



Afghan and U.S. commandos reinforce Afghan government presence in remote villages along Afghanistan-Pakistan border

Transforming the Conflict in Afghanistan

BY JOSEPH A. L'ETOILE

Many have characterized the war in Afghanistan as a violent political argument between the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (with its coalition partners) and the Taliban, with the population watching and waiting to decide whom to join, and when. The main value of this analogy is not in its characterization of the war but in its explanation of why the Afghan government and the coalition are finding it so difficult to gain traction against a largely unpopular insurgency. By framing the options as a simple binary choice between the government with its hierarchical, remote, and centralized governing structure and the Taliban with its violently repressive but locally present shadow government, the war is represented—or *misrepresented*—as a matter of unattractive choices that impel the population to remain on the sidelines waiting to see who will win.

Unfortunately, the political clock is running out in Afghanistan. It is imperative for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to capitalize on the progress in security made in the fall and winter of 2010 and continue to show progress during the fall of 2011. This is necessary in order to buy the time and the coalition resources required for an orderly and responsible transition to Afghan-led security by the end of 2014.

Joseph A. L'Etoile is the Director of the Irregular Warfare Group at Orbis Operations LLC.

The immediacy and severity of the security challenges in Afghanistan are driving political and military reconsideration of restrictions previously imposed on some population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies heretofore deemed too “risky.” Fears of warlordism and traditional Afghan factionalism are being subordinated to fears of Taliban success propelled by a shadow government that has operated with more presence and immediacy within the Afghan population. Consequently, bottom-up population mobilization has become a major line of operation for the coalition, embracing community-based constructive governance that stimulates and enables resistance to the Taliban’s malicious policies and practices.

The coalition and Afghan government have neither the time nor resources to secure the most relevant and threatened segments of

the international community and the Afghans it backed concluded that local governance and security should be handed over to local elites and their militias

the population by using only their respective resources. This has led to a shifting in the ISAF campaign plan from operations almost exclusively designed to *protect the population* to operations designed to *enable the population to protect itself*. These most recent efforts toward population mobilization represent a revisiting of previous practices that kept the population out of the conflict,¹ but at this point in the campaign, it is both logical and moral to mobilize the local Afghan populations and to make them a party to the conflict that will determine their future.

This approach has placed U.S. special operations forces (SOF) at the center of coalition

operations, returning to the very roots of the U.S. Special Forces ethos. Trained to work by, with, and through local populations to achieve desired ends, SOF have been assigned the mission to mobilize select Afghan populations to achieve campaign-level effects. Through the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan (CFSOCC–A) Village Stability Operations (VSO) and the Afghan Local Police (ALP) programs, the Afghan government and coalition are beginning to treat the population more as a resource and a potential solution and less as a burden or security chore. However, time is short and the security transition challenges are profound.

This article briefly examines coalition experiences with local defense and population-mobilization initiatives in Afghanistan to emphasize the political and sociological challenges involved. From that perspective, recent VSO/ALP initiatives are placed in context. That context in turn highlights significant challenges, both materiel and nonmateriel, that require immediate attention to enable and reinforce population mobilization efforts. Next, broad solutions to those challenges are suggested, with an emphasis on those that offer the greatest potential for near-term success as well as sustainability through 2014 and beyond.

Background

Although VSO is sometimes interpreted as the first sustained effort at bottom-up COIN since the fall of the Taliban, the operations actually represent the second swing of the pendulum toward bottom-up solutions, following a swing to top-down solutions that lasted from 2005 to the middle of 2010. After the Taliban’s defeat at the end of 2001, the international community and the Afghans it backed concluded that local governance and security

TRANSFORMING THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

should be handed over to local elites and their militias. This arrangement represented continuity with most of Afghanistan's past; since the unification of modern Afghanistan in the 18th century, the central government in Kabul has been most successful in controlling the country through provincial elites of various sorts who organized local men into militias.

For the first few years, this approach seemed to work, as there was little insurgency to be found in most of the country. In 2005, however, things began to fall apart. One reason was that the international community had begun forcing the disbandment of numerous militias and had created a national police force to replace them. Some of the militiamen were moved into the national police, but others were left jobless, and many of them proved willing to join the insurgents in return for pay. Although some militia commanders became police chiefs, others were removed from power because they had preyed on the population enough to drive it into the insurgency's arms. But the new police chiefs were often just as predatory and less competent. The U.S. penchant for lavishing development funds and insisting on intrusive power-sharing mechanisms, such as imposing term limits and leadership rotations among local elites, also contributed to instability and violence. When the insurgents ramped up their offensive activities in 2005, they fully exploited those weaknesses.

