

**U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas**  
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Lessons Learned Interview with COL Christopher Toner

This article is a result of the U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Center Lessons Learned Program and highlights several observations and insights from a U.S. Army Brigade Combat Team Commander and his experience in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012. Key to these insights is that:

- Counterinsurgency theory as found in U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 (Counterinsurgency) is sound and useful for planning and execution, and that
- Combat operations, also called “security” or lethal operations, cannot be disconnected from counterinsurgency operations.

COL Chris Toner commanded 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division from June 2009 to June 2012. 3-1ID IBCT (Task Force Duke) deployed to Khost and Paktia Provinces, Afghanistan, in January 2011 and conducted combat operations until March 2012 as part of Regional Command – East, ISAF Joint Command. The mission of 3-1ID IBCT was to execute a counterinsurgency strategy to separate the enemy from the population; achieve effects with the population through their security forces and government; and transform the environment into one where the enemy can no longer operate. COL Toner reported in October 2011 that his units had “fostered GIRoA development, increased ANSF capacity, and defeated a brutal and determined insurgency.”<sup>1</sup> Also, during a press conference on C-Span on 5 April 2012, COL Toner reported significant evidence of the effectiveness of conducting counterinsurgency operations in his area of operation. During this conference, COL Toner was emphatically confident that both ANSF and GIRoA in Khost and Paktia would be capable of independent and effective operations against Haqqani insurgent fighters after U.S. withdrawal in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

In response to questions from the Counterinsurgency Center in April 2012, COL Toner replied below.<sup>3</sup>

1. Do you think that your experience executing counterinsurgency principles validated counterinsurgency theory as found in FM 3-24?

“In our experience, the eight ‘historic principles’ found in FM 3-24 and the five ‘imperatives’ were key and instructive planning considerations that guided both the planning and execution of our campaign plan. We placed a lot of effort in our pre-deployment planning and training to ensure we understood the previous BCTs’ campaign plans and also had an appreciation for both the present and

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished unit after action report.

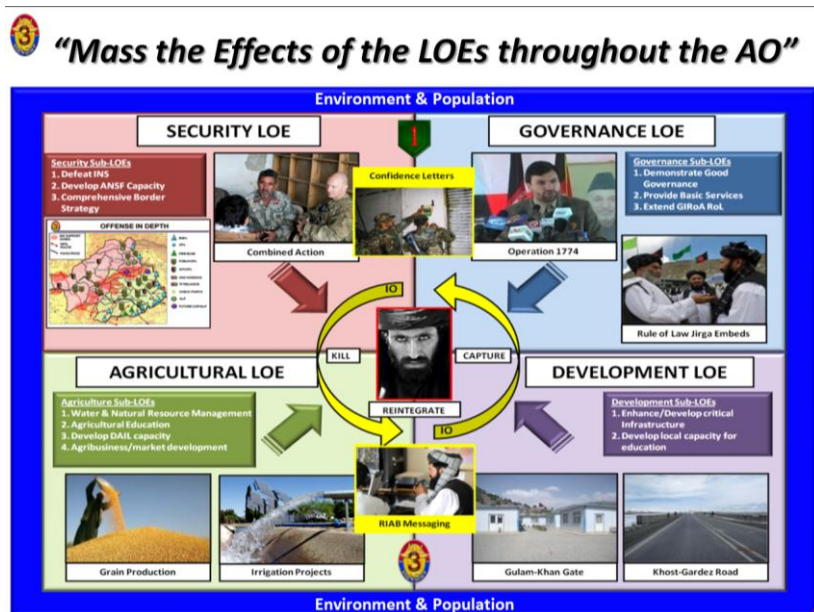
<sup>2</sup> COL Christopher Toner, Institute for the Study of War, C-Span, 5 Apr 2012, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/305329-2>

<sup>3</sup> Counterinsurgency Center interview with COL Toner, 27 April 2012

future operational environment (OE) assessments for Khost and Paktia Provinces. Coupled with the principles and imperatives found in FM 3-24 and a comprehensive understanding of the OE, TF Duke was able to design and execute its campaign plan along multiple LOEs, while obtaining massed and positive effects, towards quantitative and relative objectives. In summary, the principles and imperatives in FM 3-24 are sound COIN 'models' or frameworks, and both were helpful to us as we applied them to our given OE."

