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Unity of Effort? Or, Command?

by Michael J. Forsyth

In spite of the outstanding efforts of all our soldiers and civilians in the war in Afghanistan, there are two central problems that continue to reduce our effectiveness there. First, until recently there has been little continuity between the succeeding joint task force headquarters in Afghanistan -- we have had eleven since late 2001. Each succeeding joint task force headquarters tends to have a different vision regarding the character of the fight from the one it replaced. Second, compounding this problem, there is no unity of command in the area of operation (AO) among military units and the various U.S. Government agencies operating on the battlefield, with many of the civilian entities operating without coordinating with the military chain of command. Both of these problems create operational weaknesses affecting continuity of strategy and execution of operations. The combination of these two factors creates a pendulum effect in terms of policy and sends conflicting messages to the Afghan populace as well as our own personnel. Moreover, it creates an unhealthy tension and competitiveness between military and civilian governmental organizations that can cause friction throughout an operation. Both of these problems are solvable if we modify the way we deploy major unit headquarters and eliminate the ambiguity of command relationships in theater that enable side-stepping the critical principle of unity of command. This article will address these problems in more depth, and conclude with recommendations to remedy the issues identified.

Too Many Headquarters over Time Creates Disunity of Effort

As of June 2011 the United States military will have seen its eleventh rotation of headquarters and troops in Afghanistan. Each major headquarters in Afghanistan at the joint task force or theater level is composed of a division or corps headquarters. Each deploys for a specified amount of time, ranging from twelve to fifteen months. Over the course of ten years in Afghanistan we have witnessed eleven different major headquarters. Such rotations have not always been the case historically. In most previous American wars, headquarters and commanders have remained intact for the duration. Examples include General Dwight D. Eisenhower with his combined headquarters in World War II in the 20th Century. In the 19th Century Lieutenant General Winfield Scott led the army from the beginning of the Mexican War through the occupation phase at the end of hostilities. Only in recent times have our forces conducted routine rotations of headquarters and commanders.¹

The purpose of rotating headquarters arises from political and practical considerations. From a political perspective it would not be feasible to deploy units – which are composed of individual soldiers with families – for much longer than a year because the American people

¹ Nadia Schadlow, “From the Jaws of Victory,” *The Wall Street Journal Online*. 7 February 2008: A19. Web. 15 February 2008.

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would view this as asking too much of the troops.² From a practical standpoint the troops and their leaders can only run at full steam in combat for a finite amount of time before they need rest and recuperation, whether in a line combat unit or as staff in a pressure packed headquarters. As a result, the major headquarters change over frequently and with that constant transition comes an inevitable loss of knowledge of the theater and potentially a differing vision of what must be done. When a new unit implements changes based on these factors we witness the pendulum effect.

In contrast, the insurgency has displayed much more consistency because the Taliban shura, which composes the senior leadership of the movement, remains largely intact from the beginning ten years ago to the present. With consistent leadership the insurgency is able to implement its directives and adapt when the situation required. Over time the character of the insurgency has evolved rather seamlessly to adapt to coalition operations and tactics through their consistent and stable leadership. Fundamentally the insurgency at its heart has promulgated and maintained the following strategic and operational components for the last several years: a guerilla force with cross-border sanctuary; the guerillas use intimidation to influence the population; the guerilla force uses violence to achieve their ends; the insurgents attempt to disrupt the massive reconstruction effort by attacking workers and destroying infrastructure; and they attempt to disrupt the fledgling government through assassinations and attacks on government facilities. The Taliban's approach has remained generally consistent since its emergence soon after the arrival of US forces in Afghanistan.

By contrast, our constantly changing headquarters create a potential disadvantage because the operational vision can change with each new unit. This means our forces are constantly changing tack. However, the long-term nature of the mission requires a consistent operational approach to achieve the strategic ends set forth by national authority while also requiring our forces to remain flexible and adapt to the ever-changing tactical situation. Yet, each succeeding rotation of headquarters views the mission differently resulting in a fractured vision over time rather than consistency. Different people, operating under different interpretations of the campaign plan will tend to implement their vision, which rails against steady and consistent progress.

