

# Counterinsurgency 3.0

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After eight years of war, more than 907 Americans dead and 4,400 wounded, and \$227 billion in aid from the United States alone, Afghanistan was “deteriorating” badly, according to the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander, General Stanley McChrystal, in an August 2009 report to the Secretary of Defense.<sup>1</sup> Although General McChrystal has been more optimistic of late, the fact remains that the Taliban’s reach is more extensive now than at any time since being expelled from Kabul eight years ago. They have shadow governors in every province except Kabul. People turn to Taliban courts rather than state courts for justice in many parts of Afghanistan. And many Afghans prefer the Taliban’s austerity over the Karzai government’s corruption and incompetence. Why?

Why have the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies, who just a few years ago were reviled by the vast majority of Afghans for their brutality and fanaticism, grown in strength and popularity during nearly a decade of US and international assistance? More broadly, why has massive international development assistance in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere failed to defeat the grip of extremist ideologies among many people who have benefited from billions of dollars worth of aid? Is it even possible for international development aid to help defeat radical Islam and other ideologies hostile to the West and, if so, how?

The conflict in Iraq taught the US military many valuable lessons about how to gain the trust and cooperation of the local populace in the fight against radical Islamic insurgents, demonstrated in the new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy implemented during the 2007 “surge.” First, the Anbar Awakening established a successful precedent of the US military partnering with local tribes against insurgents, a tactical approach that could be considered “COIN 1.0.” Next, COIN theorists led by General David Petraeus described the Clear-Hold-Build strategy to transition and expand tribal security

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alliances into long-term governance arrangements, a strategic advance that can be termed “COIN 2.0.” General McChrystal and ISAF forces are applying many of these lessons in their current COIN operations in Afghanistan. There remains, however, a substantial doctrinal need to move from tactical methods that cultivate and develop tribal alliances to the strategic use of international aid to defeat insurgencies broadly and decisively. The authors term this new strategic approach to providing development aid in conflict areas “COIN 3.0.”<sup>2</sup>

This article explains how civilian and military policy-makers have incorrectly assumed that international development aid is inherently beneficial to local populations; necessarily fosters stability; and invariably leads to a grateful populace that will shun insurgents, thereby advancing US strategic goals. The article posits that using international aid to combat radical Islamic insurgencies is more complex than aid advocates assume and outlines a different conception of what constitutes development. Finally, it explains how small-scale, micro-development based on corporate social responsibility practices, rather than traditional foreign aid, will have the greatest and most enduring impact against Islamic insurgencies. Such an approach most effectively inculcates beliefs and institutionalizes behaviors that are congenial to the West while being sensitive to local conditions.

### ***Afghanistan: More of the Same***

At the recent London Conference on Afghanistan, which brought together leaders and ministers from 60 nations, “the international community pledged to maintain its long-term commitment to Afghanistan,” without explaining why the prior eight years of assistance had produced such limited results.<sup>3</sup> The new US *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, announced the week before the London Conference, also omitted any explanation.<sup>4</sup> Except for calling past efforts “historically under-resourced,” last summer’s report from General McChrystal also offered no account.

The international consensus on how to stabilize Afghanistan remains the same: provide more and better military and development aid to help build a credible national Afghan government, especially its security forces. The London Conference pledged, among other things, to support the “growth and expansion of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police” as well as a “better coordinated and resourced civilian effort” to overcome Afghanistan’s “formidable development challenges.” Similarly, the *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy* calls for a global coalition to “contribute increased civilian and military resources, pursue efforts to build legitimate trade and economic activity, curb illicit financial flows, and provide critical political support.” General McChrystal’s report did recognize the “urgent need for a significant change to our strategy and the way that we

think and operate” in Afghanistan, including treating the Afghan people as the main objective of the COIN effort. But despite the report’s innovations, it

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too focuses on improving Afghan security forces “through greater partnering” and “improving governance at all levels through both formal and traditional mechanisms.” But these efforts are not enough, because traditional mechanisms frequently ignore

local self-determination and are often characterized by local rivalries, corruption, and even tyranny.

