thirds of our entire staff, we were able to propose a new approach to security and stability to take into 2004.[11] Initially called "Security Strategy South and East," this effort quickly grew into a comprehensive COIN approach for Afghanistan. Ultimately, it evolved into a detailed campaign plan co-written with the U.S. Embassy and broadly shared by the Afghans and international community. Titled "Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan," the plan was crafted in the absence of U.S. military doctrine, but reflected a solid knowledge of classic COIN approaches. The bookshelves in my Kabul offices at the embassy and military compound were well stocked with my own COIN readings and several senior British officers on my staff supplied important operational insights from their Northern Ireland tours.[12]

To outline our strategy in simple terms, we created "The Five Pillars" diagram (figure 1). This graphic became a powerful tool for explaining the basics of our strategy to civilians, and within the command it circulated down to the very lowest tactical levels. In addition to providing an extraordinarily effective means of communicating complex ideas, it helped us implement the strategy's fundamentals.[13]

Overarching Principle 1: The People as Center of Gravity

The core principle animating the new strategy was our identification of the Afghan people as the center of gravity for COIN (roof of the five pillars).[14] This constituted a sea change in practice from earlier approaches, which had held that the *enemy* was the center of gravity and should be the focus of our military effort (a determination driven in part by the U.S. strategic outlook in 2003, which viewed nation-building as an inappropriate military task).

In making this change we were motivated by both classic counterinsurgency practice as well as thoughtful consideration of Afghan military history. In late 2003, international forces comprised nearly 20,000 armed foreigners living in the midst of 31 million (often armed) Afghans who, throughout

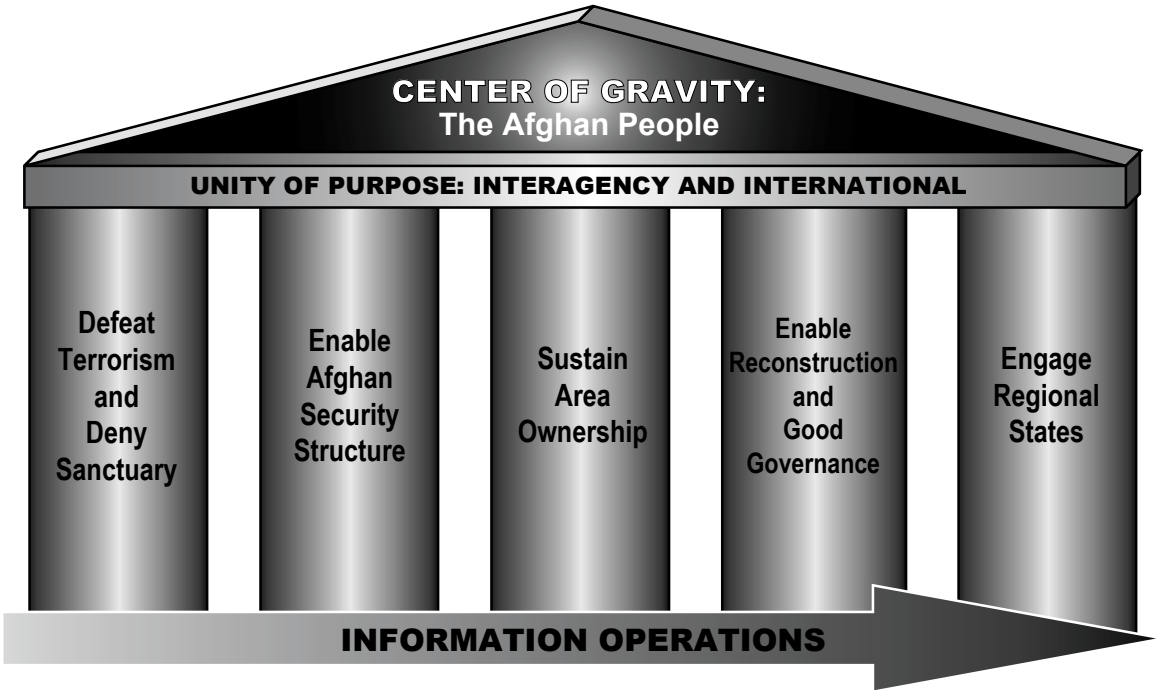

Figure 1. CFC-A counterinsurgency strategy, 2003-2005.

their history, had shown immense enmity to foreign forces. Two successive British expeditions in the 19th century and the massive Soviet invasion in the late 20th century had provoked virulent responses from the people of Afghanistan—each ending in the bloody demise of the foreign military presence. In fact, the "light footprint" approach taken by U.S. force planners was, in many respects, derived from a strong desire not to replicate the Soviet attempt at omnipresence.[15]

In our emerging strategy, I viewed the tolerance of the Afghan people for this new international military effort as a "bag of capital," one that was finite and had to be spent slowly and frugally. Afghan civilian casualties, detainee abuse, lack of respect shown to tribal elders, even inadvertent offenses to the conservative Afghan culture—all would have the effect of spending the contents of this bag of capital, tolerance for foreigners, more quickly.

With "respect for Afghans" as our watchword, we decided that convincing the Afghan people to commit to their future by supporting elections for a new government would be the near-term centerpiece of coalition efforts. Thus, our military "main effort" in 2004 would be explicitly to "set the conditions for a successful Afghan presidential election"—certainly an unconventional military focus. One of the changes in our military approach evinced by this focus on the population was a near-ironclad prohibition against using airpower to strike targets not directly engaged in close combat with coalition troops. Air strikes based solely on technical intelligence were almost entirely eliminated owing both to their conspicuous lack of success and the unintended casualties they characteristically caused among Afghan civilians. In my estimation, this new judicious reserve in the application of coalition firepower helped sustain the people's fragile tolerance of an extended international military presence. In essence, we traded some tactical effect for much more important strategic consequences.