The government of Hamid Karzai and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies responded to the deterioration in security by increasing the size of Alliance forces and attempting to strengthen the top-down Afghan security organizations: the Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan National Army (ANA), and National Directorate of Security (NDS). The pendulum had swung all the way to the

top-down side. The NDS made progress most quickly because it received robust advice and support from the Central Intelligence Agency and was a smaller organization with a smaller scope of mission. But its small size prevented it from exerting a decisive impact on the war. The ANA made slower but significant progress; however, like the NDS, it was too small for the task, and it shied away from the long-term population security operations required in COIN, preferring to concentrate on offensive operations. The ANP grew in size, but its abbreviated training and poor leadership resulted in such widespread predation and incompetence that its presence was often beneficial to the insurgents. Many ANP members served outside their home areas, a decided disadvantage given the provincialism of rural Afghans, the need for counterinsurgents to know the human terrain, and the value of having friends and relatives as intelligence sources. Not until 2008 did the international community really begin addressing the problems in the ANP, and it is still in need of much improvement. Although increased partnering with ISAF and purges of malign actors have cut down on predation, the ANP remains deficient in the intelligence and operations capabilities required to combat the insurgents. More importantly, the ANP is not connected to an effective judicial system. This is especially problematic since the most significant governance void the insurgency fills is the need for judicial and dispute-resolution procedures.

From 2001 to 2005, the international security forces in Afghanistan concentrated on counterterrorism missions. Operating from bases that were often distant from the population, they sought to capture or kill high-value targets. With the growth of the insurgency in 2005 and the consequent expansion of the foreign troop presence, emphasis shifted to "population-centric" COIN operations. Because of

population-centric doctrine and prohibitions against recruiting local militias, ISAF commanders focused on “protecting the population” rather than “mobilizing the population”—a distinction built on a profound underlying difference: there were often too few troops to protect much of the population, and when protection existed, it did not guarantee the cooperation of the villagers. Obtaining intelligence on the enemy, in particular, proved very difficult.

The security forces and civil servants the national government sent to the provinces were hobbled by unforeseen difficulties in the employment of individuals outside their home

the inability of the top-down security organizations to stem the insurgency after 2005 reignited interest in bottom-up solutions

districts. Afghans regularly deserted or disappeared for weeks at a time to be with their families. In addition, Afghan villagers by nature tend to be hostile to outsiders and unwilling to cooperate even with Afghans from other parts of the country who show up in their villages. ISAF leaders were often surprised that the nationally recruited ANSF elements assigned to rural areas were often perceived as just as “foreign” as NATO personnel.

The inability of the top-down security organizations to stem the insurgency after 2005 reignited interest in bottom-up solutions. Some ISAF commanders sought permission to recruit local men into militias, but their requests were denied by the Karzai government, civilian NATO authorities, and the U.S. Department of State on the grounds that militias had been socially disruptive in the past and were to blame for much of the support for the insurgency. But,

as occurred in Iraq, the continued decline in the security situation began to weaken the resistance of higher authorities to local security programs. Additionally, the successes that flowed from population mobilization efforts in Iraq suggested that under certain circumstances, similar efforts might enjoy success in Afghanistan.

At the end of 2006, President Karzai authorized creation of the 10,000-man Afghanistan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), which was supposed to be a local security force, albeit under national authority. But many recruits did not end up serving in their home districts, and the program eventually collapsed because of poor oversight and weak leadership. Following the ANAP program was a series of bottom-up defense initiatives: the Afghan Public Protection Program, Afghan Public Protection Force, and the direct predecessors of VSO: the Community Defense Initiative (CDI) and the Local Defense Initiative (LDI). Many of these programs attempted to harness the “indirect approach” preferred by U.S. SOF and other COIN advocates—that of using local partner nation forces to protect the population. However, the effort stalled from a lack of political support from both the Afghan and U.S. governments.

