

Defeating the Taliban's Shadow Government:

A Foreign Internal Governance Strategy

by **Daniel R. Green**

***I believe that government starts at the bottom and moves upward,
for government exists for the welfare of the masses of the
nation.¹***

Former Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay

As the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) assumes greater control of its sovereignty and the U.S. presence in Afghanistan diminishes, the ability of Special Operations Forces (SOF) to exercise positive political influence on both GIROA and the Afghan people in support of village stability operations (VSO) will greatly diminish. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that those elements of the United States government that do exercise political influence, such as provincial reconstruction teams and district support teams, and their civilian enablers, such as the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), will either disappear from the area in the next few years or their presence will be greatly reduced.

Since the Taliban insurgency will persist for some time, the need to confront its political arm as much as its military arm will persist for special operations forces into the near future. In many respects, special operations forces are better able to work with GIROA at all levels than the State Department, USAID, or conventional military forces because of its organizational structure, constant contact with the Afghan people, and ability to leverage personal relationships to exercise influence. Special Operations Forces have a robust tradition of working by, with, and through indigenous institutions, and while many of the skill sets for coaching, teaching, and mentoring indigenous security forces are distinct from those required for working specifically with the political institutions of host governments, there are far more similarities than differences. The

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ability to build and leverage relationships with both security and government officials within GIRoA to further the goals of stabilizing Afghanistan will assume greater importance in the next few years.

What is required is a new and complementary approach to the foreign internal defense approach called foreign internal governance that

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uses an integrated influence initiative to prompt GIRoA to defeat the insurgency's political arm more effectively. Before beginning a discussion of this new approach, it is useful to review the Taliban's political program and why aspects of it resonate with the Pashtun population.

The Taliban's Political Program

Social injustice, bullying by military or police, and corruption must be seen as grave weaknesses in the defense of a country, errors that can lead to its downfall and eventually, as our friends are eliminated, to the downfall of the United States.

– Edward Geary Lansdale²

Even though the Taliban's strategic goals of uniting the Pashtuns, ejecting foreign military occupation, and imposing Sharia law are well known, their tactical political program is less well understood and its popularity among many Pashtuns even more so. The Taliban have carefully crafted a political strategy that taps into Pashtunwali traditions; takes advantage of U.S., coalition, and Afghan government

mistakes; and capitalizes on the weaknesses of the Afghan state in the villages. Though the U.S. has expended substantial efforts to promote good governance in the provinces, its efforts have been unequal to the task, cumbersome, bureaucratic, and sometimes even counterproductive.

The Taliban's positive political program has at least five aspects: justice, micro-politics, reconciliation, laissez-faire, and democracy. While the Taliban will impose their will on villagers if they must and have done so, often violently, they also have a positive agenda that entices supporters to support their cause.

In the face of corrupt and/or murderous government officials, a non-functioning judiciary, and the perversion or suspension of Pashtunwali traditions, the typical villager has a limited ability to seek justice for the things that bother him most—murders, theft, assault, rape, and land and water disputes. For the Taliban political agent, this vein of discontent is rich and can be mined by appealing to the structures of justice created by Sharia law. While the villager may not be inclined to support Sharia law in its totality, he is likely to do so in the absence of a viable alternative. Because the Taliban agent is sitting in the villager's home, solicits his grievances, and then quickly seeks to remedy them, the villager is hard-pressed to support a government that is often distant and abuses its authority.

Along these same lines, the Taliban practice micro-politics to a remarkably high degree of sophistication. The Taliban political agent will find any problem that a village or individual may have and make it his own. If a village is hoarding water from a stream causing a downstream village's crops to fail, the Taliban will enlist with the aggrieved party. If a tribe has been abused by the Afghan government, the Taliban will join with them to seek justice. This political granularity stands in marked contrast to the frequently inept, ineffective, and insouciant

efforts of the Afghan state and the sometimes counterproductive work of the coalition.

The Taliban's political program is also furthered by their "do-no-harm" approach to the central drivers of local politics and economies. If a farmer wants to cultivate poppy, the Taliban allow it; if he once worked for or supported the Afghan government, he is allowed to reconcile with the Taliban; if a tribal leader wants his authority respected, they will do so if it furthers their agenda. Additionally, if villagers feel that "their" government does not represent them or has unfairly attacked their interests, then the Taliban preach inclusion, grievance, and justice. Against this well-crafted, flexible, dynamic, and pervasive program, U.S., coalition, and Afghan efforts lag significantly.