Overarching Principle 2: Unity of Purpose

A second principle of our strategy was interagency and international unity of purpose. Militarily, this was paralleled by a deliberate and measured reorganization to achieve unity of command in coalition operations. As noted above, our military organizational structures had evolved unevenly as forces echeloned into Afghanistan in disparate increments following the Taliban's fall in late 2001. During the execution of that early operational phase, most U.S. troops were based outside of Afghanistan, and those

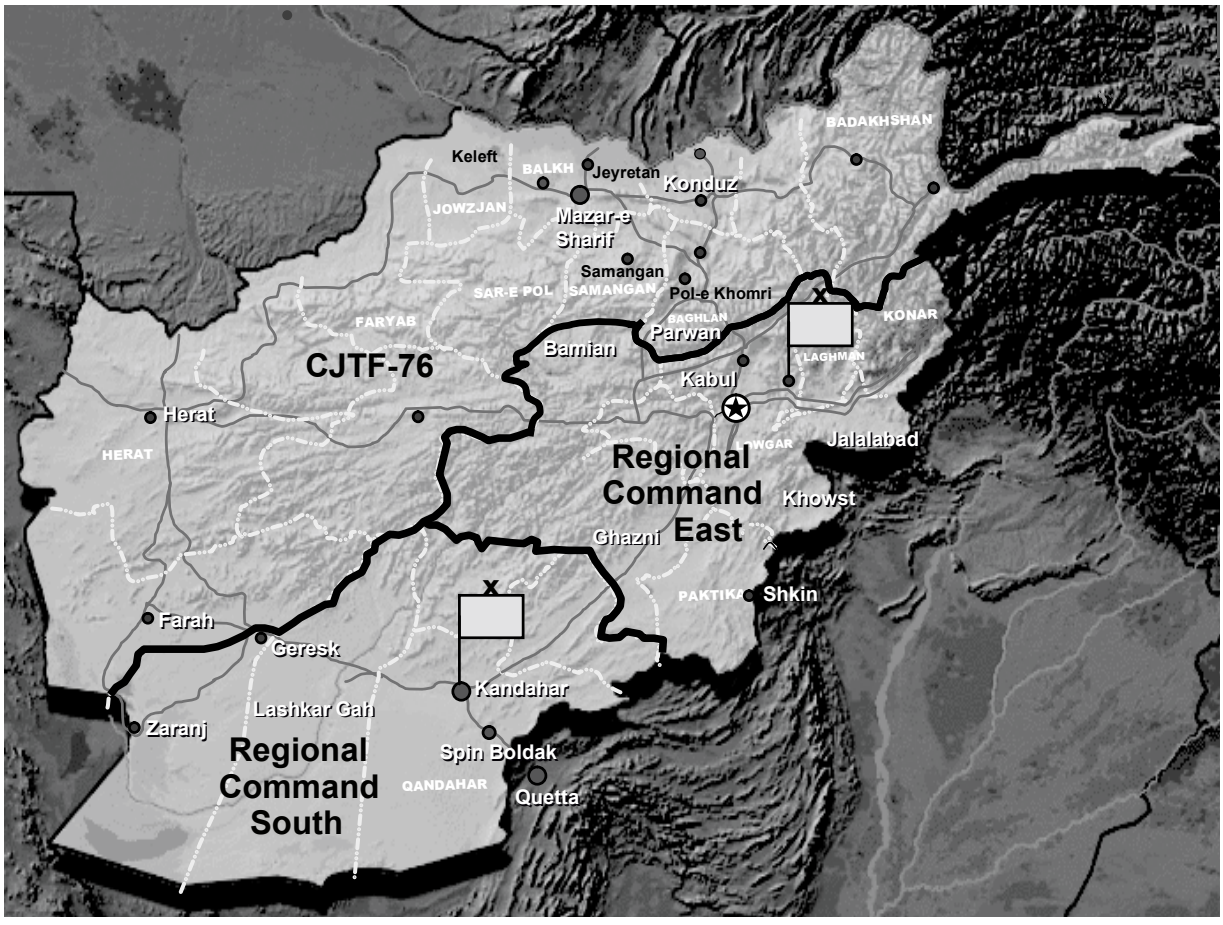

Figure 2. U.S. and Coalition Battlefield Geometry, May 2004

in-country had only begun to establish what would become long-term operating bases. During 2002, Bagram and Kandahar became the primary base locations for large units, logistical infrastructure, and coalition airpower. As more units were added to the mix, and as the coalition presence continued long beyond initial expectations, a patchwork line of command authorities had evolved—an unsurprising situation given the need to cover a huge country with a small sliver of forces.

Our moves over the next months focused on establishing two ground brigade-level headquarters, one assigned the hazardous south and the other the volatile east (figure 2).[16] (The northern half of the country remained largely free from any enemy threat, and thus became an economy-of-force area.) The brigades' headquarters in the south and east became centers for regional command and control of forces in the vast southern half of the country. Each brigade was assigned an area of operations spanning its entire region. All organizations operating in this battlespace worked directly for or in support of the brigade commander. This was a striking and powerful organizational change.

Establishing unity of purpose in the non-military sphere was much more difficult. Arguably, the greatest flaw in our 21st-century approach to COIN is our inability to marshal and fuse efforts from all the elements of national power into a unified whole. This failure has resulted in an approach akin to punching an adversary with five outstretched fingers rather than one powerful closed fist.