ANSF growth rates, quality, and usefulness in the provincial outlands of Afghanistan began to indicate that the security forces available to support security transition requirements were insufficient. In recognition of these circumstances, CFSOCC–A began pushing against the restraints placed on the CDI and LDI programs to establish local examples of what was possible in these bottom-up approaches. Confronted with those early CFSOCC–A population mobilization successes, paired with intensive lobbying by the U.S. Government, President Karzai agreed in August 2010 to the creation of

TRANSFORMING THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

a 10,000-man local security program, titled the Afghan Local Police, with the proviso that its units would be subordinate to the district police chief and, ultimately, the Ministry of Interior. Armed forces organized under the CDI/LDI Initiative were merged into VSO/ALP, and CFSOCC–A became the lead U.S. organization for VSO/ALP. For the first time, strategic buy-in from the Afghan government and ISAF set the stage for coherent and widely effective population mobilization from the bottom up.

Population Mobilization and VSO/ALP

The overriding U.S. objective in Afghanistan is preventing the use of Afghan territory for terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland and American interests abroad. The United States seeks to build the capabilities of the Afghan government so it can carry more of the security burden and enable the United States to reduce the costs and scope of its involvement. America and its NATO Allies have devoted considerable intelligence and military resources toward counterterror strikes against extremists within Afghanistan, but those strikes alone have not been sufficient to rid Afghanistan of the terrorist threat or enable the country to take responsibility for its own security. Complicating the security challenge is the fact that the sanctuaries in Pakistan are the source of the majority of the ideologically driven individuals who lead the insurgent groups in Afghanistan. Geopolitical realities prevent the coalition from undertaking operations in Pakistan of sufficient magnitude to stop this flow of insurgents. Nor is it possible to stop these insurgents at the transit zone, the 2,430-kilometer Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The only practical solution for success at this point in the campaign is to turn Afghanistan itself into a hostile arrival zone for insurgents.

The preceding argument is not an attempt to apply Manichean absolutes to complex problems. Clearly, a layered security approach that addresses the challenges within Pakistan, as well as in Afghanistan itself, is required to meet strategic objectives. Likewise, the Afghan government and ANSF must have the defining role in security and must obtain legitimacy within its own constituency. However, given the strategic timelines playing out and the magnitude of the challenges, population-mobilization strategies that augment and do not compete with ANSF are not only legitimate, but imperative. By failing to mobilize the population, we have elevated the importance of the Pakistan sanctuaries and the border regions—two areas where we are least capable of affecting outcomes.

The fundamental resource for transforming Afghanistan into an environment hostile to the insurgency is its population. Without this resource, ANSF and the Afghan government stand little chance of succeeding, especially in the face of transition demands. However, the population is not a homogeneous entity that conforms well to cookie-cutter solutions and top-down approaches. Perhaps the most universal and most powerful characteristic of Afghan society is its proud and independent character. At the most fundamental level, Afghan tribal society (especially those tribes that aid and abet

it is shameful for a man to be denied a role in protecting his own family, clan, or tribe

the Taliban) is governed by a shame- and honor-based value system (Pashtunwali). In such a society, it is shameful for a man to be denied a role in protecting his own family, clan, or tribe. All

L'ETOILE

of the good works of governance and development will come to naught if population-centric COIN strategies do not take this simple fact into account. General Sir Frank Kitson's thoughts on this idea are instructive:

I was gradually arriving at the conclusion that I have found to hold good in various different places. Briefly it is that three separate factors have to be brought into play in order to make a man shift his allegiance. First, he must be given an incentive that is strong enough to make him want to do so. This is the carrot. Then he must be made to realize that failure will result in something unpleasant happening to him. This is the stick. Third, he must be given a reasonable opportunity of proving both to himself and to his friends that there is nothing fundamentally dishonorable about his action. Some people consider that the carrot and the stick is all that is necessary, but I am sure that many people will refuse the one and face the other if by doing otherwise they lose their self-respect.

Providing security feeds an honor narrative and taps into the deep cultural DNA of Afghans. More fundamentally, VSO/ALP feeds a strategic narrative of Afghans helping Afghans. Concerns over the factionalism of Afghan tribal society are legitimate, but denying tribal members a role in securing their own families and villages, especially when qualitative and quantitative ANSF deficiencies leave them vulnerable to predation and mobilization by the Taliban, is tantamount to declaring them a greater threat to themselves than is the Taliban. It also reenforces a foreign occupation narrative.

