Unified Effort
Key to Special Operations and Irregular Warfare in Afghanistan

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The U.S. Government strategy for success in Afghanistan unveiled by President Barack Obama on March 27, 2009, emphasized a classic population-centric counterinsurgency approach. The novelty of this approach can be debated, but clearly the emphasis has shifted under the Obama administration. Securing the population and reducing civilian casualties are now the focus of attention. This approach should be more popular with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies, who prefer stabilization operations to offensive operations against insurgents, and with the Afghan government, which has vocally objected to operations that produce inadvertent civilian casualties. The possibility of greater support from Allies and the Afghan government increases the likelihood that the strategy can be executed with better unity of effort. The architects of the new strategy recognize that it puts a premium on better collaboration and that they have limited time for demonstrating progress. In these circumstances, taking every reasonable step to strengthen unity of effort is necessary.

The Obama administration already has taken important steps to improve unified effort among the diverse actors working to promote stability and defeat the Taliban insurgency. Even so, more needs to be done. To make the case for this assertion, we first

Secretary Gates and ADM Mullen brief press on continuing emphasis to prevent civilian casualties in war zones

DOD (Robert D. Ward)

review what has been done to improve unity of effort. Next, we summarize generally why unified effort is so important and yet so difficult to achieve. We illustrate those points by examining the case of special operations in Afghanistan and the extent to which they support the indirect approach championed by General Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and NATO forces there.[1] Because they benefit from an authoritative chain of command and a common culture that values unity of command, military operations should be easier to execute with unified effort than more complex politico-military endeavors. However, the record to date demonstrates that special operations serve conflicting objectives in Afghanistan. We offer an explanation for this incongruity to underscore just how difficult unity of effort is to achieve, and to establish some baseline requirements for remedial action. We then make recommendations designed to improve unity of effort in military operations, civil-military cooperation, and among international and Afghan partners.

New Strategy and Leadership Team

The new strategy had to address the relative priority of dislodging al Qaeda from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region versus pursuing broader counterinsurgency objectives in Afghanistan.[2] The tension between the two objectives was a point of contention as the strategy was being prepared and remains one today as the strategy is being reassessed. Some senior leaders focus on attacking al Qaeda, while others favor defeating the Taliban as a means of denying al Qaeda its sanctuary over the long term.[3] When President Obama unveiled the strategy, the stated goal was "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan," as well as "prevent [al Qaeda's] return to either country in the future." The focus on al Qaeda may be interpreted as giving priority to counterterrorism, but the goal of denying al Qaeda a future sanctuary from which to operate justified a wider counterinsurgency effort to defeat the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.[4]

The commitment to pursue counter-insurgency as an indirect means of isolating and weakening al Qaeda was not open ended. Thus, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' description of Afghanistan in 2008 as "the longest campaign of the long war" gave way to an informal deadline of 1 year in which measurable progress needs to be demonstrated.[5] As Secretary Gates noted, "It's my view—and, I think, the President's—that if we can show we are making progress, if we're headed in the right direction, then the American people and the Congress will sustain this effort. But if in a year or so, it appears that we are in a stalemate and we're taking even more casualties, then patience will wear thin pretty soon."[6] Secretary Gates' assessment now appears optimistic since the administration is currently debating whether there is sufficient political support for providing the resources required by the strategy.

Thus, military commanders now understand that "the trend lines better start swinging in our direction or we're going to lose the international community and we're going to lose Washington."[7] With the clock ticking, senior leaders such as General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. Central Command, emphasize that success in implementing the new strategy will require unprecedented unity of effort: "Addressing the challenges and threats . . . requires a comprehensive, whole of government approach that fully integrates our military and nonmilitary efforts and those of our allies and partners. This approach puts a premium on unity of effort at all levels and with all participants."[8]

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Better unified effort in turn requires clear strategic guidance, which senior military leaders provided when they insisted that the population-centric counterinsurgency approach take precedence over counterterrorism operations. General McChrystal is unequivocal on this point: "If we win this effort it will be because we protected the population. . . . Going after the high-value enemy targets will just be a supporting effort to do that."[9] General Petraeus similarly affirms that counterinsurgency is the priority, noting that whether Allied forces are involved in counterterrorism or counterinsurgency, "their actions and operations must adhere to basic counter-insurgency principles." Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry also stresses that the new strategy "depends upon protecting the Afghan people" and requires integrating civilian and military strategies and capabilities.[10]

Thus, absent a major change in strategy, those executing operations in Afghanistan will follow classic counterinsurgency doctrine, which views the population as the key center of gravity. The new approach emphasizes the need to *shape*, *clear*, *hold*, and *build*: shape the environment through intelligence and information operations, clear areas affected by insurgent presence, hold the areas cleared to ensure that insurgents will not reassert their authority, and build national and local institutions that improve living standards.[11] Assuming the strategy is reapproved and resources are provided by Congress, the key to success will be getting all the disparate components of the international effort in Afghanistan to work well together in implementing the strategy. This will not be easy.

As a former senior U.S. military commander noted in early 2009, unity of effort is the most serious problem in Afghanistan today: "It's not the Taliban. It's not governance. It's not security. It's the utter failure in the unity of effort department."[12] Getting the multiple international organizations, dozens of nations, numerous development organizations, myriad U.S. departments and agencies, and even diverse U.S. military units to pull in the same direction is a monumental challenge.

