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FAILURE BY DESIGN: HOW THE WEST'S INABILITY TO INEFFECTIVELY PLAN MILITARY CAMPAIGNS CAUSES US TO LOSE

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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“The West” has been in Afghanistan now for nearly three times as long as we conducted major military operations during World War II (WW II). Unlike during that latter conflict, there has been no definitive success achieved in Afghanistan to date. Indeed, given recent reported events and the results of the January 2017 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, the situation appears to be drastically worsening.¹ Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan civilian casualties are at their highest levels since the initial intervention into the country, while effective governance and security of the population appear to be fragile and at risk.²

While the two conflicts do not have the same relative importance, the fact that Western countries appear to be less and less able to effectively conclude military operations in a manner that achieves intended national strategic objectives is of significant concern. Why does the West keep losing? Is it by design?

This paper will address whether shortcomings in operational design play a role in the failure of most Western military operations to achieve decisive results since the end of WWII. For the purposes of this paper, “the West” will be deemed to consist of those countries designated as part of the “Five Eyes” community – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. While “the West” is more generally deemed to include much of Europe, Japan, parts of Latin America and various other countries espousing democratic and liberal principles in their forms of governance, the “Five Eyes” (FVEYE) community has been chosen for examination due to its relatively

¹ Daniel Politi, “Taliban Fighters Kill at Least 140 Afghan Soldiers at Army Base,” *Slate*, 22 April 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/04/22/taliban_kill_at_least_140_afghan_soldiers_at_army_base.html.

² United Nations, “Afghan Casualties Hit Record High 11,000 in 2015 – UN report,” UN News Centre, 14 February 2016, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53229#.WQ_dm_7mp9B; Editorial, “Afghan Civilian Casualties at Record High in 2016: UN,” *Aljazeera*, 6 February 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/afghan-civilian-casualties-2016-170206062807210.html>.

high degree of cultural, linguistic and philosophical homogeneity. Notwithstanding that there are significant differences between the members of the FVEYE community in terms of national interests, national power and the specifics of operations in which they have been involved, this definition will assist in keeping the examination within manageable limits, and will ensure that the results of the analysis have the potential for near term practical application in order to improve our success in the conduct of major military operations.

Major Western conflicts since WWII that directly implicate the FVEYE community include the Malayan Emergency, the Korean War, the Second Indo-China War (more colloquially known as the Viet Nam War), the Falklands War, the First Gulf War, the Afghanistan War and the Second Gulf War (also known as the Iraq War). When combined with various other Western led military interventions, such as Somalia, the Balkans and Rwanda, it is illustrative in that more of these conflicts resulted in operational failure, rather than success, for the FVEYE countries involved.

The current model for operational design is generally accepted as a format for campaigning, or the sequencing of tactical actions and operations to achieve overall military objectives in pursuit of the desired strategic end state. In current usage, operational designs are usually organised along logical lines of operation (LOO), based on decisive points that move military operations toward the accomplishment of military objectives. The sum of these military objectives is described as the end state, and should lead to the accomplishment of the strategic or policy objectives.³ An illustration of

³ Department of National Defence, B-GJ-005-500/FP-000, CFJP 5.0 *The Canadian Forces Operational Planning Process* (Ottawa: DND Canada, April 2008), 2-1 to 2-4.

operational design is presented in Figure 1. An illustration of a line of operation (LOO) is presented in Figure 2.