Oftentimes, this rift has had its origin in relations between the U.S. chief of mission (i.e., our ambassador) and the military commander—each reporting to different chains of command in the midst of a nation embroiled in a counterinsurgency war. Afghanistan in 2003 was no exception—a situation made even more difficult by personnel turnover. After the U.S. ambassador departed in July without a replacement, the deputy chief of mission served as the acting chief for four months, and the presidential special

envoy for Iraq and Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, shuttled in and out. Ultimately named as the new U.S. ambassador, Khalilzad arrived for full-time duties on Thanksgiving Day 2003—but retained his special envoy status and thus had direct and regular access to the president as well as to the Department of State (DOS).[17] As the U.S. and coalition military commander, I reported to the commander of U.S. Central Command, General John P. Abizaid, and through him to the secretary of defense and the president. Our system dictates that our top diplomat and main military commander receive orders from and report to different people, coming together only at the president. Moreover, the cultural differences which separate the departments of State and Defense—and their people—are well known.

Fortunately, chemistry counts, and personalities matter. Ambassador Khalilzad and I both recognized that our personal relationship would set the tone for embassy and military teams across Afghanistan. We established a strong personal bond in Kabul that became a keystone in what would be a seamless approach to the interagency challenges we faced in Afghanistan.[18] (In retrospect, I have viewed this approach as much akin to a "supporting-supported" relationship between the military and the embassy for many tasks involving other than the military elements of power). My guidance to our staff was that as the most powerful organization in the country, we would take a direct interest in *everything*—not just the traditional warfighting piece. As I told an exasperated and overworked staff officer in October 2003: "We own it all!"[19] Our tactics outside the military arena would largely be characterized as "leading from the rear" but were nonetheless very effective. To demonstrate personal commitment to this unified embassy-military approach, I moved into a half-trailer on the embassy compound and established an office there next to the ambassador's. I began each day attending country-team and core security-group meetings with our new ambassador. The message to our staffs was unambiguous: there would be no "white space" between the military and interagency effort in Kabul, and by extension, throughout Afghanistan.

The close personal relationship the ambassador and I established paid us both immense dividends. Through daily meetings of key players in the embassy, we developed a common view of the fight that further cemented the unity of our integrated effort. This shared view significantly shaped our unified interagency approach. It also had a major impact on the direction of our military efforts.[20]

Building teamwork and consensus among the diverse international players in Kabul was more problematic. The simple challenge was getting all the players on the same playing field, playing the same sport, and moving toward the same set of goal posts. (Having everyone in the same jersey was not expected!) We spent significant personal time and military staff effort building close relations with the Afghans, UNAMA, foreign embassies, the media, and even the NGO community. A key element in developing our COIN campaign plan was "shopping it around" in draft form—first to the members of the U.S. Embassy, then to the broader set of international and Afghan players who would be essential in supporting its goals. This unconventional approach sent a message of inclusion to all those committed to Afghanistan's future. At the same time, it significantly refined and improved our planning.

We also seconded five military staff officers to the ambassador packaged as an unusual new group, the Embassy Interagency Planning Group, or EPIG. Led by a brilliant Army military intelligence colonel, this small core of talented planners—the "piglets"—applied structured military staff planning to the diverse requirements Ambassador Khalilzad faced in shaping the interagency response in Afghanistan.[21] With the ambassador's guidance, the EPIG drafted the embassy's mission performance plan, and it developed and tracked metrics for him on all aspects of interagency and military performance. Eventually, we also seconded military officers from our headquarters to many of the embassy's key sections to augment a small, young country team. This served two important purposes: it lent structured planning and organizing support to overworked embassy offices, and it kept our military team well connected to the embassy's efforts across the spectrum. This move, too, contributed to building a unified team with close personal ties, trust, and confidence.

Five Pillars

As figure 1 depicts, our COIN plan for Afghanistan had five pillars:

- Defeat terrorism and deny sanctuary.
- Enable the Afghan security structure.

- Sustain area ownership.
- Enable reconstruction and good governance.
- Engage regional states.

Linking these pillars together was information operations (IO)—winning the war of ideas.

The keys to delivering on our COIN strategy were to implement and integrate the actions called for by these pillars, and to have every platoon, squad, and team in Afghanistan clearly understand their intent. We had departed notably from previous, more constrained approaches by naming the Afghan people as our operational center of gravity and by focusing on unity of purpose across diverse stakeholders. The five pillars reflected our reassessment of how to apply even long-standing military capabilities in new directions.

Defeat terrorism and deny sanctuary. As we switched our focus from the enemy to the people, we did not neglect the operational tenet of maintaining pressure on the enemy. Selected special operations forces (SOF) continued their full-time hunt for Al-Qaeda's senior leaders. The blood debt of 9/11 was nowhere more keenly felt every day than in Afghanistan. No Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine serving there ever needed an explanation for his or her presence—they "got it." Dedicated units worked the Al-Qaeda fight on a 24-hour basis and continued to do so into 2004 and 2005.

In some ways, however, attacking enemy cells became a supporting effort: our primary objective was maintaining popular support. Thus, respect for the Afghan people's customs, religion, tribal ways, and growing feelings of sovereignty became an inherent aspect of all military operations. As well, the "three-block war" construct became the norm for our conventional forces.[22] Any given tactical mission would likely include some mixture of kinetics (e.g., fighting insurgents), peacekeeping (e.g., negotiating between rival clans), and humanitarian relief (e.g., digging wells or assessing local needs). The 2001-2003 notion of enemy-centric counterterrorist operations now became nested in a wholly different context, that of "war amongst the people," in the words of British General Sir Rupert Smith.[23]

Our forces in the field once again demonstrated their remarkable ability to adjust to changing situations with only general guidance—and deliver results. When I asked a superb battalion commander how, in the absence of doctrine, he was able to shift his leaders toward a largely new COIN approach in the middle of their combat tour, he laughed and said: "Easy, sir—Books-A-Million.Com!"[24] Reading classic counterinsurgency texts in the field became a substitute for official doctrine. The realization grew that "First, do no harm" must be a central consideration, and that Afghan security forces must play a visible role in coalition military operations. Even local elders were enlisted, for we knew that intelligence could often be manipulated to settle old scores and discredit our efforts.