One common recommendation for improving unity of effort is to select compatible personalities for key leadership positions. Another way is to add command structures dedicated to coordination activities. Both these expedients were proposed at the April 3, 2009, NATO summit, and were subsequently approved. Secretary Gates suggested that the four-star commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) focus on strategy and high-level "cooperation between civil and military efforts." Among other key issues, the new command could help improve the disjointed international aid effort and training of Afghan national security forces.[13] Secretary Gates proposed, and

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NATO accepted, a new subordinate three-star command to oversee the day-to-day battle to ensure that all the diverse U.S. (and Allied) forces in Afghanistan are in synch. He introduced NATO leaders to his handpicked choices for the new commands: General McChrystal and Lieutenant General David M. Rodriguez, USA, respectively. McChrystal and Rodriguez are counterinsurgency experts with close ties to Secretary Gates, and have a personal friendship spanning several decades. General McChrystal, perhaps best known for leading the special operations forces[14] (SOF) special mission units that tracked down Saddam Hussein and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, more recently led a Pentagon task force that reviewed strategy alternatives in Afghanistan. General Rodriguez was selected by Secretary Gates as his personal military assistant after Rodriguez's previous tour in Afghanistan was widely acknowledged as a model for successful counterinsurgency efforts.[15]

GEN McChrystal and LTG Rodriguez talk with Deputy Secretary of Defense William J. Lynn III at ISAF Headquarters in Kabul

U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

In another move calculated to improve unity of effort, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen invited General McChrystal to handpick his subordinates, and McChrystal chose several flag officers from the Pentagon. In addition, McChrystal is having Brigadier General Scott Miller, USA (a SOF veteran), assemble "a corps of 400 officers and soldiers who will rotate between the United States and Afghanistan for a minimum of three years" to provide deep expertise and continuity. When not serving in Afghanistan, officers will fill important positions in the Pentagon, which should ensure good communication between the field and headquarters in Washington.

Secretary Gates gave General McChrystal 60 days to tour Afghanistan, size up the situation, and make a detailed report on how best to implement the new strategy and layered commands. McChrystal's August 30 report emphasized the importance of unified effort and identified additional ways to improve it. To assess whether the urgent, well-conceived, and collectively unprecedented reorganization of command structures and leadership would ensure unity of effort, it is first necessary to understand why collaboration in pursuit of common objectives is such a challenge in irregular warfare in general and in Afghanistan specifically.

Unity of Effort in Irregular Warfare

Arguments about the need for a whole-of-government approach to counterinsurgency (one form of irregular warfare) are commonplace, yet the need is rarely satisfied for several reasons. First, counterinsurgency is a multidimensional enterprise that requires the integration of diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other elements of power. Thus, a nation's multiple national security bureaucracies must work well together to succeed in counterinsurgency. Second, counterinsurgency strategy must be implemented flexibly as evolving circumstances dictate rather than be determined a priori by the strategy. The situation-dependent nature of counterinsurgency strategy implementation substantially increases the complexity of operations and the challenge for unified effort. Some examples illustrate this point.

One strategy objective is to turn over military operations to Afghan forces rapidly, but if done too quickly, they may not have the capacity to respond effectively to the insurgency. Conversely, delaying handover for too long and relying on international forces (meaning all non-Afghan forces in Operation *Enduring Freedom* [OEF] and ISAF) risk alienating a population increasingly critical of those forces. Another difficult implementation issue is promoting good governance, not only in Kabul but also in the provinces. The United States wants to strengthen the legitimacy of the central government and reinforce Afghan national identity by improving the government's capacity to deliver basic services to the population. Yet Kabul's ability to extend its authority and provide services across the country is weak, and Afghans often attach greater significance to local relationships. Thus, support for the central government must be balanced with support for good local governance without alienating Kabul and the local populace from one another.

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Many other difficult tradeoffs can be identified: the timing and extent of political reconciliation with insurgents, how boldly to attack sanctuaries in Pakistan, how much intelligence to share and with whom, which areas of the country should receive the main focus with a limited number of troops, and so forth. Such strategy implementation issues must be resolved in complex and shifting circumstances—including rapid adaptation by the enemy—that vary greatly from one province to another. With so many issues to coordinate, the entire effort can easily lose coherence. When counterinsurgency elements work at cross-purposes, political and moral capital is squandered. The population is likely to conclude the government and its allies are incompetent, untrustworthy, or both. Since the center of gravity is the support of the population, insufficient unity of purpose and effort in a fast-moving situation

is often the critical shortcoming in a counterinsurgency campaign.

The third obstacle to unified effort is the sheer number and competing objectives of players and activities involved. Currently, over 40 countries, three major international organizations (United Nations [UN], European Union, and NATO), and scores of other agencies and nongovernmental organizations are working in Afghanistan. Moreover, these diverse actors are more or less aligned in support of one of two different missions with competing priorities that have evolved over time: NATO's ISAF mission, and the U.S.-led OEF mission. ISAF has evolved from a small security force concentrated in Kabul to a country-wide "stabilization" effort driven by classic population-centric counterinsurgency objectives, including "the extension of government authority across Afghanistan; the development of the Afghan Government structures necessary to maintain security across the country without the assistance of international forces . . . and the promotion by the Afghan Government of democracy, human rights and the rule of law."[16]

However, a core strategic objective of the OEF mission is the disruption of terrorist activity by killing or capturing al Qaeda leaders.[17] OEF operations have expanded to support counterinsurgency by targeting Taliban insurgent leaders.[18] Each mission involves organizations from many nations and the international community, and each mission can be pursued with more or less emphasis on cooperation with the Afghan forces and populace. In addition, the diverse military forces operating in Afghanistan include General Purpose (or conventional) Forces and special operations forces that do not always cooperate well.

For all these reasons, unity of effort is a critical but difficult challenge in irregular warfare, especially in Afghanistan. Using special operations as a cardinal example, we can illustrate that unified effort is difficult to achieve even when all the organizations pursuing an objective share a common chain of command and consider unified effort a core organizational value.