For example, one headquarters may view the mission as requiring a softer approach that focuses on development, while the succeeding headquarters might see the mission from a predominantly kinetic standpoint with development as an irritating distraction. I personally witnessed this phenomenon while serving as a plans officer on a combined joint task force (CJTF) staff in Afghanistan. The division headquarters replacing ours took a diametrically different view of the conflict as noted above. Soon after our departure from Afghanistan the succeeding headquarters implemented its own policies and operations took a radical turn from the way my division had conducted them. At the beginning of another tour in Afghanistan I observed this dynamic in action yet again with my own division taking a viewpoint of the counter-insurgency effort that was opposite of our predecessors. The end result of the shifting

² There is a plethora of articles and blogs published in the 2007-2008 timeframe which discuss tour length. Most discuss the fact that combat tours are too long, which has a negative effect on retention, morale, and the ability to sustain the fight over the long term. Examples of these include articles by James Joyner, "Combat Tours Still Too Long," *Outside the Beltway*. Web. April 11, 2008. http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/combat_tours_still_too_long/ and an Associated Press piece with no author titled "U.S. Revisits Length of Iraq Combat Tours," *USA Today*. Web. June 19, 2007. http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-06-19-us-iraq_N.htm.

policy is stunted progress and an Afghan government and populace that are confused about coalition objectives. Ultimately, this inconsistency of vision affects implementation of operations on the ground creating a pendulum that pulls the populace of Afghanistan from one extreme to the other. This fails to inspire confidence among the people that their government Afghanistan and coalition know what they are doing. The pendulum effect plays into the hands of the insurgents, by allowing them to exploit these inconsistencies.

When one headquarters emphasizes the kinetic nature of the conflict the Taliban will paint our forces as heavy-handed in their information operations with the Afghan population. On the other hand, when another headquarters takes a softer approach the Taliban will say that the coalition is weakening and the enemy will take advantage of this to expand their control of specific areas through shadow governments as a result of the change in operations. As we know now, the war in Afghanistan requires a balanced combination of offensive and defensive operations with support and stability operations to counter the enemy on all levels. To achieve this balance and consistency the strategic and operational headquarters must establish coherent policies and see them through to fruition. They can do this by either establishing longer tours for those headquarters or with changes to the current system of transitioning headquarters to facilitate seamlessness between the incoming and outgoing headquarters.

Poorly Crafted Command Relationships

The second issue compounding the inconsistent vision is the lack of unified command. Operating in the battle space of Afghanistan are conventional forces, special forces, special operating forces³, and a number of United States government organizations. In most cases the military forces and other government agencies do not operate in this space under a single commander. Command relationships such as coordinating authority or supporting/supported are used to establish "unity of effort" and cooperation in the battle space.⁴ But, as a practical matter the level of cooperation is more dependent upon the personalities of the commanders and their civilian counterparts being amenable to working together to achieve common objectives. If they do not necessarily agree upon the objectives friction is the natural outcome. The resulting friction can cause tacit cooperation, no cooperation, or in worst case scenarios serious setbacks in the form of friendly losses and information campaign losses.

It is common for a ground maneuver unit to partner with a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) within the same area of operation. Additionally, it is routine for special forces and US government agencies to operate within that area. All of these entities may or may not have a single commander. They are expected to harmonize their operations and are given 'coordinating authority' to affect this harmony. But, if the ground maneuver and the PRT commander – both of which are the same rank – fundamentally disagree about the path of development then they will begin to work at cross-purposes. Ultimately, this affects the Afghan people and our mission.

³ Special forces are the "Green Berets" whose traditional missions include the development of host nation armed forces as in Afghanistan. Special operating forces are distinguished from special forces in that they perform direct action missions against high payoff targets such as the recent mission carried out against Osama bin Laden.

⁴ JP 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), II-6 – II-7.

