32

THEATER COMMAND IN AFGHANISTAN

Taking charge of “The Other War” in 2003–2005

*David W. Barno*¹

The war in Afghanistan from the period of 2003–2005 is a story of a theater in transition. Fought in the mountains and valleys of the Hindu Kush during those key years, the war was largely waged in the shadows, far away from news headlines. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 absorbed nearly all of the American public’s attention and dramatically shifted Afghanistan to a secondary war, designated as the “economy of force” theater.

The war presented a unique confluence of military, diplomatic, and economic challenges to those of us charged with its leadership. It little resembled the short combat operations of my previous experience in Grenada and Panama,² nor the major conventional wars that I had spent years preparing for in Army schools. Commanding such a complex economy of force theater called upon every bit of my lifelong learning and professional preparation, beginning with my days as a cadet at West Point.

This chapter describes the requirements of theater command under those conditions and reinforces the necessity of adaptable leadership when faced with constrained resources, muddled interagency coordination, and limited guidance from Washington. Most of all, it is an account of adaptation and flexibility of command in war.

Taking command

In mid-2003, I was commanding one of the Army’s largest training bases when I received a surprise phone call from General John Abizaid, the commander of U.S. Central Command. Abizaid discussed the possibility of me taking over command of our military mission in Afghanistan.

Earlier that year, I had assembled and led an ad hoc Army task force in Hungary to train Iraqi exiles for the looming invasion, and the effort had received positive attention in Washington and among senior Army leaders.³ Moreover, Abizaid and I had both served as company commanders in the 1st Ranger Battalion during the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada and remained good friends. This personal relationship would be crucial to my surprising new mission over the next two years: taking command of the overall U.S. effort in Afghanistan. I would be responsible for establishing a new three-star headquarters to run the war, located close to the hub of diplomatic efforts in Kabul.

Before that point, the military command in Bagram was 65 kilometers away and physically separate from the U.S. diplomatic effort in Kabul. The new headquarters in Kabul would be responsible for integrating the disparate U.S. diplomatic and military efforts, and it would be positioned to work more closely with the U.S. Embassy and the interim Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai. We would continue to

fight the remnants of Taliban and al-Qaida forces scattered across the country but now through a much more integrated effort.

Soon after our first phone call, Abizaid asked me to visit Afghanistan to view our current efforts. My week-long visit in September 2003 began to reveal the full scope of the challenges that would confront a new commander arriving in Afghanistan. Force levels were small for a country substantially larger than Texas—only about 12,000 U.S. troops, along with about 1,500 coalition partners based in Bagram.⁴

Another 5,000 troops formed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under a separate NATO command that was limited to peacekeeping operations in Kabul. U.S. troops were located on just a few dispersed bases, mostly in the country's volatile south and east.

Battalion-sized U.S. Army task forces sortied out on large-scale raids nearly every month to far-flung parts of the country, often patrolling for a week or more before returning to their bases to plan another mission. Warlords continued to dominate many remote areas of the country, and their private armies were often equipped with better heavy weaponry than the nascent Afghan National Army.

The transitional government in Kabul was less than two years old, and it exerted little influence outside of the capital despite having governors and administrators appointed at the provincial and district levels throughout the country. The United Nations led the international effort to rebuild Afghanistan and restore a functioning long-term government.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was the most important international body in the country, based in Kabul and led by the highly respected Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi. Seasoned ambassadors represented numerous countries in the capital, regularly interacting with the United Nations mission and the transitional government.

The United States maintained a modest diplomatic mission with about 200 personnel, guarded in its fortified embassy compound by a Marine infantry company. The Taliban and al-Qaida stayed largely out of sight; they were still reeling from the effects of U.S. operations in late 2001 and 2002, although they occasionally conducted surprise attacks on Afghan government facilities, especially in the south and east of the country. Both groups continued to find sanctuary in nearby Pakistan, a fact that deeply complicated the U.S.-Pakistan military relationship along the border. Pakistan was a significant portion of the U.S. command's operating area,⁵ which spanned four countries.

During my visit, I made several striking observations. As noted, the U.S. military effort was based at a former Soviet air base at Bagram, which was over an hour by road from the capital. The U.S. diplomatic effort operated out of the embassy in Kabul, led by a *chargé d'affaires* in the absence of a permanent U.S. ambassador.

The two efforts rarely interacted. I witnessed an exchange at the Kabul airport between the *chargé* and the senior U.S. commander discussing the upcoming visit of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The commander mentioned that he was going to brief Rumsfeld later that week on the U.S. military situation in Afghanistan, to which the *chargé* acidly replied, "I'd sure like to know the U.S. military situation in Afghanistan!" Civil-military relations were clearly fraught, which strongly shaped my thinking about the need to develop a unified U.S. interagency campaign.

