The Rise And Fall Of Village Stability Operations In Afghanistan: Lessons For Future Irregular Warfare Campaigns

Description

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In 2009, as American interest focused once again on Afghanistan, seasoned special operations forces (SOF) commanders conceived a plan they believed could transform the floundering war effort. Fueled by frustration with the status quo, the difficulty of holding terrain after clearing operations, and a belief that â??there has to be more to solving this problem than killing people,â?• they called for a return to the Vietnam-era experience of the special operations community by arming progovernment militias to secure rural areas. This bottom-up local defense initiative that resulted took shape as the Village Stability Operations (VSO) and Afghan Local Police (ALP) programs. Both active from 2010 to 2020, the two programs were closely linkedâ??VSO was the tool with which SOF worked to set the conditions for ALP to be established in Afghan districts, and the two programs were largely interdependent and operationalized in tandem.

This innovative approach achieved tangible security outcomes in key and contested districts. While systematic examination of the VSO and ALP programs remains limited, research from RAND and a working paper by Stanford PhD student Jon Bate find a reduction in insurgent attacks in districts where ALP units were set up. American commanders, including General David Petraeus, offered effusive praise for the program, noting its ability to flip key districts away from supporting the Taliban. Some Taliban commanders even viewed ALP units as, in the words of one analyst, â??enemy number oneâ?• due to their ability to detect and stop attempts to infiltrate local communities.

A large part of VSO/ALPâ??s success depended upon the careful condition setting, training, and oversight by SOF. However, due to the pressure to achieve results prior to the Obama administrationâ??s planned conclusion of the American combat mission in 2014, VSO/ALP morphed from a targeted program to an industrial-scale enterprise, with deleterious effects. Scaling up a program of this nature proved dangerous in the absence of deliberate monitoring and evaluation efforts. Leveraging local forces should remain a key element of US irregular warfare (IW) capabilities, but for such efforts to succeed, practitioners must remember the second SOF Truthâ??â??Quality is better than quantity.â?• Future bottom-up security programs will require discrimination and patience,

given the dangers inherent in arming local forces.

Origins and Program Design

The US military entered 2009 frustrated with ongoing efforts in Afghanistan but hopeful that new resources and tactics could turn the tide of the war. Influential defense thinkers and practitioners argued that the top-down efforts to build a centralized regime and national army remained out of step with Afghanistan's cultural traditions and fragmented politics. "Politics remains a local game," RAND's Seth Jones wrote in 2009. Instead of copying the top-down model, which doomed efforts from reformist kings like Amanullah Khan to the Soviet-backed governments, Jones and others called for a bottom-up strategy.

SOF commanders echoed these concerns, angry with the limited progress despite repeated deployments to Afghanistan. "For years we talked about clear, hold, and build," one commander complained in 2008. "Hold?" he continued. "We had never done it—and we weren't going to do it without locals." This frustration and desire for a new approach gave rise to VSO/ALP.

VSO planners envisioned small SOF teams embedded in villages and partnering with locals to resist Taliban control. This approach sought to adapt American strategy to the reality of Afghanistan's highly localized and often fissiparous politics. By empowering local actors, planners also believed they could counteract the Taliban's appeal to Afghanistan's disadvantaged minority tribes and subtribes—groups traditionally ignored (or preyed upon) by the central government and wary of government control.

These planners sought to impose careful constraints, such as the use of a district-level *shura*, or consultative council, to vet and approve all recruits and commanders, to prevent the emergence of rogue militias and predatory warlords. The fledgling program stressed selectivity. Plans outlined how commanders should establish locations both based on their strategic relevance and in response to requests from locals for assistance in protecting their communities against the Taliban. Given limits in special operations manpower, planners emphasized that "we cannot establish [village stability platforms] everywhere."