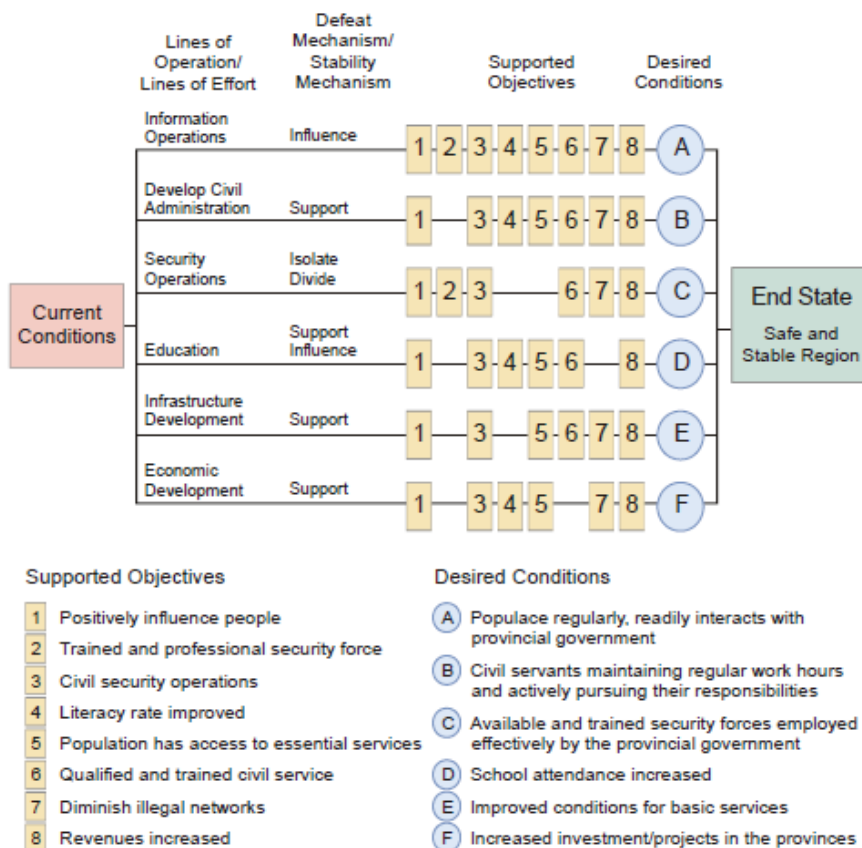


Figure 1 – Illustration of Operational Design⁴

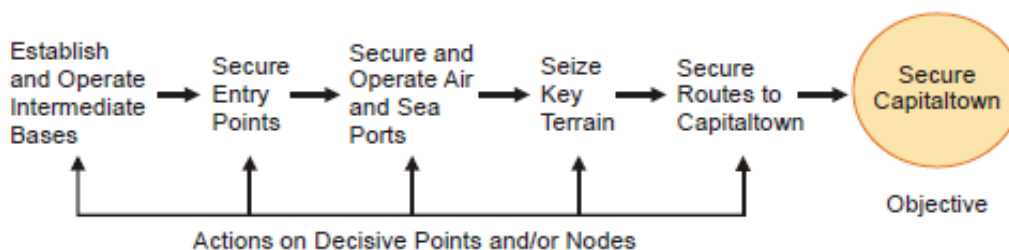


Figure 2 – Illustration of a Line of Operation⁵

⁴ Department of Defense, JP 5-0 *Joint Operational Planning*, (Washington DC: Department of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 11 December 2011), III-15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III-27

The thesis of this paper is that Western countries have become less adept at developing and applying effective operational designs in order to achieve lasting success in military interventions over the last 70 years, notwithstanding an improved theoretical basis for campaign design.

METHODOLOGY

Having refined the problem set, we will examine the failure of Western operational design by contrasting the success in resolving the Malayan Emergency against the failure to date to successfully achieve the desired objectives in Afghanistan. We will start by briefly reviewing the background of events during both conflicts, and confirming that they provide a valid basis on which to make our comparison, being sufficiently similar in nature to warrant comparative analysis. We shall then discuss the operational design employed for Malaya, and verify that it did in fact achieve the desired objectives. We shall next examine the operational designs that have been employed over the course of the Afghan campaign to date and confirm that operations thus far have not achieved military success. An examination of some other potential contributors to operational failure will be conducted, with the conclusion that poor operational design remains the primary causal factor. We shall then compare the two operational designs, in order to evaluate why it is that recent operational design fails to achieve success, and what elements of successful operational design should be incorporated in the future.

BACKGROUND

The Malayan Emergency was officially declared on 17 June 1948, as the result of a period of rising tensions in the aftermath of Britain's reoccupation of Malaya following the expulsion of the Japanese during WWII.⁶ The insurgent forces were primarily Malay Chinese, adherents of the Communist ideology, and had as a goal the expulsion of the British Colonial Administration and the creation of a Communist Malay state.⁷ The Emergency escalated up until approximately 1952, by which point British and Malay security forces had taken effective measures to bring the insurgency under control.⁸ Independence was granted to Malaya on 31 August 1957, and the Emergency was declared over on 31 July 1960. The British accomplished their goals of preventing Malaya from becoming a Communist country dominated by ethnic minority Chinese.⁹

The most recent Afghan conflict effectively commenced following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001. The attack was launched by Al Qaeda (AQ) operatives, who received their direction and financing from Usama bin Laden, based in Afghanistan.¹⁰ After US demands to the Taliban government of Afghanistan were rebuffed, the US invaded and overthrew them with significant assistance from the Northern Alliance, with the intent of bringing Usama bin Laden to justice. While the initial mission, Operation *ENDURING FREEDOM* (OEF), was primarily focused on counter-terrorism and dismantling AQ, a United Nations (UN)

⁶ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

⁸ Karl Hack, "The Malayan Emergency as Counter-Insurgency Paradigm," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 3: 384.