I also saw various U.S. military efforts throughout the country, including Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—a then-novel civil-military approach that posted small detachments of troops with foreign service officers and aid officials in provincial capitals. PRTs were designed to enhance both security and development by partnering international expertise with local Afghan government officials. I discovered that there were multiple "stovepiped" U.S. military chains of command directing the far-flung military units around the country. American PRTs were overseen by one chain of command, infantry units by another, aviation elements by a third, Special Operations Forces by yet another—a confusing arrangement with little apparent coordination or support.

We seemed to be fighting two largely unconnected wars—one aimed at finding and killing the enemy and another focused on security and reconstruction. I began to see the war as a classic counterinsurgency

conflict and reflected upon some of the principles that succeeding in such a war would demand. Unifying these two efforts into a single endeavor was critical, both within the U.S. military and between the military and civilian components. Clearly, this would require some new partnerships and different thinking from the existing approach.

I was also surprised to learn that maneuver commanders were not assigned to a particular battlespace for more than a few weeks. Most missions were large-scale raids lasting one or two weeks in remote parts of the country, followed by a return to secure bases to plan another mission at a different location. While these tactics were useful as a narrow enemy-centric, counterterrorism approach, they struck me as out of step with the growing insurgency threatening Afghanistan's population and government.

Brief large-scale raids into remote areas seemed an unlikely way to engage the Afghan people or create confidence in the ability of international forces to protect the population. Our current approach seemed to be totally out of sync with what I saw unfolding in the country during my short visit. If I were tapped to take command, I believed that we would need to move in some bold new directions, shifting quickly toward an integrated civil-military counterinsurgency strategy. Only the U.S. military, in my judgment, could be the catalyst for such a holistic approach.

Abizaid called soon after my return and offered me command of the mission, along with some brief, if explicit, guidance: "Your job, Dave, is big Pol and little mil. . . . Get out there as soon as you can." With only a few days of advance warning, my time to prepare for this new job was scant—no more than a few days of briefings and meetings in Washington with key policymakers and experts. My formal transition with the outgoing U.S. commander, with whom I had spent some time during my earlier visit, was almost comically brief. We spoke for less than an hour over coffee at Ramstein Air Base in Germany as I headed into the theater, while he returned to the United States.

Less than four weeks after my short assessment visit, I found myself back in Afghanistan in charge of the U.S. military mission. I had much to learn, and all of it would now be on-the-job training. As I flew into Afghanistan that night, strapped in behind the pilots on the flight deck of a C-17 aircraft, the enormity of taking command of a war zone began to sink in. As we approached Afghan airspace in the dark, the flight crew and I donned body armor and helmets in case we encountered ground fire. Staring through the inky blackness of the night, I found it sobering gazing at the vast territory unfolding below with no visible lights for mile after mile.

Soon, tiny lights appeared in the distance marking the Kandahar airbase, where the only U.S. infantry brigade in the country was based. We landed just after 2 AM on the mostly blacked-out runway, and I was surprised to be met by the brigade commander and his command sergeant major. I knew both men well from my years in the 75th Ranger Regiment and 25th Infantry Division.

The next morning, we discussed the challenges they faced with too few troops and too many missions. This was the first of many times that my personal relationships with past subordinates quickly broke down the barriers of rank and distance, which repeatedly enabled me to receive unfiltered, candid feedback about the situation on the ground.

The next day, I flew to Kabul to join a non-existent headquarters—a challenge that no other U.S. commander in either Afghanistan or Iraq has ever faced. The U.S. military has used two combat theater models of command since 2001. The first is a rotational model, where senior commanders and their staff rotate in and out of theater together. These commanders train up for their new wartime mission with an augmented staff⁶ for several months at home station, which usually includes a rigorous final certification exercise, and then they deploy together. Examples of this model include the XVIII Airborne Corps headquarters assuming theater command in Afghanistan as Combined Joint Task Force 180 (CJTF-180) in 2002 and the III Corps headquarters assuming command of Multi-National Corps—Iraq in early 2004.

The second model involves maintaining a headquarters permanently based in the combat zone, with individual commanders rotating in and out. Staff members also rotate individually, providing substantial headquarters continuity. This model has been used in Afghanistan since 2007⁷ and in Iraq from 2004–2011.⁸

Neither model applied to Afghanistan in 2003. I deployed to Kabul individually in October 2003 knowing there would be no existing staff. My job was to build one while simultaneously commanding a theater at war. The new headquarters, eventually called Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan (CFC–A), officially stood up in February 2004 with approximately 100 staff members.⁹

The original plan envisioned the new headquarters in Kabul drawing entirely upon the existing CJTF–180¹⁰ staff in Bagram for “reachback” support, save a few senior officers sent forward to Kabul. In effect, this meant the CJTF–180 staff would have to work for two different commanders—one located in Kabul and one in Bagram—at the same time. Unsurprisingly, having two commanders direct one staff proved completely impractical, and I had no choice but to adapt to reality.

