POLITICAL ADVISORS
Harnessing the Soft Power of Brigade Commanders

**Captain Adam Scher,
U.S. Army**

Captain Adam Scher is the commander of Dog Company, 2d Squadron, 2d Stryker Cavalry Regiment. He previously served as the political advisor to the brigade commander of the 3d Brigade Combat Team (187th Infantry Regiment), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). He deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004 to 2005 and from 2007 to 2008. CPT Scher earned a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy.

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PHOTO: U.S. Army Major General Peter Aylward, deputy commanding officer of Iraqi Security Forces, speaks with a 10th Iraqi Army Division General during a meeting at Camp Sparrow Hawk, Maysan, Iraq, 18 November 2009. (U.S. Army, SPC Ernest E. Sivia III)

DESPITE TACTICAL SUCCESSES and operational gains during the past five years in Iraq, the U.S. Army's doctrinal evolution is still very much in its infancy. Consider the ground-breaking concepts encapsulated in FM 3-24 at the beginning of the counterinsurgency doctrinal dialogue. Due to current force commitments and the strategic framework for the near future, military leaders can expect to find themselves continually deployed to developing countries to conduct full spectrum operations based on the principles of reconstruction and stabilization. To achieve success, leaders at all levels must continue a professional discourse about the shortfalls of traditional maneuver operations in a counterinsurgency environment.

To meet the challenges presented by the people and politics in this environment, brigade combat team commanders should establish political advisors (POLADs). Political advisory cells whose personnel support unit-of-action commanders complement physical security operations and protect the population. The POLAD cell would provide anthropological, sociological, and political analysis to support the military decision-making process, maximizing the application of "soft power."

The asymmetric nature of an insurgency enables a weaker, dispersed, and outnumbered guerrilla force to challenge and attrit the capabilities of a larger, technologically advanced, and better-resourced conventional force. In this operating environment, the conventional force's proficiency and technical skill is actually a weakness that can discourage key leaders from adapting. Senior leaders have spent their careers focusing on massing combat power at a decisive place and time. Unfortunately, recent U.S. military experiences in Iraq illustrate that "conventional military forces are too prone to emphasize offensive actions such as capturing or killing terrorists rather than the predominately political, economic, and security requirements upon which the ultimate defeat of the insurgency depends."[1] Leaders often become caught up in wanting to fight the enemy they trained for instead of the enemy they face.

The most important difference between conventional and counterinsurgency warfare is this: the central battleground of the latter is not physical space. In counterinsurgency warfare, key terrain does not exist on a map, on the ground, or in any physical form. Instead of land, the people—or to be precise, the way they think, act and feel—are the terrain the insurgent and counterinsurgent must control to achieve victory. Initial efforts in Iraq applied conventional warfare concepts in search and destroy operations against insurgent elements on specific physical territory. The results were

counterproductive. However, when U.S. leaders understood that the Iraqi population was the key terrain, they had greater success neutralizing insurgents. Accepting a "people-centric" paradigm is the first step in converting conventional force doctrine from a liability into an asset. Once leaders adopt this mentality, they can apply their knowledge, experience, and institutional systems to evaluate, influence, and manage the population—the insurgent's most treasured sanctuary.

Instead of engaging an amorphous enemy with predetermined forms of attack to seize land, we must focus our superior strength in numbers, technology, and resources on the real terrain of combat—the physical and emotional loyalty of people. Political advisors and political advisory cells in the brigade combat team will provide primary and specialized support for these efforts.