The Afghan Constitution Inhibits Local Success

I believe that he who has less in life should have more in law. . . . I believe that a high and unwavering sense of morality should pervade all spheres of governmental activity.³

– Former Philippine President
Ramon Magsaysay

One of the central challenges of Afghanistan has been building a viable government at the provincial, district, and village levels that can compete with the Taliban's political program. While security conditions have long been a limiting factor to establishing an effective government in many parts of the country, Afghanistan's history of a decentralized or nonexistent state has also complicated the task. Good governance efforts have been further hindered by Afghanistan's high illiteracy rates, formidable terrain, and lack of trained civil servants. While the state is quite weak in many areas, it is too strong in others where the central government has so much authority that local initiative is often stymied. Often in

these areas, provincial officials must secure the central government's approval for actions that rightfully should fall within the discretion of community leaders.

Afghanistan's "democracy deficit" at the provincial level also inhibits the creation of a dynamic government able to address the concerns of the people. Because provincial governors are appointed by the central government, they are indirectly accountable to the people. They often lack direct budget authority and the ability to hire and fire local officials, and because they are ever mindful of maintaining political connections in Kabul, they are not overly concerned with local sentiment. Because the people are unable to hold corrupt or ineffective provincial officials accountable, they often turn to the Taliban to address injustices or to "right the balance" of accountability at the local level.

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This system of government encourages corruption because accountability and responsibility are disconnected. Because they lack a viable judiciary and political party system, local residents have no realistic way of addressing complaints. Because no formal political party system exists in Afghanistan, an informal network of personal, tribal, factional, and regional groups operate not only within the formal Afghan government system, but also around it to exercise political influence. This informal dynamic is much more agile, better-informed, and capable than the bureaucratic processes of the Afghan state. Similarly, it is far

more capable of exercising political influence than most U.S. government agencies ostensibly focused on good governance efforts.

U.S. State-Building Efforts Lack Presence, Persistence and Performance

*I believe that the pulse of government should be strong and steady, and the men at the helm imbued with missionary zeal.*⁴

– Former Philippine President
Ramon Magsaysay

*A week after his initial meeting with Wilson, when his assignment had been confirmed and he had finished his processing, Vann went to the embassy for a political briefing on the province. The political section could not find its sparse file on Hau Nghia, and he left.*⁵

– Neil Sheehan

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fraught with continuity problems due to frequent personnel rotations, and are characterized more by friction, miscommunication, lack of teamwork, and poor planning than by being a well-organized and coordinated effort. While the civilian uplift significantly increased the presence of the State Department, USAID, and U.S. Department of Agriculture personnel in

the field, the effort was unequal to the challenge of building the Afghan state in the countryside. Large numbers of Afghanistan's districts did not receive any interagency support, and even in those districts that did, it was not uncommon for the full complement of interagency personnel to be absent or never filled. This tendency will be further exacerbated as the presence of U.S. interagency draws down in the next two years.

Establishing the Interagency Provincial Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, civil-military working groups, and senior-civilian representative positions at the regional commands did provide greater coherency to state-building efforts. However, absent a sufficient presence in the districts, these efforts did not have the collective desired effects.

Because of insufficient training, frequent leave breaks (up to five a year), poor recruitment, and poor integration with the U.S. military, many U.S. interagency state-building efforts achieved less than was hoped for or was promised. When it comes to the collective good governance efforts of the U.S. and the international community, the United Nations has the mandate but not the manpower, the State Department has the responsibility but not the resources, and the military has the manpower but not the mission.

President Karzai and his political supporters continue to outmaneuver the U.S. between the vertical seams of the military and civilian agencies and horizontally between the different tactical, operational, and strategic levels. His ability to “out-govern” and “out politick” the U.S. government is great, and while his formal government is still weak, his informal government of tribal allies, warlords, and friends is fully organized, capable, and effective.

While much has been done to improve U.S. and coalition state-building efforts, the U.S. needs a new, better-resourced approach that fully integrates civilian and military efforts, connects the field to the capital, and is sustainable for the

long-term, especially as districts and provinces transition to civilian GIRoA control.

A Strategy of Foreign Internal Governance

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.⁶

– David Galula

This is first a political war, second a psychological war, and third a military war.⁷

– Lieutenant General Lewis Walt

While much has been accomplished with respect to building the Afghan state, the ability to conduct politics within U.S. good governance efforts has consistently been erratic. Politics within good governance efforts focus on the machinations of political players in Kabul rather than those at the local level that are most likely to confront the Taliban’s political program. The U.S. interagency has proven to be an imperfect instrument in prompting GIRoA to optimize its performance. The U.S. must embark on a new, complementary effort. The U.S. approaches stability operations by doing what its bureaucracies are comfortable with, rather than dealing with the problem of insurgency on its own terms. A significant portion of this strategy has been capital centric, biased toward formal government institutions, focused on long-term development versus stabilization, and imperfectly partnered with the U.S. military. In the face of an opponent that blends civil and military approaches seamlessly, is strongest in the countryside, has a nuanced engagement strategy with the local population, and is not

suffering from any manpower shortage, it is not surprising the U.S. has had problems implementing a good governance strategy. A new approach that institutionalizes state-building programs and puts them on a more sustainable path for long-term development will do much to ensure that the sacrifices of our forces in Afghanistan will have not been in vain. The U.S. government must recognize that politics, good governance, and development are too important to be left solely to the civilian interagency in Afghanistan, and it is time for the military to assume a more central role.