SOF in Afghanistan

Special operations forces typically are trained specifically for counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and often approach those missions with different tactics than those employed by conventional forces. Even within the SOF community, units may approach counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions differently for historical and cultural reasons. Thus, SOF are in the middle of the debate over the relative priority of counterterrorism against al Qaeda and counterinsurgency against the Taliban.

Theoretically, the two missions can complement one another. Counterterrorist kill/capture operations can disrupt insurgent operations, produce intelligence on the insurgency, and buy time for other population-centric counterinsurgency efforts to bear fruit. Similarly, counterinsurgency efforts can generate good intelligence for targeting terrorists and alienate them from sympathizers who otherwise would provide support for their activities. In practice, however, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions tend to clash. With their emphasis on nighttime raids, counterterrorist operations can produce inadvertent civilian casualties that anger the population and complicate attempts by counterinsurgents to win popular support. Resentment runs even higher when counterterrorist operations are carried out by foreign forces that appear insensitive to local communities. Counterinsurgents working with Afghan authorities and forces may compromise a counterterrorist operation if the Afghan counterparts warn the enemy, or if those operations are carried out less skillfully than would be the case if they were conducted by international forces.

The tension between the two missions is thus a question of priorities: the importance of targeting individual enemies relative to the risk of incurring civilian casualties and damaging relationships with local communities; and the importance of working with Afghan authorities and forces relative to the risk that doing so will compromise efforts to target enemy leaders. Only a clear strategy and unified effort can minimize the tension between these two missions. Hy Rothstein provides a compelling account of how the original focus on killing terrorist leaders and destroying Taliban forces in 2002 needed to shift to counterinsurgency when the Taliban adopted insurgent tactics.[19] Instead, conventional forces and headquarters pushed aside Army Special Forces that had developed close working relationships with their Afghan counterparts. Unilateral search operations by conventional forces caused increasing resentment, particularly in Pashtun communities. Eventually, new U.S. leadership put the effort back on track:

in practice, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions tend to clash

Afghan National Police indicate possible enemy routes to U.S. Marines in Helmand Province during counterinsurgency operations

U.S. Marine Corps (Pete Thibodeau)

Between late 2003 and early 2005, we were moving on the right path in Afghanistan. Under Ambassador [Zalmay] *Khalilzad and Lieutenant General David Barno, the United States completely overhauled its strategy for Afghanistan. We increased the number of American forces in the country, expanded nonmilitary assistance to the Afghan government and—most*

importantly—abandoned a counterterrorism-based strategy that emphasized seeking out and attacking the enemy, in favor of one that emphasized counterinsurgency and the protection of the population. All of this was overseen by an integrated civil-military command structure, in which the Ambassador and the coalition commander worked in the same building, from adjoining offices. The result was that, by late 2004, governance and reconstruction were improving. . . . Entrenched warlords were being nudged out of power. . . . [N]*ational elections were conducted successfully* [and] *the Taliban showed signs of internal dissention and splintering. Rather than building on these gains, however, we squandered them. Beginning in 2005, our integrated civil-military command structure was disassembled and replaced by a balkanized and dysfunctional arrangement. The integrated counterinsurgency strategy was replaced by a patchwork of different strategies, depending on the location and on which country's troops were doing the fighting.*[20]

U.S. Government policy statements at the time emphasized counterinsurgency and close cooperation with allies. However, the Embassy turned its attention to other matters, and General Karl Eikenberry, USA, who succeeded General Barno, returned the military emphasis to kill/capture operations. The result was an increasing number of incidents producing civilian casualties, which led to a steep decline in popular support.[21] Civilian casualties are not the only factor alienating the Afghan population,[22] but they are the main one.

This historical overview suggests that it will not be easy to ensure that operations give priority to protecting the population, even though the new strategy requires it. There are several reasons why this is true. The main one is the reliance on air support to compensate for the inadequate number of U.S., Allied, and properly trained Afghan forces. Airstrikes that result in major civilian casualties can occur in support of conventional forces. However, over the past several years, 80 percent of the major civilian casualty incidents where ground forces could be identified involved U.S. SOF (see table 1). Operating in small teams, SOF often make contact with enemy forces, find themselves outnumbered, and require close air support that occasionally results in high civilian casualties.

Most Afghans' experience with bombing is "strongly correlated with negative attitudes towards the U.S., towards the Afghan central and provincial governments, and regarding Afghanistan's direction."[23] The Taliban are working hard to exploit this popular resentment in order to counter the tactical advantage that international forces enjoy. Insurgents quickly capitalize on the issue of civilian casualties with a more agile and dynamic communications capacity than the international military forces. They sometimes succeed in pressuring local officials to inflate estimates of civilian casualties. However, it