Many of the initiatives by ISAF and other foreign governments active in Afghanistan are laudable. In a nation where 70 percent of the population is less than 22 years old, promoting jobs, education, and the overall economy is vital. When more than 80 percent of the population believes that corruption is a serious problem, accountability and good governance initiatives are crucial.<sup>5</sup> No matter how successful these programs are, however, in order for foreign military and civilian efforts to have an enduring impact, they have to fundamentally alter Afghan society’s vulnerability to theocracy, xenophobia, intolerance, sexism, and clannishness. Until Afghans can develop the institutions and mores to overcome these characteristics, Afghanistan will not be able to resist those who foster and exploit them—the Taliban and al Qaeda. Put another way, for sustainable success, international assistance needs to gain the support and trust of a traditional society even as foreign aid transforms it. To do that, programs to promote security forces, good government, and economic development will not be enough.

### ***The Smart Power Consensus***

There is a widespread consensus in US civilian and military policy circles that the Bush Administration relied too much on the use of force or “hard power” to promote its foreign policy goals. As an alternative, foreign policy thinkers developed the concept of “smart power” to further America’s strategic objectives at a reduced human cost. In the words of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, smart power employs “the full range of tools at our disposal—diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural” to advance US interests, security, and values.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, well before the Obama Administration took office, the US military had implemented a doctrinal shift toward smart power, especially in counterinsurgency campaigns and stability operations. At the policy level over the last eight years, numerous military and civilian counterinsurgency experts advocated integrating soft and hard power, emphasizing that economic and infrastructure development is part of successful counterinsurgen-

cy operations. In July 2005, then-Major General Peter Chiarelli, commander of the deployed 1st Cavalry Division at the time, recognized that sewer, water, electricity, trash, and employment activities in Iraq were as important as security operations to stabilize the nation.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the Army and Marine Corps produced a joint field manual on counterinsurgency and now conduct extensive stability operations training. “The integration of civilian and military efforts is crucial to successful COIN operations. All efforts need to focus on supporting the local populace and HN [host nation] government,” the joint manual directs. “Political, social, and economic programs are usually more valuable than conventional military operations in addressing the root causes of conflict and undermining an insurgency.”<sup>8</sup> Each service also has produced other doctrinal manuals that include political and economic development concepts. In addition, the Army has rewritten four manuals that guide its overall strategic direction, each of which codifies smart power as a major component of Army doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

Most recently, the US Army provided commanders from the brigade level and lower with guidance on using funds to defeat “COIN targets without creating collateral damage by motivating antigovernment forces to cease lethal and nonlethal operations, by creating and providing jobs along with other forms of financial assistance to the indigenous population, and by restoring or creating vital infrastructure.”<sup>10</sup> But aside from listing various types of projects that may be helpful toward achieving these goals—such as water and food production, healthcare, sanitation, electricity, and education—there is little-to-no guidance on how to select projects, whether or how to enlist local support in their design and development, or even how to determine if an aid project is actually helpful. Rather, by far the greatest emphasis is on compliance with government contracting requirements. Simply integrating civil and military efforts is not enough.

### ***The Development Disconnect***

While winning short-term support from locals through cash infusions and small development projects may be an effective “weapon system” at the tactical level, especially when battling insurgents, local commanders often have little time or expertise to assess and implement the full strategic potential of development aid. Frequently, the civilian aid workers assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have to focus on specific projects and are evaluated according to standard development metrics, such as the number of schools built, roads paved, or wells dug. Given the emphasis on finishing aid projects before PRT deployments end and the brevity of certain deployments, as short as a few months in some cases, there is little opportunity to tackle challenges that require extended, fundamental change.

