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10 Years of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan — Is It Working?

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On the 10th anniversary of the War in Afghanistan, ABC News takes a closer look at the U.S. Army strategy being used in Afghanistan to win – and end – America’s longest war.

FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kan. — In an interview with ABC News, Lt. Col. John Paganini, director of the U.S. Army’s Counterinsurgency Center, explained how the counterinsurgency strategy being employed in Afghanistan is still the Army’s strategy there, despite having no concrete end date, no measurable metric of success and awareness that resources are limited.

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Q: How has COIN [the counterinsurgency strategy] been going in Afghanistan?

A: You have to look at every single day in a counterinsurgency through the history of counterinsurgency, as every day is a challenge, to be adaptive. So we can’t say, “Well, today we’re doing really well,” because everything is adaptive. We are an adaptive organization, you know, for an entity as structured as the U.S. military. And I can speak a little bit about the Marine Corps as a

ground element because I've worked with them a little bit in the past, and we've worked relatively closely together with the Marine Corps Irregular Warfare Center and us.

There is a tremendous amount of being adaptable in the leadership and at the soldier level. And we're talking from the strategic down to the team leader and lance corporal on the ground, who are making decisions on the ground to try to stay one step ahead of the reason the insurgency is there. And that's significant because we could spend all of our time focusing our adaptive capability on the insurgent, or we can focus it on the insurgency. And I think what we're seeing a lot more is, we are becoming adaptive to overcome the insurgency, not just those who are out to kill us or apply military force against us or the protectors of the society of the host nation, but it really also gets after "Why does the insurgency exist? What are the conditions that allow the population to either passively or actively support an external entity that wants to degrade the ability of the host nation government's security force?"

And it's that adaptability, that ability to work with the host nation entities to eliminate the conditions that allow the insurgency to exist, that allow us to be more adaptive than the enemy.

Q: What are some of the root causes of the insurgency that you have focused on?

A: ... I think the biggest thing that we eliminated was this idea in the minds of the Afghan citizenry and the Afghan leaders that this is an external problem with external solutions. And I think what you really started to see in 2009 with the overemphasis of focus on the population – Gen. McChrystal talked about it a lot – not from a sense of restricting ROE [rules of engagement] but more of a sense of take into account the perception of the population because that's why the insurgency is allowed to exist.

And then start penetrating the minds of the Afghans to reinforce the notion that they already have, that this is their problem, and their solutions are going to fix this problem. And I think what you've seen from the initial stages of an awareness of that to an acceptance of that to a practice of it, that's where you've seen significant gains. But it's not anything that you can put a number on the wall and say, "Here's the metric." We're going to measure that against, here I can stand in front of the nation and say, "We're winning the war because of this." It's a very subjective, very underlying pretense, but it's there. I mean, when you go into Kandahar City, or you walk Kabul, bad things still happen. Bad things still happen in New York. It doesn't mean that the police don't have control.

But, when you get the sense that Afghan leaders, government leaders from village and sub-tribal are willing to step up and make decisions in the best interest of their people for the long-term interests of Afghanistan – that's significant. And I don't think that's something we saw in 2006-2007. So to me, that's the biggest thing we did. It wasn't a physical attack or a series of offensive operations. It was: Let's address how the insurgency's allowed to live, and then eliminate that.

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Q: How do you overcome intimidation so you can hold shuras, hold council meetings, install a district governor, and then you have Taliban insurgents coming — assassinations, night letters, other forms of intimidation, bombings. How do you counteract that?

A: It's a great question. Again, from the Counterinsurgency Center, the way we teach it is, we've always spent a lot of time focusing on the enemy event. What we're really trying to get after is what is the purpose of the enemy event. So is that bombing to eliminate a specific leader because there's tribal friction and a counter-tribe wants something in there? Or was it intimidation to send a message to the population to not participate in governance functions? Or, you know, was it an act of violence to prove that there's a lack of, decrease that perception of security in the eyes of the populace?

And you have to solve each one of them differently. Intimidation is a difficult factor, especially for a population that has experienced what they've experienced for the last 30 years. But having walked the streets with them, I can tell you they are proud and strong and courageous people. Intimidation will affect certain things that they do, but they're willing to stand in the face of intimidation if there's a promise of something.