⁹ Edgar O'Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War, 1940-1960*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1966), 164.

¹⁰ Dr. Howard G. Coombs, "Canadian Whole of Government Operations in Kandahar – September 2010 to July 2011," *Vimy Paper* (Ottawa: The Conference of Defence Associations Institute, December 2012), 4.

mandate was issued to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) for the creation of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). ISAF's mandate ". . . was to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security . . . to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists."¹¹ ISAF operations were initially focused in and around Kabul, with ISAF not assuming full responsibility for the entire area of operations of Afghanistan until July 2006.¹² Throughout, US forces continued to operate under an OEF mandate. Commencing in 2011, ISAF forces gradually transferred responsibility for security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The process was completed at the end of 2014, at which point ISAF elements commenced a smaller non-combat mission known as Operation *RESOLUTE SUPPORT*, focused on providing ongoing training, advice and assistance to the ANSF.¹³ Since the assumption by ANSF of primary responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan, the security situation has continuously and seriously degraded, to the point where in January of 2017 the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) was deemed to have effective control of no more than 64% of its districts.¹⁴

¹¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, "ISAF's Mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014)," last modified 1 September 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/on/natohq/topics_69366.htm.

¹² Col Brad Booth, "Winning in Afghanistan: A NATO Operational Design," (USAWC Strategic Research Project, United States Army War College, 2008), 12.

¹³ NATO, "ISAF's Mission In Afghanistan . . .," last modified 1 September 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/on/natohq/topics_69366.htm.

¹⁴ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *High Risk List January 2017* (Virginia: SIGAR, January 2017), 2.

A LEGITIMATE COMPARISON

While separated by more than fifty years in time, and located on opposite sides of Asia, the situations in Afghanistan and the Malayan Emergency are sufficiently similar to justify comparison.

Both conflicts are cases of counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare. Both have made extensive use of military and police forces from the FVEYE community and locally raised and trained indigenous personnel. Both conflicts were also led by a FVEYE member – the British Colonial administration in Malaya, at least until independence was granted, and the US for OEF, ISAF and ORS missions (notwithstanding that ISAF was commanded by non-US generals on a number of occasions).

Critics would counter that the differences in the situations prevent relevant comparisons from being made. The Malayan insurgency was driven by Communist ideology, whereas the principal driving factor of the Afghan insurgency has been assessed to be religious in nature, specifically fundamentalist Islamism.¹⁵ The form of Afghanistan's insurgency is further complicated by the fact that it is not monolithic. There have been multiple insurgent actors, including the predominantly Pashtun indigenous Taliban, the Saudi Wahabbist founded AQ, various warlord groups such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami-Gulbuddin (HIG), numerous foreign fighters and various criminal elements including those who traffic in narcotics.¹⁶ By contrast, the Malayan insurgents were highly homogeneous, composed almost entirely of Malay

¹⁵ Booth, "Winning in Afghanistan . . .," 7.

¹⁶ MacLeans, "Can This Warlord Save Afghanistan?," last modified 2 May 2017, <http://www.macleans.ca/news/world/can-this-warlord-save-afghanistan/>; Booth, "Winning in Afghanistan . . .," 7.

Chinese, with only a very few ethnic Malays or Indians.¹⁷ Finally, there are the surface level differences presented by the environment in which the COIN fight took place – largely jungle terrain in the case of the Malayan Emergency, as contrasted with the arid, mountainous terrain and periodic dense “green zones” of Afghanistan.

These arguments are unconvincing in trying to disprove the significant similarities between the Malayan Emergency and the current conflict in Afghanistan. The fact that there were differences in the ideologies of the respective insurgents is not as relevant as the fact that a discernible ideology was in place, was identifiable, and could therefore be used to understand insurgent motives. In the one case, it was the ejection of the British and the establishment of a Communist Malaya, in the other it was the ejection of NATO forces and the re-establishment of a theologically sound Islamic government.¹⁸ The homogeneity of the Malayan insurgents presents both advantages for COIN forces, such as a relatively simpler problem to understand and deal with, and complications, such as the insurgents’ greater cohesion and ability to generate and sustain forces. That said, the Malayan insurgents were by no means monolithic. They had a variety of sub elements, and there was at least one instance where the MCP appeared to have either sub-factional disputes, or even a fifth columnist leader put in place by government forces, Loi Tak.¹⁹ The differences in the terrain over which the campaigns took place are also largely irrelevant. Both offer complex, compartmentalised terrain which the insurgents were able to use as sanctuary, interspersed with urban areas in which the COIN forces were more

¹⁷ O’Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War* . . . , 100.

