From: Dewald LtCol Edward T
To: Cassidy Maj Charles R; Cassidy Maj Charles (2MARDIVFWD FOPS); Styskal Lt Col Michael S. (RC(SW) II MEF C-3 Future Ops); Styskal LtCol Michael (IIMEFFWD G3 FUTURE OPS); Styskal LtCol Michael S; St Peter LtCol Robert (IIMEFFWD G3 FOPS); St Peter LtCol Robert E; St Peter LtCol Robert E US USMC RC (SW) FOPS Planner;
cc: Wray Maj John D; Aylward CIV Matthew M; Hoffman CIV Douglas K;
Subject: On Assessments
Date: Wednesday, November 17, 2010 16:49:49

Gentlemen,

I found the below short article interesting, in our lane, and worth sharing with some thoughts:

- The article is about measuring success in AFGH and is best summed by the extract:

"... public audiences worldwide struggle to comprehend progress using heavily qualified metrics open to varied interpretation. What remains is a still-murky picture of the security situation in Afghanistan."

- We don't have magic glasses that make the murky picture clear, but we do endeavor to bring something useful to the table.

- Looking forward to an opportunity to contribute to your team.

V/R,
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http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/05/war_of_words_describing_success_in_southern_afghanistan

War of words: Describing success in southern Afghanistan

By Alec Barker, November 5, 2010 Friday, November 5, 2010 - 12:25 PM

The passage of command from one military officer to another is a curious martial ritual, designed to interrupt the daily rhythm of military life and -- using the power of ceremony -- draw attention to the fact that an organization has renewed its leadership. In so doing, the organization also pauses to highlight its accomplishments. This week in Afghanistan's Regional Command -- South, a subordinate command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the transfer of command marked an unusually significant change that placed the last of the three most conflicted Afghan regions (the East, South, and Southwest regions that border Pakistan) under American leadership. The ceremony, in which British Army Major General Nick Carter transferred authority to United States Army Major General James Terry, illustrated the inherent challenges of publicly explaining military accomplishments in this peculiar type of war.

Take for example Carter's claim, reported in the Guardian yesterday, that security in the area has been demonstrably enhanced because the price of ammonium nitrate, a banned fertilizer and major component of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in southern Afghanistan, has increased ten-fold, and the price of other bomb components has risen eleven-fold. He made the same claim about ammonium nitrate a few days earlier in a press conference, referring to anecdotal evidence pertaining to the Zhari district near Kandahar. The Guardian's coverage leads the reader to believe that his comment applies to "the south of Afghanistan, including Kandahar." Further, the story does not report that Carter believed these figures were "by no means huge measures of success." The Guardian's version of the story, which has already crept into other media reports, might lead one to think erroneously that the general claimed a very significant accomplishment and made an unqualified statement of statistical fact throughout southern Afghanistan, rather than a limited observation about one district in the South.

Furthermore, even if a generalized ammonium nitrate price increase occurred throughout southern Afghanistan, this change may not indicate a successful effort to suppress IEDs. Carter's comment suggests that higher prices indicate a systematic disruption in supply of IED materials caused by ISAF operations. But price is a product of supply and demand, and in southern Afghanistan, demand for illicit explosives is demonstrably sky-high. The Guardian article points out that explosive device incident figures have reached record highs this year. And Monday's discovery of an explosives factory and 24-ton cache of ammonium nitrate in southern Helmand province shows that when it comes to this material, suppliers will take great risks to fulfill demand.

It is possible, indeed likely, that the jump in price is a result of two concurrent shifts. The supply shift may be driven by operations of ISAF and Afghan security forces as well as a national ban in January on fertilizer imports. But given the steady increase in insurgent attacks over the past year, the demand shift is probably driven by an energetic insurgency. The end result: higher prices and just as many, if not more, homemade bombs on the battlefield, provided that the insurgency remains well-funded. Since there generally are more and more bombs appearing in the south over time, the insurgency appears to be insensitive to rapid swings in the price of fertilizer. Because this is an illicit and informal market, it is extremely difficult to know trends in prices precisely, or to know which factor - supply or demand - dominates. The point is that although anecdotal evidence about the price of fertilizer is suggestive of shifts in informal markets, it makes an unreliable indicator of success in disrupting an insurgency.

Suppose it were true that ISAF operations had achieved a complete suppression of the trade in explosive fertilizer. This too would not entirely indicate success. Improvised explosives can be made from many commonly available, household ingredients. And an insurgency that operates with foreign support might replace fertilizer with some not-so-common bomb ingredients like military munitions or construction explosives. Anyway, insurgents could move to different explosives for reasons unrelated to ISAF operations, such as changes in tactical intention, training, or sources of external support.

Moments like this one demonstrate the frustrating little peculiarities of this type of war, and underscore the idea that traditional notions of victory and surrender are unrealistic when applied to the current Afghanistan conflict. Unable to quantify success in terms of targets destroyed or enemy units disabled, commanders in Afghanistan are left to argue that although opaque economic indicators are by no means indicative of success, and effects will not be observable until next summer, progress is nonetheless being made. Then they must watch as their nuanced ideas morph into misleading sound bites and creep into public discourse.

It is possible that when Major General Terry departs Regional Command South he will explain accomplishments that more clearly indicate progress towards the goal of a stable Afghanistan that can secure itself against extremists. Important indicators of improvement might include the number of districts permanently transferred to Afghan control, or reductions in the volume and frequency of homemade bomb attacks (Indeed, Helmand provincial governor Gulab Mangal suggested in London this week that Afghan forces would be ready to assume control of several districts in the coming year). If Terry can tout a significant decrease in Taliban recidivism, higher voter participation rates, or steady recruiting and retention among Afghan security forces, then he might offer less ambiguous evidence that the insurgency had lost the faith of the Afghan people.

In the meantime, public audiences worldwide struggle to comprehend progress using heavily qualified metrics open to varied interpretation. What remains is a still-murky picture of the security situation in Afghanistan.

Alec Barker is a national security analyst and consultant based in Washington, D. C. He is solely responsible for the content of this piece.