I began to build an ad hoc staff to address the many requirements of running a theater strategic headquarters in the capital. My headquarters would have much different responsibilities from our subordinate headquarters in Bagram, which I tasked with running the day-to-day operations of the war—from overseeing tactical actions to countrywide logistics.

As the theater headquarters, I wanted CFC–A to focus on the big picture of setting conditions for overall U.S. success in Afghanistan—including everything from teaming with the U.S. Embassy, meeting with Afghan ministers, and maintaining military ties with Pakistan. Our job at CFC–A was to be “up and out,” while the CJTF at Bagram would focus on “down and in.”

Almost all of the guidance on my role in Afghanistan came from phone conversations with Abizaid, often once or more per week, and his personal visits every few weeks. After about a week in Kabul, I updated him by phone. Sharing my first impressions, I observed that it was already obvious to me that my mission in Kabul could not simply be “big Pol” and “little mil” as he had directed. Instead, I argued that it needed to be “Big Pol, Big Mil, Big Econ, and Big Everything Else,” and that I would need a full headquarters with a real staff to accomplish the sizable mission I faced.

Unfortunately, the combination of increasing personnel demands driven by the growing war in Iraq and bureaucratic inertia in Washington meant that it would take over a year for that process to begin in earnest and nearly six more months for CFC–A to reach full strength.¹¹ In the meantime, more creative adaptation was the order of the day.

When I arrived, my initial staff of six included an aide I brought from my last command and four more leaders I drafted from the Office of Military Cooperation–Afghanistan, whose mission was developing and training the Afghan army—including a chief of staff, a pol-mil officer, and a communicator. By sheer chance, three of these six had served with me in the battalion I commanded 10 years earlier.

Personal relationships once again proved crucial. Since I had served with these officers for years at the tactical level, I trusted their judgment absolutely. They also knew me well, understood my basic philosophy of command, and could be painfully candid because they trusted me in return. In our earliest days, we held staff meetings in the hallway outside my prefab office. My ability to have total trust and confidence in this small group was a priceless advantage—all while shouldering a commander’s responsibility for ongoing combat operations and simultaneously standing up a new theater headquarters.

CJTF–180 in Bagram slowly divested itself from the theater strategic functions it had previously been required to perform as we began to shift those tasks to our new headquarters in Kabul. We pulled several dozen of their staff members into our headquarters as we assumed those functions.

I soon drafted several more officers from the Office of Military Cooperation–Afghanistan, and we slowly began to receive individual augmentees from the United States as well. Many of these individuals were activated members of the Individual Ready Reserve, most of whom had been out of uniform for years.

Building a new counterinsurgency strategy

Some weeks after arriving in Kabul, I attended a small dinner for senior international diplomats hosted by Lakhdar Brahimi, the special representative of the United Nations secretary general in Kabul and the head

of UNAMA. I sat at the table with Afghan ministers, a cluster of key foreign ambassadors, the ISAF commander, and several other senior United Nations representatives.

After the meal, Brahimi shared his strong concerns about the lack of security in the country and its impact upon the international reconstruction efforts. Brahimi publicly challenged me to devise a strategy to deal with what he viewed as a growing problem. It was a gauntlet thrown down that I could not ignore, but it was also a welcome catalyst to move ahead quickly with my plans to shift our approach to a broad-based counterinsurgency strategy. I never sought or received explicit permission to change our approach to a counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. I went ahead while keeping Abizaid fully informed and with the understanding that, unless otherwise directed, I would reshape our efforts in this new direction.

I immediately told my small staff to produce what would become our new counterinsurgency strategy. Its “Five Pillar” framework would ultimately guide our integrated civil-military operations for the subsequent years (see Figure 32.1). As a simple diagram, it could be easily communicated to and understood by various audiences—from infantry platoons to visiting diplomats. It also captured in one chart all of the key objectives that we would need to meet to achieve success then and in the near future. It is important to note that the Army effectively lacked counterinsurgency doctrine at the time, as General David Petraeus’ counterinsurgency manual was not published until December 2006.¹²

The new strategy was more than just a military approach, and it included plans to integrate all elements of power into a unified effort. We crafted the CFC-A mission statement to be broad enough to provide us the flexibility to accomplish a diverse range of tasks. To get widespread buy-in for this new strategy, we spent many hours briefing it and receiving feedback from as many key actors in Kabul as possible—including colleagues at the U.S. Embassy, ISAF, the Afghan government, UNAMA, and diplomats across the international community. We adjusted the plan and the language to accommodate concerns and rolled out the new strategy as 2004 arrived.¹⁴ We also developed seven detailed lines of operation to support the “Five Pillar” framework and a thorough operations plan for the coming year.