¹⁸ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* . . . , 63; Booth, “Winning in Afghanistan . . .,” 7.

¹⁹ Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya: 1948-1960*, (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1975), 39-41.

effective. As such, the general operational environment was similar, notwithstanding its surface level differences.

Most importantly, all of the apparent differences can be readily encompassed and dealt with by an effective operational design.

A DEFINITIVE OPERATIONAL DESIGN SUCCESS IN MALAYA

Having established the justification for our comparison, an examination of the Malayan Emergency as a successful COIN campaign is now in order.

As a historical case, the facts with regard to Malaya are relatively clear. The Communist forces were defeated and Malaya was retained initially under British control, being granted its independence in 1957 under terms satisfactory to British interests.²⁰ As such, the operational design can be deemed to have been effective. While it went through periods of re-evaluation and adjustment, most notably in late 1949 and 1952, the operational design followed logical lines of operation (LOO), and can largely be attributed to the Briggs Plan, issued on 24 May 1950 by Lieutenant-General Sir Harold Briggs.²¹

The three principle logical LOOs that become evident by analysis of the Briggs Plan are attacking insurgent support, improving civilian populace security, and maintaining and improving governance. One might choose to infer a strategic communications plan as an additional LOO, however modern analysis tends to assign “stratcomms” as an ongoing activity, rather than a distinct LOO.²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 503-505.

²¹ Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya . . .*, 237.

²² *Ibid.*

Dismantling insurgent support was focused on separating insurgents from access to the civilian populace and the materiel support they were capable of providing, whether voluntarily or by coercion. This specifically included food, money, arms and ammunition.²³ The second LOO was focused on improving the security situation for the civilian populace, by conducting offensive operations against insurgent forces, and physically protecting the populace, where necessary by relocation into the “New Villages,” though this last can also be viewed as a component of the LOO attacking insurgent support.²⁴ The final LOO was aimed at maintaining and improving governance, through improved governance structures, coordination between military and civilian agencies, and development of the ability of the local Malay populace to exercise self rule.²⁵

Some view the COIN campaign conducted in Malaya as having failed. They point to the fact that Malaya did not remain under direct control of Britain. They also point to the fact that a second Communist insurrection occurred under one of the former leaders of the MCP, Chin Peng, from 1967 until 1989. The overall argument is that a successful COIN campaign (and associated operational design) would have fully prevented a future recurrence of insurgency, and would have retained Malaya under direct British control.

These criticisms of the Malayan campaign and the underlying operational design that drove it do not stand up to detailed scrutiny. The British intent to grant Malayan self-rule was in place well prior to the declaration of the Emergency, so can actually be seen to be an incorporated part of the overall operational design, specifically the desired end

²³ O’Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War* . . . , 108-110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109, 112.

²⁵ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* . . . , 101.

state.²⁶ More telling is the fact that independence was granted even prior to the completion of operations – the conditions had been set to ensure effective Malay self-government, with sufficiently legitimate and robust state institutions that British direct control was no longer necessary.²⁷ The second Communist insurrection failed in the face of indigenous Malaysian government resistance, and Malaysia remains today a federal constitutional monarchy, democratic, economically progressive and deemed to be generally inclusive on both ethnic and religious grounds.²⁸ This is proof of the most definitive sort of the effectiveness of the operational design applied in resolving the Malaya Emergency.

FAILED COUNTER-INSURGENCY DESIGN FOR AFGHANISTAN

In stark contrast to the enduring success achieved in Malaya, the COIN fight in Afghanistan has been on a downward trend for some time.

Establishing a distinct operational design for Afghanistan is difficult, given the differing intent of the various phases of the campaign, from counter-terrorism, to counter-insurgency, to stability operations. That said, since 2001, and more prominently since 2003 when the UN mandate expanding ISAF across Afghanistan was put in place, the campaign has predominantly been focused on three LOO – governance, security and development.²⁹

The objectives for each of these LOO sees: GIRoA able to effectively execute governance across its sovereign territory, ANSF able to provide effective security

²⁶ O'Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War* . . . , 117.

²⁷ Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya* . . . , 503-505.

²⁸ CIA World Factbook, "Malaysia," last modified 12 January 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/my.html>.

²⁹ Coombs, "Whole of Government Operations in Kandahar . . .," 11.

throughout that same territory (recognising that some insurgent elements may still be present), and the quality of life for the Afghan people having been significantly improved.³⁰ The end state has been articulated as a free and democratic GIROA, capable of maintaining domestic security, and that denies sanctuary and safe haven to terrorists.³¹

An illustrative example of a proposed operational design, presented in 2007 by Colonel Booth of the US Army War College, is included at Figure 3.