Our growing recognition of the need to respect the population eventually led us to develop the "Fifteen Points," a coordinated set of guidelines (see sidebar) that we proposed to President Karzai in response to his growing concerns about the impact of coalition military operations. Together, we publicized these efforts in order to assure the Afghans that we recognized and respected the sovereignty of their country. This had the intended effect. It extended the freedom of action granted to coalition forces for perhaps years, allowing us to spend the "bag of capital"—Afghan tolerance—that much more slowly.[25]

Enable the Afghan security structure. Under this pillar, we extended and accelerated the training of the Afghan National Army, and ultimately turned our scrutiny to the police as well. The development of the ANA and the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) were significant success stories in the two years after the fall of the Taliban. Despite intense tribal rivalries, the ANA and MOD were re-created with an ethnically balanced, merit-based leader selection process that, by late 2003, had established both as models among the most-reformed bodies of the Afghan Government.

The ANA training effort produced ethnically balanced, well-trained formations down to platoon level. The strikingly positive reaction these units evoked when they entered villages alongside their embedded U.S. trainers stood in stark contrast to the reactions elicited by the repressive tribal militias then still common in Afghanistan. In fact, villagers often assumed that ANA units were foreign forces until their members began to speak in local dialects. Their professionalism, discipline, and combat effectiveness stood out; they became sources of national pride. The Office of Military

THE FIFTEEN POINTS

1. No searches of national government property are conducted without COMCFC-AFG approval.
2. Units must coordinate to have a government official present during the search of the property of another government official.
3. All units must coordinate for local police or other government officials when conducting searches unless there is a compelling and time sensitive reason. Approval authority for this is the regional commander.
4. All material/documents taken in a search will be returned, unless the person is detained, in which case the property becomes evidence.
5. Soldiers participating in searches will be briefed on local customs.
6. When possible soldiers will ask locals to open locked doors versus forcing entry.
7. Units must avoid cuffing/binding hands unless necessary for security.
8. During low risk operations, a local person will be asked to enter a structure first to explain what is happening.
9. Require Regional Commander approval for conducting night searches.
10. Units will infuse reconstruction funds into areas where people were detained and subsequently released.
11. Inform people that the International Committee of the Red Cross has information on detainees.
12. Establish a Joint Afghan led board in the Ministry of Interior to provide information on detainees and coordinate releases.
13. Work with national government to identify ineffective or corrupt local officials.
14. Monthly Joint review to identify which units are receiving the most complaints.
15. Assign an Afghan liaison to each of our units.

Cooperation-Afghanistan (OMC-A), initially led by Major General (now Lieutenant General) Karl Eikenberry, produced a remarkable training and combat organizational structure from a base of near-zero in less than a year's time. From 2003 to 2005, no ANA formations were defeated or broke in combat engagements. Moreover, ANA units showed notable discipline during intense civil-disturbance operations—operations for which they had not been specifically trained.[26]

The police forces in Afghanistan during this period were more problematic. Initially under-resourced and hampered by a training model that focused on the individual policeman (unlike the ANA, which adopted a "train as units" model), the police program faltered until interagency realignments in mid-2005 permitted OMC-A to assume joint oversight (with DOS) of the police. Lobbied for by both the military and the embassy from Kabul, this significant change allowed the coalition to put lessons learned in ANA training to good effect in police training. It also enabled the coalition to realize economies of scale by combining the two forces' training oversight. With the police widely acknowledged to be the "first line of defense" in a COIN campaign, it remains unfortunate that the fusion of police and ANA training oversight came so late.

Sustain area ownership. In my view, this pillar codified the most important, although least visible, change on the ground. *Area ownership* is an extension of unity of command. Under the previous "raid strategy," units owned no battlespace save the ground they were on during a two- or three-week operation. Long-term, battlespace was "owned" only at the CJTF-180 level in Bagram; no subordinate unit had long-term responsibility for the outcomes in any specified area. With area ownership, we dedicated key contested areas of Afghanistan (i.e., the south and east) to each maneuver brigade and battalion. This seemingly simple concept had profound implications. Now, rather than pass through an area intent on simply routing out an enemy based on intelligence derived in a faraway operating base, units operated in their own distinct territory for up to 12 months.

Our approach consciously mirrored New York City's very successful policy in the 1990s of holding police captains responsible for reducing crime in their precincts. Like New York's captains, our commanders now "owned" their areas and were responsible for results. Area ownership meant that for the first time in the war, unit commanders had a defined area, clear sets of challenges, and direct responsibility for long-term outcomes.

Of course, they also had the authority to effect those outcomes, along with Commanders Emergency Response Program funding to address pressing civil needs with a minimum of bureaucracy. Commanders could become experts in their areas, build personal relations with tribal elders and key government officials, convince the population that they were there to stay—and then see the results.[27] The areas were unavoidably large—one battalion had an area the size of Vermont, another the size of Rhode Island—but those areas were *theirs!* Again, this is classic counterinsurgency, although it was new in Afghanistan.

Enable reconstruction and good governance. Extending the reach of the central government was fundamental to helping Afghanistan become a nation that embraced the rule of law and entrusted its elected government with a monopoly on violence. As Said Jawad, Afghan Ambassador to the U.S., often notes, "Afghanistan is a strong nation, but a weak state." Afghanistan, over its long history, has stayed together as a country despite many opportunities for powerful interests to fracture the nation into separate tribal parts. At the same time, the power of the nation's legitimate institutions grows weaker with every kilometer of distance from Kabul. Effective local government remains elusive, and traditional tribal and clan cultures hold powerful sway even today throughout much of the countryside—and will likely do so for generations. The primary military instrument designed to address this challenge was the provincial reconstruction team.