To effectively seize and hold this new key terrain—the local population— military leaders must reconstruct their organizations. As Galula states—

> In conventional warfare, the staff of a large military unit is composed roughly of two main branches—intelligence/operations and logistics. In counterinsurgency warfare, there is a desperate need for a third branch—the political one—which would have the same weight as the others. The officer in charge of it would follow the developments in all matters pertaining to political and civic action, advise his chief, make his voice heard when operations are in the planning stage, and not have to wait until they are too advanced to be altered.[2]

Once we realize that the population is the key terrain and the counterinsurgency fight is primarily a maneuver that supports political action, we must decide which echelon will be the fighting element of the counterinsurgent force. Higher headquarters identifies this basic unit, and then organizes it to *live among the population*. Galula notes—

> The basic unit of counterinsurgency warfare as the largest unit whose leader is in direct and continuous contact with the population. This is the most important unit in counterinsurgency operations, the level where most of the practical problems arise, where the war is won or lost.[3]

Today, battalions live among the people they defend and support. Battalions establish and maintain numerous static security positions, and other units conduct day-to-day patrolling. These actions generate trust in the local population and create bonds that are vital for sharing information and intelligence. Unfortunately, each battalion is relatively static and can only muster significant combat power for short periods during company or larger operations. Living among the population limits unit flexibility, and the decreased maneuverability of company-sized elements limits the brigade commander's ability to amass combat power at a given time and location.

The new brigade focus is not on applying large formations of combat power at a decisive time and place on specific terrain. Instead, the brigade embraces a people-centric paradigm that recognizes society itself as the actual battleground. The commander has two unconventional but significant "weapon systems" at his disposal in the counterinsurgency fight: money and the office of the brigade combat team commander.

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Capital, Money, and Funding

Money is the most significant weapon system. The brigade combat team can effectively command, control, and apply funds to each of its subordinate elements using the arts and science of nonlethal operations. During the deployment of the 3d Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2007 to 2009, the brigade combat team continually used money as an instrument of combat power by targeting critical aspects of society through—

- Friendly force sustainment.
- Micro-grants and loans.
- Civil service contracts.
- Internal security contracts and disarmament.
- Demobilization contracts.
- Reintegration contracts.

Battalions disbursed these funds. The brigade team staff requested funds from division, supported

the term *soft power* as "getting other actors to want what you want."[4] Instead of mandating, dictating, or coercing the population through hard power, the commander uses his reputation, integrity, and character to mold the beliefs and preferences of key leaders within the local population in his area of responsibility. Dr. Nye concludes, "The [soft] power of ideas or the ability to set the political agenda and determine the framework of debate can shape other's preferences, desires, and decisions."[5]

A local electronics store owner explains the improvements he has made to his business, in Dibbis, Iraq, 28 August 2009. U.S. Soldiers follow-up on micro-grants issued throughout the city.

battalions in the acquisition process, and adjudicated funding priorities among subordinate headquarters. The use of money as a weapon system was largely successful, primarily due to the brigade staff's ability to interact with various echelons and become a single point of contact and a subject matter expert for the entire brigade combat team.

Political Capital

A second and equally effective "weapon" is the commander himself. He possesses "soft-power" or political capital in the engaged culture. He is a "super-sheik" with the power of the purse, and he has armed forces, construction material, technical expertise, and law enforcement capabilities at his disposal, as well as the institutional knowledge to employ them across a large area of operations. While we normally measure combat power based on the massing of forces, numbers of troops, tanks, planes, and bombs with respect to a geographic location, transforming our understanding of terrain means adapting other notions of power as well. In a people-centric context, power is not a function of the ability to kill or capture the enemy, but the result of reputation, demeanor, and the ability to persuade and influence noncombatants. In other words, it is soft power.

Dr. Joseph S. Nye, author of *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, defines

Soft power lends credibility and legitimacy to the coalition's continued footprint in Iraq. Because this type of influence is less invasive, it generally creates less animosity and less resistance from the local population.

Patterned behavior. The brigade combat team commander builds soft power through patterns of behavior, repeated interactions, shared vulnerabilities, and shared successes with the population. A shared military ethic and professional courtesies enhance the commander's soft power among Iraqi Army commanders, and directing subordinate commanders to engage in daily political interactions at the grass-roots level establishes soft power's base amid the people. The level of interaction and the rapport developed increase physical and economic security.