The added benefit of an effective population-mobilization strategy directly bolsters the success of U.S. forces as well. As COIN lessons in Iraq

and elsewhere have demonstrated, beneficial second- and third-order effects emerge once local populations have embraced the view that U.S. forces do not represent an "occupation," but rather exist to facilitate good governance, development, and social stability, and to protect against Taliban oppression. These benefits include increased information on malign actors, increased security, and real sustainable progress on developmental projects with community buy-in. Sustained progress within these programs at local levels is essential to achieve stated objectives that cross Afghan, inter-agency, and coalition lines of effort, thus realizing common goals that allow legitimacy and governance to grow and function at district, provincial, and national levels.

How VSO/ALP Works

Previously, the analogy of an argument was used to describe the conflict between the Afghan government/coalition and the Taliban, with the population waiting to pick a side. VSO/ALP turns this dynamic on its head by engaging in a dialectic with the population instead of perpetuating a violent argument with the Taliban. VSO/ALP blends formal and informal forms of governance into a cohesive, trust-building, dynamic approach. Because population mobilization requires a coalescing element, VSO places renewed emphasis on identifying the root causes of *stability* instead of the root causes of *instability*. Every village is ordered by some coalescing element. In some villages, it is a key personality, elder, mullah, merchant, or strongman. In other villages, it is a collaborative body such as a shura. The point is that no village exists in utter entropy with no leadership structure, however informal—and where there is order of any kind there is opportunity. Instead of asking "What *isn't* working here?" VSO asks "What *is* working here?" and seeks to amplify and support it. Using skill

TRANSFORMING THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

sets honed via specialized training and adapted for Afghanistan, U.S. SOF stimulate, amplify, and support these sources of stability. Eventually, living in the village day and night, these VSO special forces create, nurture, and assist successful conditions along three lines of operations: security, governance, and development.

VSO progresses in four stages—shape, hold, build, and transition. During the shaping phase, the SOF team gathers information on the human terrain, opens dialogue with local leaders, and conducts kinetic operations against insurgent forces. In this phase, the crucial situational awareness of inter- and intra-tribal dynamics is developed, and those structures and individuals that contribute to stability—the things that are working—are identified for reinforcement and maturation into the sustainable foundations of security. In the hold phase, the SOF team is granted access to the village structure or invited to live within it. In this phase, the team organizes an ALP unit while continuing to conduct population security operations and begins governance and development activities. It is during the build phase that the governance and development activities of VSO come to the fore, with the overarching objective of connecting villages to the district government and, just as importantly, the district government to the villages. In a sense, the government auditions for the village, and the village auditions for the government. After these phases have been completed in a village, the SOF team transitions its responsibilities to the ALP and moves on to a neighboring village, which by this time may be eager to participate. After a period of between 2 and 5 years, the ALP element will either be merged into the Afghan National Police or disbanded, or its “contract” may be renewed as conditions dictate.

CFSOCC–A has incorporated ALP into what it terms the Village Stability Platform (VSP), which consists of the ALP and its SOF partners

and engages in VSOs, which are COIN operations to provide security, governance, and development. Most, but not all, VSO sites have ALP units. As of July 22, 2011, there were 43 validated ALP sites, with a total of 6,849 ALP members. Communities

in the hold phase, the SOF team is granted access to the village structure or invited to live within it

petition the government to participate in the program, and the government selects those that it believes have the will and capability to make the program succeed. Local shuras nominate commanders and ALP members, who are vetted by NDS, SOF, and village elders and trained and equipped by the Ministry of Interior.

Each VSO site has a small SOF detachment from the U.S. Army Special Forces, Marine Special Operations Command, or Navy SEALs. The ISAF commander has attached two conventional U.S. Army battalions to CFSOCC–A to provide additional manpower for the program. These Soldiers augment the SOF teams, allowing the latter to be split into multiple parts that can cover different sites.

Transition and VSO/ALP

The campaign in Afghanistan is entering a process of transition of security responsibilities to the Afghan government. The 2011 to 2014 timeframe, while subject to varying definitions, sets clear goals for transferring lead security responsibilities. The ability of the government and ANSF to control transitioned districts and provinces will be infinitely easier with a mobilized population instead of a populace still sitting on the fence watching to see who will win. While the Awakening in Iraq is not a perfect analogy, there

are some undeniable similarities. The Iraqi population mobilized (often at the local level), identified its enemy, became a party to the conflict, collaborated with the coalition and the Iraqi government, and set the conditions for an orderly transition of security responsibilities. These measures or actions are similar to the objectives of the Afghan security transition process.

