

THE AFGHAN TEST BED IN “MARJA”

KEY TESTS OF VICTORY ARE STILL
MONTHS AND YEARS AWAY

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The Afghan “Test Bed” in Marja: Key Tests of Victory Are Still Months and Years Away

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The fighting in Marja is important. It challenges the Taliban on its home ground and will provide visible evidence that it cannot hold an area it has dominated for years and one whose drugs play an important role in its financing. The Marja offensive will test the President’s new strategy, and show whether a population centered strategy can work. At the same time, this means that “winning” involves far more than tactical victory, and that the aftermath of the fighting will be much more important than the immediate outcome of the battle.

ISAF, Afghan Forces, and the Afghan government must not only show that they win, but must demonstrate that they can stay and transition to Afghan government control. They must show that months of words and rhetoric about a population-oriented strategy have practical meaning.

ISAF and Afghan forces must show that they have “shaped” operations in ways that do lasting and cumulative damage to the insurgents. They must show that can really “clear” areas of all the Taliban, and “hold” in ways that provide lasting security. They must demonstrate that the Afghan government and its forces can then “build” by governing effectively, promoting economic development, and winning popular support on a lasting basis. And, over time, the Afghan government must then prove that it can accept the transfer of responsibility with only limited foreign support.

This means that the core phases of the struggle for Marja (and Helmand) will play out over at least another year and probably much longer. It is one thing to make initial gains when so many ISAF and Afghan resources are concentrated in a small area. It is another thing to show that these gains can be sustained for years in an area that has been a Taliban stronghold. More importantly, ISAF and the Afghan government may have little more than the current campaign season to show that the new strategy can credibly succeed outside the Helmand River area, and do so on the scale necessary to win the country and the war.

The Challenges in “Shape”

ISAF has already shown that it can successfully shape the battle, but several key issues remain. One is how real a commitment the Karzai government has made to fight this kind of war on a prolonged and national level. The second is how untied the rest of ISAF and the aid effort will be in shaping such operations in the rest of Afghanistan, and whether unity of effort can replace the past focus on national priorities and national caveats. The third is how effective ISAF and Afghan forces can be once the Taliban has more experience with this kind of offensive, and can use Marja as its own test bed in preparing for future attacks.

British and US forces have always been fighting forces capable of unity of effort. Shaping operations on a national level, however, requires all major ISAF and PRT countries to cooperate. It also requires the Afghan government to become steadily more effective, less corrupt and less subject to power brokers. It also requires the government to play a growing role in shaping operations throughout the country. Success in Marja can only be a prelude to these broader tests of unity of effort. The success of the new strategy requires that all the elements of ISAF and the Afghan government be able to shape integrated civil-military operations on a national level.

There is a fourth area of concern. Every ISAF and Afghan effort to “shape” a major operation in the coalition environment in Afghanistan is likely to provide the Taliban and other insurgents with extensive strategic warning. In the case of Marja, it took months of effort to “shape” the present battlefield and prepare to implement a new strategy. The Taliban had half a year of strategic warning, and plenty of time to develop a tactical response.

It is not clear that the Taliban and other insurgents will have this much warning in the future; nor is it clear how well they can learn to adapt. Any large-scale ISAF-Afghan government operation is likely to become known at least weeks before it begins, and this is something the Taliban can potentially exploit. Afghan loyalties are too uncertain, ISAF operations are too complex and visible, and creating an effective Afghan civil and military presence in a new region involves too much coordination to avoid providing at least this level of warning.

ISAF and Afghan forces may still achieve substantial operational security and surprise at the tactical level, but strategic warning seems more likely to be the norm than the exception. The question is how well the Taliban can take advantage of such warning, and how skillful it is at exploiting the situation.

The Challenges in “Clear”

Some ISAF sources are already talking about moving from the “clear” phase to the “hold” phase, but past insurgencies have shown that “clear” is not just a matter of driving the most visible insurgent combat forces out of an area, and often poses major mid-term and long-term challenges. Marja will become more vulnerable when ISAF and Afghan forces can no longer concentrate some 6,000-8,000 troops in such a small area, and this may well be the real test of “clear.”

The Taliban’s ability to pose such a challenge is uncertain, but the Taliban does seem to have adopted an initial set of tactics that draws on both its experience and the lessons of other insurgencies. The question is just much the Taliban has learned these lessons and how well it adapts to changing strategies.