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What is required is a tightly organized, vertically integrated, influencing initiative that seeks to maximize GIRoA performance, especially with respect to defeating the Taliban’s local political program and leveraging Afghan informal networks that also shape government behavior. This initiative must be able to reach as many villages as possible, continually liaise and embed with government officials, conduct political action, and exercise persistent presence and performance. The integrated VSO approach of using District Augmentation Teams, Provincial Augmentation Teams, and regional village stability centers up to the national level to partner with Afghan officials is a basic structure that if strengthened could provide a light, lean, and long-term capability to undertake the essential non-kinetic tasks that provide stability to rural Afghanistan.

A foreign internal governance strategy to complement a foreign internal defense approach through village stability operations will provide a means of exercising consistent and positive political influence at all levels of government within Afghanistan. A foreign internal governance approach will not replicate the state-building efforts of the State Department and USAID but will seek to exercise political influence through embedded mentoring with GIRoA officials, shape GIRoA policy and programmatic outcomes through relationships, and address local drivers of instability through

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focused attention to the countryside. In many respects, the organization of civilian and military efforts is the greatest hindrance to operating in Afghanistan. An integrated approach of this kind will address the incoherency of current good governance efforts. Improving organization and better resourcing will do much to stabilize the state-building program, as well as ensure that the U.S. can marshal a more robust political program to defeat the Taliban.

General George C. Marshall once made a statement about opposition to putting one military service under the command of another: “We cannot manage by cooperation. Human frailties are such that there would be emphatic unwillingness to place portions of troops under another service. If we can make a plan for unified command now, it will solve nine-tenths of our troubles.” An integrated approach to exercising consistent and positive influence by, with, and through the GIRoA must be better organized and resourced. It must blend as seamlessly as

possible a detailed understanding of the Afghan human terrain with a political action arm able to influence Afghan officials with diminished assets in theater.

The following ten recommendations are intended to strengthen and better integrate existing approaches to exercising positive political influence by, with, and through the GIRoA and to create new efforts to maximize personal relationships with the GIRoA to better support village stability operations.

1. Establish Village Augmentation Teams.

In order to better serve village stability programs and to bring focused attention to local political issues, the augmentation team concept should be expanded to the village level. This will not only free-up local SOF to concentrate on other pressing tasks, such as recruiting and training Afghan local police, but will also allow for a professional focus on the sorts of political, tribal, and development issues the Taliban exploit to their benefit. A team of this nature should consist of at least two individuals in order to provide a more expansive program of local interaction, as well as to allow better continuity during unit rotations or when members go on leave.

2. Bolster District and Provincial Augmentation Teams.

As the U.S. civilian interagency presence diminishes, the U.S. must develop a more robust capability at the district and provincial levels of government to better support village stability programs and their issues with the GIRoA. Based on the size of the province, District Augmentation Teams should consist of at least two personnel, and Provincial Augmentation Teams should grow to at least six members.

3. Establish stability operations information cells and human terrain teams at all levels of SOF.

While the U.S. has made great strides in understanding the human terrain of Afghanistan, past efforts to centralize this information at all levels have been uneven. The U.S. must maintain a detailed and well-informed understanding of formal and informal Afghan leaders, local economics, tribal and political histories, government programs, and good governance and development initiatives. While the Village Augmentation Teams, District Augmentation Teams and Provincial Augmentation Teams will largely be responsible for collecting this sort of information, they will need dedicated intelligence support in order to organize it and make it useful.

4. Integrate U.S. interagency representatives into each advanced operations base (AOB) and special operations task force (SOTF).

Even though the civilian inter-agency's presence in Afghanistan will dramatically decrease in the next few years, opportunities still exist to work with the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Agriculture. SOF should review the practical aspects of having select, civilian-interagency representatives at each of its AOBs and SOTFs as well as at Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) and Special Operations Joint Task Force–Afghanistan (SOJTF-A) in order to enrich non-kinetic planning and operations as well as to enable SOF to access U.S. Embassy programming.