On a broader level, although many of the military's new manuals task commanders with developing local cultural awareness, they reflect the

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***The very nature of warfare influences political, economic, and social conditions.***

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flawed assumptions of much smart power thinking: western-style political institutions are the remedy to instability; major infrastructure projects will have the greatest improvement on people's lives; and development necessarily promotes gratitude and loyalty to aid providers. Along with the flawed belief that these acts will result in the target population's adoption of western values of human rights, democracy, good governance, and the rule of law.

Many civilian smart power advocates share these assumptions. In seeking to extend an open hand rather than the Bush Administration's clenched fist, smart power proponents have unwittingly adopted the prior Administration's misguided notion that Iraqis, Yemenis, and tribesmen throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan want the same things that Americans desire, namely democracy, free markets, pluralism, and similar values. Through economic development, improved healthcare, educational opportunities, and other material improvements, smart power advocates believe that the United States and its allies can shift the support of clans and tribes away from radical Islam to more secular, universal values. Indeed, reared in the tradition of the New Deal, Democrats have been especially attracted to the dogma that material improvements in people's lives can shift political loyalties away from al Qaeda and the Taliban toward the United States, its allies, and the West in general.

Traditional societies of the Middle East and Central Asia, however, operate on a host of principles and values that may be at odds with western notions of justice, honor, and freedom. For example, in clan culture, justice might be more about retribution than due process; honor is rooted more in familial reputation than nationalist pride; and parents often want their daughters to be married more than they want them legally or politically emancipated. Even in the United States, as Thomas Franks observed, people frequently base their political allegiances more on cultural or religious values than they do on economic self-interest.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to say that humanitarian aid and development programs should not be a central focus of US foreign policy or that such programs cannot benefit national security. The United States and other forces of modernity, however, are competing against radicalized Islamic challengers, who operate under the pretense of traditional values and cultural affinity with local societies.

To succeed, policy-makers will have to trust in the very people they want most to change, by ceding to them the choice of how to change and

what to change. This approach may not guarantee that aid recipients become close US allies in the fight against terrorism, but it is the best way to prevent them from supporting al Qaeda and the Taliban. COIN practitioners can achieve a greater degree of success by recognizing and supporting those traditional values that are consonant with western values, including self-governance and freedom.

### ***The Development Dilemma***

Smart power advocates overwhelmingly view development aid as intrinsically benign.<sup>12</sup> After all, development means improving people's health, education, and welfare. When their lives change for the better, smart power thinking posits, people will support the agents that brought improvement. In Afghanistan, those agents are ISAF forces and the Karzai government; elsewhere, they are the West and international aid organizations that espouse western ideals.

But as anyone who has ever implemented a foreign assistance project knows, aid is inherently disruptive and potentially destabilizing, and development does not necessarily translate into pro-American or pro-Afghan government sentiments. Indeed, in much of the countryside the Karzai government is more estranged than ever, with ISAF still seen as occupiers, according to a District Reconstruction Team member who wished to remain anonymous. Years of misrule and abusive, government-backed militias have overshadowed billions of dollars in aid.

Especially in starkly underdeveloped countries such as Afghanistan, foreign development assistance confronts the absorption paradox: Although the need is seemingly infinite, the capacity to absorb foreign aid is quite finite. Limitations in human capacity, infrastructure, and public and private institutions place severe constraints on what can be achieved and how quickly. Once the foreign aid saturation point is reached, excess money quickly becomes a source of waste, abuse, and corruption. But now that US policymakers believe Afghanistan has been "under-resourced" for the past eight years, military and civilian aid groups will face enormous pressure to spend foreign aid dollars, despite these risks.

Even when well-implemented, foreign aid can be extraordinarily disruptive, challenging every aspect of society. It can distort traditional labor markets, depress prices of locally produced goods while inflating prices of other commodities, and strain natural resources. Foreign aid and the development it brings may upset established economic relations between family members, villagers, clans and tribes, and among villages and towns. It does so by changing how people make their living, what constitutes property, what is valuable and valued, and who has power over other people's livelihoods and lives. International aid has the potential to diminish or destroy

some kinds of private property, while introducing totally new kinds of property; just as it can introduce whole new skills into a community, while rendering old ones obsolete. It may change how people think and learn, what they believe, and what they trust or how people see themselves, the world in which they live, and those who exert power or influence over them. As a result, development affects who and what is respected, valued, admired, and obeyed. Thus, aid designed to quell violence might actually unleash dynamics that generate conflict, as individuals and groups compete for new sources of wealth and power.

