

Observations on the Need for a Comprehensive Approach

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ABSTRACT

NATO countries have made enormous resource investments into Afghanistan, not the least of which is Canada. Over several years, the Government of Canada has taken extraordinary steps to ensure that the policy conditions were set to allow the instruments of Canadian national power to work in an integrated and synchronized manner across security, development and governance lines of operation in order to achieve the desired effects in Kandahar Province. The establishment of parliamentary committees, interdepartmental task forces and the deployment of Foreign Service officers and Public Servants alongside Canadian Forces personnel have had important implications. The presence of Canada's whole of government partners, while obviously critical to mission-success, undoubtedly creates a new level of complexity for NATO. As an officer deployed to the Operations Coordination Centre (Province) (OCC-P) in Kandahar City from May 2008 until February 2009, I have a unique perspective of that complexity. This paper is autobiographical in nature. My observations of the joint, interagency, multinational and public (JIMP) operating environment can, it is hoped, inform future discussions about the need for a comprehensive approach.

1.0 CONTEXT

From May 2008 until January 2009, I was deployed as then a lieutenant-colonel to the Operations Coordination Centre – Province (OCC-P) in Kandahar City. The OCC-P was co-located with the Governor's Palace in the centre of the province's capital. The OCC-P is an Afghan construct. A decree by President Karzai established coordination centres across the country to allow for members of the Afghan National Security Forces to conduct information sharing, coordination and joint planning under the oversight of the Afghan Ministry of Defence. The OCC-P concept replaced the Ministry of Interior led Joint Provincial Coordination Centre construct in those Provinces where the security situation required Army intervention. In the case of Kandahar's OCC-P, the organization was enabled entirely by Canadian resources as the demand for the Afghan National Army resources, provided through the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan, far-exceeded the supply. My small team of Canadians was imbedded with Afghan National Army, Police and Provincial government staffers. What is important to note is that although the Canadians were "staff" under NATO command responsive to Headquarters Task Force Kandahar, we were also responsive to the Afghan Ministry of Defence through a nascent Operations Coordination Centre for the Region as a consequence of Karzai's decree, and in addition we were accountable to the Governor of Kandahar as Chair of the Provincial Security Committee reporting chain directed by the Joint Provincial Coordination Centre construct that had existed since 2005. We had also inherited the responsibility of enabling and augmenting the command and control functions of the Afghan National Police headquarters for the Province of Kandahar. The OCC-P consequently had almost a dozen clients who relied upon us a clearing house for information, a reliable and secure location to conduct joint planning and coordination, and a call centre where connections and relationships between all client groups could be established and nurtured.

2.0 AUTHORITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Clearly as Canadian staff detached to the Governor's Palace our legal authority to act originated from our national chain of command. As a tool or mechanism to support our Commander, we needed to absolutely and definitively understand his intent. In a NATO structure, this is well-established and understood. The hierarchy is formally articulated and our training and professional development prepare Canadian Forces personnel for this organizational structure. The OCC-P's particular situation was that each of our clients' had the expectation that we would be responsive and supportive to them. My Commander clearly expected us to enable the Afghan National Security Forces and the Government of Kandahar Province. Doctrinally, I am required to consider my commander's intent and my superior commander's concept of operations. My mission analysis therefore became extremely complex as each discrete task that my team performed had a different client or "superior commander" in mind. One could expect that as the formal NATO chain of command was designed, my commander's superior, the Commander Regional Command (South), would play a dominant role in shaping my activities. For practical purposes, this was not the case.

2.1 THE NATO CHAIN OF COMMAND

The controversy over the 2009 change in appointment of the Commander of International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) highlighted a peculiar problem to me. The move to appoint the US General David Patrenus COMISAF gathered international attention and was the focus of much discussion in the media but my interest in the matter had nothing to do with Rolling Stone magazine or US domestic policy. Rather, it had to do with whether who was commanding ISAF would have made any substantive difference at my level. My suspicion is that the role of the NATO chain of command has been transformed and frankly diminished at the tactical and low operational level because of the introduction of other government departments into the deployed environment and the creation of the operational level headquarters (Canadian Expeditionary Force Command) responsible to the Government of Canada for the conduct of all deployed operations.