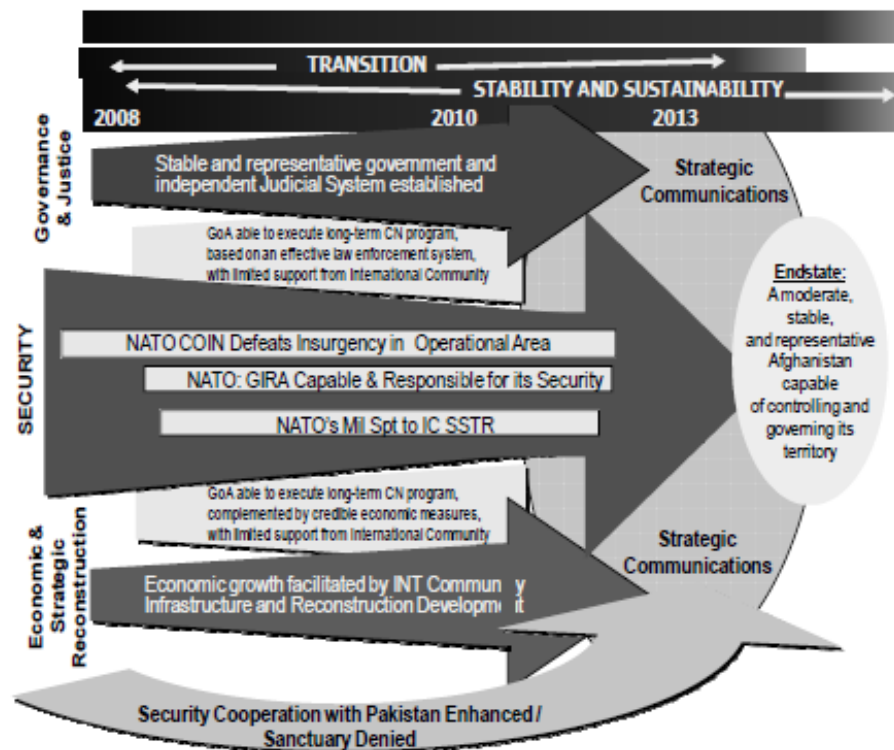


Figure 3 – Booth’s Proposed Campaign Design for Afghanistan, 2007³²

While the overarching operational design appears to make sense in achieving NATO objectives, a closer examination shows that the detailed design is lacking in rigour, coherence and rational analysis.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Booth, “Winning in Afghanistan . . .,” 26.

³² Booth, “Winning in Afghanistan . . .,” 25.

In the governance LOO, one of the key issues impacting effective GIRoA effectiveness is a perception of legitimacy. This has been negatively impacted on at least two counts – the results of both the 2009 and 2014 Presidential elections, which were widely believed to have been marred by electoral fraud, and an ongoing systemic issue with corruption.³³ Of the two, the issue with corruption is deemed to be the more problematic, as Afghanistan does not have a long tradition of democratic elections, and local power structures are generally comfortable with non-elected leaders, for example tribal elders, appointed town officials, etc.

Corruption, however, has a daily impact on the lives of many Afghans. While “baksheesh,” payment for service, is an Afghan cultural tradition, analysis by various parties has determined that it has become so prevalent that it is having a negative impact on the ability of Afghans to obtain basic services.³⁴ At a more institutional level, and from a perspective that adversely impacts operational design, corruption has compromised the ability of NATO to generate effective GIRoA institutions. Line ministries are effectively compromised in terms of their operating budgets because such a significant amount of funding is diverted for personal profit.³⁵ This led to a dedicated anti-corruption task force being established under then Brigadier-General H.R. McMaster in 2010. Unfortunately, the task force was closed down in 2014 without ever having

³³ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, (Virginia: SIGAR, 30 October 2010), 11; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, (Virginia: SIGAR, 30 July 2014), 67-68.

³⁴ SIGAR, *High Risk List January 2017* . . . , 6, 20-22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

made a tangible difference in the degree of corruption present throughout the GIRoA.³⁶ The obvious implication is that the governance LOO has failed to achieve its objectives.

