INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I would like to discuss the conclusions I drew from a seven-month tour in Afghanistan, from June 2009 to January 2010. I was sent there as the commander of the 2nd Infantry Regiment of the Foreign Legion. My regiment was deployed in the district of Surobi and in the Southern part of Kapisa, about an one-hour drive to the East of Kabul.

Before going any further I want to make two preliminary comments. Firstly, these remarks only represent my own views. They do not necessarily reflect the official French doctrine of counter-insurgency. To put it precisely, what we are talking about here is a particular application of this doctrine. Second, I want to express my deep gratitude to the US commanders of the operations in which my regiment and I took part as well as the US forces alongside whom we fought. All of them were exceptional soldiers and very dedicated people. The American officers that I had the privilege to get to know while in Afghanistan were truly a credit to their nation.

The Prussian strategist Clausewitz said: “The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and the commander have to make is to establish…the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature.” It seems to me that in today’s Afghan conflict we are prisoners to a series of models and paradigms drawn from false historical references, coming both from the media and from our own fears. Of these the often heard idea of our being “bogged down” in a Vietnam-style “quagmire” is but one example.

The main idea I would like to develop is the following: this is an Afghan crisis and if it is to be solved then Afghans themselves must arrive at an Afghan solution. This may seem at first glance to be an idea mainly driven by the search for political correctness, but when you look more carefully at its concrete implications it is far less easy to achieve. The question is: how can we foster this solution?

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1 This paper was originally presented as a talk sponsored by the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University, 8 March 2011.
2 *On War*, Chapter I, Book I, par. 27.
I shall have recourse to some Clausewitzian concepts in order to structure my speech. Clausewitz’s “remarkable trinity” of the people, the army and the government is a helpful tool both with which to analyze the situation (which will be the first part of my presentation) and to suggest some appropriate courses of action – one for the political aspect of the problem, one for the social aspect and one for the military aspect. The second, the third and the fourth part of my presentation will respectively treat these three matters.

In a nutshell, I would argue that the Afghan war is the combination of a lot of traditional micro-wars more than one classical insurgency.

In my view, local political, social and military factors often outweigh the factors that underpin the larger conflict and give to each of these micro-conflicts a certain autonomy. Let me give you an overview of the situation as I found it in the district of Surobi and in the southern part of Kapisa through the lens of the Clausewitzian trinity; the people, the political pillar and the military side of the question.

AFGHAN POLITICS

At the local level, one has to solve problem that is much more political than military.

There is a local political problem to solve within a complex and now established political game between local elders, government officials, and coalition commanders. On the one hand, it is hard to foster peace if a national agreement is not underpinned by local political solutions. On the other, however, I truly believe that a local political agreement may bring about local peace even in the absence of a nation-wide settlement that may lie much farther down the road.

To solve this problem, one needs first to consider Afghan Society. In spite of a long period of war, there is still one Afghan society. In this society there is no real gap between the “bad guys” and the “good guys”; that is, between the most extremist jihadists and the most loyal supporters of the coalition, but rather a continuous spectrum of opinions, a seamless network of shared or of competing interests, of common experience and of family links, even though there are indeed two polarized extremes. We should not overemphasize the political obstacles that ethnic divisions may represent for the construction of national unity. In fact, the main partition line crosses the heart of each Afghan. The average Afghan does not want the Taliban back but he is not happy about the presence of foreign forces in his country.

THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF THE AFGHAN CRISIS

That there is considerable fear of modernity in very traditional societies like Afghanistan’s should not come to us as a surprise, and in Afghanistan there is indeed the feeling that traditional ways of life are under threat. Such fear of modernity often takes form as a defense of Islam, but in such defense of Islam we see more a pretext or the visible side of the issue rather than the real problem. The real problem here is the antagonism between the people living in the most remote parts of the valleys and the urban population. The mountain people accuse city-dwellers of monopolizing jobs and wealth. For their part, educated urban people
despise the mountain people as uncouth peasants. More broadly, it also does not help matters that many young men have no jobs and not much to do.

