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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Doctrinal Insights: Innovation and OEF: 4/25 Operations in P2k, Winter 2009-2010
James A. Russell, 10/1/2011

Background

I was embedded with the 4/25 from 8-25 January 2010, part of an initial data gathering phase of my ongoing research project on innovation in war, to assess the degree of tactical adaptation and organizational innovation in the brigade over the course of its deployment. This is the start of a new phase of a project that first focused on the COIN effort in Iraq in 2005-06 when the tide of battle was turned, during which U.S. forces showed tremendous tactical innovation in the field during wartime, often innovating COIN solutions months in advance of their formal integration into doctrine.

This preliminary research in Afghanistan will result in new work that critically examines U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. The concepts of tactical adaptation and innovation are different, but related. Tactical adaptation is seen as incremental change introduced by units to improve their performance on the battlefield in their quest to defeat enemy. Innovation is seen as broader, more permanent phenomenon that some believe is evidenced by the promulgation of new doctrine. Doctrine is seen by many to be the best example of institutional learning. In the case of the Army, FM 3-24 is pointed to as an example of this phenomenon, in which publication of the manual is seen as evidence that the institution had finally embraced as a core mission a form of warfare for which it has historically shown little interest. Tactical adaptation and organizational innovation happen in learning organizations. Organizational learning is defined by Richard Duncan Downie as: "A process by which an organization (such as the U.S. Army) uses new knowledge or understanding gained from experience or study to adjust institutional norms, doctrine, and procedures in ways designed to minimize previous gaps in performance and maximize future successes."^[1]

In previous research on operations by a number of units in Iraq in 2005 and 2006, I found that tactical adaptation gathered momentum over the course of the units' deployment, producing new organizational SOPs that formalized a series of competencies not initially present when the units deployed into Iraq. The case studies (1/1 in Ramadi, 172nd SBCT in Mosul and their battalions) suggested that units developed a series of new core competencies surrounding counterinsurgency. These core competences were developed organically, from the ground up, on the fly as it were while the units were engaged with the enemy. I argue that this process can be defined as innovation and not merely tactical adaptation.

Insights from Afghanistan

My winter 2009-2010 visit to 4/25, facilitated by Captain Bobby Davis in Company D, 3-509th in Khost province – a former student of mine from the Naval Postgraduate School – was meant to determine the degree to which units in Afghanistan exhibited this same degree of ground, up organically generated adaptation and innovation that I found in Iraq. As recounted above in my discussion of my book on the Iraq insurgency, I disagree with the "structuralist" argument, which asserts that formal doctrine and top-down processes in the hierarchically structured military drive the process of tactical adaptation – but this is really an aside. I instead believe that adaptation and innovation flows from a complex mixture of top-down and bottom up processes to produce new or different organizational behavior in war.

The 4-25 is frankly an excellent example of this phenomenon – in which COIN doctrine, operational guidance provided by ISAF, and a brigade-level campaign plan has been liberally, and differently

interpreted by the brigade elements and applied in creative ways on the battlefield. Each maneuver element in the brigade structured its operations in ways to support this top-down guidance, but showed significant differences in structuring their organizational outputs in pursuit of the command's objectives.

Brigade Level Operations

Most field grade officers demonstrated significant intellectual grounding in COIN literature through a professional reading program developed by the brigade leadership. Virtually all the battalion commanders, their S3's and XO's found this literature to be extremely useful during the pre-deployment training cycle. The 1-40 CAV even used one of the reading modules as the basis to do a seminar on COIN with their Afghan Army partners at FOB Orgun. All these commanders as well as the senior NCO's intellectually understood the historical and theoretical dimensions of COIN operations. This understanding proved critical to the learning process in the battalions conducting the fight. Because I am unfamiliar with brigade-level operations in Afghanistan outside the 4-25, I have no basis to compare the management framework established by the 4-25 with other units during this period. It seemed clear, however, that the 4-25 has established a viable and I believe new template for conduct of the entire USG government effort in Afghanistan. The 4-25 established an interagency "Board of Directors" for all operations in P2K that sought to coordinate and synchronize all the USG variegated organizational competencies being brought to bear in the environment. This organizational structure featured formal participation by the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the Department of Agriculture, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Agribusiness Development Teams, Law Enforcement Professionals, a Counter-IED Task Force, Human Terrain Teams, and other organizations.