The program spread from a highly successful pilot effort in the tough security environment of Wardak province in 2009 to eleven key districts across the country by April 2010. Based on the tangible security progress achieved at the initial sites, then Brigadier General Austin "Scotty" Miller approved a national-level version of the program, which subsequently received endorsements from the theater commander, Petraeus, as well as Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Karzai agreed to authorize a force of ten thousand local policemen across the country, but insisted that the program fall under the

Ministry of the Interior as an additional check on the reemergence of warlordism.

From Local to Industrial

This targeted, small-scale, and village-based approach, however, quickly expanded and evolved. In the fall of 2010, Petraeus sought, and Karzai approved, an increase in the programâ??s target size from ten thousand to thirty thousand local policemen. To support this growth, the special operations component in Afghanistan nearly doubled in size, from 2,900 servicemembers to over 5,400 by mid-2012. Miller received an additional thirteen SOF tactical teams from US Special Operations Command to execute this expansion. Petraeus also asked the Pentagon for two infantry battalions to augment the program and â??extend security while we can, while we have the forces.â?• Of note, contemporary US Army Special Operations Command senior leadership reportedly opposed this decision to employ conventional forces to grow VSO/ALP due to fears of diluting SOF capabilities.

By March 2011, this beefed-up force created a total of forty-six VSO/ALP sites. At the tactical level, these sites produced security gains, measured in both increased territorial control and a reduction of Taliban attacks on coalition and Afghan forces. According to a 2012 RAND study, within ten months of VSO/ALP site establishment, violence levels (measured in attacks against civilians or coalition forces) decreased by a statistically significant amount. More recently, Jon Bateâ??s preliminary findings suggest that site establishment caused what he calls tactical substitution, a reduction of direct-fire attacks but an increase in attacks using improvised explosive devices, as well as geographic substitution, a phenomenon where insurgents shifted attacks to neighboring districts without ALP. However, due to a lack of systematic evaluation using common metrics, the programâ??s tactical and strategic impactsâ??to say nothing of ALPâ??s impact on villager well-beingâ??remains unclear.

The May 2011 raid that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and the subsequent announcement from the White House of the impending end of Americaâ??s combat mission in Afghanistan by the end of 2014 augured new changes to the program. But instead of focusing on improving existing sites in preparation for a US departure, the program would instead double in size over the next year. While VSO planners envisioned the program as a response to genuine local requests for defense, in practice most sites in this period were selected by American commanders. In many cases, units cut corners in the nomination and vetting processes. When then Major General Tony Thomas assumed command of an expanded special operations headquarters in Afghanistan in March 2012, he inherited 103 VSO/ALP sites. These sites were now dispersed throughout Afghanistan, including twenty-seven sites in the then comparably tranquil Regional Command North and Regional Command West.

The accelerated American withdrawal spurred further modifications to the VSO/ALP program. Many VSO sites would now open and â??transitionâ?• within a six-month timeframeâ??the length of a tactical special operations unitâ??s deploymentâ??leaving the newly created local police operating independently of SOF mentorship and oversight. In other areas, SOF teams began living in larger conventional bases for force protection and commuting to their villages, which were sometimes in different districts altogether. Training for ALP also transitioned out of their home villages and into provincial training centers.

Overexpansion and its Adverse Effects

This imperative for speed led some leaders in 2011 and 2012 to bypass key VSO/ALP safety measures such as *shura* vetting, living in villages, and continued monitoring and evaluation. This rapid growth caused significant problemsâ??especially as local US commanders diverged from the programâ??s careful template in the haste to rapidly establish new sites. General Petraeus later noted to the Special Investigator General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) that â??VSO expansion was absolutely driven by the timeline.â?• One anonymous official told SIGAR that â??both at the strategic and the operational level, doing it right took a backseat to doing it fast.â?• For example, in Zabulâ??s Shajoy District, local leaders told analysts that American commanders simply announced the ALP commander in 2011 without vetting by a tribal *shura*. This individual reportedly held previous connections with SOF from his time in the Afghan National Police. He proved deeply corrupt and predatoryâ??driving many locals to embrace Taliban rule.