The security LOO revolves largely around reducing the effectiveness of insurgent forces and improving the effectiveness (both capability and capacity) of the ANSF, focused on the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP), though other forces have also been involved (such as the National Security Directorate [NSD], Afghan Border Police [ABP] and Afghan Local Police [ALP]). At least two major issues have been consistently in play for the duration of the campaign with regards to the ANSF. The first has been the credibility of the ANP, who are widely seen by the Afghan populace to be corrupt, unprofessional, and in many cases predatory.³⁷ As the intent of NATO has long been to turn areas cleared of insurgency over to the ANP, marking the transition from military operations to normal governance, the lack of capability and credibility of the ANP has been the subject of significant training efforts, in an attempt to professionalise them. Those efforts have demonstrated little progress to date.³⁸

More drastically, the ANA, seen widely by the populace as being a credible and professional force, have had their own significant issues. Despite dedicated training efforts since at least 2004, the ANA have consistently had issues recruiting, training and retaining sufficient forces to meet the demands of a prolonged COIN fight. This has only been exacerbated since the handover of primary security responsibility from NATO to the ANSF in 2014. Retention and desertion remain significant problems that have increased

³⁶ Maggie Ybarra, "Afghanistan anti-corruption task force shuttered amid US troop drawdown," *The Washington Times*, last modified 20 October 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/oct/20/afghanistan-anti-corruption-task-force-shuttered-a/>.

³⁷ Col Julian D. Alford and Capt Scott A. Cuomo, "Operational Design for ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan: A Primer," *Joint Force Quarterly* 53, (2009), 95-96.

³⁸ Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, "Campaign Disconnect: Operational Progress and Strategic Obstacles in Afghanistan, 2009-2011," *International Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2011), 278-279.

in concert with the rising casualties suffered by the ANA since the departure of NATO combat forces.³⁹ When combined with previously mentioned corruption, reflected within the ANSF in the form of “ghost soldiers,” the ANSF’s ability to provide effective security across the country has been on a continuous downward trend. The situation has become so bad that the prior security strategy of “clear, hold, build” has been adjusted to “disrupt, hold, fight,” with security forces consciously ceding terrain to the insurgents as an economy of force measure.⁴⁰

The development LOO has also seen significant failures. While many small local projects have had some shorter term, immediate impact, it is not clear that there has been any coherent or lasting result for the Afghan people. Clinics and schools that have been built have been rendered useless when the line Ministries have been unable to provide medical professionals or teachers to staff them.⁴¹ In some cases the infrastructure itself has either fallen into disrepair, or seized by insurgents for use. On a larger scale, some of the key projects that were intended to make lasting differences to the Afghan populace, in terms of enabling and improving their way of life, have failed to be brought to a successful conclusion. Two that are immediately evident in the south, the heart of the insurgency, are the Kajaki and Dahla dams. Both were intended to have long term impacts on a broad swath of Afghan society, providing electrical power and sustainable, predictable access to water for irrigation and farming.⁴² In both cases, the projects sit

³⁹ Chaudhuri and Farrell, “Campaign Disconnect . . .,” 277; SIGAR, *High Risk List January 2017* . . ., 13.

⁴⁰ SIGAR, *High Risk List January 2017* . . ., 18; Andre J. Bacevich, “The Never-Ending War in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 13 March 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/opinion/the-never-ending-war-in-afghanistan.html?_r=3 .

⁴¹ SIGAR, *High Risk List January 2017* . . ., 35, 48.

⁴² Coombs, “Whole of Government Operations in Kandahar . . .,” 9.

long delayed and unfinished, with neither their immediate benefits nor their longer term effects to assist the Afghan people in place.⁴³

The countervailing view is that there have been significant successes achieved on all three LOO. From a governance perspective, advocates of Afghan success point to the Loya Jirga in 2002 and the initial, successful presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2004. On the security LOO, proponents of a successful op design point to ANSF that are currently numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and the fact that the security situation was deemed sufficiently stable to allow a transition to ANSF lead in 2014.⁴⁴ From a developmental LOO perspective, the significant decreases in child mortality and the increased number of children, particularly girls, in school are held up as an example of tangible results.⁴⁵

This issue with all of the above revolves around the question of long term stability and sustainability. The ISAF mission was declared complete as of 1 Dec 2014, and was intended to mark a definitive point at which the GIRoA was capable of providing for the ongoing security of its own country, in addition to preventing its territory from being used as a base of terrorist activity. That is clearly not the case. The US maintains at least 9500 military personnel in Afghanistan, providing ongoing advice, training and

⁴³ David Pugliese, "More Problems for the Dahla Dam . . .," Ottawa Citizen, 26 February 2016, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/more-problems-for-the-dahla-dam-one-of-canadas-signature-project-in-afghanistan> ; G.I. Dough, "Afghanistan Waste Exhibit A: Kajaki Dam . . .," Pro Publica, 19 January 2016, <https://www.propublica.org/article/afghanistan-waste-kajaki-dam-more-than-300-million-spent-still-not-done> .

⁴⁴ Chaudhuri and Farrell, "Campaign Disconnect . . .," 276.