Operations in each province were coordinated through a "Team Khost" framework, with weekly meetings between all organizational participants to jointly plan and review activities in each of the provinces. I am unfamiliar with any other military commander that has attempted to orchestrate and synchronize this variety of different organizations in the battle space. This management oversight structure provides a leading edge template for how modern warfare should be conducted by the United States in most scenarios short of all-out conventional war.

While the brigade commander loses some authority over the battle space under the board of director's arrangement, he/she is also able to assign responsibility for core strategic and operational objectives that reside in other agencies – AID, Agriculture, and State, for example. This management structure was to some extent replicated in battalion S9 shops, in which the PRT, AID, State, and civil affairs formed an integrated civil-military team, working side-by-side. Personality and leadership are of course paramount to the successful working of the system, which are limiters in the application of this model across the board. The 4/25 civil-military team appeared aligned in their unity of effort and purpose.

The brigade made significant strides in integrating capabilities from other government agencies and special operations forces to maximize its offensive capabilities against the insurgents. Disruption of enemy operations has become a shared function across the interagency. While this is not necessarily new to the 4/25, the targeting fusion cell provides a particularly good example of how wartime circumstances can lead to complex, flattened organizational hierarchies that (mostly) share information and bring strategic/national level collection capabilities to bear on the tactical fight. The brigade successively layered on a series of specialized organizational competencies in its S2 staff that helped in the free flow of information across classification and organizational domains.

Battalion Level Operations

Most of the battalions visited exhibited strong evidence of being learning organizations, whose approach on the battlefield evolved significantly over the course of their deployments. Some of this evolutionary process was the result of forces beyond their control – the enemy, and unforeseen circumstances of course affect this process. Several of the battalions expressed frustration at not being able to conduct the kind of COIN operations for which they had trained until the fall of 2009 – nearly 6 months into their deployment cycle. The disappearance of a US soldier in the summer of 2009 and the intensive optempo that followed this incident turned various units away from their main lines of COIN effort. Second, the Afghan national elections also imposed requirements on battalion commanders that some felt diverted them from their COIN missions.

Various units stated that in they "really got rolling on COIN" in the Fall of 2009 after promulgation of the ISAF COIN guidance and the directive for maneuver elements to directly partner and co-locate with their Afghan counterparts – a long overdue step that may have finally started us on the path to building an

effective ANSF. The partnering program is being aggressively embraced by all the elements visited during this trip. I do have questions about the priorities of this effort, which remain (1) The Afghan Army; (2) Afghan Police; and (3) Afghan Border Police, as the police remain the front line of defense in any counterinsurgency and should perhaps receive higher priority in this effort. The Afghan Army brigade at Orgun for example has received much new equipment over the last several years. In contrast, a visit to the main police station in downtown Khost is an eye-opening experience on this aspect of our capacity building efforts. The police operate on a shoestring and need significant help with new equipment and training. It will be difficult to defeat the Taliban without an effective police force.

Battalions displayed significant tactical and, I would argue, innovative capacities once they gained good situational awareness of their AORs and were permitted to focus on stability operations. For example, in December 2009 the 1-501 restored security in the town of Yahya Kheyl in Western Paktika with the use of a soft cordon operation based on an example from the Vietnam War that had been studied by the battalion during its pre-deployment training. The unit initially air assaulted Afghan and American elements in to the beleaguered district center in the town. Following the insertion, the battalion and its Afghan Army counterparts surrounded the town. The ANA built several redoubts, or forts, on the ingress and egress routes. They allowed people to leave, but not return through the cordon. They then mounted information operations using loudspeakers featuring Afghan interlocutors urge the insurgents to lay down their arms or leave the city. They emphasized that they did not want to have a pitched battle that would destroy the city. The village elders subsequently pledged to help manage the security environment – negotiation primarily with the ANA. Nearly a month later, the security situation is greatly improved and commerce is once again thriving in the Yahya Kel bazaar. The unit is applying the lessons learned from this operation to address the security situation in another contested population center in Sar Howzer.

Another important initiative in Western Paktika is the district subgovernor's pilot budget program, in which the 1-501 in partnership with AID is working to make CERP funding available to the district subgovernors as a way to connect these vital local leaders to the population. The initial results of the program are promising – particularly in areas with high quality district sub governors. Many small-scale local projects have been approved in various Paktika districts, and there is interest in other districts to apply for projects. This small scale program of \$15,000 a month represents the kind of focused, tailored development projects that has so far been absent from our development programs.