In short, development aid can be revolutionary. It poses the possibility of an upheaval in traditional economic, social, and political relations. Similar to all revolutionary catalysts, its consequences are difficult to foresee, let alone control. Providing development assistance with the goal of promoting political stability for a host nation might thus be profoundly ill-conceived.

In fact, revolutionary change is often desirable. Many lines of authority in developing countries and traditional societies are tyrannical, corrupt, elitist, and factional, all of which can be sources of conflict and oppression and thus easily exploited by insurgents. Increasing the level of development aid without addressing these ailments is futile. The key challenge for COIN advocates is to provide aid that will yield social, political, and economic advances—changes that will be revolutionary but not driven by radical Islam, and that will be fundamental without fostering fundamentalism. To do so, aid providers will have to understand aid as altering established practices and modes of thinking, not just completing projects; and will have to understand development as building values and mores, not just infrastructure. They also will have to marry resources for economic growth with additional resources to foster good governance and social justice.

### ***Development as Freedom***

Some scholars, such as Tufts University researcher Andrew Wilder, are skeptical that development aid can have any strategic impact. Wilder argues, for example, that research shows “that far from winning hearts and minds, current aid efforts are much more likely to be losing them.”<sup>13</sup> If development assistance is conducted the same way it has been for decades, Wilder and his colleagues are probably correct. As he notes, a 1988 US Agency for International Development (USAID) study of the two decades America provided development assistance to Afghanistan prior to the Soviet invasion concluded that:

The United States generally had too much confidence in the applicability of technical solutions to complex social and economic development problems and of the appropriateness and transferability of US values and experience. This overconfidence . . . meant that too little

attention was paid to local circumstances and values in the preparation and execution of aid activities.<sup>14</sup>

Health clinics, schools, roads, wells, and other development projects may buy ISAF good will and temporary friends, but they will not improve Afghan society in the long-term. It is a brutal irony that the irrigation canals built by USAID engineers in the 1950s were recently used by Taliban snipers in the battle for Marja, the Taliban stronghold in Helmand province.<sup>15</sup> Efforts to “win hearts and minds” will invariably be temporary, since hearts can be fickle and minds forgetful. The only way to build loyalty is to empower local people to act as partners with government and foreign aid agencies toward shared, long-term objectives. Creating dependency on short-term government or foreign aid will yield temporary alliances, not sustained allegiance, from local populations facing insurgents. The way in which development aid is delivered—establishing a deliberative process, gaining input from all constituencies, respecting dissenting views, and acting on a nondiscriminatory basis—is the key to sustainable progress. These practices will promote the values and behavioral norms necessary to build civil society and promote an affinity with the West.

Harvard professor and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen envisions freedom as both the primary ends and principal means of development.<sup>16</sup> His conception of freedom is broad and encompasses “processes” in which people can make choices as well as “opportunities” or conditions that allow people to pursue their choices. Specifically, he identifies five complementary yet “distinct types of rights and opportunities” that can help to “advance the general capability of a person.” They are:

- Political freedoms.
- Economic facilities.
- Social opportunities.
- Transparency guarantees.
- Protective security.<sup>17</sup>

Development, Sen argues, should not only promote each of these freedoms as instruments to enable “people to lead the kinds of lives they have reason to value,” but also reinforce the link among these freedoms in order to enhance human freedom generally.

But how? How should ISAF and civilian development agencies promote societal freedom in places such as Afghanistan, one of the poorest, most corrupt countries on Earth and one that is suffering from overwhelming illiteracy, a vigorous insurgency, and trauma from 30 years of war?

