



Is NATO's Counterinsurgency Strategy Working in Afghanistan? A Case Study

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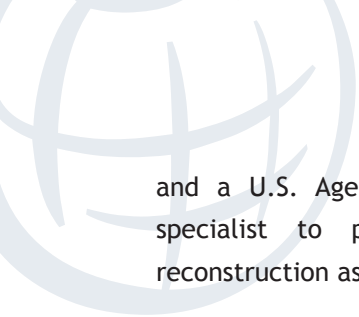
On July 2, 2009, a battalion of U.S. Marines descended on Nawa, a community of mud-walled homes and wheat fields along the Helmand River in southwestern Afghanistan. Prior to their arrival, the only NATO presence in the district was a vastly outmatched team of 40 British and Danish soldiers assigned to mentor Afghan army and police units in the area. Taliban fighters swaggered about with impunity, setting up checkpoints, seeding the roads with bombs and shooting at the NATO base almost every night. Most stalls in the bazaar had been padlocked, as had the school and the health clinic. Thousands of residents had fled. Government officials and municipal services were nonexistent.

The Marines in Nawa district were among the first U.S. military units to engage in a fully resourced counterinsurgency (COIN) mission in Afghanistan. The approximately 1,000 Marines and 500 Afghan security forces in the district, which is home to about 75,000 people, yielded exactly the 1-to-50 ratio prescribed by U.S. military's COIN doctrine. The Marines focused on

At a glance...

- *The turnaround in Nawa district over the past 20 months demonstrates what is possible in Afghanistan when all the elements of a counterinsurgency strategy come together correctly.*
- *NATO commanders hope to employ the lessons of Nawa in other strife-torn parts of the country.*
- *Despite the improvements, the changes in Nawa still feel fragile, and much of what has transpired appears more unique than universal.*

protecting the population by engaging in frequent foot patrolling—each platoon conducts, on average, two walks a day—and regular engagement with local leaders. On the civilian side, the U.S. State Department established one of the first District Support Teams in Nawa, which brought together a U.S. diplomat, a British stabilization adviser



and a U.S. Agency for International Development specialist to provide governance support and reconstruction assistance.

The result has been a profound transformation. Nawa now is one of the safest districts in southern Afghanistan. Marines who live at a base in the district center have not fired a single bullet while on foot patrol in the past six months. School classrooms are packed. The bazaar is thriving.

COIN strategy concentrates not on hunting down guerrillas but on protecting the civilian population from insurgents. The idea is that by separating the good from the bad, and focusing on the good, it will deprive the insurgency of the popular support it requires to expand. Popularized by Gen. David H. Petraeus during the U.S. military's bleakest days in Baghdad, COIN theory draws upon what worked—and what didn't—in efforts to suppress guerrilla movements from Malaya to Algeria. But COIN requires resources and time. Protecting civilians involves ensuring law-and-order, providing basic services, setting up government operations, training local security forces, and rebuilding schools, health clinics and other infrastructure. It also requires far more personnel than simply those required for hunt-and-kill operations. And even if you do all of that, change does not occur immediately. It can take years before the population feels safe and confident to demonstrate allegiance to their nation.

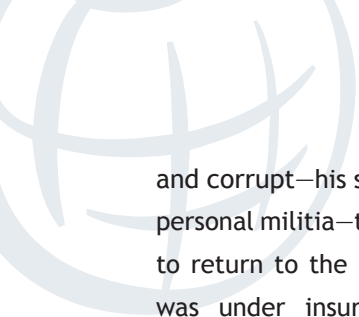
With 140,000 NATO troops trying to beat back a resilient Taliban insurgency, what has occurred in Nawa is a valuable case study. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the former top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, referred to the district as his “number one Petri dish.” Understanding the reasons for the turnaround, and the degree to which these changes can hold, can provide answers about the efficacy of COIN strategy across Afghanistan. There are many aspects of what has occurred in Nawa that seem more unique than universal, but there are other developments that could provide lessons for the rest of the country.