So part of it is you got to increase the overall perception of security, if there is, God forbid, a murder in my neighborhood, that doesn't mean I'm never going to leave my house again — mainly because I know the police are out there, I know there's general law and order. I know if I call 911, a police [officer] is going to show up and he's going to be professional, and he's going to do his job.

That same sense of protection can exist in Afghanistan, whether it's provided by the Afghan Local Police, the Afghan Uniformed Police, Afghan National Police, the ANCO or the ANA in portions of the country where the police aren't there. And part of that is this continued professionalization of the host nation security forces, and you're seeing it with the institutions — the NMTA — the training mission function that we are using to create both Afghan and police, increase professionalism, but it's also what they're doing internally to increase their police force.

And then, they have really taken a larger role in their own information operations, their own influence activities to get the word out to the population that, "Hey we are the sole protectors of society — we are here to protect you and when bad things happen, we're the ones that are going to come help." So I think you're starting to see a lot more interaction between the population and the host nation security force, and just that mindset of, "I can trust that guy to do his job" — that overcomes intimidation.

And then the one thing that always overcomes psychological effect is leadership. You have a strong Afghan leader at tribe, at village, at district, at provincial, whatever, that people are willing to follow, that can inspire people's actions, it's going to overcome intimidation and you watch some of these, you know, from all ages, you know, I had the absolute honor to work with a 36-year-old district governor. Again, tremendously courageous young man who stood up in front of repeated attempts on

his life, intimidation on his family, you know, tribal infighting, because he was making decisions in the best interests of the overall district, not just one specific tribe. But the people followed him, and intimidation decreased significantly in our area because he stood up and said, “Just follow me and let’s make this place better.” And they did.

Q: And how hard is it to find people like that, especially of Pashtun descent from the Southern areas, instead of bringing someone in from a different ethnic group, or someone from Northern or Central Afghanistan?

A: I think the conditions are getting much better to bring some of these people further into the fold. They’re not hard to find, and they are absolutely interested in participating. The one drawback is a lot of these gentlemen are — and there is women as well — that are willing to step forward. And you know, the women’s shuras in Southern Afghanistan are picking up, and it’s, again, a symbol of absolute courage, that they’re willing to step forward and do this.

They are passionate about their area, their province, their district, and this sense of nationalism that’s growing. There’s a lot of them, I’ll be honest with you, [that] did not want to step forward because they were not certain they were the right person to lead their village, their tribe, and some of it was based on: Listen, my family’s had money for generations, if I step up and take over, people are going to say I’m corrupt because I have money. ... The ones that don’t step forward, it’s not because they’re selfish or complacent or don’t care. A lot of them really do it because they believe, “I don’t know that I’m the right person to lead right now.” But there are some absolutely phenomenal individuals. At the village level, there’s some great people that step forward and say, “If nobody else will do this, I will.”

... I believe there is a brighter future. It takes awhile, and the cost is extremely high. But there is that capability, this long-term tremendous benefit specifically for Afghanistan, but for a greater area. I mean, the region can look at that, and say, I would have bet everything against that, but look at it, it’s working. And I think that has an impact.

Q: You mentioned setting the grounds for counterinsurgency at least since 2006, and now it’s 2011. How much longer do you think it will be until we win the counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan?

A: I really couldn’t predict that. There’s so many things that have to fall into place. What I will tell you is the appetite of the people of Afghanistan to take control of their own country is huge. And that is one of the largest ingredients to success. We as a foreign force can come in there, establish conditions for stability, establish the conditions for the host nation government, and the host nation government security force to take control and then there are a series of conditions that have to happen, but there’s so much that happens from an international perspective that affects the timeline.

Now, is victory inevitable? No, because there are so many conditions that are out there, but we are clearly on the path for it, and it starts at the Afghan national government, the government of the

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for all of the things that people want to throw at it and undercut it and talk about what's wrong with it, there's a lot of things that are right about it, all the way down to the village leadership that is trying to do something better for their people, all the way down to this idea that the leaders of whatever area it is are responsible to their people more than they are to their higher echelon. That is a new concept.