Conceived in 2002 by a British officer, PRTs were 80- to 100-person organizations normally posted to provincial capitals. Led by a colonel or lieutenant colonel, they typically comprised a security force, medical and logistics components, a civil affairs team, a command and control element, and senior representatives from the Afghan Ministry of Interior, U.S. DOS, USAID, and in certain areas, the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission of the PRTs included security and reconstruction, in fine balance. A PRT's very presence in an area served as a catalyst for both, and it signified the international and Afghan commitment to bettering the lives of the people through improved government support. A multinational PRT executive steering committee in Kabul, co-chaired by the Afghan Minister of Interior and U.S./coalition commander, coordinated the PRT effort.[28]

PRTs became a powerful offensive weapon in our strategic arsenal as we crafted our plans for 2004 in Afghanistan. The four existing PRTs, as mentioned earlier, were deployed in largely quiet areas (Gardez, Konduz, Mazar-e-Sharif, Bamian) with the next four being developed at a very deliberate pace. We soon accelerated the latter by largely disassembling the combined and joint civil-military operations task force headquarters in Bagram and sending its well-resourced pool of civil affairs experts to form new PRTs in the field. The immediate goal became eight new PRTs in the south and east of Afghanistan, so that when the snows melted in the spring of 2004, we would have newly deployed PRTs confronting the Taliban across the most contested areas. (figure 3)

This bold move sent an incontrovertible message about the progress of the security and reconstruction effort into the most dangerous areas of Afghanistan. It was a calculated risk. PRTs had little ability to defend themselves, but the enemy well understood that 20 minutes after a distress call, any PRT in southern Afghanistan could have combat aircraft with bombs overhead and a rapid reaction force ready to arrive soon thereafter. The 2001 offensive that toppled the Taliban had produced a healthy respect for American airpower that allowed us, among other things, to conduct small patrols far from our bases in relative security. PRTs similarly benefitted from air support, and leveraged it regularly.

Engage regional states. This task fell largely into my in-box, but senior leaders at our tactical headquarters in Bagram ably supported me.[29] Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan's (CFC-A) combined joint operations area for USCENTCOM included all of Afghanistan, all of Pakistan less Jammu and Kashmir, and the southern portions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Our forces conducted combat operations only in Afghanistan, but my charter gave me authority to travel and interact regularly with the senior security leaders of the other three countries—with particular emphasis on Pakistan.

This Pakistani component of engagement was necessary to address border-security issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan (the Taliban operated in both) and to assist the Pakistanis in their own efforts to disrupt and defeat so-called "miscreants" in their tribal areas adjacent to Afghanistan. Quarterly

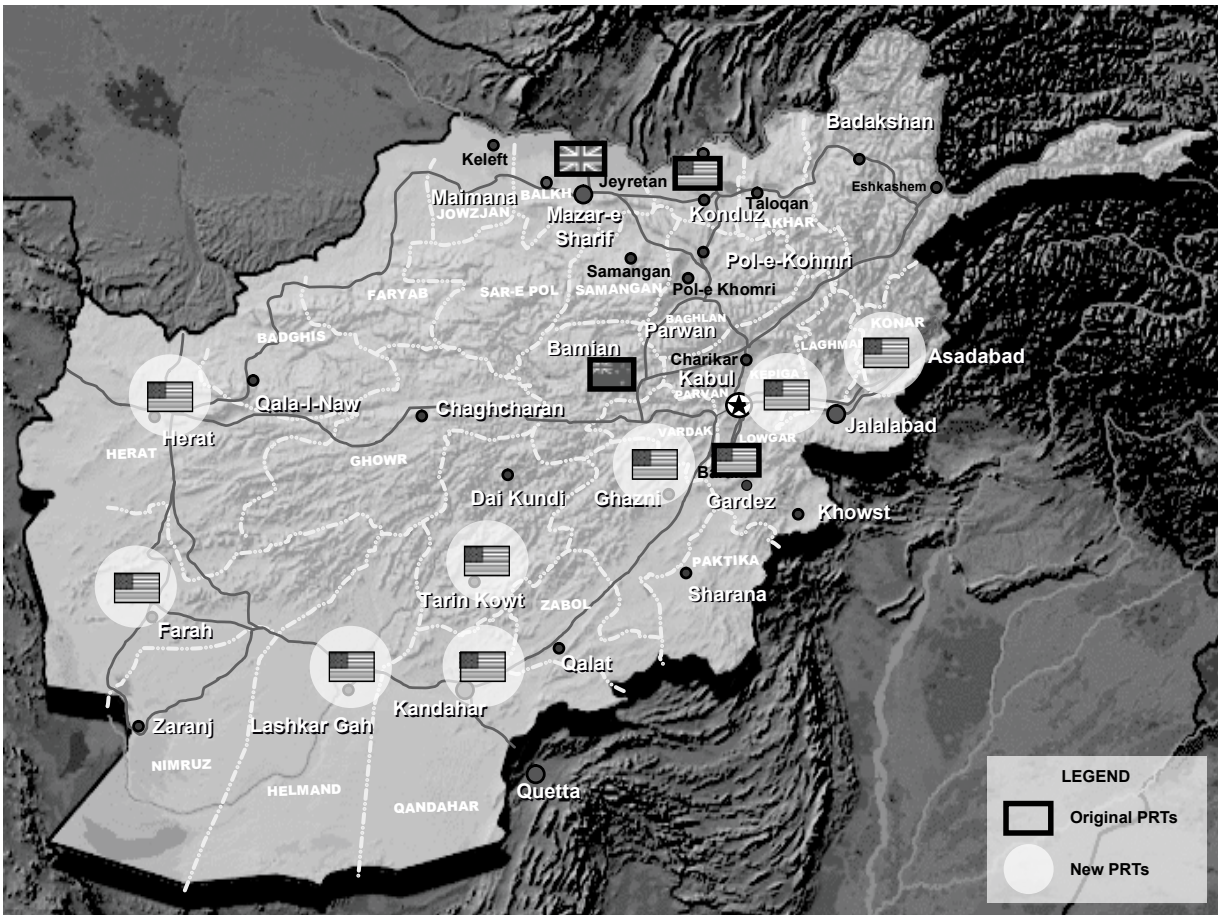

Figure 3. Provincial Reconstruction Teams, 2004.