Given past Taliban action, the most obvious lessons of past wars, and Taliban action in Marja to date; the Taliban may be able to pose the following near and longer-term challenges to ISAF and Afghan efforts to “clear:”

- The Taliban fights enough to inflict casualties, forces ISAF and Afghan forces to move slowly, tests their capabilities before it retreats and disperses, and ensures that the fighting calls attention to the plight of Afghan civilians and the cost in ISAF casualties.
- It limits the exposure of its forces, and raises the cost to ISAF and Afghan forces by using snipers and using large numbers of IEDs to block roads, forces ISAF and Afghan force to move on foot, and increases the impact of terrain/water barriers. This slows down the ISAF and Afghan forces, increases casualties and media attention to them, and gives the Taliban more time to infiltrate out of threatened areas.
- It takes advantage of the new limits on the use of ISAF air power and artillery, and seeks to strengthen them by publicizing or inventing civilian casualties and suffering. It exploits the fact that “shock and awe” don’t work where the Afghan people are at risk, and “caution and civilian casualties” are a key requirement. Exploiting an opponent’s unwillingness to risk civilian casualties and collateral damage has always been a strategy used in insurgencies, both in tactical fighting and in the battle for popular perceptions and media coverage.
- The Taliban risks local fighters while minimizing losses of key cadres in terms of leaders, skilled bomb makers and other specialists, and experienced combat personnel. It leaves the scene selectively, minimizing cost to the core structure of its forces.
- The Taliban withdraws the better-known faces of its shadow government while leaving duplicates behind. It has infiltrated the incoming Afghan government and forces, as well as created a network of local Afghan leaders that claim to support the government, but actually support the Taliban. It has tribal leaders and Taliban insurgents ready to change sides and reconcile that actually remain loyal to the Taliban.
- The Taliban kills and sabotages selectively after ISAF and Afghan forces occupy Marja. It uses “night letters,” targeted killings, and other techniques to fight a war of terrorism and intimidation. It phases this response to wait until ISAF and Afghan Army forces have largely left and it can strike at more vulnerable local leaders, Afghan officials and police, and aid workers.
- It seeks to “own the night” in spite of ISAF’s night vision technology by moving small numbers of fighters, or individuals, in ways that show it is always present; it conducts sudden raids or ambushes, and intimidates or attack key figures.
- It targets key areas of vulnerability like schools, police stations, and government offices. It creates a covert network to tax crops and economic activities, and it sabotages efforts to replace narcotics with alternative crops. US and other ISAF aid workers and any NGO personnel become key targets both because of their vulnerability and their impact in helping the Taliban fight a war of political attrition to drive the US and other ISAF countries out of the war. The Taliban seeks support in an alliance with local power brokers and narcotics traffickers.
- The Taliban moves into outlying areas in small disperse numbers, taking advantage of the country’s topography to find cover. It rotates personnel to minimize creating stable, fixed targets. It carries out large bombings and attacks sporadically to demonstrate its power and that the Afghan/ISAF campaign is not successful.

These tactics and techniques have already been used to some degree in Afghanistan and Iraq. Most are modifications of techniques used by Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh – and

some by Sun Tzu. In fact, they are only a partial list of well-established ways to counter a population-centric strategy and prevent a government victory, as well as to respond to tactical defeats by launching a war of attrition that can extend for years, months, or decades.

The ultimate success of the “clear” aspects of the new strategy cannot be determined until Afghan forces show how capable they are of operating on their own or with minimal ISAF support. This cannot be demonstrated in an ISAF dominated operation like Helmand. Moreover, Afghan Army forces need at least several more years to improve their strength and quality. Even in cases like Marja, it will take Afghan forces time to show they can properly partner ISAF forces.

It will take Afghan forces several years to show whether they can replace ISAF forces; and to demonstrate their ability to gradually move towards the creation of a security system based on local elements, the Afghan police, and an Afghan government-run judicial system. Despite reports that the Afghan government is already deploying some 2,000 police to the Helmand River area, ISAF has yet to demonstrate that it has provided the Afghan government with the help it needs to deploy local justice systems. Moreover, ISAF is again reorganizing a police training effort that has suffered from eight years of waste and failure.

This latter transition presents a key test for the new strategy: The shift in responsibilities from ISAF and the Afghan Army to the Afghan police and justice system will be one of the most critical tests of real and lasting success in the “hold” phase. In practice, “Hold” will actually have two phases: a military phase and then a rule of law phase.

In short, the key test of “hold” is which side proves be most successful over time – and there are three critical dimensions that will measure the level of success or failure of ISAF and Afghan forces that is still to come: *Persistence, scale, and popular support*.