And the population is still kind of grasping that. So, you know, they've had 30 years of chaos and generations before that of a monarchical system for lack of a better term, so how long does it take to change a mindset? It could take generations, it could take you know, the people of Afghanistan one or two iterations with some semblance of an election and feedback mechanisms that let them see that this is good. And then the development of the host nation security force. And that tie, that interaction between the host nation security force and the host nation populace.

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Q: You came back [from Afghanistan] in spring. How did you find applying the doctrine of counterinsurgency?

A: I was the mouthpiece for a doctrinal approach to solving the problems on the ground. Southern Afghanistan when I was there, turned— I mean, we watched Col. Martindale and his brigade up in the Arghandab River absolutely change the total set of conditions in the Arghandab. We watched Col. Kandarian and his brigade from the 101st change Zari, the birthplace of [Mullah] Omar and that birthplace had a lot of trouble, and he came in there, and then the Canadian Task Force that I was part of. We achieved some pretty significant success in the South. And if you go back and look at what happened in the South that changed, you know, was it the surge of force?

Well the surge of force not doing the right thing would not have gotten the results. What got the results was strong leadership from guys like Col. Martindale and Col. Kandarian, and Gen. Vance and Gen. Milner from the Canadian Task Force, who said, "Listen, we have a doctrine. It says, 'How do we fight?' And it's not just run out every day and find the IEDs or find the bad guys, and focus on that. It's: What is our overall end state? How do we nest subordinate end states into that? And what tasks do you need to execute to achieve that end state?" And when you study that problem, you recognize there are a lot of things we need to do other than go out there and just hunt the enemy.

There's always a component of hunting the enemy, there are people in Afghanistan that need to die, and that's part of counterinsurgency, but there are also people in Afghanistan that need to be protected, and there's also people in Afghanistan that need to be supported to promote good governance and promote a legitimate host nation security force that meets the needs of its people and I think that that broadening of scope is what — is the practical application of doctrine.

And if you read FM-324, and it's basically what it talks to, so I believe our doctrine is sound, we're revising it a little bit, and we've learned so many lessons since 2005 when that was written. But we're revising the document a bit, but we're keeping the basic principles. I mean, the basic principles still

apply. The idea that you go from one spectrum to another, which is kind of the way our doctrine defines how to fight an insurgency, that's what the guys are doing on the ground to achieve success.

Q: So in very simple terms, how has COIN changed from the beginning of the Afghan War to present day?

I think we do a much better job now and again, I left Afghanistan in 2003 and I didn't go back until 2010, so there was that period in the middle there where I wasn't there, but if you go back and look at the history we didn't focus enough on tying national governance to the population. There was a national government and clearly if you were going to achieve the sort of end state that our nation wants and all of our nested strategies from national on down, you have to have a strong government, that strong government's got to be tied to an international community, it's got to be recognizable to its people, but it's got to be recognized worldwide, so there's a lot of focus on the national level.

At tactical level for my peer group, I don't think we focused enough on establishing the programs — the long-lasting Afghan sustainable programs at district, sub-district and village level that really tied to a higher piece and the development of the host nation security force was always part of what we did, but not a major focus area, and I think we started focusing quite a bit more on that towards the latter portions of probably in the last 3 or 4 years, and I think that's had a dramatic effect.

That has come at the balance of — we are not capable of doing as many or as dense you know, enemy-centric focused patrols to eliminate the IEDs cells and the facilitators and the financiers and all of that, so that's the cost. I think when you look at the end result though, the benefit still outweighs the cost from a mission accomplishment perspective.

Q: Where would you say we are in the 'clear, hold build and transfer' phases of COIN?

A: It depends on what area you're in. Because I'll tell you there are some areas where we're in the tactical bordering on the strategic overwatch in a lot of places. There's a lot of places where the Afghan governance clearly is the sole provider for the populace and the host nation security force is the sole agent for security.

That's the conditions for transition. And that's happened in a lot of places. Out in the west, the Marines have done a great job in the Southwest in creating those conditions, the South has a lot of areas — village, district, sub-province that are, in those conditions RC-North has a lot of those conditions, surprisingly, there are conditions in RC-East, where those conditions exist, where the host nation security force and the host nation government have taken responsibility for their populations, and for the long-term growth can sustain the programs that they have in place, and we're in the tactical overwatch.

