SMA/CENTCOM Afghanistan Project Phase II Insights[1]

Executive Summary

This paper provides the TRADOC G27 Models and Simulations Branch initial assessment for Phases I and II of the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) CENTCOM Afghanistan project. Phase I specifically assessed the impact of three different hypothetical Afghan government constructs: Centralized, Enhanced Local Governance and Decentralized (regional). Phase II focused on the potential outcomes of a negotiated settlement including: truce, power-sharing Afghan government, and reconciliation.

TRADOC G27 used the Athena Simulation to model the discrete futures listed above in order to assess the political and social outcomes of each future by measuring control, influence, support, security and the relationship between the population and GIRoA.[2] This analysis was descriptive rather than prescriptive. Follow on efforts will use the results from the 19 November 2018 United States Institute for Peace workshop in order to further refine these potential futures.

Overall Insights

1. A decentralized (regional centric) form of government improved GIRoA control in some areas but opens these areas to regional leader and Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) control if the regional leaders withdraw their support from GIRoA.
2. While much of Afghanistan's territory is not controlled by GIRoA the QST can only control large amounts of territory under very specific conditions.
3. A truce may be a necessary step towards any negotiated settlement between GIRoA and QST but by itself a truce does not result in any increased GIRoA control.
4. Irrespective of how the study scenario reintegrated QST fighters into the ANSF (both in number and ANSF component), it did not substantially impact GIRoA control or popular support over simply demobilizing them.
5. **QST fighter demobilization resulted in by far the greatest improvement of GIRoA control and increase in GIRoA popular support of all the variables we assessed in both Phases I and II.**

Methodology: The methodology of this paper continued the work that TRADOC G27 completed during Phase I of the SMA/CENTCOM Afghanistan effort, and combined open source elicitations and simulation. The elicitations consisted of interviews with Subject Matter Experts that took place during August/September 2018 under the aegis of the SMA/CENTCOM Afghanistan effort. These elicitations focused on how a negotiated settlement would potentially unfold in

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[1] This white paper does not represent official USG policy or position.
[2] The Athena Simulation is a decision support tool designed to increase decision-makers' understanding of the effects of PMESII-PT variables on operations in a given area over time. It was developed by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in conjunction with the US Army TRADOC G-27 Models and Simulations Branch.

Afghanistan and how this settlement could influence the structure of a power-sharing Afghan government. While SMEs were unable to reach consensus on the specifics of a post-negotiated settlement Afghan government, they did identify three critical steps along the path: truce, governance and reintegration which we subsequently modeled during Phase II.

Insight 1: A decentralized (regional centric) form of government improved GIRoA control in some areas but opens these areas to regional leader and QST control if the regional leaders withdraw their support from GIRoA. The study team modelled a shift to a regional government which allowed four notional ethnic figures (Tajik, Uzbek/Turkmen, Pashtun Southeast and Pashtun South) a large degree of autonomy to administer their respective areas. This construct established GIRoA control in Pakhtunkhwa South and Pakhtunkhwa West; increasing GIRoA control to seven of the 13 neighborhoods, consisting of 37% of the population (Figure 1, Below Left). However, empowering regional governance comes with a potential downside. Recent Afghan history has shown that regional leaders often chafe under centralized control and won't hesitate to ignore the national government. When the study team modeled regional leaders supporting themselves exclusively it resulted in a reduced area of GIRoA control (three of 13 neighborhoods, 26% of the population) (Figure 1, Below Right). The Uzbek/Turkmen leader was able to control Mazar-i-Sharif for four weeks during the 52 week period modeled before GIRoA wrested control back. The Pashtun Southeast Leader was able to control Pakhtunkhwa South but only after alternating control with the QST who controlled the area for 14 weeks during the 52 week period. This was the only scenario modeled where the QST gained control of a neighborhood for any period of time.
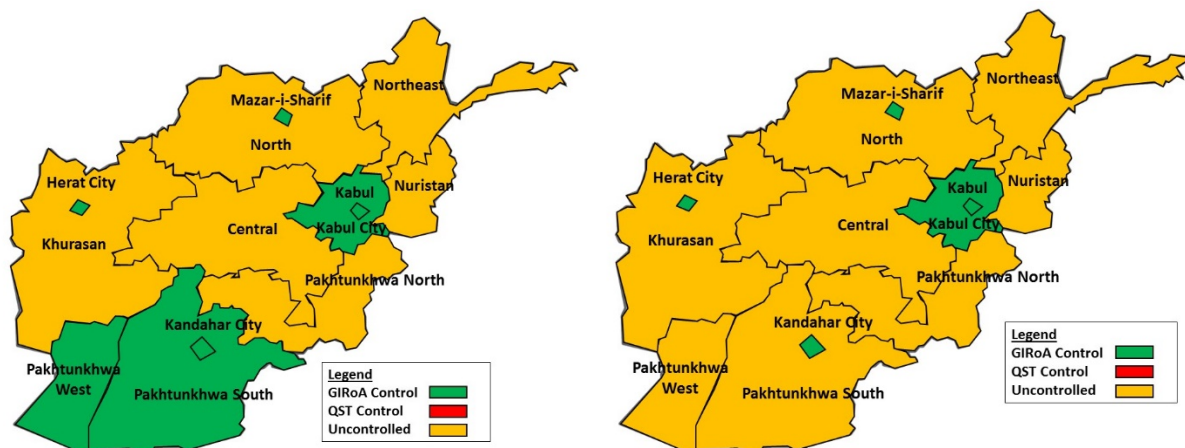