Table 1. Major (>10) Civilian Casualty Incidents, 2006–2009

Date	Location	Estimated Civilian Fatalities*	Military Forces/Type of Incident
June 14, 2009	Kirjan District, Dai Kundi Province	NA/13	International forces†/targeted airstrike
May 4, 2009	Bala Boluk, Farah Province	26/86	U.S. special operations forces (SOF)/ troops in contact (TIC)**
February 17, 2009	Gozara District, Herat Province	13/13	U.S. forces†/unspecified airstrike
November 5, 2008	Shah Wali Kot District, Kandahar Province	37/37	Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) forces† and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)/TIC
August 21–22, 2008	Shindand District, Herat Province	33/78–92	U.S. SOF/TIC**
August 9, 2008	Tagub District, Kapisa Province	NA/11–12	North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) airstrike/targeted
June 6, 2008	Dela Bala District, Nangarhar Province	NA/47	OEF airstrike†
May 8, 2008	Sangin District, Helmand Province	NA/21–80	U.S. SOF/TIC**
January 23, 2008	Ghazni Province	11/11	U.S. SOF/TIC**
June 26–27, 2007	Greshk District, Helmand Province	12/45–65	U.S. forces† and ANSF/TIC
June 22, 2007	Greshk District, Helmand Province	NA/25	NATO forces†/TIC
May 8, 2007	Sangin District, Helmand Province	NA/21	U.S. SOF/TIC**
May 1, 2007	Maruf District, Kandahar Province	NA/13	U.S. forces†/TIC
April 29, 2007	Shindand District, Herat Province	NA/42	U.S. SOF/TIC**
March 4, 2007	Jalalabad District, Nangarhar Province	16/16	U.S. SOF/road convoy**
November 1, 2006	Kandahar Province	NA/31	U.S. SOF/TIC**
October 26, 2006	Panjwayi District, Kandahar Province	12/40	NATO forces†/TIC
October 18, 2006	Greshk District, Kandahar Province	NA/13	NATO forces†/TIC
May 21, 2006	Panjwayi District, Kandahar Province	17/34	U.S. forces†/TIC

Sources: Air Strike Tracker Web site (http://ourbombs.com/striketracker); United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) Mid Year Bulletin on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (2009); UNAMA Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (2008); and Human Rights Watch "Troops in Contact" Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan (2008), which include details of specific incidents.

* Casualty figures are often disputed. The first figure is the international military forces estimate; the second figure is either an Afghanistan government or a public media estimate. NA: not available.

** Incidents involving SOF troops.

† Indicates military forces involved or type of incident is disputed.

is also evident that international military estimates of civilian casualties can err. Afghan public resentment is compounded when international military forces resort to blanket statements denying or contesting the number of civilian casualties without an adequate investigation. The emergence of video footage showing dead civilians prompted a review of initial findings that just seven civilians were killed during August 2008 airstrikes in Shindand District, Herat Province. The investigation determined that at least 33 civilians were killed during the operation.[24]

Although they receive less media attention, civilian casualties incurred during house raids—the vast majority conducted by SOF—also cause resentment among Afghans (see table 2). Many such operations produce benefits never made public for security reasons. Yet their cumulative political effect may turn tactical successes into a strategic failure, a point repeatedly highlighted by Afghan authorities and increasingly by U.S. military officials as well. For example, in December 2006, in the aftermath of a SOF operation in Khost Province, the U.S. military claimed four suspected terrorists had been killed. However, then-Governor Arsala Jamal, with whom the U.S. military had developed a strong working relationship, contested the statement, stating that the raid mistakenly targeted a pro-government village. Four of the five brothers living in the compound worked for the government, and Jamal asserted there was "little reason to suspect them of being anti-government elements."[25] In March 2008, in response to two SOF operations that led to the deaths of several Afghan women and children, Jamal complained to Richard Holbrooke that "this undermines everything we are trying to do here."[26] On a subsequent visit to the White House in April 2008, he argued to President George W. Bush that "special operations is the biggest, biggest challenge and [they have a] negative impact on the people's mind in regard to coalition forces. There is no single bigger issue than that."[27] President Hamid Karzai and Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak also have called for an end to uncoordinated SOF raids.

Karzai has long been extremely critical of airstrikes and house raids. In July 2002, following an American airstrike by a SOF AC–130 that killed scores of people celebrating a wedding, Karzai stressed the importance of procedures to prevent future

Table 2. Major (>5) Civilian Casualty Incidents (House Raids), 2006–2009

Date	Location	Estimated Civilians Killed*	Military Forces
April 9, 2009	Gurbuz District, Khost Province	4/5	U.S. special operations forces (SOF)**
March 22, 2009	Kunduz Province	NA/5	U.S. forces†
March 13, 2009	Charkh District, Logar Province	NA/5	U.S. and Afghan SOF**
March 6, 2009	Sabari District, Khost Province	NA/4	U.S. forces†; Afghan forces present†
February 12, 2009	Uruzgan Province	5/3	North Atlantic Treaty Organization Australian forces†
January 23, 2009	Laghman Province	NA/16	U.S. SOF**
January 19, 2009	Kapisa Province	NA/14	U.S. SOF**
January 7, 2009	Laghman Province	NA/13	U.S. SOF**
September 1, 2008	Kabul Province	NA/4	International and Afghan forces†
April 28, 2007(?)	Nangarhar Province	2/5	U.S. forces†
December 12, 2006	Mandozai District, Khost Province	5/5	U.S. SOF**

* In some of these cases, the Department of Defense asserts that combatants and not civilians were killed. The first figure is the international military forces estimate; the second figure is either an Afghanistan government or a public media estimate. NA: not available.

** Incidents involving SOF troops.

† Indicates military forces involved or type of incident is disputed.

Royal Marine Commandos participate in stabilization and security operation with Afghan National Security Force and ISAF troops, Helmand Province

ISAF

tragedies. He has repeatedly called for an end to airstrikes and to international forces entering Afghan homes without permission from Afghan authorities, and his rhetoric has escalated over the years. He has lamented the inability to stop "the coalition from killing our children" and accused foreign forces of "extreme" and "disproportionate" use of force. In September 2008, Karzai protested the continued killing of Afghan civilians before the UN General Assembly. Shortly thereafter, he announced: "This is my first demand of the new president of the United States—to put an end to civilian casualties." More recently, Karzai has campaigned on the promise of bringing international military forces under control.