So it's difficult to say well, the country is in the hold, or the build, when you look at, again — clear, hold, build, you don't get to cookie punch — "I believe I'm in the build today, so I'm going to stamp that" — it's the conditions on the ground. And it's not just what is the enemy doing, although that is a

factor of it — what is the enemy doing, what is the host nation government doing, what is the host nation security force doing, and what is the population doing. You take into account all of those activities, and those activities dictate where you are along the spectrum of clear, hold, and build.

So if you look at it from a national perspective, you know, is the population too afraid to go outside? No. Is the population willing to participate in local governance? In a lot of places you'll see that. Shuras, open shuras are generating a significant amount of participation from the local population. Well those are conditions for the build. So is the host nation security force, the Afghan police, the Afghan border police, the Afghan Army, the ANCOP, are they taking lead on operations, are they capable of independent self-sustaining operations, and in a lot of places they are. Those are conditions that say we're in the build. Is it nationwide? Probably not. But are the indicators pointing in the right direction? Clearly I think so.

Q: You mentioned Arghandab. We poured in a ton of money — a lot of contracting parties went in, like IRD, are we able to sustain that in the long term, even after we thin out in those areas in the South and do you worry about American patience running out and about Congress wanting to reduce funds — are you worried about the resources running out in order to effect that type of success that we had in Arghandab?

A: I think everybody, not just military, everybody, businesses, everybody worries about, do I have the resources to continue this infinitum, talk to somebody who's running Merrill Lynch, talk to somebody who's the owner of the Kansas City Chiefs, he's going to tell you the same thing, so this is not purely a military thing and this is not my demand of Congress to continue to fund this — we've got to work within the resources that we're capable of.

...When that money was being allocated in those amounts to the Arghandab, it was based on achieving a specific effect. So it was a great amount of study done, and I'm glad you mentioned IRD because that was a great program — it was a huge collaboration, and again, it points to the successes and the lessons that we learned in 2004, we weren't doing collaborative planning sessions from the U.S. military perspective with anybody other than the general of the U.S. military.

We talked about the joint interagency, intergovernmental, multi-national environment that we all operate in — that was a huge example of it — Afghan military, Afghan leadership, IRD, international community, NGOs — there were a whole host of people that sat around the table and said, what do we have to do to change the conditions in the Arghandab, and we came up with a number of things. Some of them were precision offensive operations to eliminate enemy safe havens that was immediately followed up by some sort of program to generate a quick response to the population to bring families back who had left.

So can we sustain that money? No. But do we need to? No, the families are back. ... I mean you can grow all the grapes in the world in the Arghandab, but if you can't move them to market and generate some capacity to package them, and refrigerate them, and then move them to an overall global

market, then there's no sense in requiring this increased amount of money into developing the Arghandab.

So I don't know that we necessarily need to sustain that amount of money, but what we need to sustain is that thought process of whatever resources we commit, American treasure in soldiers, or money or whatever it is, it's got to be geared towards a specific effect, and how long-lasting do we want that effect to be, and how do we sustain the benefits of that effect — that's the critical thought that's got to go into it. And we know as we talk about sustainment of that effect that the resources are not unlimited. So you do have to plan for, OK, at some point, how are we going to turn this over or scale down this, and let the Afghans take more control of this, and it's not just in the South.

Q: You mentioned FM-324, that's the Army counterinsurgency manual — one of its key recommendations is to foot patrol as often as possible. My father's friend's son, he said, the only time I left in a helicopter was when I was injured. Do you have to make a decision between security or conducting COIN?

A: I think you got to look at the problem totally differently. I mean, at every level. And I can talk specifically from the tactical, from what my unit and all of the units that were around me, did to include as some of these units are coming back, we get the opportunity to talk to some of them about what we thought was important, composite risk management is something that goes into every commander's thought process when he's making a decision but what dictates the patrol is what's the end state of that patrol. So when I said, the purpose of today's patrol is to conduct a reconnaissance of village X, to determine if the increased crop yield that we saw last week has generated an increased market participation this week, that's a reconnaissance patrol, you can't do that from a truck.

