
Prosecuting the war in Afghanistan from provincial capitals has been disastrous; we need to turn our military strategy inside out.

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All Counterinsurgency Is Local

June was the deadliest month for the U.S. military in Afghanistan since the invasion in October 2001. July became the second straight month in which casualties exceeded those in Iraq, where four times as many U.S. troops are on the ground. More Americans have been killed in Afghanistan since the invasion began than in the first nine years of the Vietnam War, from 1956 to 1964.

As in Vietnam, the U.S. has never lost a tactical engagement in Afghanistan, and this tactical success is still often conflated with strategic progress. Yet the Taliban insurgency grows more intense and gains more popular traction each year. More and more, the American effort in Afghanistan resembles the Vietnam War—with its emphasis on body counts and air strikes, its cross-border sanctuaries, and its daily tactical victories that never affected the slow and eventually decisive erosion of rural support for the counterinsurgency.

As the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, noted in a blunt interview with the BBC in May, the current military engagement is also beginning to look like the Soviets' decade-long Afghan adventure, which ended ignominiously in 1989. That intervention, like the current one, was based on a strategy of administering and securing Afghanistan from urban centers such as Kabul and the provincial capitals. The Soviets held all the provincial capitals, just as we do, and sought to exert influence from there. The mujahideen stoked insurgency in the rural areas of the Pashtun south and east, just as the Taliban do now.

The U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is foundering because of the endemic failure to engage and protect rural villages, and to immunize them against insurgency. Many analysts have called for more troops inside the country, and for more effort to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries outside it, in neighboring Pakistan. Both developments would be welcome. Yet neither would solve the central problem of our involvement: the paradigm that has formed the backbone of the international effort since 2003—extending the reach of the central government—is in fact precisely the wrong strategy.

National government has never much mattered in Afghanistan. Only once in its troubled history has the country had something like the system of strong central government that's mandated by the current constitution. That was under the "Iron Emir," Abdur Rehman, in the late 19th century, and Rehman famously maintained control by building towers of skulls from the heads of all who opposed him, a tactic unavailable to the current president, Hamid Karzai.

Politically and strategically, the most important level of governance in Afghanistan is neither national nor regional nor provincial. Afghan identity is rooted in the *woleswali*: the districts within each province that are typically home to a single clan or tribe. Historically, unrest has always bubbled up from this stratum—whether against Alexander, the Victorian British, or the Soviet Union. Yet the *woleswali* are last, not first, in U.S. military and political strategy.

Large numbers of U.S. and NATO troops are now heavily concentrated in Kabul, Kandahar, and other major cities. Thousands of U.S. personnel are stationed at Bagram Air Force Base, for instance, which is complete with Burger King, Dairy Queen, and a shopping center, but is hundreds of miles from the heart of the insurgency. Meanwhile, the military's contact with villagers in remote areas where the Taliban operate is rare, typically brief, and almost always limited to daylight hours.

The Taliban are well aware that the center of gravity in Afghanistan is the rural Pashtun district and village, and that Afghan army and coalition forces are seldom seen there. With one hand, the Taliban threaten tribal elders who do not welcome them. With the other, they offer assistance. (As one U.S. officer recently noted, they're "taking a page from the Hezbollah organizations in Lebanon, with their own public works to assist the tribes in villages that are deep in the inaccessible regions of the country. This helps support their cause with the population, making it hard to turn the population in support of the Afghan government and the coalition.")

The rural Pashtun south has its own systems of tribal governance and law, and its people don't want Western styles of either. But nor are they predisposed to support the Taliban, which espouses an alien and intolerant form of Islam, and goes against the grain of traditional respect for elders and decision by consensus. Re-empowering the village councils of elders and restoring their community leadership is the only way to re-create the traditional check against the powerful political network of rural mullahs, who have been radicalized by the Taliban. But the elders won't commit to opposing the Taliban if they and their families are vulnerable to Taliban torture and murder, and they can hardly be blamed for that.

To reverse its fortunes in Afghanistan, the U.S. needs to fundamentally reconfigure its operations, creating small development and security teams posted at new compounds in every district in the south and east of the country. This approach would not necessarily require adding troops, although that would help—200 district-based teams of 100 people each would require 20,000 personnel, one-third of the 60,000 foreign troops currently in the country.

Each new compound would become home to roughly 60 to 70 NATO security personnel, 30 to 40 support staff to manage logistics and supervise local development efforts, and an additional 30 to 40 Afghan National Army soldiers. The troops would provide a steady security presence, strengthen the position of tribal elders, and bolster the district police. Today, Afghan police often run away from the superior firepower of attacking Taliban forces. It's hard to fault them—more than 900 police were killed in such attacks last year alone. But with better daily training and help only minutes away, local police would be far more likely to put up a good fight, and win. Indirectly, the daily presence of embedded police trainers would also prevent much of the police corruption that fuels resentment against the government. And regular contact at the district and village levels would greatly improve the collection and analysis of intelligence.

Perhaps most important, district-based teams would serve as the primary organization for Afghan rural development. Currently, "Provincial Reconstruction Teams," based in each provincial capital, are responsible for the U.S. military's local development efforts. These teams have had no strategic impact on the insurgency, because they are too thin on the ground—the ratio of impoverished Afghan Pashtuns to provincial reconstruction teams is roughly a million to one. Few teams are able to visit every district in their province even once a month; it's no wonder that rural development has been marred by poor design and ineffective execution.

Local teams with on-site development personnel—"District Development Teams," if you will—could change all that, and also serve to support nonmilitary development projects. State Department and USAID personnel, along with medics, veterinarians, engineers, agricultural experts, hydrologists, and so on, could live on the local compounds and work in their districts daily, building trust and confidence.

Deploying relatively small units in numerous forward positions would undoubtedly put more troops in harm's way. But the Taliban have not demonstrated the ability to overrun international elements of this size, and the

teams could be mutually reinforcing. (Air support would be critical.)
Ultimately, we have to accept a certain amount of risk; you can't beat a rural insurgency without a rural security presence.

As long as the compounds are discreetly sited, house Afghan soldiers to provide the most visible security presence, and fly the Afghan flag, they need not exacerbate fears of foreign occupation. Instead, they would reinforce the country's most important, most neglected political units; strengthen the tribal elders; win local support; and reverse the slow slide into strategic failure.