This then begs the question: why not follow our own doctrine and place all assets, including the civilian US government agencies, under a single ground commander to produce true unity?⁵

Friction also arises from many factors such as the need to protect what is perceived as "turf" or missions reserved for specific units or agencies. Professional arrogance can arise as well when some leaders believe that only their chain of command can properly employ their forces or agency. This patchwork command structure represents "doctrinal sleight of hand" that rails against true unity of effort. Such command and control arrangements have existed since the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom and continue to the present day. In the long run, diverging vision and mission sets combined with lack of a single leader operating in the same battle space could lead to operational and tactical friction heightening risk to friendly forces and the long-term mission.⁶

Military forces share the battle space with civilian agencies conducting capacity-building and reconstruction activities. Organizations such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State, and other government agencies (OGA) operate throughout Afghanistan and in many cases with little or no coordination with military forces. There are many times when the efforts of these agencies diverge from military operations because the reconstruction priorities are not synchronized by time, location, or effect. For example, the ground maneuver commander may have targeted a specific village for development in order to facilitate cooperation with the village elders on security matters. However, the PRT commander may want to focus in another area for different reasons. If both units carry through their plans they disperse the development effort sending conflicting signals to the people and wasting precious resources in divergent directions.

This presents a serious problem which undermines progress in an area and on the wider stage of Afghanistan simply because the two commanders do not agree on the way forward. Who ties together these disparate organizations in terms of direction and employment when they disagree? Without a clear chain of command a clash of wills can result causing a corrosive effect and stagnate progress in the non-kinetic arena. Unity of effort implies that the entities working in an area agree on the direction, but this is not always the case. Unity of command denotes that a single commander is responsible for operations and when a decision is made on a direction all entities *must* move along that path. Therefore, in light of these issues we must mount an effort to solve the problems in order to ensure success in the war in Afghanistan. A clear command relationship placing one individual in charge of an area could help remedy the problem of disunity of effort.

Recommendations

There are two potential solutions to the issue of the swinging pendulum of command in Afghanistan. First, major headquarters could serve extended tours in order to maintain continuity of effort. Or, major headquarters could modify the ways in which they conduct transitions of authority to sustain continuity of operations. Both have inherent advantages and disadvantages, but regardless of which approach is adopted we must improve the way we

⁵ *Ibid.*, II8-II11. Rather than utilizing the nebulous command relationship of coordinating authority, which denotes a consultative relationship, unity of command could be established by assigning command relationships of tactical or operational control. This would establish a single commander with other entities in that area reporting to this individual.

⁶ Sean Naylor. *Not a Good Day to Die*. (New York: Berkeley Books, 2005), 91-92.

conduct business to facilitate a steady rate of progress in Afghanistan – or in any other theater now or in the future – to avoid the pendulum effect.

The first way that we could maintain continuity of direction is by mandating headquarters deployments for a two year period. This would ensure that the vision of the commander and the expertise of the staff remain in place to translate that vision into reality. The obvious disadvantage to this is the wear on personnel serving in a combat zone for that length of time. How could we mitigate this effect? The best way would be to institute a more robust rest and recuperation program. The current system provides for fifteen days of leave for a one year deployment, which provides very little time for real recovery. For a two-year deployment a better model might be thirty days leave per annum and a four day rest period per quarter. This could sustain a JTF headquarters over the long haul and provide the needed continuity in the theater.

If the military retained the current deployment model then adjustments to the transition process are required to increase greater continuity. For example, the incoming staff could embed key members on the staff of the outgoing unit months before the deployment. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or Central Command (CENTCOM) headquarters could implement a systematic orientation program for incoming JTF staffs that outlines the campaign plan, commander's vision, and the operational approach to counter-insurgency. Further, as a part of the orientation program the higher headquarters should mandate that any radical changes in course must gain approval by that commander before the incoming headquarters implements a different approach. Finally, at least fifty percent of the incoming staff, including the chief of staff and commander, should have operational experience in the theater. This would ensure a preponderance of knowledgeable leaders in the headquarters to maintain continuity. The disadvantage to this course of action is that it still requires a transition of authority at the twelve to fifteen month mark. However, instituting some changes as suggested above could mitigate the loss of continuity.

The second issue concerns unity of effort. In order to fix this critical problem we should look to the time honored principle of war: unity of command. This principle has always referred to the relationships between military organizations within the battle area. However, with the plethora of other government agencies operating within that space it is now time to consider applying that principle to both military and civilian organizations in the theater. If the strategic headquarters in Afghanistan enforced the concept of unity of command, combined with the promulgation of the counter-insurgency directives, it would improve operational effectiveness in two ways. First, it would establish consistency between rotations of US forces and agencies over time to reduce the pendulum effect that can negatively impact upon the local populace and operations. Second, it would ensure that all agencies operating within a given space do so under a single, unified vision set forth by the area commander. This would mitigate competing notions of what the objectives and means to accomplish the mission are within an area of operations. The result would be that all agencies on the battlefield would all push on the wall in the same direction rather than against each other.