Karzai's stridency may be calculated to garner popular support, but it also reflects the public mood. An increasing number of mass demonstrations against civilian casualties testify to serious public discontent, and evidence suggests civilian casualties are one reason some Afghans take up arms against international military forces.[28] In Herat Province in April 2007, villagers reportedly took up arms against SOF in response to a series of raids that resulted in the deaths of several civilians.[29] General Barno has summarized the dilemma posed by SOF operations that alienate Afghans:

the tolerance of the Afghan population for foreign military forces [can be described as] *a bag of capital that has to be spent very slowly . . . every time we kick down doors in the middle of the night, every time we create some offense to Afghan cultural sensibilities, we spend that bag of capital—that toleration for foreign forces—more and more quickly. And we've been spending that bag of capital at an extraordinarily fearsome rate, here, in the last two years, in part because of civilian casualties and in part because of, simply, the tactics that we've been using.*[30]

General McChrystal's recent report on the situation in Afghanistan also concluded that "civilian casualties and collateral damage to homes and property . . . have severely damaged ISAF's legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people." This contention is supported by early 2009 polls, which indicate that the number of Afghans who say the United States has performed well in Afghanistan was cut in half, from 68 percent in 2005 to 32 percent—and ratings of NATO/ISAF forces were just as bad. Civilian casualties are a key irritant: "77% of Afghans call such strikes unacceptable, saying the risk to civilians outweighs the value of these raids in fighting the Taliban." Ominously, 25 percent of poll respondents now say attacks on U.S. or NATO/ISAF forces can be justified—twice the level in 2006.[31] Even though international forces are aware of these trends and want to avoid civilian casualties, the number of civilian casualties produced by coalition operations continued to climb throughout 2008, increasing somewhere between 39 and 54 percent.[32]

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Several steps were taken to address the civilian casualty issue. First, in a memorandum to Admiral Mullen in October 2008, Secretary Gates directed a change in communications posture from "investigate first, make amends later" to "make amends first, investigate later."[33] The new approach includes refraining from making initial statements contesting casualty estimates, responding more quickly to allegations, conducting joint investigations with Afghan authorities, and apologizing publicly where civilian casualties are confirmed as a result of international military operations.[34]

Second, in late 2008, General David McKiernan, USA, former commander of U.S. and ISAF forces, directed that all searches and house raids should be led by Afghan security forces except when there was a "clear and identified danger" coming from a building. McKiernan's directive did not apply to SOF special mission units, and it is unclear whether it applied to other SOF. Nevertheless, SOF leaders independently suspended special mission unit activities for 2 weeks in February 2009 to review procedures to reduce civilian casualties. The problem did not disappear, however. In June 2009, in a rare departure from diplomatic protocol, Kai Eide, the Norwegian head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, publicly declared an "urgent need to review" SOF activities in Afghanistan, asserting the political costs of SOF raids were "disproportionate to the military gains."[35]

Shortly thereafter, General McChrystal issued a tactical directive that curtails the use of airstrikes to "very limited situations" where forces are in imminent danger. The directive emphasizes that "Commanders must weigh the gain of using [close air support] against the cost of civilian casualties, which in the long run make mission success more difficult and turn the Afghan people against us."[36] This

Kai Eide, special representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, addresses Security Council on situation in Afghanistan

UN (Paulo Filgueiras)

approach has not been without criticism, but General McChrystal has said that he "cannot overstate" his support for operating in ways that limit civilian casualties.[37] The directive is also consistent with the approach some NATO military forces already use in Afghanistan, which bodes well for better unified effort within the Alliance.

McChrystal's directive and his priorities reflect the indirect approach to SOF operations historically embraced by Army Special Forces, one that gives priority to working by, through, and with indigenous forces and populations.[38] This means the relationship with local forces and population is determined to be more important than the effects that U.S. forces can achieve against targets unilaterally. For example, in 2001 a Special Forces captain routinely deferred to the judgment of the Afghan leader he worked with, who happened to be Hamid Karzai, the current president of Afghanistan: "Hamid was very careful. If there was any doubt, we wouldn't bother killing it. I could afford to let a few guys go if I wasn't sure. Hurting the populace hurt our own cause."[39]

McChrystal's directive gives priority to working by, through, and with indigenous forces and populations

The spirit and challenge of implementing the indirect approach was captured recently by an Army Special Forces colonel who answered his own rhetorical question about which of the many overlapping forces in Afghanistan own any given battle space: "The correct answer is the Afghans own the battle space and we are there in support of them. But [the] mentality that we own the battle space in a sovereign country . . . can cause us to operate in ways that are counterproductive."[40]

To reiterate, the new population-centric counterinsurgency strategy requires the indirect approach traditionally championed by Army Special Forces. This means it is necessary to build the capacity of indigenous forces that know the populace better, even for kill/capture operations. However, U.S. forces operating under the OEF mandate have focused for years on the direct approach to special operations, targeting individual enemy leaders unilaterally. This is true not only for SOF special mission units that specialize in

Soldier assesses security of village

U.S. Air Force (Sarah R. Webb)

direct action, but also increasingly for Army Special Forces, who now often accord equal or higher priority to unilateral kill/capture operations than the indirect approach.[41] Ironically, whereas in 2002 conventional forces such as the 82d Airborne conducted counterinsurgency sweeps that damaged relationships carefully cultivated by Army Special Forces, today the reverse is true. It is now common for SOF kill/capture operations to disrupt relationships with local Afghans cultivated by conventional force commanders who, after 8 years of learning in multiple theaters, are increasingly attentive to counterinsurgency principles.

