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Strategic Insights: Better Late Than Never

October 23, 2018 | Dr. M. Chris Mason

Seventeen years ago this November, in a conference room in the Pentagon, I explained that, in whatever form it took, the new Government of Afghanistan would require some sort of provincial or territorial forces under Afghan Army command to augment the regular national army, which the interagency working group was tasked with creating. This structure was how Afghanistan organized its army from 1910 to 1979. Afghanistan could never afford to pay the salaries for, be able to maintain, or fill the ranks of a regular, all-volunteer army large enough to defend all of its territory simultaneously. And in Afghanistan, there's always an uprising somewhere. This advice was ignored. Now, in 2018, the U.S. Army is finally experimenting with this approach, but only after exploring seemingly every possible permutation of getting irregular security forces wrong in the intervening 17 years.¹

There have been at least nine failed efforts by the U.S. military to establish irregular forces in Afghanistan since that initial meeting in November 2001. The long list of U.S. military failures with irregular forces in Afghanistan includes: the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (who were given 10 days of training, an AK47, and a uniform, and then cast adrift); the Afghan Local Police; the Community Defense Initiative (later rebranded the Local Defense Initiative); the deeply flawed Village Stability Operations program; Community Based Security Solutions; the Critical Infrastructure Protection concept; the Intermediate Security for Critical Infrastructure plan; the Afghan Public Protection Program; and the short-lived Local Security Forces initiative. What these programs all had in common—besides failure, getting a lot of people killed, and adding nothing to Afghan security—was that all of the forces created were notionally under the control of the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs, which Afghanistan's own President calls the “heart of corruption.”²

In his essay, *Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten (Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through)*, Sigmund Freud observed that individuals are compelled to repeat bad experiences rather than to learn from them. This certainly seems to be true of the U.S. Army, for which “lessons learned” is often an oxymoron. In an observation apropos of “lessons learned,” Freud said that a person usually does not remember experiences (“lessons”) and anything that he has forgotten and repressed, he acts out, “without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.”³ “The individual,” Freud added, “is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of . . . remembering it.”⁴ This psychological tendency applies collectively to organizations as well, and this may explain why the U.S. military is so bad at learning the lessons it pays for with blood and treasure. This is true of most of the lessons of the Vietnam war and particularly true of the militia programs in the Afghan war.

Historically, Afghan soldiers have always served close to home. Every successful Afghan Army since 1900 has been built on local foundations. Local men serving near home with other local men were much less likely to desert. If they did, they probably would be discovered at their homes and shamed, and they knew it. Ironically, this was the very reason why the U.S. Army was

built entirely on state-based regiments from its founding until the experiment of the 82d “All American” Division in World War I. The 82d “All American” Division was the first U.S. Army unit to test the novel idea of mixing men from different regions of the country in the same fighting unit—130 years after transparent democracy was successfully established in a fully-literate America. In fact, studies show that one of the primary reasons men do not desert from the military is because of this fear of being shamed and called a coward back home. However, in late 2001 and early 2002, the U.S. military ignored both Afghan history and its own history and decided instead to create a “mini-me” national army for a country that is centuries away from being a nation. Decision-makers in Washington believed that men who did not live in a territory would be more effective and committed to securing that territory from warlords or invaders than men who did live there. Thus, the new Afghan National Army (ANA) became a large-scale social experiment in America’s latest nation-creating project in Asia. In the 16 years since I watched the first ANA kandak (battalion) form in Kabul in May 2002, the annual desertion rate of the ANA has never once been below 32 percent.