The rapid expansion of the program also reflected the genuine enthusiasm of tribal and ethnic leaders for ALP, particularly as the reality of the US withdrawal came into focus. These tribal local power brokers, however, sometimes proved more interested in using the ALP program to aggregate power for their tribal, local, or ethnic groups than in employing this capability against the Taliban. Research by anthropologists such as David Edwards and Thomas Barfield indicates that this type of behavior is inherent to, and rewarded by, the tribal system. Indeed, Afghans expect their tribal leaders to use their influence and position to aggregate power and prosperity for the tribe.

The principal-agent dilemma as applied to counterinsurgency environments, pioneered by Stephen Biddle and others, further illuminates these dynamics. This argument posits that differences in objectives between the foreign sponsor (the principal) and host-nation elites (the agent) can badly skew counterinsurgency efforts. In the case of VSO/ALP, both principal (the US military) and agent (tribal leaders) proved eager to create ALP. However, US objectivesâ??the creation of a bottom-up rural security force to check Taliban gainsâ??frequently diverged from the interests of Afghan tribal leaders.

In many areas in the countryâ??s north, influential Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek warlords and local commanders reflagged their existing militias under the ALP program. Reflagging provided a measure of official impunity for predatory actionsâ??to say nothing of American financial and material support. In other areas, the program counteracted efforts to empower Afghan government actors, such as district governors and Afghan National Army commanders. Tribal power brokers took full advantage of these discrepancies. In Garmser district in 2011, for instance, Carter Malkasian and other US advisors convinced Wakil Manan, an influential tribal leader, to disarm his militia, only to see him resurrect this force under the ALP program six months later.

The demands of the American withdrawal created new pressures on the program. Major General Edward Reeder told SIGAR that by 2013, â??ALP became outer-ring security to protect urban areas along the ring road,â?• referring to the critical Highway 1 that connects Afghanistanâ??s regions. Several unnamed SOF officials interviewed by SIGAR echoed this assessment and noted that â??by September 2013, the priority of VSO shifted to keeping the lights on and keeping HWY 1 open.â?• Other officials described to SIGAR their frustration at ALP being increasingly used in static checkpoints away from their villagesâ??despite Ministry of the Interior regulations that later required ALP to be used within one kilometer of their home villages. Unsurprisingly, the employment of ALP on roadside checkpoints exacerbated incidents of predatory corruption and illegal taxation.

Nevertheless, senior commanders, such as General John Allen, who led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from 2011 to 2013, viewed ALP as a vital counterinsurgency tool. Allen later praised the program as â??one of the most effectiveâ?• stabilization programs initiated by ISAF. Allen recognized that â??we went from an end-state to an end-date,â?• but saw an expanded ALP as a vital component of his overall strategy. Meanwhile, some Taliban leaders viewed the program as highly disruptive due to ALP membersâ?? knowledge of local and tribal dynamics. According to intelligence disclosed in US congressional testimony, one Taliban commander told his forces that â??if you can kill an ALP commander itâ??s worth 10 coalition soldiers.â?• Neutral observers like the United Nations Assistance Missionâ??Afghanistan also praised the program, noting in 2014 that â??most communities continued to welcome the stability and enhanced security provided by the ALP.â?•

While ALP in some areas continued to represent a valuable bulwark against the Taliban, credible reports of abuses by ALP increased as the safety measures installed by VSO/ALPâ??s designers eroded. The rapid expansion of VSO/ALP and corresponding weakening of programmatic safety measures diminished US oversight and proved counterproductive for Americaâ??s long-term stabilization goals. At some hastily created sites, local vetting disappeared entirely. Some of these rapidly created and unsupervised ALP increasingly preyed upon the civilian population, engaged in tribal infighting, and smuggled opium. Ultimately, one 2013 study with extensive access to American

SOF leaders estimated that roughly one-third of ALP units increased the security of their communities, one-third proved counterproductive and predatory, and one-third sat somewhere in the middle.

