

Summary of 28 Aug 09 VTC between Russian generals (Afghanistan vets) and GEN McChrystal/MG Flynn: (summarized by Bruce Fitton, SIA, CT Div, JITF-CT)

SVTC with two Russian AFG vets: LtGen Ruslan Sultanovich Aushev, Hero of the Soviet Union (CMH-equivalent and a practicing Muslim) and Mr Vladimir Shabanov who spent 10 years in AFG (since March 1979) as "MFA representative."

Generals McChrystal and Flynn--and their staffs were VTCed from ISAF, as was MG Mike Jones from CENTCOM. SHAPE/EUCOM were also on the line. On the J-Staff side, VADM Harwood, USN and LtGen Deptula, USAF, plus about 10 J-Staff GO/FOs were in attendance. What follows is a quick EXSUM of the historic VTC and the even more candid, Russian-only lunch conversation w/only BG Henry Nowak (former DATT in Moscow). In no particular order, here are the main points:

- "Our mission was never to win. Aushev explained they were sent in to prop a corrupt regime and the AFG leadership was all too happy to stand back, stay in the safety of their guarded compounds in Kabul, and let the Russians do the fighting for them. "They refused to do anything for the benefit of the people. In his mind, "from the perspective of the average Afghan, little has changed since"
- Taliban is an idea. It can only be fought with another idea. How does one do the "substitution"? Build mosques! "All it takes is 4 walls, a copula and a few carpets". Hire a respected "preacher". Pay him well. Have him show the villagers what the Koran really says. And, since the folks can't read, just tell them. Invite the Talibs (students) into this "learning circle". Have them argue their points openly. Repeat village by village. Convene loya jirgas all over the country. Give a voice to the people through a system they are used to v. western style ballot boxes.
- Money talks. Tribal leaders and regular folks can be bought off. "Don't be embarrassed to talk to the opposition". Strike deals by all means necessary. Empower local warlords to help "clear and hold". Bargain for safe passage--make people give their word of honor and stick to it.
- Don't allow people to long for the "law and order"--and speedy justice--the Taliban has established. Set up local sharia courts to resolve minor disputes. Have an effective appeal process that speaks to peoples' innate sense of justice--"they know what's right and what's wrong". Don't try to impose western-style institutions. It'll fail.
- Focus on the young generation. Send youngsters to be educated all over the world. Take them out of the toxic environment of constant violence and let them experience firsthand life in the 21st century. Bring them back to build their country.

- Use effective propaganda. Employ modern comm. media. Give people transistor radios, DVD players and cell phones--as well as "paper media". We've ceded the propaganda fight to the Talibs--need to wrest it away from them.
- Same people have been in charge of everything for 30 years. They're totally isolated from the people and their needs. AFG needs new blood and new ideas. Need charismatic, credible leaders brought into leadership positions.
- The elite isn't in AFG. They live in the Gulf, in Europe and the former Soviet Stans. Make it worth their while to come back and build their own country.
- After 8 years, the insurgents know way more about us than we know about them. We rotate in and out. They stay. Nothing surprises them and their adaptation is always a step ahead of ours.
- The solution for IEDs isn't technological; it's HUMINT. "When someone digs (to bury an IED) someone else sees it, knows where it is and recognizes the digger". Make it known that you'll reward useful information. \$\$\$ and material goods can save lives.
- AFG will never be a unified country or a democracy. Accept it for what it is. All politics are local; corruption is endemic. Use it to your advantage (meaning pay folks off).
- "An ENLIGHTENED dictator" is preferable to an incompetent democrat (they really don't like Karzai and say the Afghans they interact with see him as a Western "puppet").
- PAK is the center of gravity. The line between the Pashtuns on both sides is artificial. Wish Musharraf and the military were back in charge--nukes would be safer.

Couple of things surprised me: while I knew the Soviet government was very reluctant to send forces into AFG in 1979, I didn't know that they've made the political decision to withdraw 5 years BEFORE the actual withdrawal in '89. They truly believe that what they left in place would've survived if it weren't for the political decision in Moscow to cut off all assistance to Kabul. VERY reminiscent of Vietnam.

The consistent emphasis on "Afghanization" surprised me as well. I didn't realize the extent of their effort to "put an Afghani face on everything"--as reflected in their tactics to cordon off an area and send the ANA in. I also didn't realize that they've "paired" Soviet Republics with specific AFG provinces, capitalizing on common language, culture, customs, etc for both intel gathering and reconstruction. That was a huge advantage they had. Food for thought here.

Last, I didn't realize the extent to which they negotiated with those they were fighting, the local truces and safe zones they've established, their pretty sophisticated approach to

COIN (including differentiating not only between urban and rural areas, but also between mountains, desert and what they call "green zones"--the fertile valleys--and adopting different tactics for each. I also didn't realize the extent of their CURRENT ties with AFG leaders. Gen Aushev was there just a few weeks ago, "talking to my former enemies."

Key Take-Aways:

1. Taliban is an idea; it can only be fought with another idea
 2. More troops won't make a difference. The Russians entered with 3 x divisions and as "things escalated" wound up with 120,000 in country, plus at least equal that number in the neighboring Soviet Republics.
 3. They decided to call it quits because the Afghans wouldn't take responsibility for their own country a full five years before the actual withdrawal – and thus bled for five years more than they needed to!
 4. They failed for three reasons: (i) Afghanistan's nature/character; (ii) the civilian casualties their "stray bullets" caused (Soviet fire discipline and mitigation efforts have never been known to be particularly robust); their attempt to rebuild Afghanistan in their own image.
 5. The Coalition is better postured to win than they were – the Coalition has international support – the Soviets did not. That said, they had a 60+ year effort to build the economy and functioning institutions. "Before the (April 1979) Revolution we were addressed as "Mister"; after that we were called "Rafik" (comrade); five years later we were called "Dushmans" (bandits).
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