THE MILITARY PROBLEM: THE INSURGENTS

Today we often come across many wrong ideas about the insurgents’ organization. Their task organization consists of many small groups, most with as few as 10 to 20 men, rather than an unified insurgency. In my AOR (area of responsibility), I considered that these groups were as much out of control of the higher authorities of the insurgency as they were out of control of the central government. Ninety-five percent of these fighters live in the valley in which they fight. Sometimes, one finds some IED experts or middle-level leaders, but not very often. Contrary to what you might believe, I think this is probably the case in most parts of Afghanistan. Therefore, the insurgents are far from being the equivalent of the Vietminh or Vietcong: they have no clear command structure, they have not developed any sophisticated insurgency doctrine and it is hard to identify any clear political goal.

It is interesting to consider the distribution of their actions in space. There are some stable areas, pretty well controlled by the governmental forces. Then there are insurgent-controlled areas, which are likewise rather quiet, too. And between the insurgent-controlled areas and the government-controlled areas, there are contested areas. You know that whenever you go in these areas, you will have to fight. The insurgents usually claim these areas as their own and they organize ambushes if coalition or governmental forces enter them.

Why do they fight? In fact, the insurgents’ reasons for going to war are similar to the three main motivations for war that Thucydides identified twenty-four centuries ago: Fear, honor and interest.

Firstly, the insurgents’ fear is not only fear of modernity but also fear of being brought to justice. Many of the insurgent are called the “sad brothers” : they are in fact young men excluded from Afghan society for whatever reason – it can be a disagreement, an offense, etc. They have left behind their families, broken their links with their friends and become social outcasts.

Honor may consist of the duty to get revenge or the desire to accomplish exploits. This is the reason for which insurgents are usually brave, very courageous and mobile.

Third, interest matters too: the leaders of these small insurgent groups are tied into a loose network of allegiances. They are the equivalent of micro-warlords trying to increase their influence in a context of traditional antagonisms and shared or competing interests. And each member of the group is very often motivated by the money he earns when he takes part in a fire-fight.

To be sure, the local factors of the Afghan crisis are not the only ones. It would be short-sighted to deny the regional dimension of the crisis. The question, however, remains: what are the links between the crisis’ local and national dimension? The main idea that I want to convey is that the command and control system of the insurgents in my AOR, and in many others, relies on influence more than on any classical hierarchy or strategy.
The main concrete external factor that fuels the insurgency is money, for money is indeed the main leverage that external actors use in order to try to control the insurgents. The only way to increase the number of attacks against the coalition forces is to bring more money into a given area. The other main leverage is propaganda, especially when it can exploit collateral damages.

THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF THE PROBLEM.

Nearly all the authors that have written about counter-insurgency affirm that in this kind of conflict, the problem is mainly political. A famous Roman general, Scipio Africanus, said in answer to someone that accused him of not being belligerent enough: “In me, my mother brought to the world a general, not a warrior.” Like most of history’s military masters, Scipio understood that it takes far more than winning battles to win a war. It would be hard to over-emphasize this point – the solution to the Afghan crisis will be and must be an Afghan solution. Without this necessary ingredient we can win hundreds of engagements with insurgents, and this at the cost of priceless human lives, and walk away from these so-called battlefield “victories” with little, if any, results that are real and lasting.

This idea should guide our overall strategy. Our main objective is not to conquer hearts and minds. Of course this is a useful mantra if it means that we should care about the people, which is indeed a key to solving the Afghan crisis. But if we go beyond that, we should recognize that this mantra can be an illusion. Why should the Afghans give their hearts and their minds to foreigners they hardly know? In fact what we should do is different – we have to bring together the hearts and minds of Afghans now in conflict, to help to unify them while minimizing our own place in this equation. If I may, the trick is not to conquer hearts and minds but to help to free them from what I might call “Taliban obscurantism”; that is, from backward ideologies, from parochial interests and hatreds that pit Afghans against each other and keep them from reaching a broader and legitimate national settlement.

This idea entails several important points. I truly believe the best way to bring the Afghans together is to use the tools of democracy; that is, to rely on some of the most proven principles of our own democracies. Let me give you a few examples of this approach by addressing the issue of the elections, Afghan public opinion and the Afghan political game.