Figure 32.1 Five Pillar framework.¹³

Source: David W. Barno, “Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan” (Policy Forum, briefing to Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, May 14, 2004).

Two central elements of the “Five Pillar” strategy were strikingly new and marked a major departure from previous efforts. First, rather than focusing primarily on killing and capturing the enemy, I shifted our mission axis to a broad-based counterinsurgency approach with the Afghan population as the strategic center of gravity.

I realized that CFC-A would never have sufficient troops to secure the entire country and all of its citizens. Instead, my intent was to use our efforts to help align the population with the government rather than the insurgents and to do so in ways that would maintain Afghan support for the presence of international troops as long as possible.

I viewed Afghan popular support for foreign troops as a finite “bag of capital” to be spent frugally by the coalition. Every airstrike that killed Afghan civilians, or every night raid that kicked down doors of innocent households or unintentionally disrespected Afghan women, quickly spent down that precious capital of good will. We would now seek to operate in ways that would protect our troops¹⁵ but also respect the Afghan population to the greatest extent possible.

Second, we would quietly take ownership of helping to facilitate and integrate the U.S. interagency and international effort. The U.S. military was by far the largest and best-resourced organization in Afghanistan and could employ a vast range of capabilities. In part because of this fact, I viewed my job as doing everything possible to deliver success for the overall U.S. policy in Afghanistan, not simply narrowly trying to achieve an elusive military win.

I believed that if the U.S. Embassy failed, the United States would fail in Afghanistan—even if U.S. military operations succeeded. I did not see the war primarily as a military conflict but instead as a political conflict where the military effort was one of many lines of action—both for the coalition and for the Taliban. This was classic counterinsurgency theory. It was appropriate because in my judgment, the enemy strategy had shifted to become an insurgency.

Successfully countering such an insurgency would require an integrated effort that might be as much as 80% civil and only 20% military in nature.¹⁶ I firmly believed that only the U.S. military in Afghanistan, with all its immense capabilities, could help push the disparate efforts toward a much more unified one. We would have to achieve this kind of unity if we had any hopes of defeating a relatively cohesive enemy.

I was complemented in taking on this new approach by the newly arrived U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad. He was born in Afghanistan but moved to the United States as a child and was an experienced defense expert. Khalilzad had close personal ties to the White House and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and he could bypass layers of the bureaucracy through his lifelong personal contacts.

Khalilzad also spoke fluent Pashto and Dari, and he was able to establish rapport with senior Afghan political figures easily.¹⁷ He and I shared nearly identical views about the road ahead in Afghanistan and pushed our staffs to cooperate fully. Although I had only met Khalilzad a few times before he arrived in Kabul, we immediately forged a close personal relationship. Even before his arrival, I had moved my personal quarters to the embassy compound to work more closely with the embassy staff. I lived in a spartanly furnished half-shipping container at the site, just yards from his only slightly more luxurious, multi-container “residence.”

I made a point of starting my day at the embassy in an office just 10 feet from the ambassador’s door, which was my “alternate command post” from my military headquarters and other office about a mile away. I spent the first few hours of every day attending the daily country team meeting and Khalilzad’s follow-on small security core group huddle.

Spending most of the rest of the day at the military headquarters¹⁸ and traveling around the capital, I returned to the embassy in the evening and finished my workday there. This proximity allowed me to interact with the ambassador and his key staff on a regular basis, stay up to date on the ever-changing political and economic developments in the country, and physically demonstrate my commitment to a unified U.S. effort.

In addition, I assigned four very talented members of my bare-bones staff to the ambassador on a full-time basis to serve as his strategic planning team, a concept called the Embassy Interagency Planning

Group.¹⁹ Over time, I also provided a small number of officers to augment chronically undermanned embassy sections we deemed necessary to advance our integrated strategy. Collectively, these many small steps enabled the U.S. military and the embassy to coalesce in ways that would previously have been unimaginable. We slowly grew a “One Team” approach, built on this shared physical co-location and our commitment to common goals.

My daily schedule also reflected the unique political-military nature of my command. With fewer than 14,000 U.S. troops in country, many of whom were based at Bagram, I traveled to visit field units only once or twice a week. These traditional battlefield circulation events allowed me to see how well our new policies were being adapted in the field, listen to field commanders and their troops, and make adjustments as necessary.

Early in my tenure, I chose to avoid joining the daily battlefield update briefs that the CJTF-180 commander and staff hosted twice a day from Bagram. These hour-long briefs featured commanders all across Afghanistan calling in via videoconference with reports from their far-flung units in the field. I received these updates in a daily update book, but I was convinced that participating in these discussions on a daily basis would drag me, as the theater commander, too far down to the tactical level.