Elements of Success in Nawa

The most significant reason why Nawa turned around so quickly was that the Taliban didn't put up much of a fight there. When the Marines arrived in July 2009, most of the insurgents who lorded over the district fled to the neighboring district of Marja. Others buried their weapons and blended back into the community. Very few decided to challenge the Marines, and those who did usually wound up dead. The Marines also got lucky with the Afghan army. The battalion sent to Nawa had been part of a national drug-eradication force. They did not have extensive military training, but the soldiers had worked together for more than a year, yielding a degree of cohesion that few other units sent to southern Afghanistan had. After months of joint operations with the Marines, the Afghans have been deemed capable enough to take charge of five small patrol bases—the first step in a gradual process of transition to full Afghan control over the district. The next phase, which could occur as early as this spring, involves moving most of the Marines here to bases in the surrounding desert, where they would be available to provide emergency backup for Afghan soldiers and to interdict insurgents seeking to enter the area.

Another key reason why Nawa is so stable is governance. Unlike most other government buildings in Afghanistan, there is no portrait of President Karzai on the whitewashed walls of district governor Abdul Manaf's office. “People here don't like Karzai. His government is filled with snakes and spiders,” one local leader told me. But that attitude may be a key reason why things are working so well in Nawa.

In 2002, Karzai appointed a five-foot-tall warlord, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, as the governor of Helmand. Akhundzada, who hails from a family of wealthy landowners that has long ruled the province, rose to prominence as a commander in the armed resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. His rule, which largely involved consolidating control over Helmand's opium production network, was so brutal



and corrupt—his sidekick police chief ran the force as a personal militia—that many residents invited the Taliban to return to the province. By 2004, much of Helmand was under insurgent control. In 2005, the British government insisted that Karzai remove Akhundzada as a condition of deploying NATO forces to Helmand. The president initially objected. Then nine tons of opium were found in Akhundzada’s basement. He was sacked, but he remains a close adviser to Karzai. On his way out, according to intelligence analysts, he told many of his militiamen to join forces with the Taliban to protect his drug interests and drive out the British.

After two incompetent replacements, Karzai eventually gave the job of governor to Gulab Mangal, who had run two smaller provinces with distinction. With the help of the British and later the Marines, Mangal set out to improve Helmand’s government by appointing more competent district leaders—Nawa governor Manaf has a physics degree from Kabul University—and focusing on delivering basic services to the population. That has helped Mangal build popular support. But even more significant is that he is regarded by many Helmandis as the first leader who has been willing to stand up to Akhundzada—and, by extension, Karzai. In Nawa, there may be no Karzai photo on the wall, but there is a giant poster of Mangal in the hallway leading to the district governor’s office.

Nawa also has been aided by relatively stable tribal dynamics. The majority Barakzai get along with the smaller tribes in the area. All of them are represented on a 45-member community council, and the elders have been generally willing to work with Manaf to spread the spoils of development projects in an equitable way. Because central Nawa is so quiet, representatives from several key government ministries, including education, health and agriculture, have arrived in the district—a feat that has occurred in few other districts in southern Afghanistan.

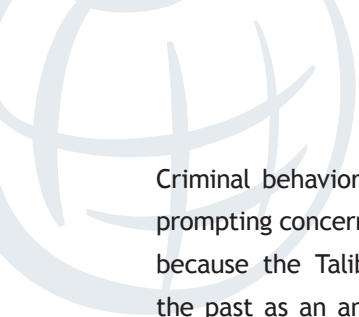
For the Marines and international civilian reconstruction advisers, perhaps the biggest worry about the government in Nawa is Manaf’s health. He was hospitalized earlier this

year because of high blood pressure and other issues, but he is doing little to remedy his condition. He still consumes two meals a day of fried chicken enrobed in an inch-thick layer of palm oil. He has refused the Marines’ entreaties to exercise on a new concrete track that circles the helicopter pad at the base next to his office. And he frequently mixes the medicines he receives from a Navy corpsman with pills his aide buys at the bazaar. “We’re one heart attack away from a really big problem,” said a member of the District Support Team.

Good government and stable tribal relations are only part of the story of why Nawa is so quiet. Another important part of the puzzle is a multimillion-dollar U.S.-funded economic stimulus, which has won over much of the population. In the past year, the Marines and the U.S. Agency for International Development have spent more than \$30 million in this district. The money has been used to hire more than 16,000 men for short-term manual labor projects, provide farmers with seeds and fertilizer, equip agricultural cooperatives with new tractors and transform rutted dirt roads into smoother gravel ones so farmers can take their goods to market. Over the next year, the military plans to invest \$22 million more to rebuild the road connecting Nawa to Helmand’s capital. The financial assistance has had a direct impact on security: Because seemingly everyone who wants a job has one, many young men have opted to stop working for the Taliban. The cash infusion has also led to increased economic activity in the bazaar. Many residents now have enough disposable income to buy motorcycles and mobile phones. District administrator Mohammed Khan put it best. Nawa, he told me, “has returned from the dead.”