2.1.1 The Kandahar Action Plan

The Kandahar Action Plan was a document produced by Task Force Kandahar that captured all of the direction from the Government of Canada, the Canadian Forces and NATO chains of command in close cooperation with partners from Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency. The Kandahar Action Plan as it was in 2008 was the Campaign Plan for Kandahar. While the document included direction from NATO and was informed by various international treaties and agreements (like the Afghan Compact and the Afghan Development Plan) it was a Canadian document. It was signed by both the Commander Task Force Kandahar and the senior Canadian Foreign Service Officer in Kandahar known as the Representative of Canada in Kandahar (ROCK). Not only was the Action Plan an order to Canadian Forces, it was also treated informally as a negotiated memorandum of understanding between the various Canadian agencies in Kandahar. The role of diplomats in the national chain of command is an important and evolving factor for NATO forces.

2.1.2 From Caveat to Command

During previous deployments with NATO, I had become accustomed to the notion of the "national caveat" whereby the Canadian chain of command would approve or reject an order given to a deployed unit or formation because it was inconsistent with the values, laws, policies or interests of the Government of Canada. This was perceived by me at the tactical level as a more passive system where operational command occurred in theatre from a Multinational NATO headquarters and the National Command authority negotiated a way ahead or less frequently vetoed an order. In the context of 2008, my perception was that operations and tasks were more frequently assigned from the national chain than from the NATO chain.

Rather than issue caveats as they had done during the Balkans missions of the late 1990s, the National Command authorities were issuing commands, undoubtedly due to the need to synchronize the efforts of military forces ostensibly under NATO command, with those of the civilian partners that were strictly under national command and operating with an entirely different set of obligations to the Alliance. In coincidental meetings with more senior NATO officers from different nations, I was frequently surprised by the shock I caused them by carrying out simple tasks without needing to check in with my national chain of command. They appeared to be applying an “ask, don’t tell” approach where they were reluctant to interfere with the extant direction I had received that would have left them in an awkward or potentially embarrassing situation. It is likely that an experienced commander would not issue an order that will not be followed as it can damage credibility and cohesion. Clearly, senior officers serving in NATO missions have become sensitized to the dynamics between national and multinational command authorities; however, they lack strong confidence that their intuitive and diplomatic approach will result in their direction being followed.

2.1.3 Preparation for Deployment

One of the single most important factors contributing to the preference for national command precedence over multinational command was the fact that NATO appeared largely invisible in predeployment training. During computer-assisted exercises and larger training deployments, the NATO chain of command was under-represented in exercise scenarios. Only a few role players represented Regional Command or flanking formations. The resources required to replicate the complexity of the operating environment more accurately would have been enormous and inevitably inaccurate. There are no obvious solutions to this problem except that NATO will need to leverage technology in order to get more involved in the Force Generation of tactical level organizations prior to deployment if there is to be a countervailing force to the trend that I have already described.

2.2 THE KANDAHARI GOVERNMENT

Over my 9-month deployment, three different men held the appointment of Governor of Kandahar. This was important not just because the Governor was my landlord but also because I was effectively the liaison between the Governor and NATO. I inherited the role of secretary to the Provincial Security Committee and therefore had a role in setting the agenda for the weekly meetings. From a Canadian perspective, this was beneficial as it provided me easier access to decision-makers during the Province’s frequent emergencies. Engagement with each of the Governors was complex because they were personality driven and because the topics ranged across a wide spectrum of matters that were frequently outside of my authority and expertise to address. Clearly, Foreign Service Officers were responsible to mentor Afghan governmental institutions and to engage with provincial-level bureaucrats on matters of policy, law and finance but frequently I needed to be aware of issues in order to effectively communicate between my higher headquarters, the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) and the Kandahari government. I certainly experienced angst and anxiety as my role delved into matters outside the Security line of operations but I was also attuned to the same angst and anxiety that it caused the whole of government partners. As the security situation in Kandahar City did not frequently allow for the free movement of Canadian Public Servants and Canadian civilian police, my portfolio could spontaneously expand without significant notice or the degree of background on issues that would have achieved more optimal results. Undoubtedly, this happened more frequently as my relationship with all of the parties improved as a function of trust brought about by some success but the operating environment precluded the ideal solution of solely having the whole of government team deal with the civilian government. The fact that Canadian Public Servants reported to their national chain meant that I served a role as messenger or mailbox without entirely being apprised or consulted. Without a formal requirement to keep me informed, I frequently conducted meetings and coordination without a fallback position or a safety net. The operating environment required me to take risks in ways that I would never have predicted.