However, one of the primary lessons from security transition efforts in Iraq to date is that the first casualty of coalition forces engaging in transition is often situational awareness. As

initially, SOICs will more likely be consumers of VSCC information and intelligence than providers

coalition forces scaled back local operations in Iraq, contact with the population was drastically reduced and a concomitant reduction in situational awareness resulted. As the Joint Afghan-NATO Inteqal (Transition) Board considers provinces and districts for transition, it will be reliant on district stability reporting. Accurate district stability reporting is in turn reliant on timely and reliable local information. Quantitative assessment processes that depend on objective criteria expressed in measures of effectiveness and measures of progress will have an important role in the transition. However, more subjective or qualitative reporting, the type based on a first-hand understanding of an operating area (the kind that can only be obtained by living with the population) will be more valuable in most cases. If transition requires situational awareness, and situational awareness requires intimate local knowledge, then the value of VSO/ALP is heightened, not reduced, by sound and effective transition plans and activities.

Fortunately, there are considerable opportunities to integrate VSO/ALP activities and reporting into overall stabilization and development planning. Village or local level information can and should be passed via the Village Stability Coordination Centers (VSCCs) to the regional Stability Operations Information Centers (SOICs) to create a mutually reinforcing information architecture that, with appropriate manning and focus, can establish situational awareness networks and enterprises that can thrive in and through the transition. By combining the nontraditional information sources, which SOICs should be focused on, with the bottom-up tactile information that VSO/ALP can provide, the challenges of maintaining situational awareness during security transitions can be largely overcome. The key is to undertake the planning steps and resource investments now so when the traditional “INTs” of military intelligence (such as human intelligence—HUMINT—and signals intelligence—SIGINT) begin to thin as a result of security transition activities, nontraditional and local informational/intelligence capabilities can more than make up for the reductions.

SOICs and VSO/ALP

As Major General Michael Flynn, USAF, and others suggest in *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*,² information about nontraditional intelligence subjects such as local environments, key influencers, grievances, demographics, loyalties, and so forth are as important to VSO, or COIN, as geospatial intelligence is to kinetic targeting. Yet the organizational framework and architectures for this support are still immature. Commensurate training, guidance, and lessons learned are still insufficient, and until adequately trained and experienced personnel are providing effective support *and* reporting key details affecting local populations, intelligence

TRANSFORMING THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

Resident of Now Bahar District voices concerns during Afghan Local Police validation shura



DOD (Brian Ferguson)

support to VSO will not be optimal. In fact, initially, SOICs will more likely be consumers of VSCC information and intelligence than providers. This highlights the imperative to tie the VSCCs into a broader information/intelligence architecture. Eventually and appropriately, the lines will blur regarding who is the supported or supporting entity—the SOIC or VSCC. Serious consideration should be given to those information-sharing mechanisms, especially the exchange of liaison officers who can expeditiously and effectively push and pull relevant population-centric information across the VSO/ALP enterprise. Lastly, by properly nesting VSCCs and SOICs, VSCCs will have broad access to interagency personnel, and interagency personnel will have access to detailed local knowledge.

Challenges

The defining characteristic of VSO/ALP operations is their distributed nature. Operating from austere locations beyond the mutual support of adjacent units and reliant on hyper-extended lines of communication and support, VSO inserts American SOF into new environments with unfamiliar geographical and human terrain, against insurgents who are intimately familiar with both. The force protection and mission accomplishment challenges of VSO/ALP operations are therefore considerable; they span the domains both of warfighting functions and doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) considerations. The solution to existing problems clearly is *not* to add more SOF personnel to each VSO site. First, there are not enough SOF personnel available. Second, the majority of the challenges to VSO/ALP require a mixture of qualitative, not just quantitative, materiel and nonmateriel solutions. The key is to significantly enable

VSO and eventually ALP members so they have access to and represent much more powerful networks, accelerate learning, aid in rapid informed decisionmaking, and ensure that the geographic isolation of VSO sites does not translate into unacceptable mission and force protection risks.