In my view, those discussions were more appropriate for my subordinate two-star headquarters in Bagram that had direct operational warfighting responsibility. I never regretted this decision. It freed me, as the three-star theater commander, to remain focused at the strategic level—the ever-changing dynamics that affected U.S. national objectives in Afghanistan—rather than being flooded with tactical reports with great detail down to as low as platoon-level actions.

I often accompanied the ambassador to major events outside Kabul such as opening new PRTs and meeting Afghan officials; this not only provided the ambassador with helicopter transport, but it also presented to the Afghans a symbolically unified U.S. civil-military face. These frequent trips allowed me to meet and interact with Afghan governors, warlords, and military leaders in the provinces and take their measure. These wide-ranging visits in my first few months led me to view the conflict in Afghanistan in a new way. Early in 2004, I scribbled down a diagram I called the “Three Wars of Afghanistan” on the back of a piece of paper (see Figure 32.2). It attempted to visualize the environment I saw while traveling widely around the country.

Figure 32.2 The Three Wars of Afghanistan.²⁰

Source: Barno, “Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan.”

The first war was against terrorist senior leadership cells, particularly al-Qaida—a counterterrorism fight that relied exclusively on sound and actionable intelligence. Special Operations Forces largely fought this war.

The second was the counterinsurgency war against the networks of the various terrorist and insurgent groups (such as al-Qaida, Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, and the Taliban): their fighters, active supporters, and passive enablers. Coalition and Afghan conventional forces mostly carried out this war. I saw its success rooted in the people of Afghanistan and finding ways to preserve their support for the national government.

The third war encompassed the enduring internal forces of Afghanistan that perpetually threatened to tear the country apart: drugs, crime, warlordism, poverty, and corruption. I believed that success would come from extending the reach and credibility of the central government to the distant corners of the country. In some ways, that would prove the most daunting task.

All of these efforts required effective communications with the Afghan people, which we mounted with information operations designed to highlight successes and explain setbacks and missteps quickly and honestly.²¹ My sketch soon became part of our formal strategy.

I frequently visited Pakistan, regularly engaging with the Pakistani Army chief, other senior commanders, and, at times, the head of the Pakistani intelligence service. I encouraged plans to conduct complementary counterinsurgency operations on both sides of the border and set up border coordination mechanisms to allow commanders on both sides to talk. I constantly pressured the Pakistanis to increase their counterinsurgency efforts in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a dangerous hotbed of insurgent activity.²²

I hosted a quarterly Tripartite Commission that brought together senior military and security leaders from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States—the only venue in which all three countries discussed issues of mutual security concern. These political-military tasks were complex and required diplomatic skills that stretched my capabilities. Nevertheless, they were key components of executing our overall regional policy and keeping pressure on terrorist and insurgent groups.²³

Spending the majority of his time in Kabul, Ambassador Khalilzad visited President Karzai daily, often returning to the presidential palace at day's end and staying until late in the evening. These intensive interactions yielded priceless information on the relevant political cross-currents in Afghanistan. We learned critical information about how the president, provincial governors, and many ordinary citizens perceived our military operations.²⁴

I also met often with numerous foreign diplomats in Kabul, building relationships with the growing number of nations that were supporting the rebuilding of Afghanistan. I leveraged these warm relations to help convince more countries to consider deploying PRTs to complement the surge of new U.S. PRTs I had directed in early 2004.²⁵ I began to chair a monthly PRT Executive Steering Committee meeting that brought together the Afghan minister of interior, the UNAMA deputy chief, the ISAF commander, the U.S. deputy chief of mission, and diplomatic representatives from all existing and potential PRT-contributing countries.

These meetings became an unofficial monthly international clearinghouse to share information, discuss a wide range of problems, and coordinate strategy. They served as an invaluable tool to promote shared awareness of the nationwide security and reconstruction situation and address its shortcomings in a collaborative fashion. The fact that they were always hosted by the senior U.S. military commander lent much weight to the discussions, in part because I had the wherewithal to implement our decisions.

Beyond my close bond with the U.S. ambassador, perhaps the most important relationship that I built in Kabul was with the special representative of the United Nations secretary general. UNAMA was unquestionably the most important international actor in the country, overseeing efforts for everything from rebuilding the shattered Afghan countryside, to reforming the security sector, to establishing a framework to conduct nationwide democratic elections. Brahimi served as the special representative of the secretary general until March 2004 when his deputy, a French diplomat named Jean Arnault, replaced him.

Relations between UNAMA and the U.S. military had been fraught previously, exemplified by both sides heatedly contesting the monthly United Nations report that critiqued declining security across the country. It was clear to me that improving this relationship would be important, as the United Nations undergirded the diplomatic, military, and economic efforts of dozens of U.S. friends and allies supporting our efforts in the country.

Soon after taking office, Arnault invited me to have breakfast at his residence every Monday morning. U.S. diplomatic relations with France were at a low point at the time because of disagreements over Iraq. Our breakfasts, however, became an opportunity to build a personal relationship between two people with very different backgrounds who were leading organizations often at odds with one another.