At a minimum, we need to dispel the myth that traditional Islamic societies are immune to change. Contrary to the stereotype of rustic Afghanistan composed of static “tribal” social and political structures dominated by

elders, rural Afghan society is far more fluid and localized. The Army's Afghanistan Research Reachback Center describes current circumstances as:

Instead of "tribal engagement" in Afghanistan, the [Center] advocates for "local knowledge, cultural understanding, and local contacts," in the words of David Kilcullen. There are no shortcuts . . . Most of Afghanistan has not been "tribal" in the last few centuries, and the areas that might have been (majority-Pashtun areas that make up parts of Regional Commands South and East) have changed drastically over the past 30 years.<sup>18</sup>

The authors have worked in traditional Islamic societies confronting terrorism and civil war and have witnessed these societies responding to new challenges and opportunities. The fact that 70 percent of Afghanistan's population is less than 22 years of age presents an enormous opportunity to shape the future. This cohort is especially impressionable and will embrace change if technology, education, and employment opportunities are available. Those strategists who invoke history as proof that Afghanistan will reject foreign influences have little understanding of how dynamic societies can be if foreigners bring opportunity instead of conquest. One of the most essential elements for success in security and development is harnessing this human potential for change. Indeed, Afghans are already acutely aware of the freedom they enjoy. Eighty percent of Afghans believe that they have more personal freedom now than under the Taliban, a number that has grown despite rising concerns about security.<sup>19</sup> Coupled with development that promotes local empowerment, this sense of freedom will flourish.

On the other hand, government imposed from Kabul, as ISAF continues to promote, will have a hard time gaining acceptance or fulfilling local Afghan aspirations. General McChrystal's "government in a box, ready to roll in"<sup>20</sup> description of the Afghan governor, administrators, and 1,900 police officers brought into Marja to take control—while an improvement over past COIN operations that did not sufficiently involve the Afghan government—should not be the final goal. Indeed, many members of the Afghan National Security Forces recently used to secure Helmand province "are not from those areas, many times they do not speak the local language or dialect, and can seem just as foreign as US forces," according to one District Reconstruction Team member with extensive experience in the area.

### ***Micro-Development, Macro-Results***

Rather than thinking of COIN as a top-down approach to establish security for national government administrators and foreign aid workers to arrive and provide services and development aid to win the hearts and minds of poor and primitive people, COIN 3.0 would engage a broad spectrum of society with a bottom-up approach. Currently, the Afghan government's

Community Development Councils and National Solidarity Program and the US military's Commander's Emergency Response Program have had some success. But village elders, local government officials, and traditional bodies such as "*shuras*" are not broad enough to empower all Afghans, especially women. The COIN 3.0 approach would challenge aid providers to go deeper into communities and, in turn, would call upon community members to evolve their traditions and practices, including empowering women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.

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***COIN 3.0 begins with an assessment to evaluate social, economic, political, and risk conditions.***

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Smart power advocates invariably highlight the development expertise of civilian aid agencies, but the authors believe that cutting-edge corporate social responsibility practices adopted by a number of multinational corporations provide a more sophisticated and effective approach. First, COIN 3.0 would begin with a community needs assessment that evaluates local social, economic, political, and risk conditions. This assessment would take special care to include women, children, the elderly, the disabled, ethnic minorities, and others who are often marginalized in traditional societies.

Second, based on this assessment, community members would help develop proposals and would have substantial input in evaluating and selecting projects. Decision-making would be shared by all relevant community members, local government officials, foreign military and civilian aid providers, and other relevant stakeholders. Mechanisms would be created to enable community decision-making and feedback throughout project cycles. Third, local people will help design projects, thereby allowing the community to define goals more precisely, expand potential resources available for projects, and permit the lifecycle of a project to extend beyond the deployment of a particular PRT or other foreign aid provider's tenure. Fourth, aid providers will train community members to implement and manage as much of a project as possible. Fifth, community members will be involved in monitoring projects to ensure that they meet local expectations, and in modifying projects when necessary.