The number of Americans assigned to a VSO site usually ranges from 10 to 20, and initially the team has no one to rely on for help except itself. The insurgents may have several times that number in the area, and they usually have established networks of supporters among the civilian population who provide them with food, shelter, and information. It is therefore imperative that the SOF team rapidly develops its rapport with the population and obtains the cooperation of some of its members. This requires intelligent and informed interaction with the local population. Team members must meet regularly with elites to gain influence with them. These Key Leader Engagements are essential to population mobilization efforts at all levels. They must organize development projects to gain the community's support. They must communicate with the population to identify its needs, collect information, and relay messages. Under these circumstances, the sine qua non of successful VSO/ALP is situational awareness.

Identifying the right villagers, groups, and individuals for inclusion in ALP is important and difficult. Afghanistan is divided into numerous competing factions, so the creation of ALP with one group is liable to engender enough resentment in a neighboring group to drive it into the insurgency. One focus of VSO personnel is working with the local shura, which is the body of villagers that selects ALP members. But often the shura system is broken or dominated by one faction. To create viable Afghan Local Police, VSO personnel must be able to identify the major local players and rivalries and untangle any

interpersonal intrigues. They may need to bring elders back from the cities, or assist in negotiations between factions. Additionally, while VSO strives to link village populations to district-level administration, in many cases that administration may be utterly ineffective or corrupt, calling into question the utility of creating the linkages. VSO personnel need to know how to handle bad actors within the government. When they cannot achieve the removal or marginalization of such individuals, they need to look for ways for villages to run their affairs without extensive involvement from the districts.

Unfortunately, U.S. SOF by themselves do not have sufficient personnel to conduct VSO on a scale that is likely to influence the overall campaign decisively. Splitting the teams up further is unlikely to be productive because the teams are already small and have few people with certain key specializations, particularly intelligence; and the VSCCs will require additional capacity. Therefore, forces outside of SOF are being incorporated into VSO to meet the ISAF commander's growth targets. Some General Purpose Forces (GPF) have been assigned to the SOF teams at VSO sites and placed under the control of the detachment commander. In some instances, GPF are being used to hold a site after SOF have formed the ALP and removed most of the insurgents. Adequate preparation and command and control of the U.S. forces assigned to VSO demands great attention and care. As VSO matures, there may develop a scalable menu of options from the current exclusively SOF teams and SOF-GPF hybrids, to GPF-led/SOF-enabled teams and exclusively GPF teams. Selection of the preferred model may depend on the complexity of the operating environment (including threat and tribal dynamics), the maturity of the operating environment

TRANSFORMING THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

(especially previous and current experience with coalition and ANSF forces), and the risk tolerance of the Afghan government and ISAF as 2014 transition goals approach. Regardless of the model, most of the challenges are likely to remain the same or similar.

Additionally, through involvement in governance and development, VSO is intervening in matters that previously have been in the domain of the U.S. State Department, the Afghan government, and other coalition organizations, mainly because of security conditions and in some cases a lack of civilian personnel. However, the shortage of civilian personnel in the districts, and the ability for SOF to achieve access to local villages, creates an unavoidable necessity for military involvement in governance and development. SOF have Civil Affairs specialists who possess expertise in governance and development, but there are too few to provide support at all VSO sites. Traditionally, Civil Affairs has been a minor supporting element of any U.S. military approach, with a consequent dearth of funding. As the now “supported element,” the development and Civil Affairs funding sources need to be brought into line with operational priorities. Similarly, governance and development issues are not a core competency of most U.S. personnel who will participate in the VSO mission. Developing effective education, training, and tools that empower small teams to acquire and improve competence in these areas prior to, as well as during, deployment are critical factors in achieving the desired paradigm change and subsequent stabilization effects.

Solutions

Clearly the challenges to conducting distributed VSO/ALP operations are significant, but they are by no means insurmountable. A DOTMLPF framework illustrates some of the solutions and can be used to inform the way ahead.