The 3-509 has applied a systems-based methodology called TCAPF introduced by AID that seeks to identify local sources of instability. The methodology requires platoons to provide responses to several basic questions about the sources of instability in a particular village. The quality of the data gathered under the program has steadily improved in the 1-509's AOR, and the unit now uses the data to guide its approach in each different local circumstance in eastern Paktika. In some towns, security was the paramount concern of the local population, while in others irrigation and water disputes seemed more important. The unit has used findings from the data to drive its operations throughout the western Paktika. The methodology is also being adopted by the 1-40 CAV, which has turned over responsibility for answering the questionnaires to its Afghan counterparts. This will only further improve the fidelity gained by coalition forces on the local sources of instability. I am unaware of other examples of military organizations applying a rudimentary systems-based analysis at the tactical level to drive operations across the spectrum of operations. I believe this methodology rises to the level of innovation, in which the unit has systematically altered its awareness of the battle space, an awareness that is now driving organizational outputs.

Brigade leadership has set the tone for a focus on information operations, which has been aggressively executed in units such as the 1-509 and the 2-377 PFAR. We are thankfully no longer ceding the information domain to the insurgents in P2K. In the 1-509, the unit has successfully involved company commanders working with Afghan cultural advisers and a growing cadre of Afghan media personnel to tailor broadcasts in eastern Paktika. These efforts are being replicated throughout P2K. This capacity simply did not exist before the 4/25 arrived in theater. The execution of the program has come from aggressive and talented officers working in a leadership environment that encourages their activities.

It is clear that the brigade's maneuver elements display a wide variety of organizational competencies associated with COIN operations. These competencies have been built with different organizational structures than those authorized under standard Army doctrine. The 425 BSTB is in the process of creating a new training and partnering base for the Afghan Border Police from scratch for which it has no prior background or experience. The initiative is being built from the ground up by senior NCO's in partnership with the field grade officers. The 1-40 CAV has made impressive strides in a relatively short

time in building up its Afghan counterpart brigade command structure – although much more needs to be done.

As was the case in Iraq, many of the battalions in 4/25 have substantially increased their S2 sections and simultaneously boosted the intelligence collection and analysis capacities of their companies through the COIST program. The requirements of stability operations also led to bigger S-9 organizations in the battalions. The 1-509 S2 section is over 25 people.

However, it should be noted, that the organizational changes introduced to cope with the demands of such tasks as civil-military operations, intelligence gathering and analysis, information operations, and partnering with ANSF is stretching the maneuver elements of the brigade. While the brigade's board of directors includes necessary members of the interagency, the battalions are only just beginning to see the building of comparable civilian capacities in their units to address operational and strategic priorities of governance and development.

The asymmetry between civilian and military organizational capacities is regrettably a fact of life and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Civilian agencies are not yet staffed and organized to conduct modern warfare – although progress is being made on this front in P2K. Company commanders in particular are on the front line of this asymmetry – and are currently forced into the position of pursuing a diverse and sometimes contradictory set of objectives as they conduct operations across the battle space. Trying to address endemic corruption while simultaneously building ANSF relationships and capacities are difficult objectives to balance. Pursuing the many objectives addressed by the board of directors that focus on governance, development, security, and building ANSF capacity asks too much of company commanders and runs the risk of them not being able to do any of these jobs well.

There are other limiters that affect the adaptive and innovative capacities of battalions. All 4/25 elements are distributed across their AORs over wide distances in forbidding terrain where the enemy has successfully limited their freedom of maneuver. It can take hours for units to convoy relatively short distances due to insurgents' use of IEDs. Support operations and combat logistics patrols represent a serious drain on a battalion's combat power – in some cases consuming several days of coordinated, battalion wide operations. The searing lessons of 1-501s attempt to mount a large CLP early in its deployment to southern Paktika should be briefed to all incoming commanders of the difficulties that can result from logistical operations mounted in areas where the situational awareness is low. The 1-501 subsequently developed TTPs to ensure that these operations have proceeded much more smoothly – but the problem is delivering logistics support over wide distances to support distributed operations endemic to all the maneuver elements in the AOR.

Another systemic limiter to adaptation and innovation is the mismatch between the structure of various Army units and the requirements of the operational environment. While the 4/25 maneuver elements showed great flexibility in changing the organizational structures of their units to conduct full spectrum operations, the fact that they should have to make these changes at all is worth thinking about. For example, after two ground wars where battalion commanders invariably found it necessary to plus up their S2 sections at the brigade, battalion and company level, maybe it's time for the Army to formally recognize this by realigning and/or plussing up these billets. The same holds true for the other competencies required for irregular warfare such as in information operations, which is still mostly performed by battalion fire support officers – instead of personnel trained on IO.