Over time, Arnault and I shared our differing perceptions about events in the country, discussed upcoming plans for our organizations, and surfaced contentious issues, which we usually resolved. These meetings, week after week, slowly built mutual understanding and trust, and we eventually formed a close friendship.

Our bonds of trust proved instrumental to navigating several crises. In June 2004, when five aid workers from Doctors Without Borders were killed in a remote part of western Afghanistan, they pulled all of their staff from the country.²⁶ The United Nations headquarters in New York pushed for the closure of the entire UNAMA mission as well, citing inadequate security. My relationship with Arnault helped to convince him of my view that the murders were an isolated local incident rather than a reflection of a nationwide breakdown in security.

As a result, Arnault convinced his superiors to leave UNAMA in place. If he had not done so, the pull-out of UNAMA would have made it difficult if not impossible to hold the presidential election in October, and it would have jeopardized international support for a wide range of Afghan and U.S. programs across the country. This episode brought home once again how important it is for military leaders to build effective personal relationships with people much different from themselves.

Implementing the counterinsurgency strategy

In 2004, my primary challenge was to fully implement our new counterinsurgency strategy. Our staff grew at a painfully slow rate, while our mission expanded rapidly. With fewer than 100 people in our headquarters by the end of 2003, we were risking mission failure solely because we lacked staff capacity. It was time to find new and even more creative ways to adapt.

In early 2004, I dispatched one of my most experienced and trusted staff officers to fly to the headquarters of the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii with two key missions. The first was to orient the senior leaders of the division to what they could expect in their imminent deployment to take over CJTF-180. His second mission was even more important from my perspective: to convince the division commander, Major General Eric Olson, to bring as many of his division's stay-behind leaders as he could spare²⁷ and to put them on orders to join our struggling headquarters as staff augmentees.

Olson delivered. In March, he sent us more than 40 officers and noncommissioned officers whom we quickly merged into our battle staff. This unorthodox arrangement gave us the vital capacity to take on the urgent tasks of the coming year without being entirely overwhelmed.

During 2004, it became increasingly clear that the Afghan presidential election in October would be a "make or break" moment for the U.S. and international strategy for a post-Taliban Afghanistan. We might not win the war in Afghanistan in 2004, but failing to conduct free and fair elections that enabled the Afghan people to select their next president would certainly be seen as a major defeat.

The United Nations was responsible for conducting a nationwide voter registration effort as well as the election itself—a monumental task, since more than 80% of Afghanistan's 31 million residents were scattered across remote and inhospitable terrain. The Taliban vowed to disrupt the election, demonstrating their continuing control of the countryside. The year was shaping up to be a litmus test of progress in Afghanistan, a referendum on who was winning: the Taliban or the nascent national government.

I viewed the election as an opportunity to defeat the Taliban politically and thus demonstrate its irrelevance. I believed that a successful Afghan presidential election in which large numbers of Afghans voted freely for their future could inflict a crushing defeat on the Taliban's aspirations that could not be achieved through military operations. The registration and election efforts would be the report card for U.S. policy goals in the entire war to date.

Given the stakes and potential crushing blow to the Taliban, I made the U.S. military's main effort for 2004 "setting conditions for a successful Afghan presidential election." This clear priority focused all U.S. and coalition military power on supporting this objective.

The "Five Pillar" counterinsurgency strategy supported this focus. We would continue to put military pressure on the Taliban and al-Qaida (Pillar 1) while building and buttressing Afghan security forces so they could provide security for the election (Pillar 2). With a second maneuver brigade headquarters arriving, we could finally assign battlespace across the country, so a single brigade-level commander would be responsible for each large region (Pillar 3). We greatly expanded the PRT presence across the south and east of the country, standing up eight new U.S. PRTs in areas contested by the Taliban to help enable local reconstruction and improve Afghan governance (Pillar 4). I continued to engage Pakistan to strengthen border security measures to stem Taliban infiltration before the election (Pillar 5).

We capped off this robust effort with a supporting information campaign—working together with the embassy and the international community—to highlight the value of free elections. All of these efforts were aimed at the security and allegiance of the Afghan people, which I was increasingly convinced constituted our strategic center of gravity. We also re-organized our command relationships to support these efforts.

Shifting from a raid-based military strategy to one built on long-term unit ownership of geographic areas immediately provided better awareness of the needs of the Afghan population, the Afghan security forces, and the enemy. Commanders now operated in a single territory throughout their tours and were responsible for addressing its unique challenges. We also put the growing number of PRTs under the command of the regional brigade commanders, which cleared up a fractured chain of command and restored unity of effort between the combat and reconstruction missions in each region. We provided manpower, security, and advice to UNAMA election efforts and helped open remote areas to voter registration. Across the country, our broad-based counterinsurgency enabled every aspect of the election preparations.