tripartite conferences chaired at my level (and supported by the U.S. embassies in Kabul and Islamabad) brought together Afghanistan's and Pakistan's senior security leaders to address security issues of mutual concern. CJTF-180 (and later CJTF-76) also hosted monthly tactical border-security meetings along the ill-defined Pakistan-Afghanistan border to reduce local tensions; exchange radios, communications frequencies, and procedures; and build cross-border relations at the local level. Frequent trips to Islamabad rounded out our effort and kept me closely engaged with senior Pakistani military leaders.

All this engagement paid significant dividends when the inevitable exchange of fire across the border occurred between U.S. or Afghan and Pakistani forces. The close military ties that grew from building relationships also helped encourage Pakistani action against the enemy on Pakistan's side of the border. In mid-2004, the Pakistani Army conducted major operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Area for the first time in Pakistan's history. The effort inflicted hundreds of casualties on the enemy and noticeably disrupted Taliban and Al-Qaeda operations on both sides of the border.[30]

Crosscutting vector: information operations (IO). Winning the war of ideas and communicating effectively in a wholly foreign culture was among the most vexing tasks in our COIN strategy. We recognized early on that winning the war of ideas might decide the outcome of the conflict. How would the Afghan people perceive our efforts? Would they retain hope for their future? In the end, would they have more faith in the prospects of their own elected government and their embryonic political process, or would they turn back in despair to the certainty of total control represented by the Taliban?

On balance, it became apparent to me that international forces would always remain at a permanent disadvantage in perceptions, and that the IO effort had to be first and foremost an Afghan one. Our

Winning the war of ideas and communicating effectively in a wholly foreign culture was among the most vexing tasks in our COIN strategy.

challenge was to do everything we could to be truthful, to get the facts out, to let success speak for itself, and to create the unshakeable story of good outcomes—all uncompromised by "spin." Results ultimately speak for themselves. Without demonstrably positive results, information operations can be perceived as spewing empty words that corrode credibility and legitimacy.

Evaluating Results of COIN, 2003-2005

In retrospect, the late 2003 shift in strategy from an enemy-centric counterterrorist strategy to a more comprehensive, population-centered COIN approach marked a turning point in the U.S. mission. While dedicated forces continued unabated the hunt for Al-Qaeda leaders and remnants, the overall direction of the U.S.-coalition effort shifted toward a more classic COIN approach (albeit with a very light footprint) that would have been familiar to Louis Lyautey, Sir Gerald Templer, or Creighton Abrams.

Results over the 2003-2005 period were positive and dramatic. Meeting in a national loya jirga, Afghans drew up and approved the most moderate constitution then extant in the Islamic world. Throughout the spring and summer of 2004, 10.5 million Afghans—twice as many as had been expected to do so—registered to vote in the first-ever Afghan presidential elections. In the face of significant insurgent threats, intimidation, and violence, 8.5 million Afghans actually voted that fall, electing Hamid Karzai as president with 55 percent of the vote from among 18 candidates. By year's end, a respected cabinet was in place and a peaceful inauguration completed. The year 2005 built on this success with a nationwide effort again turning out millions of voters to elect members of the *wolesi jirga*, or lower house of parliament. The winners took their seats by year's end.

All in all, as 2005 came to a close, we had achieved significant progress toward accomplishing the objectives of the 2001 Bonn conference and the follow-on 2004 Berlin conference, but most importantly, we had built a solid basis of hope among the Afghan people for a better future. Without hope among the population, any COIN effort is ultimately doomed to failure.

Afghanistan since 2005

Much has changed in Afghanistan since 2005 ended so promisingly. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda have gathered strength, changed tactics, and significantly increased both their capabilities and their attacks. As one measure, there were 139 suicide attacks in 2006, as compared to 17 in 2005, 5 in 2004, and 2 in 2003. In the first six months of 2007, there were over 80 suicide attacks.[31] Across the border in Pakistan, further offensive operations against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have been largely suspended since the aggressive Pakistani military efforts in 2004 disrupted much of the terrorist base structure in tribal areas of Waziristan.[32] Consequently, a large potential sanctuary for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda has gone largely unmolested for nearly three years.

On the American side of the ledger, the U.S. publicly announced in mid-2005 that NATO was assuming full responsibility for military operations throughout Afghanistan. By the end of that year, the U.S. declared that it was withdrawing 2,500 combat troops.[33] Unsurprisingly, this was widely viewed in the region as the first signal that the United States was "moving for the exits," thus reinforcing long-held doubts about the prospects of sustained American commitment.[34] In my judgment, these public moves have served more than any other U.S. actions since 2001 to alter the calculus of both our friends and adversaries across the region—and not in our favor.

All in all, as 2005 came to a close, …we had built a solid basis of hope among the Afghan people for a better future. Without hope among the population, any COIN effort is ultimately doomed to failure.