The focus on force protection is another limiter on battalion flexibility and innovation. Battalion commanders are faced with conflicting guidance on this issue. On the one hand, they are told to execute operations that protect the population while on the other they are urged to take steps by continually adding HESCOS to their bases that only make interaction with the population more difficult. For our troops to conduct successful COIN operations, they simply must accept a higher degree of risk to their personal safety. The combination of our focus on force protection and the IED threat has effectively cut U.S. forces off from the very population that they are seeking to protect. In Afghanistan today, US troops rumble from one armed base to the other in armored trucks and are reduced to interactions with a relatively few number of Afghan local leaders. The overwhelming focus on force protection induces a garrison-like mentality on FOBs that induces a risk averse behavior. (This sets aside the issue of FOBs in general, which seem to keep growing of their own volition, driving teeth to tail ratios to frankly absurd levels. A back of the envelope calculation at Shahrana; for example, indicate that there is today a 30:1 ratio of FOB personnel with troops outside the wire. I suspect the ratio is similar at FOB Salerno.) No commander leading engaged forces should needlessly expose his/her troops to risk, but the process of strategic interaction between us and adversary imposes certain risks

that should not be retreated from for the sake of force protection. Clearly there is a balance between these competing requirements, but I would argue that force protection has tilted this balance in its favor – which will compromise our ability to win this war.

More broadly, however, P2K provides an example of this mismatch between the environment and organizational structures. The 4/25 is using a field artillery battalion to conduct COIN operations in what is arguably the epicenter of the 4/25 AOR -- the city of Khost. While maneuver elements have been kluged onto the battalion to make it more maneuver focused, the fact is that the 2-377 PFAR is neither structured nor equipped for the COIN fight. Artillery can serve a useful purpose in COIN in the Afghan environment where large swaths of the country are largely uninhabited and are used by insurgents as infiltration routes. The 1-509, for example, paid great tribute to the use of artillery in its operations in Eastern Paktika. The point here is that asking an artillery battalion to act as a maneuver element in a COIN environment is stuffing a square peg into a round hole – despite the obvious leadership qualities of the PFAR commander that has done an outstanding job in commanding an organization three times the size of his “normal” unit. The Army needs to do a better job of aligning its organizational structures with the environment. It is largely an infantry, company commander fight in Afghanistan.

Conclusions

My initial observations from these visits to the front lines of our COIN effort in Afghanistan may seem unsurprising to officers that have gone through numerous deployments: their units remain adaptive, flexible, learning organizations that display great creativity and imagination in war. The units struggle for the most part successfully against some of the limiters on this process as outlined above. It is indeed surprising that they achieve all they do given the many and varied tasks that keep being shoehorned down into battalions and their companies.

The 4/25 command structure is an imaginative and creative mechanism that recognizes the need for organizational complexity to deliver varied organizational capacities to effect the environment. It also seems clear that the command structure is steadily improving its synchronization and coordination across the lines of operation. Regrettably, it is unclear whether this process can continue to evolve and improve as a new unit arrives, with its own ideas of how to operate in the battle space. Such is the conundrum of all military organizations in war, which, for the most part, learn and improve over time, only to see their organizational knowledge and wisdom go away when they leave the theater.

As was the case in my research in Iraq, the process of tactical adaptation and, I would argue, organizational innovation in 4/25 flowed from myriad top-down and bottom up processes. The command guidance and emphasis on COIN operations provided an intellectual and operational framework for subordinate commanders to work on creative solutions to complex problems. The ISAF directive on partnering obviously had a direct impact on how units were deployed in the field and directly affected their development of skill sets directed at building ANSF capacities. An understanding of capstone Army doctrine in addition to FM 3-24 also clearly influenced the processes and organizations developed by units to build their COIN capacities. These top-down forces, however, only provided the supporting framework for adaptation and innovation that bubbled up from within the battalions on the battlefield. The creative and innovative forces were developed from throughout the organizations – ranging from specialists to rifle squad leaders, senior NCOs and the field grade officers. Further study of the brigade will further enhance our collective understanding of how these processes interact to produce adaptation and innovation.

The Afghan War is at a critical juncture at a variety of levels that don't need elaboration here. What is critical, however, is that our military organizations do embrace the organizational innovation exhibited by 4/25 as we seek to integrate civil and military operations in the most challenging COIN environment in recent memory. This may be the most significant of 4/25 innovations that one hopes will be adopted elsewhere in Afghanistan – and even added to doctrinal guidance on COIN.

References

1. Richard Duncan Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), p. 22.

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