- *Persistence*: Success depends heavily on being able to outlast the opponent. The side that can stay active the longest tends to win, at least at the local level. Even when ISAF and Afghan counterinsurgency (COIN) forces win initially, they may not be able to stay – either because of the need to meet other threats or because of a loss of political support and financial backing. On the other hand, an extreme movement like the Taliban may encounter far more serious problems in challenging ISAF and Afghan hold capabilities over time if the insurgents end up alienating the local population. Past wars have shown that insurgents can rapidly lose influence if they cannot compete with COIN forces in providing basic services and if “hold” is supplemented with “build” in areas like prompt justice, government services, and economic security and development.
- *Scale*: The question is not who can win a given battle by concentrating its resources. It is rather which side can win at the scale required and show it can extend the scale of its operations to cover a key area, region, and then the country. The core of Marja is an area of only about 200 square kilometers with 80,000-100,000 people in a country of 652,000 square kilometers with approximately 29-31 million people.

Even if ISAF and the Afghan government do “hold” in Marja and Helmand, this will be meaningless if it means too many of the best ISAF and the Afghan resources become “trapped” in Marja, preventing them from broadening the range of their operations to cover other population centers and take control of the country. Additionally, they may not be able to provide the

resources – or unity of effort -- to scale up their victory to win on a national level. There is a potential problem with fighting in symbolic, “worst case,” areas. It requires the most resources with the most risk over the longest period of time.

At the same time, the Taliban remains small and extreme, and has succeeded in the past largely because it could exploit a power vacuum. It may prove surprisingly vulnerable when it loses in a critical area, if losing such a battle of attrition makes it seem ineffective or weak, and if ISAF and Afghan forces can follow up Marja with even moderate unity of effort in the rest of the country.

- *Popular support:* Popular support will be won over time, not demonstrated by the desire to survive dealing with the initial victors. Past insurgencies -- including Iraq -- warn that being welcomed as a liberator is far less important than what happens in the aftermath of a tactical victory. In general the side that can win the most popular support over time, and do the most to deny the other side security or “sanctuary,” wins the war.

The key problems for the Taliban are its extremism – too much violence can decisively alienate the people – and that its lack of a plan to deal with key practical issues of economic and political development. Difference of ethnicity is also a problem for the Taliban in some parts of the country. The key problems for ISAF and Afghan forces are the need to show that they can establish a sustained capability to provide security in a short window of time and the risk they take in making promises of lasting security, government services, and economic help during the “build phase” which must actually be kept.

The Challenges in “Build”

“Build” is even more experimental than hold, and whether or not the Obama Administration likes the phrase, it involves a sustained effort in armed “nation building.” Efforts like local shuras, “government in a box,” irrigation canal clearing, cash-for-work, and “school in a box” seem promising. The Afghan government and ISAF probably can concentrate enough resources to offer the people of Marja significant material incentives early in the operation. Moreover, this seems to be the first operation where enough effort has gone into preparing the necessary level of unity between bodies like the ANA, ANP, ISAF, and the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team to work with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in ways that will allow it to really assert authority in central Helmand

Nevertheless, the “build” phase will soon pose serious challenges. The US found it difficult to provide material benefits quickly and effectively in Iraq, and the Afghan government has yet to show it can keep such promises. Marja has been a comparatively rich narcotics region that must now establish new crops and markets. Marja and most of the Helmand River area has not had effective Afghan governance for years, and its people have no reason as yet to trust either ISAF or the Afghan government.

The present lack of Afghan government capacity also means that Marja will be a major test of the ability of the US and UK – and supporting ISAF countries – to deploy an effective mix of civil-military capabilities in the field to build in an area previously dominated by the Taliban. Meeting this test is much easier in theory than it is in practice. The civilian “surge” remains untested and lacks practical experience. Furthermore, the number of civilian personnel currently in Afghanistan barely makes a “ripple” in a country the size of Afghanistan.

In short, it is easy to make promises, provide short-term grants, and make initial starts. It is far more difficult to provide sufficient civilian manpower – or a combination of civil-military manpower – to sustain a credible effort that provides help with governance, economics and employment, and prompt justice that covers not only all of Marja but all of the liberated Helmand River area. This is critical because any effort that succeeds in only part of the Helmand area will alienate the population wherever it does not succeed.

Moreover, “persistence” and “scale” mean that an unproven and inexperienced Afghan government must become able to “build” at the national, provincial, district, and local levels. Any initial ISAF gains will be wasted if the Afghan government cannot deliver far better governance and economic progress both inside and outside the Helmand area. The Afghan government still has to show that it can overcome its problems in capacity and corruption, in dealing with local ethnic and tribal issues, and in actually executing the programs that it promises.

Once again, these challenges must be kept in perspective. The Taliban’s concept of governance and development has so far done little more than tax narcotics and other economic activity and provide crude – and sometime brutal – elements of prompt justice. ISAF and the Afghan government do not need to be highly effective to offer more than the Taliban. Moreover, Afghan expectations tend to be limited to the most basic government services, economic subsistence, and the most basic elements of a traditional rule of law. Any consistent ISAF and Afghan government effort that provides jobs and minimal resources, with at least a moderate level of integrity and effectiveness, may well make the Afghan government far more appealing than the Taliban.