As promised, by late 2006 NATO had assumed command of the military effort in Afghanistan, commanding over 26,000 troops (including 12,000 from the U.S.). An additional 10,000 Americans served under U.S. national control, many in logistics units and SOF. Twenty-six NATO PRTs are now deployed across Afghanistan, but they vary widely in size, composition, and mission (according to the contributor)—and now report through a different chain of command than do NATO's maneuver units in the same battlespace. The American-led three-star CFC-A headquarters has been inactivated, and the senior U.S. military commander is a two-star general once again located at Bagram—but in tactical command of only one-quarter of the country, Regional Command East. Headquarters, ISAF, has tactical responsibility for all of Afghanistan—and is assisted by a staff including 14 NATO generals.[35] Operational responsibility for Afghanistan resides in Brunssum, the Netherlands—over 3,000 miles distant. An American four-star general commands ISAF, but he officially reports only through NATO channels, not U.S. Both the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, and the Commander of U.S. Central Command own the Afghan theater and its battlespace—and direct forces in Afghanistan who report separately up their two reporting chains.[36] OMC-A has evolved into Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan and remains located in Kabul. No senior U.S. military commander lives and works at the American Embassy. U.S. Embassy Kabul is in its final stages of a "normalization," designed to make it function and look like every other U.S. embassy in the world. It remains, of course, in a combat zone.

Continual turnover of U.S. senior leaders has made continuity of effort a recurrent challenge in this very complex COIN fight. Since 2001, the U.S. endeavor in Afghanistan has seen five different chiefs of mission and six different military commanders—not counting those who served less than 60 days.[37] Since mid-2005, the comprehensive U.S.-led COIN strategy described above has been significantly altered by subsequent military and civilian leaders who held differing views. With the advent of NATO military leadership, there is today no single comprehensive strategy to guide the U.S., NATO, or international effort. Unity of purpose—both interagency and international—has suffered; unity of command is more fragmented; area ownership has receded; and tactics in some areas have seemingly reverted to earlier practices such as the aggressive use of airpower.

The "bag of capital" representing the tolerance of the Afghan people for foreign forces appears to be diminishing.[38] NATO's ISAF has assumed a narrow focus on the "20-percent military" dimension of COIN. It views the remaining "80-percent non-military" component of successful COIN operations as falling outside the purview of what is, after all, a "military alliance."[39] Both NATO and coalition tactics, too, seem to convey the belief that the center of gravity is no longer the Afghan population and their security, but the enemy. In many ways, these changes take us "back to the future" of 2002 and early 2003—and they in all likelihood do not augur well for the future of our policy goals in Afghanistan.

The Afghan people, whose aspirations rose to unprecedented heights in the exhilarating days of 2004 and 2005, have experienced a series of setbacks and disappointments. Besides facing threats from a more dangerous Taliban, President Karzai is under growing pressure from powerful interests inside his own administration. Corruption, crime, poverty, and a burgeoning narcotics trade threaten to undermine public confidence in the new democratic government. NATO, the designated heir to an originally popular international military effort, is threatened by the prospects of mounting disaffection among the Afghan people. This threat is perhaps only exceeded by political risk at home in Europe, owing to the prospect of dramatically increased NATO casualties as the lethality perfected in Iraq migrates east with jihadist fighters freed to fight other battles in Afghanistan.

Looking Ahead—Tomorrow and the Day After

At the end of the day, what is most important to the United States and to our friends in this region is that success or failure in Afghanistan will dramatically shape the future of a strategically important region for decades to come. Afghanistan's popular image is that of a backward country once best known as a "terrorist-supported state," but it remains at the center of a global energy and trade crossroads—one which is only growing in significance. It is also situated in an exceptionally important neighborhood:

to the east lies Pakistan, the second largest Islamic nation in the world, and likely armed with dozens of nuclear weapons; to the northeast is China, with growing regional energy and security interests; across the north, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, three former states of the Soviet Union, are struggling against internal forces of instability while confronting powerful neighbors; and to the west is Iran, whose looming nuclear program and support for terrorism in the region is cause for grave concern. This neighborhood defines strategic interest for the U.S. and the West—and within it, Afghanistan remains a friendly state anxious to increase its connections to the West and especially to the U.S. At this juncture of history, the U.S. and its alliance partners in NATO can ill afford to walk away from this region with any other outcome save long-term success in Afghanistan. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Reestablishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn: December, 2001), henceforth referred to as the Bonn Process. This UN-supported response assigned lead nations to oversee varied security-sector reform efforts in Afghanistan: police—Germany; military—U.S.; justice-Italy; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration—Japan; counter-narcotics—United Kingdom.

2. Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-180 (now comprising Headquarters, 10th Mountain Division) retained its name upon the departure of XVIII Airborne Corps until March 2004, when it became CJTF-76. Its focus became tactical and low-end operational as Combined forces Command-Afghanistan, the senior coalition headquarters in Kabul, assumed the role of high-end operational and theater (i.e., regional) strategic levels. NATO's ISAF in October 2003 consisted of approximately 5500 troops located exclusively within the city of Kabul.

3. Author's conversation with chief, Office of Military Cooperation, September 2003.

4. Conversations with senior U.S. commanders, 2003; see also Nicholas D. Kristoff, "The Wrong Lessons of the Somalia Debacle," *New York Times* (5 Feb 2002).

5. See *The CIA World Factbook* online entries for Afghanistan and Iraq, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

6. Author's first visit to Afghanistan, pre-deployment, September 2003.

7. Author's conversation with an infantry battalion commander, December 2003.

8. Author's conversation with General John Abizaid, October 2003: *" . . . your mission is 'big Pol' and 'little mil.'"*

9. Conversation with a former senior U.S. commander for Afghanistan, August 2003.

10. This headquarters officially became Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) in early 2004. Command responsibility was assumed in November 2003.

11. The first augmentation of our staff beyond an original six members came by moving the entire CJTF-180 CJ5 (future plans) section to Kabul under Combined Forces Command. Colonel (now Brigadier) Ian Liles, U.K., was the CJ5 largely responsible for drafting the initial "Security Strategy South and East." By May 2005, CFC-A staff stabilized at just over 400 members.