Doctrine. Unconventional warfare and Foreign Internal Defense doctrine was clearly in the minds of the Special Forces personnel who conceptualized the current VSO program. Additionally, a vast body of contemporary experience in Afghanistan informed those

VSO is intervening in matters that previously have been in the domain of the U.S. State Department, the Afghan government, and other coalition organizations

early efforts. However, for VSO/ALP to grow at the pace that the ISAF commander desires, the unique factors influencing population mobilization efforts in Afghanistan in general and in the myriad of idiosyncratic factors at the local level that influence current and potential VSO sites must be systematically captured and analyzed with the results disseminated and incorporated into training. While doctrine, as an enduring body of work, appropriately moves in deliberate fashion, it should not remain uninformed by contemporary events. Deliberate efforts should be undertaken to ensure that written, oral, and video histories, best practices, and operational lessons learned from VSO/ALP operations are made available not only to current but also to future doctrine writers. The richer the story from which it is derived, the more precise, flexible, and useable future doctrine will be.

Organizations. The organizational structure of the supported and supporting VSO/ALP organizations must be tailor-made for the operational environments in which they operate and provide support. Not only should specific local challenges such as corruption, narcotics, border issues, or displaced persons be recognized in the organic organization and/or reach back assets of the VSO/

ALP units, but the operational phase (shape, hold, build, or transition) should also influence organizational design. No two VSO/ALP teams will be identical. Mission analysis and the factors of mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations should drive team composition. As U.S. Special Operations Command is already stretched

years of kinetic operations and other nonpopulation-centric tasks have left SOF with uneven population mobilization skills

to the limit, contract subject matter expert support will prove invaluable in the near term.

Because VSO/ALP teams are only as capable as the networks that support them, considerable attention should be devoted to the processes, organization, and capability of the Village Stability Coordination Center that supports and synchronizes VSO/ALP efforts. Best practices from Company Level Intelligence Cells, Civil Affairs teams, Economic and Political Intelligence Cells, SOICs, and other niche organizations should be harvested to inform VSCC training and other preparatory efforts.

Technology should be aggressively leveraged to flatten and network VSO/ALP organizations. Real time experiences from geographically separated teams and centers can, and should, be disseminated freely, especially in the early stages of setting up VSO sites, before there is a large body of experience. Experiences shared through technological means will help to rapidly mature and refine VSO operations. Video capture and 3G capabilities will be central to organizational maturity and vicarious learning and critical to the rate of partner force (ALP) growth and development.

Training. Years of kinetic operations and other nonpopulation-centric tasks have left SOF with uneven population mobilization skills. Initial training, doctrine, and oral traditions of SOF will not be enough to transform the force. Concerted and focused training in population mobilization techniques must be undertaken. As discussed, situational awareness is both the fundamental and foundational skill set that must be developed. Advanced situational awareness training in the form of Human Behavior Pattern Recognition and Analysis is the most important VSO/ALP skill in which SOF personnel have not previously received extensive training. VSO/ALP also demands increased emphasis on human intelligence techniques, tactical questioning, site exploitation, and language and negotiation skills. If the past is prologue and the integration of GPF into VSO/ALP operations continues, SOF-GPF integration will increase dramatically both at the VSO site level and in terms of larger battlespace management issues. There should be a VSO/ALP-specific predeployment training program for GPF forces slated to participate in VSO/ALP.

Materiel. The distributed nature of VSO/ALP operations demands technologies that empower small organizations across warfighting functions. Accordingly, as mentioned previously, it is critical to apply technology solutions to the VSO mission that make qualitative differences, especially in communications and networking. The approach to technology should be considered in a phased or tiered approach. The following discussion is not a thorough examination of the materiel challenges attendant to VSO, but rather an illustration of how technologies available today can be fielded in short order and have a significant impact on VSO/ALP operations.

The distributed and disconnected nature of the VSO/ALP mission is ideal for the insertion

TRANSFORMING THE CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

of mobile devices to enable information-sharing, automated dissemination, and virtualized training. Tailored applications will be critical to harness the power of mobile devices in support of VSP unique needs, and they should be customized for both Afghan and American use. For the typical Afghan user, an approach can be applied with a mostly graphical and video-based application framework, whereas the typical U.S. user's applications can be largely text and information-based.

With the geographic and disconnected nature of the VSO mission, a tiered approach can be applied to connecting the VSCC, VSO team, ALP, and the local population. There is likely no one communications solution that can address all needs at every VSO site. An infrastructure of 3G cellular, satellite communications (SATCOM), and even Wi-Fi can provide the swarm of Internet Protocol (IP)-based connectivity to enable an environment for mobile computing. The assumption is that the initial network deployments will be focused on an unclassified environment with no direct connections to secure networks. Communication technology deployment to the VSO should be considered in the context of severity of the need, technology readiness level, deployment timeline, and vulnerability assessment. Every device on the network should be alerted, located, managed, and controlled to a level that provides options for force protection, situational awareness, remote device control (that is, perimeter security cameras), and communication.