The Challenges in “Transfer”

It is simply too early to talk about “transfer” in serious terms. ISAF is probably several years away from the point where it can make a secure transfer of Marja to full Afghan control and responsibility. We must also remember that even apparent success can be misleading. The Kuomintang Government repeatedly “won” control in rural areas of China over a 30-year period only to lose control over time. The government of South Vietnam lost control far more quickly.

This risk is no indication that ISAF or the Afghan government will lose. It is, however, a warning that short-term victory is not a measure of lasting victory. Marja should be seen as a long-term struggle, not a short term test bed. No one has ever really won a war until they have won a lasting peace.

The Challenge of adequate Progress in 2010 and Eventually Winning the Country

Above all, success in Marja (and Helmand) must be kept in national perspective. Marja is too small a test bed to provide an overall metric of how well the new strategy will work at a time when US, ISAF, and Afghan domestic support for the war is still so uncertain.

ISAF may well lose the war if it becomes so involved in Marja and Helmand that it cannot make significant gains in the rest of the country.

Moreover, Marja and Helmand are current centers of gravity in the war largely because ISAF engaged in Helmand in 2008 without adequate resources. The British were thrust into a mission larger than their forces could be expected to handle in 2009, and the US then had to provide major reinforcements. Defeating the Taliban in part of its home territory is of great value, but the fact remains that Marja and Helmand are more a center of gravity where ISAF could have lost a war of political attrition than one where it can win.

This does not mean that ISAF and the Afghan government have to secure the rest of Afghanistan's population centers in 2010, 2011, or any other date for certain. In fact, any effort to do so in 2010-2011 would probably overextend ISAF, and commit inadequate Afghan Army and Police forces years before they have the size and effectiveness for such a mission. It is doubtful at this point that the US can afford to meet President Obama's goal of capping US forces in late 2011, much less begin any meaningful reduction. Unless the Taliban collapses from within, it is unlikely that Afghan forces will be fully ready to take over the security mission until well after 2015.

ISAF and the Afghan government do, however, have to show that they can implement "shape, clear, hold, build, and transfer" in other areas of Afghanistan during the course of this year. They have to demonstrate that General McChrystal is right and that the ISAF and Afghan forces will help to reverse the course of the war.

In addition, the Afghan government must meet Ambassador Eikenberry's challenge, and make it clear that the Karzai government can be an effective partner. There must be tangible gains in at least one major population center outside of Helmand, and ISAF's maps of Taliban influence must show that this influence is shrinking in some of the areas where the Taliban only had limited or tentative control.

If neither ISAF nor the Afghan government demonstrates this degree of success during the course of 2010, it is all too possible that they will lose the support of the US Congress and media, and that of many other ISAF countries. If the Karzai government does not show that it can govern and provide improved security, its tenuous legitimacy in Afghan eyes may well be lost. Either alternative may mean losing the entire war.

While Marja is an important a "test bed," there are strategic tests of success as well as tactical ones. US and ISAF forces must demonstrate that the new strategy can work in six broader centers of gravity outside – as well as inside – the Helmand River area. ISAF must find additional "test beds" to show that it can:

- Defeat the insurgency not only in tactical terms, but also by eliminating its control and influence over the population.
- Create an effective and well-resourced NATO/ISAF and US response to defeating the insurgency and securing the population.
- Build up a much larger and more effective mix of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

- Give the Afghan government the necessary capacity and legitimacy at the national, regional/provincial, district, and local levels.
- Create a more effective, integrated, and operational civil-military effort within the US country team that better integrates the efforts of NATO/ISAF, the UN, other member countries, NGOs and the international community.
- Deal with the sixth centers of gravity outside Afghanistan and NATO/ISAF's formal mission. The actions of Pakistan, Iran, and other states will be critical to success in Afghanistan.

“Political time” will almost certainly be more demanding than “military time,” and this year seems likely to be critical in determining whether the war is sustainable. Senior officials and officers in the US and allied countries need to understand at every level that words are no longer enough. The time for new concepts and rhetoric is over.

There must be tangible and sustained progress in enough of these areas in 2010 to show that the new strategy can work over time, that credible ISAF and allied country civil efforts have the resources to make that strategy successful, and that the Afghan government has the capacity and integrity to be an effective partner. The US cannot afford more empty Power Points and PAO statements that do not reflect tangible results, do not produce real plans and schedules, do not show that adequate resources are actually available, and do not follow real measures of success.