Lessons for Future Irregular Warfare Campaigns

Careful examination of the VSO/ALP program illuminates several insights into the potential and pitfalls of bottom-up IW efforts. Working by, with, and through local and tribal forces remains a potentâ??but potentially perilousâ??approach. When considering such programs in the future, American military leaders should carefully consider three insights from the experience of VSO/ALP.

The first is to ***resist the industrialization of SOF efforts***. While US Special Operations Command morphed into an immense enterprise in post 9/11 era, SOF efforts are still best applied discriminately and patiently. This emphasis on selectivityâ??of partners, of terrain, and of effortâ??ensures that limited SOF resources are wisely employed. Adherence to the second SOF Truth that â??quality is better than quantityâ?• can prevent risky expansions of carefully designed programs. With quality as the goal, future SOF leaders should abstain from the temptation to employ conventional infantry forces to amplify IW programs. Additionally, while centralized training centers may be appropriate for partnered infantry or commando forces, a train-and-release model is poorly suited to developing and monitoring irregular forces. As one recent Joint Special Operations University study of the program aptly noted, â??over time,â?• the desire to mass-produce ALP â??outpaced an understanding of what VSO was all about.â?• While increased quality control would have reduced the number of available VSO platforms to around sixty (from the over 170 ALP sites eventually created), it could have served as a forcing function to ensure both continual monitoring and placement in only the most strategically significant districts.

A quality-centered approach also eases the difficulty of the second key task, ensuring ***local efforts are sustainable***. Such IW programs must be designed to endure over long time horizons and withstand changing strategic conditions. As a recent Center for Army Lessons Learned study of ALP concluded, these programs must include deliberate transition plans to either integrate formations into regular military elements of the partner nation or demobilize fighters. In the case of ALP, fewer outposts might have proved sustainable beyond the withdrawal of the bulk of American conventional forces in 2014. Retention of a select number of robust ALP sites under US supervision could have served several purposes. First, it would have limited the worst abuses of the tribal system by providing better monitoring and mentorship of tribal forces. While this would not have stopped all predatory behavior by ALP, it would have better mitigated the risk of civilian harm. Second, these sites might have served as sentinels for a lighter but more sustainable US presence. Such a constellation of SOF-ALP outposts might have helped hold key terrain and limited the need for SOF-partnered Afghan commando forces to recapture districts from the Taliban from 2014 to 2020.

A third insight is that **continual mentorship by SOF** in the field is typically required to mitigate the principal-agent problems involved in the divergent interests of US and host-nation forces. Despite technological advances that enable remote advising, accompanying local forces into combat remains the gold standard for developing and mentoring partner forces. Such efforts should remain tightly controlled, amply resourced, and sustainably scaled. Accompaniment of a select number of partners means deeper relationships, more capable partners, more enabler support (such as intelligence, medical teams, artillery, and air support) per site, and a lower likelihood of abuses by the partner force. These conditions allow for continued security gains, while mitigating the risks to US forces engaged in these efforts.

A Potent Tool, but No Panacea

Like much of America's war in Afghanistan, the VSO and ALP programs remain underexamined. A complete assessment of their strengths, weaknesses, and impact remains unwritten, although recent efforts represent a solid foundation for future work. IW practitioners and scholars should integrate this analysis with the emerging body of social science literature and data that examine the impact of progovernment militias, paramilitary groups, and state-sponsored proxy forces.

This body of early reflection, however, suggests the importance of deliberate site selection, sustainability, and continued boots-on-the-ground advisor presence when designing bottom-up irregular warfare efforts. Addressing these considerations will not ensure success in future conflicts, given war's unpredictable and inherently political nature. Counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, and unconventional warfare are all tremendously difficult enterprises in which no magic programmatic bullet guarantees success. However, if employed judiciously, bottom-up IW approaches represent a potent tool to help US policymakers meet future security challenges in a locally aligned and sustainable manner.

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