Disunity in Command and Control

There is broad agreement among the U.S. national security community, the leadership of U.S. Special Operations Command, and many individual SOF personnel that the indirect approach to counterinsurgency should take precedence over kill/capture operations. However, the opposite has occurred. Understanding why is important if unity of effort is to be improved. One reason for the undue emphasis on direct action is that resources have been disproportionately allocated to targeting insurgent and terrorist leaders rather than to indirect SOF activities in support of counterinsurgency. An explanation for the discrepancy between these operations and national policy was the overlapping and ad hoc command and control arrangements extant in Afghanistan to date.[42]

In OEF, civilian casualties resulting from operations may not be viewed as detrimental to the core mission of destroying terrorist organizations. However, civilian casualties are a critical issue for ISAF and its counterinsurgency mission. Most Afghans cannot distinguish between OEF and ISAF forces, and relationships painstakingly developed by ISAF are adversely affected when OEF kill/capture operations incur civilian casualties. Despite procedures to deconflict missions, lack of coordination between SOF and conventional forces is all too common. For example, in Nangarhar Province, the Army brigade commander who ostensibly controlled the battle space was aware of only 5 of the 30 operations conducted by a SOF unit in the area and had no knowledge of the one in which 17 civilians were killed and 50 injured.[43]

The problem is exacerbated by the fragmentation of SOF command and control. Special mission units conducting direct action against terrorists do not report to the same chain of command as other SOF units. From early on in OEF, SOF operated under the command of multiple joint task forces. Task Force Sword, comprised of SOF special mission units, reported directly to the combatant commander while other SOF such as Task Forces Dagger and K-Bar reported to a Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) component commander.[44] A new SOF headquarters established in February 2009 layers a one-star command on top of the CJSOTF command. Ostensibly, the purpose is to enhance coordination between SOF units and conventional international military forces, but many in Army Special Forces worry that the net effect of another layered headquarters will be less, rather than more, unity of effort.[45] In any case, special mission unit forces remain outside this command structure, so the potential for working at cross-purposes remains. The same point holds for other U.S. organizations conducting kill/capture operations, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration. Their operations targeting individuals linked to drugs and the insurgency are increasing and need to be coordinated with military operations, so they will not undermine broader counterinsurgency objectives.[46]

The disproportionate emphasis on kill/capture operations also can be attributed to organizational culture and reward systems that reinforce the different objectives embraced by OEF and ISAF commands. Americans in general, the military in particular, and SOF especially are results-oriented. The capture or elimination of enemy leaders is a measurable, concrete, and energetic activity that is easily rewarded in individual and unit performance assessment. Making a contribution to population security is passive, difficult to measure, often ambiguous, and therefore less likely to be rewarded. Within the subgroups of SOF, there are different cultural propensities toward the indirect approach to operations, but in general, the military ethos provides all SOF commanders incentives to give priority to kill/capture operations instead of population security. This is particularly true now that SOF units have built up a remarkable capability to conduct such operations frequently and for sustained periods.[47]

Unity of effort is difficult in irregular warfare, even within the military and within SOF organizations that embrace unity of command as a core value. Unified effort is even more difficult among U.S. departments and agencies, and between Allies that lack common organizational values and do not share a single, hierarchical chain of command. Disunity of command within the military, the U.S. Government, and among the United States and its Allies unfortunately is the norm, not the exception. Yet the architects of the current strategy recognize that it requires "clear unity of effort at all levels and with all participants."[48] The administration therefore needs to take every possible step to improve unified purpose and effort.

Observations and Recommendations

News reports suggest the Obama administration is evaluating the option of giving precedence to counterterrorism over counterinsurgency, and concentrating on relatively low-cost "surgical" strikes.[49] While this strategy alternative should be evaluated in detail, several observations based on the research offered here are in order. Effective kill/capture operations require political support and intelligence from indigenous populations, which are more easily obtained when the population has confidence in the government and its forces. For this reason, General McChrystal's indirect approach to irregular warfare[50] is more likely to produce effective kill/capture operations than attempts to strike surgically from afar. In addition, a strategy shift to give precedence to counterterrorism would not reduce the irregular warfare requirement for greater unity of effort, as kill/capture operations in Iraq demonstrated.[51] Whether the emphasis is on counterterrorism or counterinsurgency, the requirement for improved unity of effort is a constant in irregular warfare.

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If the United States does decide to stick with its current strategy and provide the additional resources it requires, it can and should take some more steps to improve unity of effort, particularly with NATO allies. Eliminating the tension between OEF

forces targeting enemy leadership and ISAF forces pursuing stabilization and population security efforts is the single most important requirement for better unified effort. Toward this end, almost all of the U.S.-led OEF forces should be consolidated under the NATO ISAF mission, to include most SOF forces and all U.S. training command forces that support Afghan force development and employment programs.[52] Only SOF special mission units (and their support elements) would continue to operate under the OEF mandate. Taking this step would solidify the strategic direction from General Petraeus and General McChrystal that nests counterterrorism within a wider counterinsurgency mission.[53] More importantly, it would improve the legitimacy of the international effort in Afghanistan and reinforce European support for the endeavor. The NATO ISAF mission is operating under a UN Security Council resolution and has a broader base for popular support than the U.S.-led OEF mission. Finally, the consolidation under NATO would be consistent with the administration's focus on multilateral solutions.