2. What would you say would be one or two key lessons you have learned with respect to executing counterinsurgency?

"In our campaign design, we identified security as a precondition necessary to support progress along other lines of effort. Our tasks were to defeat the insurgency and protect the populace - both of which are security centric tasks. Our method of doing so was to execute full spectrum operations and attack the enemy on multiple lines of effort - these are listed in order here, but were really non-sequential (mass effects simultaneously across all LOEs, see chart below).



"First, we attacked the insurgent structure itself- we did this through fully partnered offensive operations, which allowed the ANSF to increase in capacity while mitigating the risk of delegitimizing failure in the eyes of the population."

"Partnered offensive operations 'always' provide more positive effects than unilateral operations. What I share below are some of the characteristics of partnered offensive operations that produced the best or more positive effects.

- Intelligence driven / precision operations (especially raids), allowed for the removal of selected insurgent leaders with minimum risk of collateral

damage and a higher likelihood of removing a target of value to the insurgent network.

- Use of US enablers (route clearance packages, lift, and ISR) to extend the reach and augment the capabilities of Afghan security forces provided compounding positive effects.
- Biometric targeting became huge for us and a true game changer on the COIN battlefield. As our data base expanded we saw an exponential increase in captures through biometric evidence. In fact, we led all of Afghanistan in 'Biometric targeting.'

"In summary, we executed aggressive, discriminate, precise offensive operations fully partnered with our Afghan Security Force brothers and with tremendous support from our Governmental leaders.

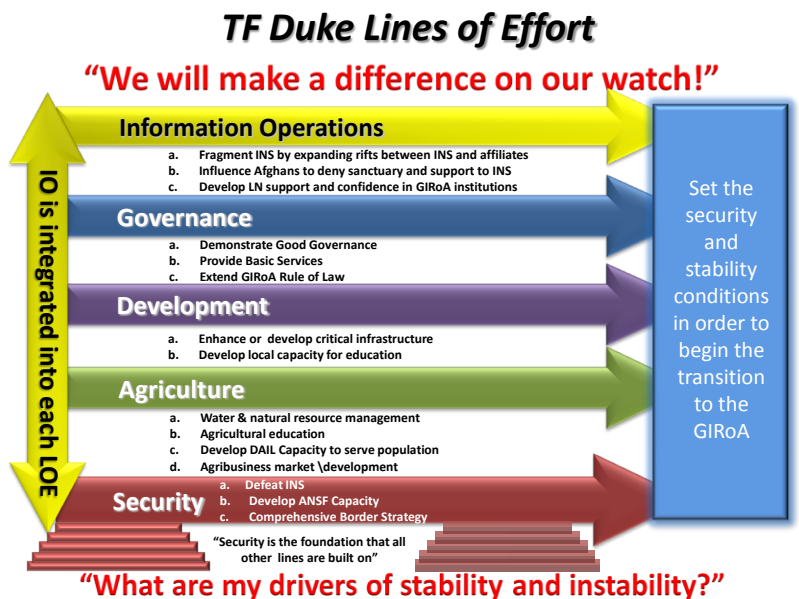
"Second, was the extension and legitimization of governance, which clearly was enabled by the simultaneous increase in security. What I would like to do is share some of the more effective tasks or measures of performance that we saw as having the most positive effects towards legitimizing governance during our deployment.