Center of gravity. The population is the center of gravity for both the insurgent and counterinsurgent force. The center of gravity for the commander is the force's posture with respect to the population, its interaction with the local community, and its actions to improve the quality of life within the community. When enemy attacks compel a unit to alter the footprint of its forces, the unit risks a decline in soft power. If the counterinsurgent force nurtures its relationship with the people through resource allocation, force positioning, and continued partnerships, then it can increase its soft power and apply more of it to political reconciliation and economic development. How much soft power the commander has depends on his force's location and relationship

with the local population. Changes in this relationship due to enemy activity or friendly maneuver have significant impact on the commander's ability to gain, maintain, and apply his soft power. (For example, if Soldiers abandon their patrol bases or battle positions because logistical resupply routes are unsafe or the counterinsurgent force cannot maintain essential services, the population's access to water or electricity may be reduced.) Similarly, the brigade commander can actively exert his influence on the community by changing the location, type, frequency, and tone of the subordinates' interactions with community leaders.

A complete weapon system. The commander gains political capital from the rapport between his Soldiers and children who walk to school in front of his most outlying patrol base. In a conventional war, no one would consider an individual Soldier as a complete weapon system. In the counterinsurgency environment, each individual Soldier factors into a "soft-power" approach. Each, through his actions and communications with the local population, becomes a "weapon" of soft power. Every word while conversing with locals is important. A Soldier's uniform and posture during such conversations also sends a message to the population. The commander must harness the implicit and latent power of such "soft" presence and employ it in support of operations.

Political Advisor

To achieve this, the brigade combat team commander should establish the position of political adviser. Working directly for the chief of staff as a special assistant to the brigade combat team commander, the POLAD has a seat at the table among other staff officers and a direct line of communication to the commander. This gives him "certifying authority" (in contrast to tasking authority, which is a training and operations officer function). Certifying authority is oversight authority. The POLAD has two distinct functions. He is the—

● Primary political advisor to the brigade combat team commander on the Iraqi elections and the Iraqi government.

● Facilitator and quality control representative to the staff and maneuver battalions, "certifying" that all actions and operations meet the brigade combat team commander's intent as to elections and governance.

The POLAD is responsible for brigade combat team staff synergy and observes the combined efforts of the—

● Team training and operations staff.
● Civil-military operations.
● Provincial reconstruction team.
● Nonlethal targeting.
● Information operations.
● Public affairs.
● Human terrain team.
● Linguists.

He validates the confluence of lethal and nonlethal force allocations, engagements, and operations that directly influence government, politics, and elections.

Galula argues, "[I]t is just as important that the minds of the leaders and men be adapted to the special demands of counterinsurgency warfare."[6] Thus, the political advisor should ideally be someone with a background in one of the following: cultural anthropology, economics, political science, international relations, languages, or maneuver warfare principles. Newly developed human terrain teams should be part of the political advisory cell. These subject matter experts can focus on a unit's operating environment and support the planning cycle with analysis derived from maneuver intelligence. Ideally, the POLAD should also have conventional warfare experience to ensure that planning and research priorities are tactically relevant.

The brigade combat team commander must make informed decisions as he task organizes his staff and political advisory cell. He should base his decisions on the characteristics and personalities of his subordinate leaders, while taking into account his own passions and concerns. The defense coordinating officer, executive officer, training and operations officer, or civil-military operations officer could perform POLAD functions. The provincial reconstruction team leader or Department of State governance official embedded with the brigade combat team could also serve in this capacity, or the commander can appoint a human terrain team leader or social anthropologist as the POLAD. Regardless of who he selects, he must choose someone (a direct assistant to the defense coordinating officer, executive officer, training and operations officer, or civil military operations officer, if necessary) to study and interpret the political landscape that

shapes the needs, concerns, and attitudes of the local population. The landscape includes governance at the local and national level, political parties and elections, and relations between foreign countries and the host nation.

The political adviser must integrate the commander's soft power effects and develop a method to analyze and understand society as terrain. During the deployment of the 3d Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the brigade commander, Colonel Dominic J. Caraccilo, empowered the POLAD to—

● Study the Iraqi political process.

● Interact with key State Department officials.