So it doesn't matter if the threat is higher, you take other risk management measures, to mitigate that effect if you've got to be out of your truck. And so it's not an idea of "Well today we have to do a patrol, but the number one piece is security so we've got to stay in our trucks." I don't think that commanders think that way. By and large, we think, what is the purpose of the patrol, how does it tie into that end state that we talked about, that nested end state that we have to get to — how does this patrol tie into that, so what's the purpose of this patrol, and how do I execute that patrol to achieve that purpose.

And that's what dictates who goes on the patrol, what enablers go on the patrol, how long the patrol is, who you're team leader engagements are going to be with, what's your method of insertion, and extraction, sometimes it is a helicopter, sometimes it's flying a helicopter through a spot and then walking in, to where you want to go. Sometimes it is taking a truck to a certain spot and then dismounting and walking.

But I'll tell you — all those principles talk to — you've got to win the population, right? One of the things we really want to clarify in 324 is what does that mean, win the population? Do you make the population believe in their government, in their host nation security force, that's winning the population, you're not doing that from inside of a truck, you've got to get out there and engage.

You've got to get hip-to-hip with a host nation counterpart and facilitate their actions and hand those actions over to them and then back off. You cannot do it from a truck.

Q: It seems like we're shifting towards a counterterrorism strategy, are those two competing strategies — a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategy — in terms of night raids and drones, or do they enhance each other?

A: They do, they absolutely do.

Q: And are we seeing a shift towards counterterrorism?

A: No, I don't think so. Because the general purpose force — Army battalions, Marine Corps battalions, are out on patrol every single day and the things that you're doing are reconnaissance of market activity, and key leader engagements to promote increased conflict resolution at the district level as opposed to at the informal level. That's not making the news. Nobody came out when I had shuras, that wasn't sexy, but when a drone drops a bomb on somebody, hell, everybody in the news wants to see that. So that, because there's so much less kinetic in the effect that we're achieving, there's so much less attention paid to it.

But that's the success — that bomb, probably did a lot towards counterterrorism, didn't do a lot towards counterinsurgency other than eliminate some of the enemy that would affect the population against the benefits of their host nation government and their host nation security force are providing. So the two are absolutely mutually benefiting each other. You get the population onboard and they're willing to — they see progress through their host nation government, they're willing to give more information, generally that information ties more and more to the legitimate threats to both Afghanistan, but also regionally and beyond.

And clearly the elimination of people who are so intent on killing has a tremendous effect on the population and their ability to live a more free life, so the two are complimentary and I don't think our — and again, I can't talk to what ISAF you know if there's been a change in their strategy for an increased focus on counterterrorism, you know, our focus is set the conditions for the host nation government to be the sole provider for the populace and the host nation security force to be the sole agent of security — that's their focus and part of that is letting people who are specifically trained to execute counterterrorism operations and those that are in the battlespace working day by day with the Afghans and the Iraqis as well by the way, to set those conditions for that long-lasting, self-sustaining victory.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your bracelet there?

A: Yea, these are [the names of] the soldiers that we didn't bring home from Afghanistan from my last tour.

Q: You wear it every day?

A: Never forget them.

Q: Is there anything else that I'm missing?

A: The principles that we had in place that even before 324 — 324 as it currently stands is still a rewrite of an older document and a lot of the principles still stayed the same. Our principles for fighting a counterinsurgency are still the same and it still requires the capability to do like we said, offensive, defensive operations, and stability operations, and all three of them, and based on the conditions on the ground dictate which one takes primacy. It takes a specially trained force to be able to do that.

It takes a well-educated force to do that, it takes a bunch of tremendously agile leaders to do that, and I'm not certain our nation recognizes just how good our force is, to be able to do what they've done for the last 10 years, and to grow to wear we are now. Not strength-wise but the intellectual capacity to solve the most difficult problems on the planet. It's pretty awe inspiring. so I'll just tell you I am really proud of the guys that are over there fighting it right now because it's tough.

And they are doing tremendous work — it's really hard to look a kid in the eye and go today you are not going out there on a hunt, that's what you went into your recruiter's office to do, today you're going out there to talk to an elder and find out why they didn't participate in a shura yesterday and that's going to get us closer to winning than anything you're doing to do on the hunt.

And when soldiers accept that and internalize that and go out and execute that, that nests, that end state, all the way out to the ISAF level — it's hugely important and tremendously difficult and they're doing it with absolute precision every day.