- Rule of law is critical to legitimizing governance, and effective police forces and prosecutors are essential to enforce the rule of law. We focused our efforts to ensure police forces and prosecutors were trained, partnered, and allocated to the 'right' places in our AO, and we believe this paid us a huge dividend.
- Continued realization of political primacy in internal operations is crucial to legitimizing governance. We found that integrating our provincial and district leaders into the planning and executing of our operations to be extremely useful to reinforce 'political primacy' and enhance the legitimacy of the government.
- We leveraged the huge aspect of religious legitimacy and countered the insurgent abuse of Islam through various legitimate 'Ulema councils' which spread religious based themes of support for GIRoA and ANSF - often using our Radio-in-the-Box platforms.
- One of our key programs was our government 'outreach' program known as Operation 1774. This brought the governors and province line directors out to the districts to meet with the elders and/or conduct evaluations of the district governors/staff. All we did was provide transportation and worked with the ANSF leaders for security of the governmental leaders. This program was hugely successful and popular with the people -- in fact the governors started to invite parliamentary leaders from Kabul to

participate. This outreach enhanced the credibility and stature of the provincial governmental leaders and often enabled them to solve security base problems.

“Finally, after bolstering the key aspects of the state, we used agriculture and economic development to deny the insurgents the base of discontented and disenfranchised people to support his efforts- this was necessarily done ‘by, with, and through’ GIROA, as progress in these areas served as the most tangible proof that GIROA was on its way to becoming a government in both word and deed. Our great State Department and other civilian representatives supported these efforts. I continued the ‘Board of Directors’ concept and sat with the DOS, USAID, and USDA senior representatives on the Brigade BOD - although I was the president and had final approval authority, I can tell you that we ran as close to consensus as possible and never had an issue with agreement on our campaign plan.

“Culminating our efforts, as seen on the attached slide (see below), was use of information operations throughout the design - we wanted to make insurgents feel that they occupied an ever dwindling refuge, which would surely disappear, leaving them with a choice of being killed or captured, or reintegrating. Governmental and ANSF leaders used radio and television (limited geographic area but often effective because of the educated population it reached) to counter enemy activity and promote the primacy of the government and security forces.”



3. Do you think FM3-24 should be radically re-written, or merely refined to take advantage of lessons learned in the last ten years?

“In our experience the basic principles and imperatives found in FM 3-24 are valid and necessary prerequisites for success in COIN, with two qualifications: first, FM 3-24 provides a ‘doctrinal base’ and is a product of historical reflection, principles of war/COIN, coupled with a bit of modern experiences - as such it does not provide a ‘school solution’ or ‘cookie cutter design’ to COIN; second, care must be taken to ensure that basic tactical procedures and principles are not discarded wantonly in favor of a ‘COIN-specific’ solution that downplays valid tactical considerations. An example would be trying to ignore an increasingly poor security environment caused by insurgent forces by focusing on non-lethal LOEs vice attacking the enemy network, etc. Refinement of FM 3-24 can draw on the over 10 years of COIN practice - both in vignette form and in analytical study of ‘what went well, what didn’t go well’. However, care must be taken to stress that the considerations and principles of war continue to apply whether in COIN or higher intensity combat.

“I think that within our Army we have a great misunderstanding, particularly among junior officers, regarding what COIN really is. I believe that, generally, many officers think of COIN as being PRIMARILY all of the non-lethal stuff. From one of my BN CDRS: ‘I can’t tell you how many times I had captains and lieutenants say things that caused me to believe that COIN and offensive combat operations were mutually exclusive – statements like, ‘We’re focusing less on COIN right now and more on going after the enemy.’ That was from a troop commander. I think we need to beat the ‘Tennessee chart’ from FM 3.0\* into their heads and also stop talking about COIN like it’s something unrelated to full spectrum operations.’\*\* I have to concur with this BN CDR - many folks think COIN does not include aggressive offensive combat operations which is not true.”

For more counterinsurgency insights and observations from Army and Marine units in combat, see “Counterinsurgency Lessons Learned” at the U.S. Army Counterinsurgency public website:

[http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/coin/lessons\\_learned\\_collection.asp](http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/coin/lessons_learned_collection.asp)

\* FM3-0 superseded by ADRP 3-0.

\*\*Decisive action replaces the term full spectrum operations as the concept of continuous, simultaneous offense, defense, stability, or defense support of civil authorities.