12. See, for example, *The History of Revolutionary Warfare*, Vols. I-V (West Point, NY: United States Military Academy, 1974). Among other valued texts I read during my nineteen months of command were John Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (University of Chicago Press: 2005) and Louis Sorley's *A Better War* (Harvest Books, 2007).

13. General Barry McCaffrey, U.S. Army (retired), comment to the author on the depth of consistent understanding of CFC-A COIN strategy during his visits to units across Afghanistan, 2004.

14. "Strategy" here is used as a more commonly understood interagency and international substitute for what would be called in military parlance a "campaign plan." Our complete campaign plan addressing all elements of power eventually became a 400-page document.

15. The footprint of fewer than 20,000 Western forces in Afghanistan in 2003 was light compared with over 100,000 Soviet troops at the height of their ill-fated military involvement. My belief remains that the "light footprint" approach in Afghanistan holds great advantages, despite its many challenges. See Rory Stewart, "Where Less is More," *New York Times*, 23 July 2007.

16. This occurred under CJTF-76, which succeeded CJTF-180 in April 2004.

17. This was a powerful advantage. Direct access and a personal relationship with the president, vice-president, and secretaries of state and defense gave Ambassador Khalilzad and the Afghan enterprise a strong voice at the most senior policy levels in Washington.

18. Christopher Griffen, "A Working Plan: Hope Isn't the Only Strategy for Afghanistan," *Armed Forces Journal* (April 2007).

19. Our entire headquarters staff at this point had fewer than 40 people.

20. Our six-day-a-week Security Core Group meetings brought top U.S. interagency leaders together to "synchronize" outlooks and information almost every morning. Among the attendees were the ambassador, military commander, USAID chief, Afghan Reconstruction Group (ARG) chief, intelligence chief, OMC-A chief, and deputy chief of mission. All left updated with a common view of events in Afghanistan, thus insuring our daily efforts remained well coordinated and mutually supportive.

21. The Embassy Interagency Planning Group (EPIG) was led by Colonel John Ritchie, USA.

22. General Charles Krulak, Commandant, USMC, created the three-block-war construct.

23. General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Alfred A. Knopf,2006), 5.

24. Discussion at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Shkin with LTC Mike Howard, USA, Commander, 1-87 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, winter 2003-4.

25. Personal observation. The reaction of President Karzai, his cabinet, and outward reactions of the Afghan people to this effort were very positive.

26. Herat riots, August 2004; preparations for civil disturbances in Kabul, August 2004.

27. Paraphrasing LTC David Paschal, Commander, 2-87 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division: "The longer I spent in one place, the more people became comfortable with me and were more willing to share information. At first, they were fearful, then they watched with curiosity but then they gained confidence in us and our ability to provide security and services. With ownership we were able to build a level of trust." Outbrief to Headquarters, CFC-A, 5 May 2004.

28. The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Executive Steering Committee met monthly and comprised senior representatives of all nations contributing PRTs or considering such a contribution. It was typically attended by the UN senior representative of the secretary general and co-chaired by the Afghan minister of interior (who oversaw PRTs in the Afghan governmental structure) and the senior U.S. (and later NATO) military commanders.

29. After the departure of Headquarters, XVIII Airborne Corps, in the spring of 2003, CJTF-180 was formed around Headquarters, 10th Mountain Division; later, CJTF-76 formed around Headquarters, 25th Infantry Division (Light), and subsequently, Headquarters, Southern European Task Force (SETAF).

30. Personal observations and discussions with senior Pakistani military officers 2004.

31. Figures on 2003-2006 suicide attacks are from former Afghan Minister of Interior Ali Jalali.

32. Situation as of mid-July 2007. The Pakistani military response in the FATA to the outburst of nationwide terrorist attacks following the government's 10 July assault on the Lal Masjid ("Red Mosque") in Islamabad had yet to fully develop as of this writing.

33. As reported by the Associated Press and AFX News Limited. See *USA Today,* "NATO to take over Afghan security in 2006" 4 August 2005; and Forbes.com, "U.S. to reduce troop numbers in Afghanistan soon," <www.forbes.com/finance/feeds/afx/2005/12/26/afx2414408.htm>.

34. A remark we commonly heard from Afghans of every stripe was "You Americans are not going to abandon us again, are you?" The Taliban were often noted for saying "the Americans may have all of the wristwatches, but we have all of the time."

35. CFC-A during this era operated with two generals: one U.S. three-star commander and one U.K. two-star deputy commander. U.K deputies were, in sucession, Major Generals John Cooper and Peter Gilchrist, both exceptional talents. The CFC-A staff principals were entirely composed of colonels or Navy captains; CFC chiefs of staff were, in succession, COL Tom Snukis, USA, and COL Dave Lamm, USA, whose efforts were nothing short of heroic.

36. For example, forces under the "Operation Enduring Freedom mandate" (e.g., U.S. Special Forces) in Afghanistan report through a U.S.-only chain to Admiral Fallon, Commander, U.S. Central Command, in Tampa; forces under the "NATO mandate" (e.g., U.S. infantry battalions) report through Headquarters, ISAF, in Kabul (tactical level), to Commander, Joint Forces Command, Brunsuum, the Netherlands (operational level) to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, General Craddock, in Mons (strategic level).

37. Ambassador Finn, Deputy Chief of Mission David Sedney, Ambassador Khalilzad, Ambassador Neumann, Ambassador Wood; LTG Mikolashek, LTG (now General) McNeill, LTG Vines, LTG Barno, LTG Eikenberry, and MG Rodriguez.

38. President Karzai press conferences; April 2006 riots in Kabul; protests to civilian casualties.

39. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger Security International Paperback, August 2006). According to Galula, successful counterinsurgency is 20 percent military effort, 80 percent non-military.