With the deployment of an IP-based communications infrastructure, mobile devices, and IP-enabled hardware comes the challenge of power. At the device level, relatively inexpensive solar solutions should be considered. The consideration for each site may be different based on the geographic location and power resupply options. For example, one site may be able to sustain a full 3G architecture, while another may

only be able to blanket the area with solar power Wi-Fi solutions tied to a SATCOM for sporadic backhaul connectivity. These kinds of factors should be assessed when determining the best technology support to each VSO location.

Leadership and Education. VSO/ALP operations are too complex to rely on discovery learning. Leaders across the force should be engaged on the salient issues now. Career, intermediate-, and top-level schools across the Department of Defense should be focused on VSO/ALP as the imperative that it is. Additionally, the numerous centers of excellence and irregular warfare/COIN/stability organizations that have proliferated in recent years must be harnessed and focused. To that end, a VSO/ALP proponent/executive agent should be expeditiously identified at an appropriate level within the Defense Department and empowered to leverage those leadership and educational entities.

Personnel. VSO/ALP organizations will require expertise in numbers that traditional military personnel systems cannot support. Accordingly, creativity must be applied to assign personnel with the right skills at the right place at the right time. Appropriate Military Operation Specialties from across Services, interagency personnel, and contract personnel should all be used. In many cases, SOF leadership will be an absolute necessity, but the demands of the current operational environment may make it necessary to go without the full complement of SOF personnel in order to set up the required number of VSO/ALP elements.

VSO/ALP are also in need of full-time Female Engagement Team (FET) personnel who can obtain information from female Afghans and assist SOF and ALP with searches. In Afghanistan, the female half of the population is prohibited by custom from speaking with American males, so FETs are the only means

L'ETOILE

by which our forces can interact with that half. Because some Afghan men have proven more comfortable speaking with American females than with American males, FETs have also served as intermediaries between community leaders and coalition forces.

The development of FET training is in its infancy, and FET-specific doctrine is nonexistent. A robust training regimen must be created if the FETs are to realize their full potential. Courses in tactical questioning, human terrain analysis, cultural understanding, and advanced situational awareness are essential. Much of the existing U.S. COIN doctrine applies to FETs, but separate doctrine must be created that builds on the strengths, and recognizes the limitations, of FETs. Establishment of a permanent FET organization will also give U.S. SOF a capability that can be deployed to other areas of the world.

Facilities. SOF, GPF, and other interagency or contracted personnel need a joint training and education center based in the United States where SOF, supported by contract subject matter experts, can help prepare non-SOF personnel for the VSO/ALP mission. Additional predeployment training and education can be provided virtually through videos and distance learning tools. However, prior to deployment, all VSO personnel slated to work together—SOF, GPF, interagency, and contracted—should participate in a multiday exercise at a simulated Afghan village, preferably at a U.S.-based VSO training facility. If robust scenarios are created and Afghan role players are properly prepared, these exercises will give VSO/ALP trainees the best possible preparation for the environment they are about to enter.

Conclusion

Time is running out in Afghanistan. We no longer have the luxury of keeping the population on the sidelines of this conflict. Population mobilization can no longer be tactics, techniques, and procedures episodically applied in Afghanistan. It has become a campaign imperative. Unlike previous bottom-up COIN efforts, Village Stability Operations and Afghan Local Police currently enjoy the political support of both the Afghan government and ISAF. But that support is tenuous, and near-term results will almost certainly determine future support. We cannot squander this opportunity: We must expeditiously resource and support VSO/ALP with a concerted effort across the DOTMLPF domains. This effort should include both materiel solutions tailored for utility to individual teams in unique environments and nonmateriel solutions that allow effective grassroots success in achieving security, development, and governance. Parsimonious or disjointed implementation of VSO/ALP programs may threaten the prospects for any further bottom-up approaches. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Previous efforts at population mobilization in Afghanistan notwithstanding, Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police is the first large-scale population mobilization effort attempted with the support of both the Afghan government and the coalition. These programs are also unique as they are being executed within a security transition framework.

² Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2010), available at <www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/AfghanIntel_Flynn_Jan2010_code507_voices.pdf>.