Upon arrival in Kandahar in May of 2008, I found myself in the unenviable position of being caught in a diplomatic stand-off between Canada and President Karzai over the future of Kandahar Governor Assadullah Khalid. My role coordinating with and between elements of the Afghan National Security Forces needed to occur regardless of tensions. I had a strong sense that my team of Canadians and Afghans lost momentum because of the lack of diplomatic clarity that contributed to the declining security situation in Kandahar. I very quickly realized that I needed to work very closely with (and for) the Representative of Canada in Kandahar in order to prevent a further decline.

During the transition between governors in the summer of 2008, my staff was approached by the incoming Palace staff. This was clearly a critical moment for both sides and, despite my absence, my staff attuned to the need to start the relationship off in a positive way that would foster trust and transparency. The first request for support was not about advice, support to governance projects or grand nation-building goals but simply for garbage bags and light bulbs that had disappeared during the brief gap in appointments. Material and logistics support to the Palace was frequently a contentious issue as it did not fall under my mandate as an organization without integral service support nor did it fit with diplomats and development officers whose strength rested with policy development and program management. The KPRT was frequently given the choice between providing material to expedite support and the need to provide advice to the new Palace staff to acquire the goods and services through their own supply chain. The dilemma of meeting day-to-day needs at the expense of strategic goals was one that was likely exacerbated by the cultural differences between the Canadian Forces personnel who enjoy solving problems and Public Servants who possess a comparatively greater degree of strategic patience. Nobody new to the palace seemed to know where Afghan government money came from or how to get it. This issue set the conditions for some suspect practices by staffers and it was frequently suggested that Canadians were mean-spirited or stingy compared to American personnel.

The OCC-P and the KPRT provided pre-paid mobile phone cards to District Governors or Chiefs of Police in order to ensure that information flowed between levels of government and between the police outstations and the Provincial police headquarters. The risk to the system was that the cards were almost as good as cash and I was increasingly required to account for phone card expenditures by Kandahari officials as the demand grew. Some District leaders would engage KPRT staff after receiving a denial for cards from my staff. Frequently it was hinted at that the information flow might cease if phone cards were not made available. ISAF's insatiable demand for information likely caused some Kandaharis to invent colourful stories of insurgent activity in order to justify another instalment of phone cards. Nobody in any branch of the coalition was willing to assume the risks inherent in changing this easily corruptible system. A comprehensive solution to the problem of enabling governance to maintain security was required but elusive.

2.3 AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES (ANSF)

The Government of the Islamic Republic in Kandahar was in greater need of a comprehensive approach than NATO during the summer of 2008. Mechanisms and methods for collaboration between the branches of government and the Afghan security forces were frequently ad hoc and personality driven. My Commander spent as much time leading Afghans as he did leading NATO personnel mostly due to the fact that he possessed informal authority for each branch of the ANSF where Afghan commanders frequently did not, by virtue of the colour of their uniform. During operations in Arghandab District in the summer of 2008, only a NATO commander enabled with cutting edge technology, force protection, mobility and superb situational awareness could be expected to maintain the tactical control of four different branches of Afghan forces fighting in a close-in urban battle. Elements of two Corps of the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Civil Order Police, National Police, and the National Directorate of Security all reinforced by elements of the Border Police converged into Arghandab District to repel the infiltration of small pockets of insurgents without clear national direction or unified command authority. Most of what was achieved in routing the Taliban from Arghanbad was done by the sheer force of will. While the ANSF had risen to the occasion and the victory was their own, they undoubtedly learned important lessons about how joint operations should be

conducted. The Governor of Kandahar, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence were required to cooperate without clear lines of command authority in order to eliminate the threat posed to Kandahar City by the Taliban offensive. In the end, they achieved a degree of cohesion and consequently achieved operational success by deferring to a Coalition Force Brigadier General. While the strategic goal of conducting independent and joint Afghan led operations was not achieved, Arghandab District was secured, which set the conditions for expanded cooperation between the civil government, police and Afghan army. This experience suggests that a comprehensive approach is critical to success but is by its very nature fraught with risk, appears incoherent and is frequently situational.