For their part, foreign and government aid providers need to ensure that programs are fair and inclusive; mend social cleavages; create and reinforce mutually beneficial relationships; and avoid favoritism, corruption, and zero-sum gamesmanship. In addition to providing technical skills and training, outside aid providers need to ensure that projects promote civic skills and practices. Specifically, aid projects should be designed and implemented to promote human rights, inclusiveness, peaceful conflict resolution, the rule of law, democracy, and other values that underlie civil society, as much as they are crafted to improve the material lives of local populations. Aid providers should also focus on institutionalizing best practices

that are adopted by local populations. In this way, development projects will be sustainable in their truest and richest sense.

Finally, in addition to traditional measures for assessing aid projects—were they completed on time, on budget, within specifications, and without waste and fraud—stakeholders will evaluate projects in light of the original social, economic, political, and risk assessments. This step will permit communities to gauge not just whether a project was successfully completed, but also what changes occurred in the communities themselves. It will also allow aid recipients to assess the practices and institutions that community members adopted to complete the project in order to understand what was effective, what should be improved, and how better to organize and deploy local resources. In this way, good governance can be tracked alongside project cycles during an extended period of time.

Far from COIN in a box, this approach is as organic as possible and evolves from local needs, resources, and priorities; each project also contributes to overall strategic objectives. In fact, the whole character of a local community, the larger society, the government, and aid programs should be integrated into a comprehensive COIN plan.

US Army Special Forces have already used some of these measures in several tactical situations. For example, a Special Forces team was able to gain popular support and operate without being attacked in Zabul province, which was formerly controlled by the Taliban and composed of local people from the same tribe as Mullah Omar, the Afghan Taliban leader. The team did this by creating mutually respectful relationships and inclusive, population-driven projects. They were also sure to include all tribes and villages in the region and to spread equitably the costs and benefits of the projects. As a result, they reduced rivalries among tribes and friction between the Special Forces and the local community.

Applying these practices can be difficult, which explains why they are rarely seen in the COIN context. Government officials or elders rarely give up power or prerogative voluntarily; bureaucrats rarely defer to those less technically trained; and foreign aid workers face enormous pressure to complete public works and infrastructure quickly. The process by which aid projects are selected and implemented is rarely a consideration, except for the desire to limit corruption. For foreign and local military commanders striving to obtain support from local power centers, whether warlords or sheiks, empowering new members of a community and thus potentially destabilizing the traditional decision-making process may seem like a threat to their mission and forces.

Yet it is precisely because social relationships in “traditional” societies have in fact adapted and evolved over hundreds of years that development aid should challenge local populations to evolve politically and socially as well as economically. The very nature of warfare influences political, eco-

conomic, and social conditions; it is foolhardy for COIN practitioners to try to avoid change. The essential question is not will there be change, but how will it occur? COIN operations will have to balance short-term and long-term exigencies, while still aiming for enduring social and political progress.

The authors are confident that in the long-term, COIN 3.0's form of development is more effective for fostering democracy, good governance, community, loyalty, economic growth, entrepreneurialism, employment, and more successful training than the current foreign aid approach. With its emphasis on micro-development, COIN 3.0 is sustainable and flexible. It does not depend on unrealistic or unsustainable contributions from the international community or a central government. Precisely because of its emphasis on the small scale, it can have a powerful, immediate impact, including by improving security.

In Afghanistan, COIN 3.0 can reinforce ISAF's role as an ally for progress rather than an occupier. Beyond Afghanistan, in places such as Yemen and Egypt, it can help defeat Islamic radicalization by making US assistance the agent of change, not al Qaeda or the Muslim Brotherhood. COIN 3.0 presents rural Afghans and others with opportunities as familiar and intimate as helping their families and as profound and transformative as the struggle for modernity—a struggle the Taliban and al Qaeda will never win.

#### NOTES

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11. See generally Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

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