Above all, one needs to ascribe real value to what people think. We should really care about Afghan public opinion. We ought not to listen to those who say that voting is not something that Afghans value. To the contrary, voting is indeed important to them. In August 2009, I was in charge of facilitating the Afghan presidential elections. This was quite a challenge, especially in the Uzbin valley, where the polling stations were in “contested” areas and some of them even in insurgent-controlled areas. But the local authorities and the elders made a deal. They decided to organize the elections. The election took place and despite the threats of the insurgents, the turn-out happened to be greater than the national average. During these elections I saw locals heading out to a polling station in the middle of the fight between us and the insurgents near the polling station. To say that these people did not value voting is both to insult these brave individuals and to foster a dangerous misunderstanding that could compromise our own efforts to help to bring a solution to the Afghan crisis.

Along the same line, one should support freedom of speech and accept the risk it may represent. In Afghanistan today there are several institutional radio stations such as radio ISAF. These stations are certainly useful for broadcasting governmental and coalition
messages when and where these need to be communicated. But I think that we need to develop community radio stations managed by Afghans. These should be as objective as possible when they broadcast news and include debates even if this means that the coalition or the Afghan government is to be criticized. In my area, we created Radio Surobi on this model. And radio Surobi gained its credibility when it announced that in a local operation, four coalition members had been wounded. Afterwards, I learned that many Afghans had said: “Look! If they announce this type of bad news, we can believe what they say!” In fact, the most efficient communication relies on truth. This is true in France or in the United States. And this is true in Afghanistan. The most dangerous enemy in this situation is not Taliban propaganda; it is rumor.

Finally, one needs to think of his action in political terms. You remember I said that there is a continuity of the Afghan society across the whole political spectrum, from the government’s loyal partisans to the insurgents. In this society, between these two extremes, there is a political center. In the middle of the spectrum there are key influencers, men that are equally attracted by insurgents and by government officials and have connections with both. Of course one may think that such men are playing a double game. In fact, they are to be convinced. The political center is the key to any election in Western countries. In Afghanistan, it is the key to the support of the people. We cannot write off or disregard Afghans that play this double-game, nor can we blame them for their lack of “loyalty” to the coalition. Our job, once again, is not to win their hearts and minds to us but rather to do our part to win them over to the idea of a broader Afghan consensus and solution.

THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF A SUCCESSFUL COUNTER-INSURGENCY

Here I shall focus my comments on the question of development. Another Roman author, Frontinus, once wrote: “One should conquer the enemy with the dolabrum.” The dolabrum was an old Roman multi-purpose tool designed to be used both to fight and to build civilian structures and facilities. Indeed, this “Frontinian” approach is another key to success. This approach first incorporates the hope that, when people make money in lawful economic activity, their incentive to fight is lowered, even if there is no proven correlation here. It likewise comprises the idea that if the government provides healthcare and justice to the mountain peoples as well as to city-dwellers, the people will respect it. This should be done in a way that respects Afghan society’s traditional structures. If the government cannot do this, or if other parties step in to fill these functions for it, then this government can easily be despised and discredited. But the question is this: how exactly does one help a country to develop? The problem is tricky indeed and I shall argue that one needs to develop a threefold, balanced approach. Indeed one needs to reach a triple-compromise about ends, ways and means.

THE FIRST COMPROMISE RELATES TO THE ENDS

It is a compromise between the need to provide the country the external help that it may need to develop and the necessity to let the society find its own way. This is especially true when we are dealing with an old society with a rich culture such as Afghanistan. One must not to be too intrusive. Indeed, there are three risks.
Firstly, there is a risk of infantilizing those to be helped; that is, to deprive them of their opportunity to learn by themselves. By imposing our own “way of doing things” and our own ideas on those we are meant to be helping, we can actually keep them from coming to local solutions that will last once the coalition leaves. The example of justice is emblematic in this regard. An efficient judicial system is extremely important. But justice is an expression of the soul of a people. Therefore, justice has to be Afghan, and to impose our own legal values risks undermining an Afghan solution.