2.4 INSURGENTS

The cohesion of Coalition Forces and the government of Afghanistan are constantly under attack, particularly in Kandahar. Whether intentional or not, insurgents consistently find the seams and gaps between units, formations, nations and governmental institutions. I frequently heard outlandish rumours that one NATO country's forces had joined with the Taliban to overthrow the government and had attacked other NATO forces. The Taliban would repeatedly report on the relative strengths of one nation's forces over another or spread rumours about the corruption of certain police or government officials. These techniques must be countered and the development of a strong comprehensive approach could address the fractures in trust and the simplicity and inadequacy of some NATO information operations.

2.5 MENTORING

Mentoring ANSF is an enormous challenge. All branches of the ANSF are concurrently expanding, generating field forces and fighting a complex insurgency. The NATO mentors assigned to each force frequently had differing priorities. One obvious example from my deployment occurred when an Afghan National Police organization refused to attend a focussed training and re-equipping session to be held in Herat Province. Nobody in the chain of command, Afghan or otherwise, was comfortable with the loss of several hundred police to a training activity at the peak of the summer season, but the schedule developed by the US led Combined Security Transition Command took precedence over the opinion of those fighting the insurgency. The outcome was almost entirely negative and the consequent trust violation between elements of the Coalition Forces, the police and CSTC-A was never repaired until after the transfer of some Afghan leaders out of the Province.

My most important role with the ANSF was to find forces to enable operations. This required my efforts to be synchronized with the efforts of mentors from a broad spectrum of nations and organizations. This frequently led to disagreements over priorities. Civilian police mentors operating with the Afghan National Police had an extremely difficult challenge because they were frequently mentoring police who were not engaged in traditional Western police roles but rather hybrid or paramilitary roles. Undoubtedly the trust issues between the Afghan army and police were exacerbated by disagreements between Coalition Forces army and police mentors about training priorities.

2.6 VOTER REGISTRATION

During January and February 2009, the OCC-P acted as the reporting centre for the security piece of the process of voter registration. In this capacity, my staff and I were required to coordinate with the police, other allies, several organizations inside the United Nations and the electoral commission. This was an arduous and time-consuming endeavour that required constant coordination. Frequently it was clear to me that any single stakeholder organization was prepared to blame the others for any mishaps or failures in the registration process.

While the process of registration itself was considered successful in the end, in retrospect it may not have achieved the effect of informing the conduct of the elections that occurred late that summer.

3.0 INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Key Leader Engagement in this context was extremely difficult as every client organization of the OCC-P had differing interests, priorities and informational demands. My Commander, the ROCK, the US and Canadian Battle Groups, and the staff of Task Force Kandahar all had slightly different opinions of the cast of characters, stakeholders and local leaders in the battle space. Military forces often respected one leader for decisiveness while the diplomats favoured others for their transparency. A shared operating picture of the human terrain would have been very useful. Selecting the appropriate tone of my engagements with these leaders was mostly intuitive and too frequently instinctive. The Key Leader Engagement matrix in the Kandahar Action Plan assigned tasks and lines of responsibility but was not fully mature enough to achieve synchronized effects. At a philosophical and policy level, some government departments challenged the military's role in engagement with the civilian authorities. The effects matrices were also somewhat contentious as they followed an effects-based approach that was inconsistent with the language and training of diplomats and Public Servants.

The absence of a coherent, shared and universally supported narrative to counter the adversary's narrative was problematic. The Pashto narrative of resistance to invaders, occupiers and even resistance to modernity had been very effectively co-opted by the Taliban and was not directly challenged, even in Western domestic media. I believe that a comprehensive approach is critical to the development of a consistent and coherent counter-narrative and public diplomacy strategy. During my deployment, it was the informational instrument of power that received the least resources and attention.

The Canadian sponsored polio eradication vaccination program conducted during my deployment is one example of where the best of intentions and a superbly executed program aimed at building trust between Kandaharis and their government failed to achieve any noticeable increase in public confidence, undoubtedly because the intent was misunderstood by military forces. Personally, the program appeared to be self-serving and most of the information available was seemingly directed at the Canadian public as an example of a successful aid program.

4.0 TRUST

Kandahar Province was experiencing a trust deficit during my deployment. In fact, the insurgency in Afghanistan could be summarized as an expression of the lack of trust and confidence between the population and government and its institutions.