The results of these efforts were striking. More than 9.7 million Afghans registered to vote, and more than 8.1 million voted on election day²⁸—a turnout rate of more than 83%. Hamid Karzai handily won the field, defeating 17 opponents in a contest still viewed today as perhaps the most free and fair election in Afghanistan.

Karzai was peacefully inaugurated in December as Afghanistan's first democratically elected president. Those of us who had been deeply involved in ensuring a fair election that engaged all of the Afghan people in their budding democracy were ecstatic, and we could sense the euphoria that swept the country. Seen many years later, it seems a different and unabashedly optimistic time. In its original context, however, it was a watershed event, one we judged may have dealt a death blow to the Taliban.

The late winter of 2004–2005 saw security incidents across the country drop to a low point. Our intelligence analysts created a briefing chart with a checklist titled, "How Do You Know When Your Enemy is Defeated?" and checked off half of the blocks. Despite the apparent good news, I continued to ask my intelligence experts a question that had bedeviled them throughout the previous year: "Are we the boiling frog?" In other words, is the Taliban moving so slowly and subtly that their actions are below our threshold of detection? Have they simply lulled us into a false sense of security?

Our combat statistics from the previous year were striking: despite the enemy's goal of disrupting the Afghan election, only 900 security incidents occurred across the country in 2004—averaging fewer than

three per day.²⁹ The coalition had suffered 58 military fatalities, of which more than 20 occurred in aviation accidents.³⁰ The coalition only dropped 86 bombs in Afghanistan throughout all of 2004³¹—another indicator of the diminished fighting power of the enemy.

Our staff assembled “then and now” comparisons of changes in the country since 2003. It was striking to see the significant progress in the Afghan political process, the growth of the Afghan army, the disassembly of warlord militias, and overall security. There was still a long way to go, but the forward momentum was palpable.

Khalilzad and I felt strongly that we were on the right path and were deeply pleased with our remarkably effective partnership. Chemistry matters, and for whatever reason, the two of us clicked as a team. The cooperation and integration between the U.S. military and the embassy had never been stronger or more effective. We began looking ahead to the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2005. Nevertheless, we remained deeply concerned that the remarkable progress we had made in blending the military and diplomatic missions into a close team with strongly shared unity of purpose in Afghanistan would begin to break apart if either of us departed.

In the spring of 2005, we began to put measures in place to institutionalize our unique political-military structure. We formalized our joint civil-military coordination structures and documented their procedures.³² The two of us worked to find every way to help sustain this unique mutual partnership between “Venus and Mars”—the embassy and the military—after one or both of our departures.

Unfortunately, Khalilzad and I both left Afghanistan in the spring of 2005 within a few weeks of each other.³³ Losing both at nearly the same time was an unexpectedly disruptive blow to our unusual and successful joint efforts. An interim ambassador was assigned until the new chief of mission arrived in September. This created a crucial continuity gap in the political-military partnership during the height of the Afghan summer fighting season.

The incoming U.S. commander had a more traditional view of the relationship between civilian and military efforts and quickly revised the campaign plan. He removed the military from non-security lines of effort and narrowed the campaign plan to military and security efforts. He also decided to move out of the embassy compound and stop attending country team meetings except for special occasions. The new commander also removed military officers from the embassy who had previously augmented bare-bones embassy projects, and he disestablished the Embassy Interagency Planning Group.

The new U.S. ambassador shared the new commander’s view. The carefully established joint governance mechanisms between the U.S. military headquarters and the embassy quickly evaporated as both new leaders shifted into their respective domains.

This proved particularly problematic because the Taliban began a multi-year resurgence in attacks across the country, which continued to grow for many years. The Taliban’s resurgence proved so dangerous by 2009 that the United States began to surge tens of thousands of new troops into Afghanistan to reverse the tide, soon bringing the total numbers of U.S. forces to nearly 100,000.

In 2011, however, the United States started a steady withdrawal of its forces. By November 2020, only 4,500 remained, with the Pentagon planning to reduce the number to 2,500 by mid-January 2021.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Afghan war continues unabated, with no clear end in sight.

Notes

1 The author is indebted to Dr. Nora Bensahel for her extensive editing and suggestions on this chapter.

2 I served in combat twice before arriving in Afghanistan: Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada in 1983 and Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989, both with the 75th Ranger Regiment. Nearly all of my professional military education from Infantry Officer Basic until I attended the Army War College was focused on defeating the Soviet Union in a major European war. None of these were of great help in Afghanistan.