Unity of command within the battle space is of critical importance to ensure a single-minded approach to operations and prevention of paralysis or friendly setbacks. The simplest way to do this would be to assign all forces and civilian agencies within the battle space to a single command. This will focus the purpose of operations and ensure determined execution toward a common center and provide *true* unity of effort. Railing against this unification of

command will be parochial accusations that only experts with certain qualifications can properly employ specific elements within the battle space. Such criticism must be ignored in order to achieve unity in the area of operations. If required, expert advisors with specialized qualifications can be attached to the overall commander's staff to assist by providing advice on employment of these assets. Failure to ensure unity of command will continue to fragment the accomplishment of the mission and concedes that we cannot prepare commanders and staffs in our professional education and training system to employ all forces and agencies in a joint, combined, and inter-agency environment.

Another longer term recommendation is to scrap all joint command relationships that are contrary to full unity of command and rely solely upon the good will and cooperation of commanders. For instance, instead of maneuver and provincial reconstruction team (PRT) commanders operating in the same AO with a partnership/command relationship, such as coordinating authority, one or the other should have full command over the other entity in a tactical or operational control command relationship. We need a structure which provides for a single commander issuing directives and orders in a given area. This ensures that all elements operating in that area share the same vision and that they implement operations with a single-minded focus. Such terms as 'coordinating authority' and 'support' do not ensure that firm decisions can be made by a commander to guarantee concerted action along a line of operation toward a common objective. Doctrinal terms like these require cooperation among commanders and are heavily dependent upon the personalities of those individuals. Further, they blur clear lines in a chain of command making it harder to achieve identified objectives. Our professional education system must ensure that we develop tactical and operational level commanders who possess the wherewithal to employ multiple forces and agencies in the inter-agency environment. Unity of command is an enduring principle of war and we cannot afford to dilute it with doctrinal terms to assuage the sensitivities and attitudes of those protecting rice bowls.

The activities of civilian agencies are at times outside the control of military commanders, causing a de-synchronization of combat and civil-military operations. Many strides have been made in this arena to better coordinate the efforts of civilian agencies operating in the battle space of military units. Obviously, civil control of the military from the embassy through the ambassador is consistent with our system of government and in Afghanistan is logical at the strategic level. But, during combat operations the military at the operational and tactical levels must exercise control of all actions within their boundaries, while ensuring their operations are in line with direction from civil authority at the strategic level. Solid liaison from civilian agencies to the military at operational and tactical levels improves synchronization and should be established as a standard for all headquarters from maneuver battalion to joint task force level. As the theater stabilizes and the political and military leaders agree that the region can transition to civil authority it is then appropriate for the military at the operational and tactical levels to relinquish control of civilian agencies locally. This should be codified in military doctrine and the executive branch of government should address this issue to provide clear lines of authority for civilian agencies and military units operating in an area of operations on the battlefield.

Conclusion

The problems of lack of continuity of vision across rotations and unity of command in Afghanistan can easily be overcome. The area of responsibility (AOR) higher headquarters must

establish a clear vision of the character of the insurgency, how to prosecute counter-insurgency operations, and enforce adherence to the concept through unity of command in clear chains of command over an extended period of time. In order to ensure this we have to change the current paradigm for deploying higher headquarters. We must either lengthen the tours of senior commanders and their staffs or adjust the current deployment process to facilitate greater continuity. Further, we must consider scraping or revising some of the doctrinal command relationships that are meant to produce “unity of effort” and instead focus command relationships around the proven principle of war, unity of command. Further, in Afghanistan proper the AOR headquarters should establish command relationships that consolidate authority under a single commander. Protecting turf or insinuating that only a commander or expert with a particular skill set can implement policies and programs rails against single-minded conduct of operations and sells short the talented joint commanders in our forces. Finally, direction of civil and military operations requires civilian control at the strategic level, but during combat operations at operational and tactical levels the military commander acting within the framework of civilian directives has to coordinate the actions of all players in the battle space. By adopting fairly simple measures like streamlining command and control we can eliminate some nagging problems in Afghanistan and reduce the friction that results from multiple agencies operating in a single defined space.

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