5. Create a consolidated civil-military center in Kabul.

Exercising positive political influence with the GIRoA will require a well-resourced but lightly organized structure within Kabul. A series of institutions have been created in the last few years that in totality exercise some degree of influence on Afghan governing institutions,

but they are not sufficiently integrated, well-resourced, or placed to have a maximum impact. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command's Information Dominance Center and Ministerial Outreach program, the Task Forces on Anti-Corruption and Contracting, and the Village National Coordination Center are examples of the kinds of initiatives required to exercise positive political influence by, with, and through Afghan governing structures. However, these and other programs should be consolidated and in some cases re-examined. The Ministerial Outreach program must be dramatically expanded, and a Parliamentary engagement program must also be created. Additionally, to facilitate better GIRoA interactions at all levels, a Visitor's Bureau should be created for provincial and district officials visiting the capital. A civilian head of this organization should be appointed to prevent any potential concerns about military influence in politics.

6. Recruit civilian advisors at all levels.

While SOF will possess many of the skill-sets, training, and concepts required to effectively engage in Foreign Internal Governance, some abilities, such as financial advising, language ability, agricultural expertise, and construction, can be found in greater quantities in the civilian sector. Additionally, it may be difficult to exercise positive political influence among some Afghans who might object to a SOF presence in ostensibly civilian institutions. In these cases, a cadre of civilian political officers and advisors must be recruited to supplement SOF efforts.

7. Expand the Ministerial Outreach Program.

Afghan ministries suffer from a dearth of talented employees, and it is not uncommon for government offices to have only two to three

literate, educated, and trained employees. To fill this gap, as well as to better link the central government to the provinces, a more robust ministerial outreach program must be created and tightly integrated into a national influence initiative. There should be at least five to six SOF liaisons to the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development, and the Ministry for Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock.

8. Establish a Parliamentary Outreach Program.

The U.S. military tends to defer to the State Department and USAID when it comes to working and liaising with Afghanistan's Parliament. However since State/USAID capacity building programs will continue, there must be a dedicated effort to understand and influence Afghanistan's members of Parliament in support of village stability operations. This endeavor will require a team and should be closely integrated into the Civil-Military Center in Kabul.

9. Establish an Afghan Visitor's Bureau.

While many provincial and district officials are able to secure meetings with central government officials when they visit Kabul, many lack the crucial connections to exercise influence with their government. Establishing an Afghan Visitor's Bureau to support the visits of local officials outside of Kabul to the capital will greatly facilitate closer links among the different levels of Afghanistan's government, as well as empower these individuals to assist their communities. This bureau would track the movements of local officials as reported by Village Augmentation Teams, District Augmentation Teams and Provincial Augmentation Teams and assist them in meeting Kabul-based officials through the Civil-Military Center and Ministerial Outreach program.

10. Create a separate political section at each AOB and SOTF and at CJSOTF-A and SOJTF-A.

While many of the traditional non-kinetic enablers at SOF, such as civil affairs, military information support operations teams, and cultural support teams, shape local politics and exercise influence by, with, and through the GIRoA, it is important to elevate and integrate these various components into a political structure. These different enablers should be subordinate to the Village Augmentation Teams, District Augmentation Teams and Provincial Augmentation Teams in order to ensure a greater unity of effort, as well as to better focus their collective non-kinetic effects on exercising influence by, with, and through GIRoA structures and officials.

Conclusion

As U.S. conventional military forces withdraw from Afghanistan and the civilian interagency presence declines in the countryside, the necessity for SOF to exercise positive political influence by, with, and through the GIRoA in support of village stability operations will not only continue but will have to expand. SOF is in many ways best positioned in Afghanistan to work with the GIRoA in a sustainable manner.

A well-resourced but light, lean, and long-term Foreign Internal Governance approach to complement the strategy of Foreign Internal Defense within Afghanistan will enable SOF to better

focus GIRoA's resources to the isolated villages in which Village Stability Operations principally operates. A determined Foreign Internal Governance strategy will prompt the GIRoA to address the needs of its citizens in a more consistent fashion; blunt, if not defeat, the Taliban's political program reducing its appeal to the broader Pashtun community; and harness Afghan informal tribal, factional, and personal networks in support of good governance in a more concerted manner.

While many of the skill sets for coaching, teaching, and mentoring indigenous security forces are distinct from those required for working specifically with the political institutions of host governments, there are far more similarities than differences. The ability to build and leverage relationships with both security and government officials within the GIRoA to further the goals of stabilizing Afghanistan will assume greater importance in the next few years, and SOF will be better positioned to do so if it assumes a more aggressive approach to good governance within Afghanistan. **IAJ**

Notes

- 1 Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation homepage, <<http://www.rmaf.org.ph>>, accessed on March 25, 2013.
- 2 Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1991, p. 373.
- 3 Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation homepage.
- 4 Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation homepage.
- 5 Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, Vintage Books, New York, 1989, p. 503.
- 6 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Praeger Security International, Connecticut, 2006, p. 64.
- 7 Lieutenant General Lewis Walt, U.S. Marine Corps, on Vietnam, February 1967.