Merging the two missions is more practicable than might be assumed. The missions have been converging for several years. The OEF counterterrorism focus has broadened to include disrupting the Taliban insurgency by targeting its leadership. More importantly, since 2006 the OEF mission has included a nationbuilding component in the form of the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan, which is charged with training and equipping Afghan National Security Forces. General McChrystal's report indicates the OEF training component command will be subsumed under ISAF, a positive step that is consistent with the decision announced at the April NATO summit to form an Alliance training mission and have it led by a single commander who also would control the U.S.-led Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan under OEF.[54]

At the same time, the ISAF mission has broadened as well. After NATO assumed command of ISAF in 2003, the UN Security Council authorized the extension of the ISAF security and stabilization mission to cover the entire country, an expansion that ISAF completed by late 2006. ISAF experienced more combat when it moved into the south and east where insurgent activity is concentrated. In this environment, the practical distinctions between "security and stabilization" and classic population-centric counterinsurgency missions almost disappear. The terminology remains politically important because NATO does not refer to ISAF's mission as counterinsurgency but rather prefers the euphemism "the comprehensive approach" to emphasize the full range of civil-military activities required to stabilize Afghanistan. Some NATO forces will continue to avoid offensive operations against the Taliban, but the current strategy emphasis on population security and the indirect approach underscores the need to have Afghan forces take the lead in such operations anyway. Thus, this limitation is not a severe handicap.

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U.S. Army (Matthew Freire)

Soldiers secure detainee during joint operation with Afghan National Security Forces and ISAF in Khowst Province

Moreover, past NATO reluctance to consider merging elements of the two missions appears to be dissipating. Until 2005, Britain, France, and Germany all opposed merging ISAF and OEF because they believed the United States wanted to dump the mission on NATO and concentrate on Iraq, and because they thought the U.S. focus was on fighting the Taliban and al Qaeda rather than population security and nationbuilding. Since 2006, however, some Allies (or particular political parties within NATO countries) have recommended merging the missions; Italy explicitly did so with the rationale that the merger would reduce civilian casualties by ramping down OEF operations.[55] Since the ISAF stabilization mission now includes the full range of activities necessary to execute the new U.S. population-centric counterinsurgency strategy, NATO should be more amenable to seeing the ISAF mission absorb the bulk of OEF forces and activities if the United States emphatically renews its commitment to success in Afghanistan.[56]

Many observers would be hesitant to give the lead to ISAF because European countries have demonstrated a marked reluctance to use lethal force. But the new U.S. strategy deemphasizes the attrition of insurgent forces, the type of operations Europeans could not support.[57] In addition, NATO troop-contributing states are relaxing their opposition to having their forces involved in combat operations when such operations are an unavoidable byproduct of stabilization operations.[58] The French, for example, now express frustration with national caveats that limit combat by NATO troops, and recently, a European Parliament report made the argument that national caveats are counterproductive. On the ground, more nations are finding combat unavoidable and a necessary means of pacification.[59] Even German forces, with arguably the most restrictive national caveats, now routinely are involved in combat.[60] ISAF forces also can rely more heavily on NATO SOF when combat operations are necessary. Many Allies have been willing to allow their SOF to conduct combat operations with a low profile.

Where fighting is heaviest, U.S. forces and likeminded Allies will have to bear the brunt of the operations until Afghan forces are ready. However, that is the case today and not an argument against rolling OEF activities under ISAF. Any U.S. concerns over the future direction of the ISAF NATO mission could be assuaged by the provision that the commander of ISAF would always be a U.S. flag officer, which is entirely reasonable given that the United States provides the majority of forces and support to the mission.

The second most important requirement for better unified effort is improved civil-military collaboration. Since, as argued above, successful irregular warfare requires rapid resolution of innumerable implementation issues, mechanisms for authoritative civil-military decisionmaking are imperative. The United States must lead the way for NATO in this area by ensuring close collaboration between General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry. In this regard, McChrystal's plan is insufficient. It calls for parallel chains of command with coordination at every level. Historically, however, the way to ensure civil-military cooperation is to formally integrate the military and civilian chains of command, as occurred when General Douglas MacArthur was given authority over all U.S. activities in Japan and when the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support Program in Vietnam was instituted. These rare experiments in formally integrated civil-military chains of command produced good results that more than justify their broader use in complex politico-military contingencies. The standard practice, however, has been to proclaim the importance of civil-military integration while doing nothing to facilitate it, which, typically and not surprisingly, produces unsatisfactory results.[61]

Occasionally, a pair of extraordinary personalities will mesh and develop a noteworthy rapport, as was the case with Ambassador Robert Oakley and Lieutenant General Robert Johnston in Somalia (1993), Ambassador Khalilzad and Lieutenant General Barno in Afghanistan (2003), and General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker in Iraq (2007). The fact that Ambassador Eikenberry is a retired Army lieutenant general may improve the odds that he and General McChrystal will collaborate, but it does not guarantee it. Even if they do, their positive example will not ensure cooperation down the line through subordinate levels of organization, as the experience with the civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan attests.[62] Great Ambassador–military commander teams are the rare exceptions that prove the general rule that such leaders typically respond to the demands of their own organizations and cultures, as do their subordinates. As a recent report from the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) concluded, "While senior leaders should get along in the interest of the mission, history is replete with examples where they have not. Rather than depending exclusively on personalities for success, the right interagency structures and processes need to be in place and working."[63]

The optimum means of ensuring unified effort would be a formal decision to integrate the civilian and military chains of command for the purpose of complex contingency operations such as counterinsurgency, but this would require changes to laws that mandate a dual civil and military chain of command at the country level.[64] The more immediate solution would be an informal agreement between Eikenberry and McChrystal to work collaboratively. Such a relationship can be hoped for, but the more prudent route would be for the administration to take steps to ensure a collaborative relationship.

