



COUNTERINSURGENCY ON THE GROUND IN AFGHANISTAN

How Different Units Adapted to Local Conditions

Executive Summary

This publication provides a glimpse into what relatively small military units—teams, platoons, companies, and highly dispersed battalions—have done to roll back the insurgency in some of the more remote areas of Afghanistan. The focus is on counterinsurgency at the tactical and local levels.

The book includes 15 vignettes about different units from the US Marines, Army, and Special Forces; the British Army and Marines; the Dutch Army and Marines; and the Canadian Army. The case studies cover ten provinces in Afghanistan's south and east. They describe the diverse conditions these units faced, how they responded to these conditions, what worked and what did not, and the successes they achieved. The research is based almost entirely on interviews with those involved in these operations.

Some of the book's key themes include:

A localized insurgency

Afghanistan's politics and economy are extremely localized and conditions vary widely from place to place. It is not uncommon for major developments in one area to have little or no effect on places just miles away, or for tactics that worked in one place to fail miserably in villages nearby. Marines and Soldiers operating in Afghanistan need to understand their local environment on its own terms and tailor their operations accordingly.

Navigating the political terrain

Insurgency is inherently political; it is about employing organized violence to achieve political objectives. The insurgents in Afghanistan are cunning political operatives. To be effective, small units needed to have an intimate knowledge of the political terrain, and the ability to navigate it shrewdly. The more successful units immersed themselves in the complex politics in their areas of operation. They gathered information on tribal and ethnic groups—their viewpoints, interests, disputes, and histories of conflict.

Searching for political solutions

The most successful operations were those where a unit identified the political problems driving the insurgency in its operating area and came up with viable solutions. In these cases, further counterinsurgency operations were sometimes unnecessary. Dialogue and negotiation also reduced the amount of fighting necessary during clear-hold-build operations and helped protect vulnerable forces in isolated areas.

Engaging the population and building popular support

Soldiers and Marines who used a population-centered approach tended to make more progress with less violence than those who focused on the enemy or the terrain. Doing so required dispersing into small outposts in or near populated areas, getting out constantly on foot, engaging and collaborating with local leaders, and implementing development projects that benefitted communities and built popular support. Units that followed this approach took on greater risk in the short term, but usually ended up safer in the long run.

Using reconstruction funds

Many units learned to target their use of reconstruction funds towards specific objectives, rather than simply fund projects for their own sake. This meant using funds to gain and maintain support in key areas, draw fighting-age males away from the insurgency, bring quarrelling factions to the negotiating table, and punish recalcitrant tribes and clans.

Protecting the population

Preventing the insurgents from intimidating the population was essential to building popular support and making reconstruction work. Afghans were rarely willing to cooperate with coalition troops if they (or their families) believed they might face retaliation. Where insurgents could target individuals working with the coalition, the presence of coalition troops did more harm than good. In contested areas, where coalition forces and insurgents fought for control over the same population, the plight of civilians was the worst.

Employing restraint in the use of force

Restraint on the use of force was essential to every operation detailed in this book. Killing the wrong people had far-reaching consequences. In many places, ill-informed or poorly conceived combat operations reversed months—and in some cases years—of patient effort overnight. In other places, targeting operations had second-order effects that were not apparent until months or years later.

Finding the right balance between concentration and dispersion

It took time and a lot of trial and error for units to figure out how much territory and how much of the population they could reasonably control with the capabilities they had. Finding the right balance between concentration and dispersion—in order to adequately protect the population and limit insurgent safe areas, without spreading one's forces too thin—was particularly hard in Afghanistan, with its vast expanses of rural hinterland, unforgiving terrain, and dispersed population.

Maintaining continuity

The counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan suffered from constant unit turnover, lack of historical memory, and a tendency to repeat the same mistakes over and over. Units on their way out took much of their hard-won local knowledge with them. In most cases, new units had to “reinvent the wheel.” In some areas, the local Afghans have seen 10-15 units cycle through, each a blank slate.

Operating with little strategic guidance

In most of the cases outlined in this book, units that followed a population-centric approach did so on their own initiative, in response to local conditions with little strategic guidance. Many mission statements said little more than “conduct COIN” or “target insurgents”—leaving it up to the small unit on the ground to figure out what objectives it should have and how to achieve them.

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