Second, by our being tactless and awkward one risks taking away some authority from the Afghans in charge of administering development aid. We have to understand the people but not stand in the middle of the people. I would like to challenge the generally admitted idea in COIN theories that we are never close enough to the Afghan people, that soldiers should live among the people. Afghan society is a proud and a decent society. It is, however, very different from our own Western societies, diverse as they themselves are. The Afghans are not at ease with foreigners watching every aspect of their life, nor should they be. In the same perspective, institutions developed on the western model risk rejection.

Third, in such development projects one always risks undermining something that is already working. For example, with all the best intentions in the world you can easily disorganize local economic chains or existing markets without even knowing what you have done. And at the end of the day, it is Afghans that will have to deal with and to try to clean up the mess left behind by well-meaning development workers.

Last, this compromise relies on a balanced and wise assessment on the respective strengths and weaknesses of the western model and local societies. Certainly, the Western model is indeed attractive in many ways, for example as far as voting is concerned, and sometimes we should play on this attractiveness. But we must not forget that Afghan society also has its strengths. In fact, it is very important to harness the local strengths as well as the country’s culture.

THE SECOND COMPROMISE RELATES TO WAYS

This compromise has to do with taking a comprehensive approach that strikes a workable balance between two opposed, extreme conceptions of our action.

On the one hand, one may advocate a purely military approach. In this case, the argument is that as long as there is no security it is meaningless to strive for development. It is widely accepted that this approach does not work because it alienates the people and only provokes more fights.

On the other hand, one can defend the idea of the complete integration of military and civilian actions. I would also challenge this approach. For when one mixes the civilian and the military approaches, in fact one loses much of the positive aspect of civilian aid. Instead of bringing people together, this approach brings war to all the sectors of society and encourages suspicion about all civilian aid. The French philosopher Raymond Aron described this phenomenon when he criticized the idea of “overall strategy” in the 1960's. It is easy to understand that it is very hard for a family to accept and to appreciate the coalition’s civilian actions when only the day before soldiers of the same coalition have killed their brother or
their father. What is more, civilian and military actions have different time scales. Civilian actions usually have a much longer time-frame and they require more trust in order to be effective. In particular, the people must trust that when the coalition has left, the civilian reforms will still be valid.

Finally, I think that one needs both some independence between development efforts and military action but also some coordination. Coordination is necessary because it is counter-productive to reward communities that are known to be supportive of the insurgency. It is necessary as well to protect civilian workers or NGO members from being taken as hostages (kidnapped). I think that the best way to achieve this coordination is to let Afghan authorities make the final decisions about where, when and how development aid and development-aid workers are to be deployed in their respective areas of authority and to let them co-ordinate the integration of these development efforts into their own spheres of influence.

THE THIRD COMPROMISE RELATES TO MEANS

Of course, money is needed to build schools, roads and hospitals, to dig wells or to create radio stations. But it is a mistake to think that money can buy any solution to this crisis, much less the Afghan solution that we need. The problem here is first and foremost a political problem. Worse, money can easily become part of the problem. For it is very hard to make sure that all the money provided by the international community will be used in an efficient way. And surely many people have no interest in this conflict being solved because of the money they earn through this conflict and its perpetuation.

In conclusion, the social aspect of this crisis is very important. It is often said that time plays against us. This is only partially true. The truth is that time also plays against the insurgents. For Afghan society does indeed have its own life without the insurgents, who are mainly active in rural areas. So, as I perceive it, you have a race between the insurgency and Afghan society. If the insurgents do not achieve their goal before Afghan society is solid enough, they will become fully irrelevant. And to make insurgents irrelevant, not to conquer them on the battlefield, must be our ultimate goal if we hope to foster an Afghan solution to this Afghan conflict. It is with this idea that I would like to move on to the last part of this presentation.

THE MILITARY ASPECTS OF THE QUESTION

It ought not to come as a surprise that I deal with this matter at the end of my speech. For in a conflict in which the problem is mainly political, the military aspect of the question can only be dealt with in close relation with the political and social aspects.