The cost of literally one-third of the entire ANA deserting every year for 16 years, in terms of both military effectiveness and taxpayer dollars wasted, has been staggering. Another of the three major reasons why a man stands and fights is for the man on his left and the man on his right.⁵ If one of those two men on the left or the right deserts every year, there is little motivation for the man in the middle to stand and fight either. This is particularly true when all three men come from different regions of Afghanistan, and are of different ethnicities and often-different linguistic groups, so that usually none of them knows or trusts the other two. In the United States, from the American Revolution through World War I, men from Massachusetts wanted to fight alongside other men from the same county in Massachusetts, not another county or another state, and the U.S. Army was organized accordingly. The same sensibility exists today in Afghanistan. Instead of fighting alongside men they know, however, ANA soldiers who have rarely, if ever, left their home districts before are obliged to fight next to soldiers from the other side of the country. The notion that 8 weeks of learning to wear shoes with laces and march in step would forge these strangers into cohesive fighting kandaks was wishful thinking at best. The results were inevitable.

Locally-raised and locally-based irregular security forces are a standard element of counter-guerilla warfare. Population security in guerilla warfare means a civilian populace completely insulated from contact with insurgents around the clock, and no army in the world is large enough to protect every village 24/7/365. The level that matters in an insurgency is the village, not the district, provincial, or national level, because the village is where the people are. Nothing that any level of government does matters if the guerillas control the villages. The role of police in this regard is self-evidently law enforcement, not rooting out insurgent cadres, much less infantry combat. Static, lightly armed, and poorly trained police are patently unsuited and unequal to the task of combating heavily armed, mobile guerilla strike forces. Thus, the reason all nine U.S. military programs to create the necessary irregular security forces in Afghanistan over the past 16 years failed is that all were structured fundamentally wrong: They were all conceptualized as auxiliary police forces notionally under the responsibility of the corrupt Ministry of Interior Affairs. These nine failed efforts ignored all of the lessons we learned about vertically integrating irregular forces in Vietnam. The last eight programs ignored the lessons learned from the previous program failures in Afghanistan. To paraphrase the famous observation of U.S. advisor John Paul Vann about Vietnam, we have not been in Afghanistan for 17 years; we have been in Afghanistan for one year 17 times.

The initial error of bifurcating the security forces in Afghanistan is understandable: The country's security architecture was designed for a country at peace. By 2005, however, it was obvious that Afghanistan was not at peace, and the Taliban were making a comeback. Nevertheless, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and in particular the U.S. Army, persisted in the notion that what was required to fight hardened, well-armed, highly motivated guerilla forces was more untrained, virtually unarmed, amateur police. Billions of dollars were poured into the leaky bucket of the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the nine auxiliary police programs. The lessons learned in Vietnam were forgotten or ignored. There, the United States created the Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF-PF), who were locally recruited, village-based, irregular, provisional infantry forces under South Vietnamese Ministry of Defense (MOD) command. They knew the villages where they patrolled and defended, and they knew the people, as well as who belonged in a cluster of hamlets and who did not. But critically, because they were an integral part of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), when they came under heavy Viet Cong attack, the ARVN units in their area came to their assistance. As the program matured, the RF-PFs became more and more professional and disciplined, to the point that in 1970, RF and PF battalions routinely fought alongside regular ARVN battalions in the field. Ultimately, the RF-PFs inflicted roughly 40 percent of all Viet Cong casualties during the war. The critical strategic point is that they were fully vertically integrated into the military chain of command. Several military advisory teams were created by the U.S. Army to train and advise the RF-PFs in the field. When partnered with a Marine rifle squad under the Combined Action Program in I Corps under Marine General Walt, no village in the program was ever retaken by the Viet Cong.

Afghan police today are being killed at a shocking rate. Approximately 17 Afghan police officers die every day in combat in Afghanistan, more than 6,000 in the last year alone.⁶ The bifurcated security architecture has crippled, and continues to cripple, the war against the Taliban. It consists of two different competing security ministries with two completely different chains of command, logistics systems, and incompatible communication systems. The two roughly equally sized forces, the ANA and the ANP, rarely even communicate with each other, much less cooperate. The ANA feels no obligation to support the ANP in the field or to assist them when they are attacked. For the past 15 years, as a result, rather than combating the insurgents with the bedrock military principle of unity of effort and unity of command, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) has been a house divided against itself. Indeed, the two sides are often antagonists rather than allies. There have been many incidents of them shooting at each other rather than at the Taliban.