- 3 See, for example, Jim Garamone, "Free Iraqi Forces Committed to Democracy, Rule of Law," *American Forces Press Service*, March 14, 2003.
- 4 Among the U.S. coalition partners were small contingents or staff from the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Australia, Germany, Norway, Italy, Romania, Denmark, New Zealand, Poland, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.
- 5 The Combined Joint Operating Area for U.S. forces headquartered in Bagram included Afghanistan, Pakistan (less Jammu and Kashmir), and the southern portions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Most of our supply lines ran through Pakistan, and the Taliban operated relatively freely across many of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas. U.S. operations since 2001 often involved coordination with Pakistan's military, especially in patrols near the border. The United States, however, only conducted military operations in Afghanistan.
- 6 The augmented staff included staff officers from other services and other countries who deployed with them.
- 7 In 2007, ISAF became the overarching single NATO headquarters, which subsumed the U.S. command.
- 8 In Iraq, this permanent headquarters was Multi-National Forces-Iraq, which remained in Baghdad until 2011.
- 9 We operated as the de facto headquarters beginning shortly after my arrival in October 2003, but the pace of activities delayed our ability to host a formal activation ceremony until February 2004.
- 10 At the time, CJTF-180 was built on the headquarters of the Army's 10th Mountain Division, commanded by then-brigadier general (promotable) Lloyd Austin.
- 11 When I departed command in May 2005, CFC-A was staffed by about 420 personnel—still remarkably small compared to subsequent theater headquarters in either Afghanistan or Iraq.
- 12 Conrad C. Crane, "United States," in *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations, and Challenges*, ed. Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney (New York: Routledge, 2010), 75–86.
- 13 David W. Barno, *Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Policy Forum, briefing to Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 14, 2004).
- 14 Minor adjustments included making some of the language less military in nature to assuage some diplomats.
- 15 For example, commanders were always authorized to employ close air support while troops were in contact. After several civilian casualty incidents due to unobserved strikes, however, they were not allowed to drop ordnance unless they could see the enemy that was targeted.
- 16 See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964); Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3–24 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006).
- 17 Khalilzad had been serving as the special presidential envoy for Afghanistan under President George W. Bush from 2001 until he was appointed as the ambassador in November 2003.
- 18 The CFC-A headquarters was located in an area then known as the Kabul compound, which was separate from the U.S. Embassy compound. The Kabul compound was later renamed Camp Eggers after U.S. Army Special Forces Captain Dan Eggers, who was killed by an improvised explosive device in May 2004.
- 19 The ambassador quickly came to rely on these skilled officers for integrated planning with CFC-A and to devise and measure metrics for the U.S. effort.
- 20 Barno, "Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan."
- 21 This included, for example, conducting investigations on errant airstrikes and being forthcoming about the results.
- 22 These visits paid dividends. In May 2004, major combat units of the Pakistani army moved into Waziristan for the first time in their nation's history. The results were bloody for their forces but very disruptive to enemy elements using Waziristan as a launch point for operations into neighboring Afghanistan.
- 23 I also convened a regional security conference in January 2005 that brought together senior military leaders of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and other Central Asian states to discuss ways to improve joint border security, counterterrorism, and counter-drug operations. This initiative was met with enthusiasm by the regional militaries. I hoped they would improve regional military cooperation on matters of shared concern. Further meetings were discontinued after my departure in May 2005.
- 24 I had many occasions to meet with Karzai and receive that feedback first-hand as well. Some of those meetings unavoidably involved explaining civilian casualties from coalition operations.
- 25 We dramatically expanded PRTs in Afghanistan to support our new strategy, growing from only two U.S. PRTs in 2003 to 10 by the spring of 2004, primarily placed in the Taliban-contested south and east of the country.
- 26 "Doctors Without Borders Condemns Fatal Attack on Aid Workers," *Doctors Without Borders*, June 3, 2004, www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/doctors-without-borders-condemns-fatal-attack-aid-workers.
- 27 Less than one-half of the 25th Division was slated to deploy to Afghanistan. The remainder would be left behind in Hawaii awaiting other commitments.
- 28 This data is available at www.electionguide.org/elections/id/1939/.
- 29 Sadly, this marked one of the low points of violence in Afghanistan. See Department of Safety and Security, *Half Year Review of the Security Situation in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United Nations, 2007); Vigilant Strategic Services, "Country Wide Incidents By Week—2007" (Kabul: Vigilant Strategic Services Afghanistan, 2007).

- 30 Coalition troop fatalities also showed a disturbing increase after 2004. See <http://icasualties.org/>.
- 31 Anthony Cordesman, *U.S. Airpower in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2004–2007* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007).
- 32 Colonel Dave Lamm, my chief of staff from mid-2004 until my departure, was a driving force behind this effort.
- 33 Khalilzad took over as the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, and I was re-assigned to the Army Staff in the Pentagon.
- 34 Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Fatima Faizi, “As Pompeo Prepared to Meet Afghan Warring Parties, New Attack Struck Kabul,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/11/21/world/middleeast/afghanistan-kabul-rocket-attack.html.