THE ENDS OF MILITARY ACTION

I have described the situation as the combination of several micro-conflicts, each of which has a certain autonomy. In each of these micro-conflicts, the coalition commander fights a limited war. His strategic goal is to bring the different insurgent leaders to admit they have lost and that their fight is meaningless. This surrender has to be a political surrender and not a military surrender. In order to achieve it, one relies on a communication strategy, on a
development program and, last but not least, on military operations. The operational goal is not attrition. Indeed, the ability of the insurgent group to recruit is almost limitless. In addition, when an insurgent is killed, not only will he be replaced but moreover his brother and his cousin will join the fight in order to avenge his death. The operational goal is instead to control the ground. First of all to affirm one’s control of “contested areas” and then progressively to gain control over the insurgent-controlled areas. This requires not only launching operations but also remaining in place in new combat outposts.

THE WAYS OF MILITARY ACTION

The main imperative is to choose very carefully the occasions to fight, whenever this is possible. The interest of the insurgents is to expand the war everywhere, at any time, because even if they do not get real tactical results, they gain some credibility. On the other side, the first and main wish of the people is to live without war, without having to worry about their children being shot by a stray bullet. It should be remembered that the responsibility for this risk will be attributed to the coalition.

Then, the strategy should limit the fight in the space and in time. It should also limit the amount of firepower to be used. In fact, in each main operation, beyond controlling the ground, the main goal is to undermine the credibility of the insurgents. Therefore, each operation should be planned as a kind of theater play.

First you choose the place of the operation. Then, it is of upmost importance to have the military operation supported by the main influencers of the region. One might say that we have to get such local influencers “to attend” our theatre play; they must be part of our operation’s “audience”. When one takes any decision, the most important thing is to rally the majority of the elders. It is always very hard to keep operations secret. So the best thing to do is openly to challenge the insurgents’ claim to control the area that you want to control. And in this endeavor the help of local authorities is of the highest importance.

The critical factor is not so much the result of the fight but rather what the inhabitants will think about it. To give one example, once we went to a village that the insurgents claimed was theirs. The insurgents did not fight and afterwards, I learned that they tried to make excuses; they told locals they had not been warned early enough, etc....

THE MEANS OF MILITARY ACTION

One needs to plan with the utmost care the way to use coalition forces, Afghan forces and the police.

Firstly, a clear separation of police and of military actions is needed. In this conflict, it is really important to understand that these two missions are not compatible at the same place and at the same time. The police has to support the rule of law and to enforce citizens’ compliance with it. For the police, society is divided into two categories of men – those who are guilty and those who are not. The role of the military is very different. Its mission is to fight in order to bring about a negotiation with good terms. But if the enemy of the military is considered as an outlaw, it becomes difficult or impossible to negotiate. It becomes very hard
for him to surrender. In other words, if we want the insurgents to surrender, in our role as military commanders we have to concede some legitimacy to their fight, regardless of our private opinions.

Therefore, different parts of each operational territory have to be differentiated. In the most stable areas, the police can operate – they can arrest people and protect civilians. In the contested areas, the military has to fight, but in a way such as to preserve the possibility of the insurgents’ ultimate political surrender. The difference is not only geographic. I would consider the insurgents that fought me and my troops on open ground as legitimate enemies. But the people who organize suicide bombings, for example, should be arrested or targeted by the Afghan police. I may add that this distinction is one well-accepted by the Afghan people.

Second the leading role should be given to the Afghan forces. There are indeed two different ways in which to organize the co-operation between the coalition forces and the Afghan forces. The first one is to mix both forces at the lowest level such as to integrate them. This is the most efficient way from a military perspective, but by doing so one risks delaying any progress of the Afghan army. The second way is to organize operations with the highest possible level of coherent Afghan military unit organization (e.g. company, regiment, brigade, division). This is the real way to develop the Afghan military. Whenever possible, Afghan military elements should be given the initiative and the most rewarding role in operations. And it is the role of the Afghan officers to explain the operations to the local population. Last, the goal is to give the coalition forces, whenever possible, a supporting role. When they are committed to operations, these operations are to be very carefully planned. Sun Tzu used to say: “the old masters only attributed their successes to their attentive care to avoid even the smallest mistakes.”

CONCLUSION

I think that despite all what the media may say, however negative be the perceptions they can give, we can achieve a positive result in this war. Nothing is ever sure in this type of conflict but I do think that we are on the road to success.