⁴⁵ World Health Organisation, "Afghanistan Neonatal and Child Health Profile," last accessed 1 May 2017, http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/epidemiology/profiles/neonatal_child/afg.pdf .; UNICEF, "Afghanistan Basic Education and Gender Equality," last accessed 1 May 2017, <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education.html> .

assistance, in addition to dedicated counter-terrorism forces.⁴⁶ Without the ongoing support of the international community, GIROA would quickly fall, and the country would plunge back into chaos. It is impossible to see how this could be viewed as the successful result of a well-developed operational design.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN IS THE PROBLEM

Having clearly established that Afghanistan marks a failure, particularly when contrasted against the successful resolution of the Malaya Emergency, we will now investigate the underlying and fundamental reasons for these uneven outcomes. The failure lies in the ability of the respective COIN forces to develop and implement effective operational design.

The clearest fault in the Afghan campaign lies in the consistent progression of COIN forces towards decisive points further along the operational design continuum, without having successfully accomplished the various decisive points that precede them (refer to Fig. 1). This is true along all three major LOO – governance, security and development. There are a variety of reasons that may have led to this occurring, however two possibilities seem most likely. Either the measures of effectiveness for any number of given decisive points have failed to be clearly defined and measured, resulting in progression to a subsequent decisive point, or there have been deliberate decisions made to progress down the operational design continuum while knowingly having failed to complete the preceding decisive point. In the case of the Afghan campaign, examination of events indicates that it is more likely that both these failures occurred in concert.

⁴⁶ NATO, “Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan,” last modified 13 October 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/in/natohq/topics_113694.htm .

Logically, this has led to a cascade failure in the mission, as decisive points further down the operational design become increasingly difficult to accomplish, given the accumulation of required transition criteria not yet met for preceding decisive points.

While a complete analysis of the failures for every decisive point is not possible within the scope of this paper, a significant example on the security LOO will illustrate the ever-increasing mass of resistance and inertia against which COIN forces operating at the far end of the operational design must contend.

NATO forces were directed to complete transition to ANSF for complete responsibility for security across Afghanistan effective December 2014. Conditions to be met for this decisive point likely included transition criteria such as the conduct of “left seat, right seat” handover missions within each Area of Operations (AO) between NATO and ANSF, the signing over of tactical infrastructure, sufficient ANSF being in place within each AO to conduct the required types and number of operations, etc. The problem is that previous decision points along the security LOO were not met. ANSF attrition rates, due to both casualties and AWOL were not met. ANSF sustainment capability levels, in terms of their ability to deliver logistic supplies and repair and maintain equipment, were not met.⁴⁷ The ability of the ANSF to effectively train, plan and lead their own operations did not meet the standards believed to be required to successfully continue the COIN fight and win against the insurgents.⁴⁸ We know this is the case based on evaluations completed subsequent to the handover of security responsibilities that clearly indicate shortcomings in these regards.

⁴⁷ SIGAR, *High Risk List January 2017* . . . , 15-16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13, 16-19.

The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the varying LOO should have been cross coordinated, and linkages between them should have been explicitly developed. This would have allowed the identification and exploitation of success in achieving a decisive point on one LOO with the potential to reinforce efforts against a decisive point on another LOO. Conversely, when weakness or failure to achieve a decisive point on one LOO necessitated exercising patience before progressing further down another LOO, a careful analysis of cross-linkages would have enabled proper coordination.

There are a number of counter arguments to the above perspective of operational design failures as the key determining factor in Afghanistan's failure. The first is that there are complicating factors present in the Afghan campaign that were not involved in the Malayan Emergency, such as the safe sanctuary for insurgent forces across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and the active involvement of other regional players, such as China, Russia, India and Pakistan, each with their own interests.⁴⁹ While legitimate points, these factors should simply have been accounted for by a more comprehensive, but still effective operational design. Complaints that "it's more complicated" do not deserve any significant attention – military planners are expected to deal with what is, not what they would prefer.