● Meet regularly with local political leaders.

● Act as an advocate for the Iraqi population.

● Advise the commander on the political landscape within the area of operations and interest.[7]

The political advisor became the subject matter expert on the Iraqi provincial elections, the national legislative process, voter registration, political entities, candidates, and perceptions among the population during the electoral cycle. The commander correctly identified the provincial elections as the single most vital political event of the deployment and allocated his resources appropriately. The Iraqi Army, police, the Sons of Iraq, and local government leaders were ready to participate in a free and fair election with little direction from coalition forces. While the election law floundered nationally and provincial elections failed to occur during 3d Brigade Combat Team's time in Iraq, significant effort and coordination at the grass-roots level by the 3d Brigade Combat Team political advisory cell created a community environment ready and willing to participate in a legitimate provincial election.

Bearing in mind that the population is the key terrain, and the "soft-power" of the brigade combat team commander is a decisive "weapon system," the following conventional concepts help determine what combination of kinetic and political operations will best achieve the desired end state:

U.S. Army, SPC Richard DelVecchio

U.S. Army COL Caraccilo, center, from 3d Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, speaks with an Iraqi city council member in Mahmudiyah, Iraq, 9 October 2008.

● Key terrain.

● Observation and fields of fire.

● Avenues of approach.

● Obstacles.

● Cover and concealment.

Key terrain. We can define key terrain as any area that, when seized, controlled, or retained, affords a marked advantage to either combatant. Key terrain is terrain that permits or denies freedom of maneuver. Key terrain may also be decisive terrain if it has an extraordinary impact on the mission.[8]

Because of the insurgents' political goals and their recruitment of and sanctuary among the people, counterinsurgent forces must organize their tactics, techniques, and systems of organization toward the population in a similar fashion. The insurgent can avoid battles with the counterinsurgent on the ground, but the insurgent must always fight for, among, and against the people. When the counterinsurgent chooses to engage the population, the insurgent risks defeat by failing to do so as well.[9] Understanding the population as terrain allows commanders to determine which parts of a society are key. Certain groups of people (elites, businessmen, military, etc.) will be more or less significant terrain features given the

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culture, sociology, and anthropology of the community. Taking the initial step of equating people to terrain allows this methodology to become a combat multiplier.

Observation and fields of fire. Observation in the conventional sense is the ability to see and understand the threat in and around areas, either visually or with surveillance devices. However, in counterinsurgency, observation includes recognizing changes in demographics or population density or recognizing when a foreigner or outsider has moved into a tribe or community. The political advisory cell will be uniquely qualified to sift through all reports from subordinate commands to execute this observation function effectively.

A field of fire is an area in which a weapon, group of weapons, or any aspect of combat power may be effectively applied.[10] In a counterinsurgency environment, a field of fire may be a specific tribe or community, a specific demographic, or a distinct sector of civil society, such as doctors, farmers, or police. Depending on the designated field of fire, one can determine the capabilities of a group of people or aspect of society by observing the changes in the key terrain—people—through physical contact or intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms.

Avenues of approach. An avenue of approach is any route that leads a force to the key terrain. Avenues of approach are developed by using mobility corridors. A mobility corridor restricts or controls the movement or application of a military force or a specific element of combat power. We can measure mobility corridors against each other and prioritize them based on the numbers of obstacles present and which corridor best allows us to capitalize on the principles of mass and speed.[11] With the local population as key terrain, avenues of approach include some traditional terrain features such as roads, subways, or rivers. An expanded view, however, includes routes to respect and gain cooperation in the local community and among social leaders. Methods for developing these routes include addressing local concerns such as dependable electricity production and distribution, operational schools and clinics, functioning government institutions, sufficient drinking water, and employment opportunities. Each one of these concerns is a mobility corridor providing access to the population. The level of humanitarian assistance and construction assets and the locations of combat outposts and patrol bases give counterinsurgent forces varying degrees of access to the society they protect.