4.1 PAROCHIALISM

Parochialism was a significant issue during my deployment to Kandahar. It was feature between organizations inside the Canadian Task Force, between nations, and between the host nation and the international community. Some very astute key leaders frequently attempted to leverage some of my modest chauvinistic and patriotic tendencies by being critical of other coalition nations. I heard repeatedly in 2008 and 2009 that Canadian soldiers were preferred by Kandaharis over all other nation's troops. Yet, in a brief deployment to Afghanistan in the winter of 2010, I was told that one narrative in the streets of Kandahar City is that Americans have done more for Kandahar in 3 months than Canada did in 3 years.

4.2 FAILURE

It has been said that failure is an orphan. Following incidents where collateral damage was reportedly inflicted on Afghan civilians, I would be summoned to the Governor's Palace to account for the loss of life or damage to property. Regardless of any relationship or degree of trust I had established with my Afghan hosts, the cultural requirement to seek revenge was always clearly and publicly evident. Every instance of collateral damage constituted a major trust violation that was frequently misunderstood and underappreciated by those not held to public account. It was enormously challenging for me to accept collective blame and over time my desire to avoid such encounters led me to feel that my colleagues were indifferent to my circumstances and were not doing enough to minimize collateral damage. In hindsight, the vast majority of the accusations made regarding collateral damage turned out to be false, but I will forever recall the anger directed at me over even a rumour that an innocent Afghan had been killed by foreign callousness.

4.3 CRIME AND CORRUPTION

Over the course of my deployment almost every politician or government official I interacted with was accused of some degree of corruption by somebody somewhere. While there is undoubtedly widespread corruption in Kandahar, my experience led me to believe that making unproven accusations of corruption was an even more popular activity than corruption itself. The net effect of the accusations was to separate the government officials and leaders of Kandahar from the Coalition Forces. Each international military and civilian organization had a different opinion about how to approach the problem, had different tolerance thresholds for alleged bad behaviour, and had different ethical and moral criteria for judging a leader's trustworthiness. The risk in condemning too many Kandahari leaders was that it would give credibility and a certain degree of moral authority to the insurgency and would undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

5.0 COIN

Counter-insurgency (COIN) operations follow a simple process according to COIN doctrine: shape, clear, hold, build and enable. One lesson of 2008 was that a comprehensive approach is required at every stage of this process. There was a tendency to believe that military COIN fighters could target and shape areas to clear and then merely hand them over to police forces mentored by civilian police that would set the conditions for governance and development. The reality was that coalition diplomatic engagement was required to select the correct areas to target and to ensure that the host nation did not become distracted by other priorities or demands inherent in the operating environment. The risks of losing public support by having to clear the same village or community of insurgent forces over and over again are unacceptable. Also, police mentors and international advisors must ensure that enough police forces are made available to hold onto communities that have been cleared. Too frequently, Coalition Forces had nobody to handover security tasks to, which led to an over-reliance on private security contractors. Development and governance projects require significant lead time to be effective. Communities that do not benefit from good governance and reconstruction are at risk of falling under insurgent control. A comprehensive approach is absolutely critical throughout every step of the COIN battle.

6.0 CONCLUSION

With possibly the exception of the US Army, currently no single government agency, military force, police organization, or non-governmental organization has the integral capability to single-handedly address the problems of insecure failing states hosting radicalized armed non-state actors engaged in an insurgency. A comprehensive approach is absolutely required to synchronize NATO's collective efforts to achieve meaningful and necessary strategic effects. NATO needs to adapt to the changing role of senior

commanders in a multinational context, particularly when the stakes for Troop Contributing Nations are extremely high. Also, there could be reconsideration of typical command and control arrangements that account for non-NATO civilians to contribute to planning more collaboratively with more empowered civilians working in deployed multinational headquarters. Additional resources could be directed at preparing forces for deployment particularly where force structures and accountability frameworks are extremely complex. It is not enough to understand one's own role in the mission; teamwork requires some understanding of everyone's role. The inability to understand and interact with a host nation is dangerous. Despite the enormous effort to understand Kandahari culture, lack of cultural understanding remains a major stumbling block. Without the respect for and understanding of the culture, engagement with security forces, government officials and the public is suboptimal, which inevitably diminishes the interagency trust critical to establishing confidence in new and frequently fragile institutions. More effort could be made towards establishing common planning tools and counterinsurgency doctrine that account for different decision-making styles and traditions, organizational structures and professional identities.