Another principal counter argument against poor operational design as the root cause of failure in Afghanistan is that the fault lies more in the execution than in the planning. Two readily available perspectives on execution related problems are issues with military organisational culture and adaptability, such as those presented by Colonel Nagl, or arguments that the problem stems from an unwillingness to adapt the operational

⁴⁹ Chaudhuri and Farrell, "Campaign Disconnect . . .," 290-293.

approach to the political context of the conflict in question, as proposed by Emile Simpson.⁵⁰

Colonel Nagl's argument ignores the fact that US forces have become almost infinitely adaptable, willing to embrace to at least some extent any new shift in focus, doctrine or training that it appears will lead to success. His view of a non-adaptive culture within the US Army in particular is dated. That said, the ability to rapidly adapt, whether in terms of materiel (such as incorporation of Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicles and Personal Mine Detectors), doctrine (the rapid development of Field Manual 3-24, Counter-Insurgency) or force structure and training (the implementation of dedicated Advise Train Assist Brigades), has done little to engender success to date. The fact that Helmand province is one of the least stable and secure provinces in Afghanistan, even though it was generally under control of British forces (Nagl's epitome of a military with an aptitude for organisational adaptation), also does little to further his argument.⁵¹

Emile Simpson's concerns regarding operational design are more subtle. In the chapter within which he discusses operational approach, he offers the viewpoint that the primary issue with current COIN fights is that the operational approach has become disconnected from the larger political context (i.e. the design does not lead to the correct strategic end state). In his words, COIN operational designs become "self referencing," rather than leading to a higher vision of success.⁵² While an interesting viewpoint, and certainly one that has a degree of applicability to current operations in Afghanistan, it

⁵⁰ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* . . . , XXV, 11, 216-217; Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 137-139.

⁵¹ Dawood Azami, "Why Sangin's fall to the Taliban matters," BBC News, 23 March 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39366111?ocid=socialflow_twitter.

⁵² Simpson, *War from the Ground Up* . . . , 131.

also fails to address the issues internal to ISAF's operational design. In other words, it focuses almost entirely on a disconnect between ends and ways, and fails to address issues in the linkages between ways and means, or even issues internal to the ways themselves. As such, his argument provides an overly restrictive view of the problem. Were we to focus our efforts principally on ensuring that Afghanistan operational design linked clearly and realistically to the desired political end state, the internal potential for failure would continue to drag efforts down to the point we would not achieve the strategic end state – Clausewitz's ever present "friction."

Adaptation by Western military forces, and their understanding (or lack thereof) of the political context of counter-insurgency operations have not helped Western forces win in Afghanistan. A concrete, coherent operational design based on rational analysis of the situation and the operational environment, particularly one that incorporates periodic and ongoing reassessment, would effectively sequence operations and activities and attain military objectives in pursuit of the strategic end state.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN LESSONS

Given that Malaya was both a successful COIN campaign and had an effective operational design, whereas the current Afghan campaign neither is nor has either. The question becomes, "what specific elements of Malaya could have been or should be incorporated into NATO's operational design for Afghanistan?"

The first is the requirement to recognise when the initial assessment of the situation is incorrect, or requires updating. The Briggs Plan involved a completely updated assessment of the state of the insurgency, the government and its security forces,

and what actions were required to move to the desired end state.⁵³ This is not a matter of adaptation – while tactical forces were making regular adjustments to the way in which they conducted operations, the Briggs plan was an evaluation of the operational design. Further, it was not change for change’s sake. Those elements of the campaign plan which were functioning well, such as the development of the Special Constabulary and the separation of insurgents from their sources of food and support were left in place.

The second is the requirement to exercise patience, adhere to well-crafted operational design, and achieve success in decisive points before moving to the next phase of the campaign. Templer’s assumption of command was notable for the lack of personality driven change to the operational design. While his arrival in Malaya involved an adjustment to the structure of civil and military power (unifying both in his person), he made relatively little changes to the overall campaign plan as developed by Briggs.⁵⁴ Further, both he and subsequent administrators were willing to wait until areas within Malaya had been decisively secured and, more importantly, until they had fully demonstrated the ability to generate ongoing security from within, before they were declared “cleared” and Emergency measures within them were lifted. This continuity of purpose and adherence to an already developed operational design is in stark contrast to various drastic shifts in policy within the campaign experienced within ISAF operations within Afghanistan, for example General McChrystal’s extreme restrictions on the use of artillery and airpower.⁵⁵

⁵³ Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya* . . . , 235-236.

⁵⁴ O’Ballance, *Malaya: The Communist Insurgent War* . . . , 117.

⁵⁵ Bing West, *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy and the Way Out of Afghanistan*, (New York: Random House, 2011), 205-206.

CONCLUSION

History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.

– Mark Twain

Following an examination of the Malay Emergency and the current and ongoing counter-insurgency fight in Afghanistan, it is clear that Western military forces continue to fail to recognise circumstances in which they could be applying the lessons of history. More importantly, it is evident that the root failure for the West's intervention in Afghanistan, and more broadly across other conflicts, is its inability to develop and implement fact-based, well-reasoned operational designs. Until this problem is addressed, the likelihood of military operational outcomes that fail to achieve national objectives will remain high. The development of an improved ability to create effective operational designs is paramount for the modern professional Western military.

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