Obstacles. Obstacles are natural or man-made terrain features that stop, impede, or divert a military force or the application of combat power. We can discover viable mobility corridors by evaluating obstacles.[12] The traditional obstacles to sustainability, lines of communication, and lines of supply apply to a people-centric concept of key terrain. In almost any corridor, the obstacles to the movement of money and political influence (soft power) are bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and sycophantism. With the population as key terrain, counterinsurgent forces must analyze specific "people features" that influence society. These include culture, women's rights, religion, and ethnicity. Military leaders must understand how such features affect daily interactions between people in the same tribe or sect, interactions between people of different tribes or sects, and interactions between locals and counterinsurgent forces. Questions to ask include the following:

● Are certain people prone to lie in order to save face?

● How does the local population view age, money, weapons, gender, etc.?

● What cultural sensitivities will affect the relationship among people in this community?

The POLAD advisory cell will perform detailed analysis to expose the extent of corruption, illegitimacy, or disenfranchisement tolerated by the local population's value system and determine how it constrains the ability to apply combat power.

Cover and concealment. Cover is protection from the enemy's small-arms effects. Concealment is protection from personal observation.[13] In a counterinsurgency, host-nation governments or governing bodies can offer concealment to counterinsurgent forces.

Indigenous military and law enforcement agencies provide cover to a counterinsurgent force. Government institutions and civilian leaders can serve as agents to implement combat power, most notably money or political capital, through a designated avenue of approach. This brings the government closer to the people and conceals the behind-the-scenes efforts of the counterinsurgent, who uses his money and influence to encourage

civilian leaders to execute key initiatives. As local forces improve their professionalism, equipment, and execution, the counterinsurgent can consider reducing his forces. After all, the overarching goal is that the indigenous government and security forces achieve enough legitimacy and credibility among the population to win the hearts and minds of the people and allow the counterinsurgent to withdraw.

The widely accepted notion that one wins or loses a counterinsurgency at the squad leader level and below is too narrow. Daily grassroots interaction is vital in determining the senior leader's soft power position, but sustaining gains made at the lower levels requires applying soft power at the highest levels. Senior leaders are not on the front lines during conventional wars, but the counterinsurgency fight requires they judiciously and systematically exercise their soft power during a kinetic conventional conflict. Using the commander's decision calculus concerning political capital and supported by a political advisory cell, the POLAD is the commander's primary representative in this process. Decisions focus on whom to target for soft power engagements and how to transfer physical security measures into civil security successes like good governance and functioning essential services.

The creation of a political advisory cell to help integrate and maximize soft power is only a first step. There is no question that physical security is paramount, and it must come before the recommendations in this article. The application of soft power can only be truly effective once physical security requirements are met and the population no longer openly supports insurgent forces. However, once the physical security situation is stable and

> *…sustaining gains made at the lower levels requires applying soft power at the highest levels.*

predictable, counterinsurgent forces must be ready to capitalize on its tactical and strategic advantages. For long-term success, the focus must be on creating the sustainable gains of economic growth and political reconciliation.

The political advisor's utility depends on the people-centric paradigm becoming a part of military doctrine and culture. Key military leaders must task organize for the challenges of living among the population. Making such a paradigm an enduring aspect of military doctrine requires that Soldiers and officers perform practical exercises based on this mode of thinking, beginning with their initial entry in the military. This is not new and unconventional; it is simply conventional wisdom, applied in an unconventional way. **MR**

NOTES

1. John Nagl, foreword, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), vii.
2. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 64.
3. Ibid., 78.
4. Joe Nye, "The Decline of America's Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2004, 155.
5. Ibid., 156.
6. Galula, 67.
7. COL Dominic J. Caraccilo, commander, 3 BCT 101st Airborne Division, and author of *Achieving Victory in Iraq* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008).
8. Norman Wade, *The Battle Staff* FM 5-0, FM 6-0, FM 1-02 (Lakeland, FL: The Lightning Press), 3-12.
9. Galula, 58.
10. Wade, 3-13.
11. Ibid., 3-12.
12. Ibid., 3-13.
13. Ibid., 3-12.