Limits of Progress

It is undeniable that Nawa has undergone a remarkable transformation since the Marines swept in, and it represents what is possible in Afghanistan when everything comes together correctly. But after five visits to the district since the Marines arrived, it is also clear that the changes are fragile.



Criminal behavior has been growing in recent months, prompting concern among some U.S. and Afghan officials because the Taliban has successfully pitched itself in the past as an antidote to lawlessness. More than half of the new solar-powered streetlights installed by the U.S. Agency for International Development are not working because their batteries have been stolen, and the district's largest money changer was recently robbed at night, causing widespread concern among merchants in the bazaar. The situation is more problematic amid the cornfields and mud-walled villages outside the main town. The Taliban have managed to sow fear with a flurry of nighttime warning letters and a few well-aimed bullets. The most-recent victim was the training coordinator for a USAID-funded agriculture project; he was assassinated as he prayed in his neighborhood mosque.

Despite repeated Marine operations to flush them out, bands of Taliban fighters remain in the treeless desert between Nawa and Marja. Their ability to roam through the more-populated agricultural areas along the Helmand River remains limited, although they still have been able to plant roadside bombs and snipe at Marine patrols. U.S. Special Operations Forces have targeted the bomb-laying cells repeatedly, providing the Marines with about three to four weeks of relative calm before a new group moves in and resumes attacks. "The SOF guys are getting a lot of them, but they're regenerating almost as fast as we can kill or capture them," said one military officer familiar with the operations.

Of particular concern is the fact that improvements in security do not seem to be extending with alacrity beyond the farming villages along the river. In the White House debate over the troop surge in late 2009, senior military leaders promised that counterinsurgency operations eventually would enlarge a zone of safety as blots of ink spread on a map. "The ink blot isn't growing by itself," the officer said. "The only reason it's expanding is because we're adding more ink."


There also are signs of a growing dependency on the largesse of the Americans. When district governor

Manaf wants something, he asks the Marines, even when it is something as trivial as a new fabric awning for stalls in the market. Although awnings are something that Afghans have fashioned for centuries out of straw, the Marines agreed to pay, as they do with many of his requests, because they want the people to appreciate Manaf, and in turn, they want Manaf to appreciate the Americans. There is broad concern here about what will happen when USAID's large agriculture program, which has been the principal source of cheap seeds and day-labor jobs, ends in the spring. USAID officials hoped that the program would result in new farm jobs, but it does not appear much new fulltime employment has been created, certainly nowhere near enough to address the needs here. Although USAID has another agriculture program in the works, it is not clear whether the labor component will be as large as it is now. Manaf said he is "very worried" about the end of the agriculture handouts. "If the Americans end their cash-for-work programs, people will go back to fighting for the Taliban," he said.

Uncertain Future

To Petraeus, now the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, what has occurred in Nawa validates his contention that a comprehensive COIN strategy can reverse Taliban momentum and stabilize Afghanistan after years of downward drift. "We started achieving progress with security, then governance, and then citizen confidence—that's literally how it plays out," Petraeus told me during a conversation at his headquarters in Kabul. "It's the kind of progression we're trying to achieve in other areas."

But many Afghans, as well as many American officials who track the war at the White House, the State Department and the CIA, remain unconvinced that other parts of Afghanistan will turn around as quickly as Nawa has. They argue that weak local governance, tribal rivalries, inept development projects and incompetent Afghan security forces remain the norm. The ratio of troops, both American and Afghan, to

the population is higher in Nawa than in most other districts. The Afghan army battalion in Nawa has unusual experience, and unlike the vast majority of districts, the contingents of Afghan soldiers and policemen are at full strength there. On the civilian side, Nawa is blessed with a far more harmonious relationship among its tribes than most other districts; Manaf is regarded by U.S. and Afghan officials as an unusually competent governor; and USAID has poured in more money, per capita, for reconstruction and short-term employment projects than any other part of the country. As Manaf put it: “Nawa is not like the rest of Afghanistan. It is a great success because many things have happened here that have not happened in other places.” 

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