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General McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry have developed a joint plan for Afghanistan,[65] as should be the norm in complex civil-military operations. They should also exchange key staff members and make decisions collaboratively whenever possible, in keeping with the best practices of our most accomplished Ambassador-commander teams. However, as the HASC recommends, they also should be given some procedural rules of thumb for collaboration. When diplomatic and military needs sharply conflict—as they must on occasion in irregular war—who has the final say should be a function of the security situation, which could be determined on a province-by-province basis. Ambassador Eikenberry would have the last say for the few contentious issues that could not be resolved collaboratively in those provinces where security was good enough to allow progress

toward political objectives to take priority—generally the northern half of the country at the moment. In provinces where the security environment is so poor that progress toward security objectives must take precedence before political progress can be realized—generally the southeast and southern half of the country—General McChrystal would resolve the issue at hand.[66] Knowing in advance who has the final say will minimize the conflict, tardy decisions, stalemates, and least common denominator solutions that are frequently the deleterious results of forcing equal authorities with competing mandates to cooperate.

As for unified effort within the military and SOF community, General McChrystal's plan calls for improved SOF command and control, and it hints that some SOF will be realigned under ISAF, as recommended here. Improved coordination between OEF and ISAF SOF will be provided by enhanced "SOF operations and planning staff, SOF advisors, and liaison officers to the Regional Command Headquarters."[67] McChrystal has the credentials to reorient the SOF focus in Afghanistan so that population-centric strategy objectives take precedence over kill/capture operations. He is a veteran of both Army Special Forces and special mission units who recognizes that decapitation of the enemy leadership will not work, but that a focused effort to keep the insurgency on the defensive is valuable if conducted properly. Offensive operations against insurgents must be informed by the kind of interagency intelligence fusion McChrystal pioneered in Iraq.[68] In-depth knowledge of local personalities and politics increases the odds that kill/capture operations will improve security and reduces the likelihood that local information sources might manipulate international forces for their own objectives.[69] To improve intelligence and political awareness, General McChrystal's new command and control guidance for SOF should pair Army Special Forces with Afghan units that have graduated from basic training and are ready for employment, and with local irregular forces generated through the Afghan Public Protection Force program (if that controversial pilot program continues).[70]

SOF kill/capture operations should continue, but only in support of counterinsurgency objectives. In some cases, conventional units integrate SOF kill/capture operations into their counterinsurgency efforts in a way that strengthens rather than weakens relationships with local Afghans.[71] However, this must be done systematically and not be left to chance. Layering of headquarters that constrains the latitude SOF traditionally exercise is not the preferred way to achieve this objective. Instead, SOF must be subject to the culture change on the issue of civilian casualties that General McChrystal is advocating.[72] Several steps already taken or currently under way should help ensure the change in perspective extends to all SOF.

Moving Army Special Forces from OEF to the ISAF counterinsurgency mission would underscore national mission priorities for SOF. Collaboration between SOF and Afghan army units working on counterinsurgency objectives should be the norm, and it is more likely to happen if SOF are working under the ISAF mission mandate. Making ISAF the main effort in Afghanistan would also make it easier to eliminate irregularities that complicate unity of effort, such as different OEF/ISAF target lists of key enemy leaders.[73] General McChrystal's emphatic statements about the need to limit civilian casualties and the subordinate importance of targeting enemy leadership effectively communicate commander's intent to all SOF forces, including the special mission units he knows so well.[74] McChrystal's priorities and plan should also help reinforce the traditional Army Special Forces indirect approach, which emphasizes the critical importance of the Afghan population and forces.

General McChrystal will have to personally attend to setting SOF special mission unit priorities within the OEF mandate. They do not formally report to him, and they would continue to operate under different rules of engagement than ISAF forces. Historically, special mission units report directly to combatant commanders. If the plan to realign all SOF to the commander of ISAF does not include special mission units, General McChrystal's past experience should at least allow him to exercise an informal veto over their operations should they threaten counterinsurgency objectives. If this kind of informal oversight relationship proves insufficient, SOF special mission units could be further constrained to operate in a geographically limited area and by a very precise list of high-value targets and cost-benefit procedures. In the past, the frequency of SOF special mission unit operations grew without sufficient accountability until they were targeting less important leaders and with unacceptably higher risks, and the same could easily happen in Afghanistan.[75] In Iraq, General McChrystal successfully executed

special operations forces must be subject to the culture change on the issue of civilian casualties that General McChrystal is advocating

GEN McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry visit Konar Province to meet with district governors and see U.S.-funded reconstruction projects

U.S. Department of State

high-value human target operations in a manner consistent with counterinsurgency principles, so there is reason to believe the same can be done in Afghanistan. Once he has established the priorities and procedures informally, the informal coordination relationship with special mission units should be transferred to General Rodriguez, who is going to coordinate the day-to-day military operations in Afghanistan. Rodriguez could emulate McChrystal's success in Iraq and ensure the coordination procedures for direct action are not so laborious as to preclude successful kill/capture operations with few civilian casualties.

Progress in Afghanistan is not possible until the strategic objectives currently under debate are resolved and priority is assigned to either counterinsurgency or counterterrorism. Paraphrasing the Cheshire cat's point in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." Choosing among competing paths is only relevant in the context of clear objectives. But it is equally true that "if you can't stay on the road you choose, no road will get you where you want to go." Choosing the best ways to achieve strategic objectives is relevant only to the extent that we can implement a strategy with unified effort. The general U.S. experience with counterinsurgency illustrates this point well. U.S. military doctrine often accurately codifies rules for winning counterinsurgency warfare, but the organizations implementing the doctrine ignore it with comparable regularity.[76] The same point holds true for unified effort across the government and among allies. We know it is critically important, but we seldom achieve it. With so much at stake and so little time to reverse a deteriorating situation, the administration must clarify its strategy and then go the extra mile by taking additional steps to improve the odds that everyone will stay on the same road to success. **JFQ**

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