The new approach reported by *The New York Times* of putting the latest iteration of irregular forces under Afghan MOD control is a step in the right direction, as is transferring many police elements to the MOD. This time, the theoretical foundation is solid. Getting the ANP out of a role for which it is patently unsuited could reduce the 16-year-long *Groundhog Day* loop of having the ANA take territory, turn it over to the ANP, and then see the ANP turn it back over to the Taliban (along with their guns, vehicles, and ammunition).⁷ An effective, properly organized, irregular force under Afghan MOD command, modeled on the RF-PFs in Vietnam, could help hold back the slowly rising Taliban tide in Afghanistan. Despite well-grounded concerns that such forces may be human rights violators like their predecessors, irregular forces are a necessary element of counter-guerilla warfare. There are simply not enough regular ANA to protect a country four times larger than South Vietnam, where, at their peak, there were 2.1 million men under arms fighting to protect the South Vietnamese Government. Today, there are no more than 100,000 ANA personnel actually present for duty, 40,000 of whom are rear echelon. This number is getting

smaller, not larger. Steady desertions, a lack of recruits, and shrinking recruiting areas (as the Taliban steadily gain more rural territory) ensure that the regular ANA will not be expanding in the future.

Nevertheless, the devil is in the details. There is a right way to approach such forces and a wrong way. The critical factors are linkage and leadership. First, for this program not to fail like its nine predecessors, each militia must be under the overall command of the local ANA *kandak* commander and respond to his orders. They must be in constant contact by phone or radio, and the relationship between the units needs to be substantive and close. If the militia comes under pressure from the Taliban or criminal elements, the regular ANA must respond quickly to the emergency. Without a quick reaction force type of response, the new militia(s) will soon go the way of their predecessors—massacred, disbanded, criminalized, or absorbed into the Taliban. The local regular ANA must be tasked with ensuring that the irregulars under their aegis have the weapons, ammunition, communications equipment, and medical care they need to operate effectively. If there is solid linkage between regulars and irregulars, the new militias have the potential to fulfill the vital role played by RF-PFs in Vietnam; if not, they will collapse.

The second critical component is leadership. Bad or renegade leadership of irregulars will doom a program, and likely to make the local situation worse, as was the case with all nine previous militia start-ups in Afghanistan. The right way to do this is to ensure that the senior officer of each militia group is a regular ANA special forces or commando officer, and that the second-in-command is elected by the men of the local militia in the same way officers were elected by the members of state militias in the American Revolutionary War period. This was the leadership model, for example, for the highly effective Soviet partisan forces fighting in Russia against the Germans in World War II. The senior officer of each partisan *oblast* (fighting group) was a regular Soviet Army or the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) officer who was parachuted or infiltrated into the unit. The second-in-command was locally chosen. Since the senior officer had access to resources and support, and the second-in-command had the respect of the rank-and-file, it was usually a highly effective leadership structure.

Time is running out for the Afghanistan project. The Taliban are making slow, steady gains year after year in the rural areas from which virtually all ANSF recruits come. They are committed to engaging in generational conflict until they win. There will be no negotiations or peace talks in which the Taliban agrees to join the existing government under the existing constitution. The issue in Afghanistan will be decided on the battlefield. A multitude of voices have pointed out that adding 5,000 more U.S. advisors to the 12,000 already in country will not succeed where 120,000 troops (and 250,000 contractors doing jobs done by soldiers in Vietnam) in 2013 did not. Nor is the real problem the usual scapegoat—the nefarious neighbors. The real problem is the Afghans themselves. As was true in South Vietnam, the United States cannot want to win the war more than the Afghans do. The Afghans who do not want another Taliban government must get their act together soon. The new militia program, if executed correctly, would be a step in that direction.

ENDNOTES

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6. Helene Cooper and Rod Nordland, "As Trump Rolls Out War Plan, Taliban Are Gaining," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2017.

7. *Groundhog Day*, Harold Ramis, dir., Columbia Pictures, 1993, film.

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