Figure 1: A decentralized regional government (left) resulted in increased GIRoA control from baseline (right).

Insight 2: While much of Afghanistan's territory was not controlled by GIRoA the QST could only control large amounts of territory under very specific conditions. Of all the governmental structures modeled, only in the failed decentralized system was the QST able to secure enough support to control any large contiguous area, and this was for only limited periods.[3]

Insight 3: A truce may be a necessary step towards any negotiated settlement between GIRoA and QST but by itself a truce does not result in any increased GIRoA control. A truce between GIRoA and the QST does not improve GIRoA control but a truce combined with a partial demobilization of QST forces allows a dramatic increase in GIRoA control. We modeled a truce which halted fighting between the ANSF and QST forces. This did not materially change GIRoA control (Figure 2, Below Left). However, when we modelled a truce in which 2/3 of Taliban forces demobilized it resulted in a substantial improvement in GIRoA control (11 of 13 neighborhoods and 91% of the population) (Figure 2, Below Right).
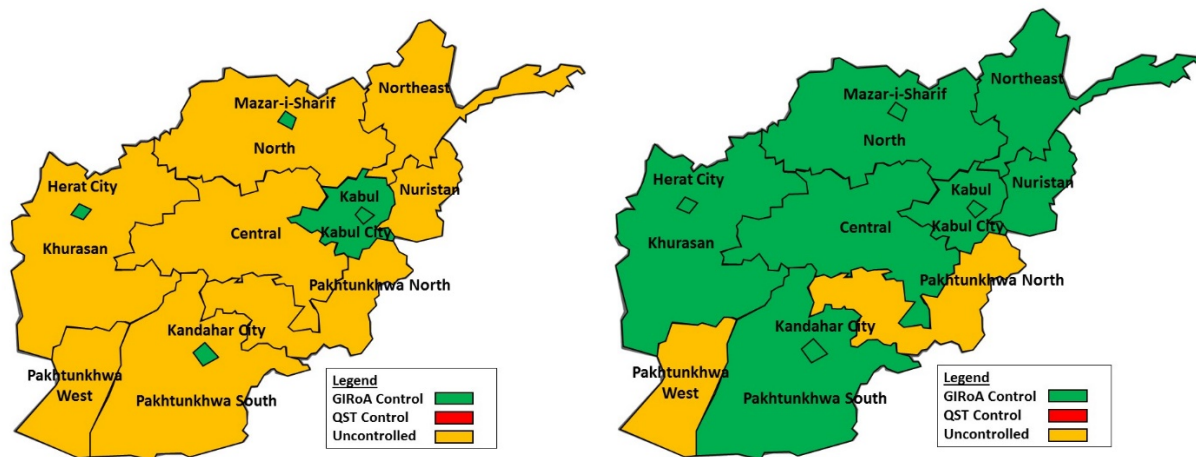

Figure 2: A truce kept GIRoA at baseline levels of control (left) but combined with 2/3 of QST fighters demobilizing was the only permutation tested that facilitated GIRoA control over the majority of Afghanistan.

Insight 4: Irrespective of how the study scenario reintegrated QST fighters into the ANSF (both in number and ANSF component), it did not substantially impact GIRoA control or popular support over simply demobilizing them. The study team modeled several permutations of the potential reintegration of former QST fighters in both percentage, and specific ANSF branch—ANA, ANP or a notional "national guard", and assessed how these would impact GIRoA control and support. Changing the number of QST fighters reintegrated into the ANSF or component of the ANSF which they reintegrated into did little to impact the Afghan Government's geographic control or popular support and provided no additional benefit over simply demobilizing them.

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[3] While this limited amount of QST controlled area may differ with perceptions of QST control they generally parallel SIGAR numbers which have the QST controlling 13 of 407 Districts (3.1% of districts).

Insight 5: QST fighter demobilization resulted in by far the greatest improvement of GIRoA control and increase in GIRoA popular support of all the variables we assessed in both Phases I and II. Figure 3 (below) shows how both demobilizing all QST fighters and demobilizing all QST fighters with 30% joining the ANA both result in similar outcomes. Both outcomes generate considerably more support for the Afghan Government than a truce but no demobilization of QST fighters.
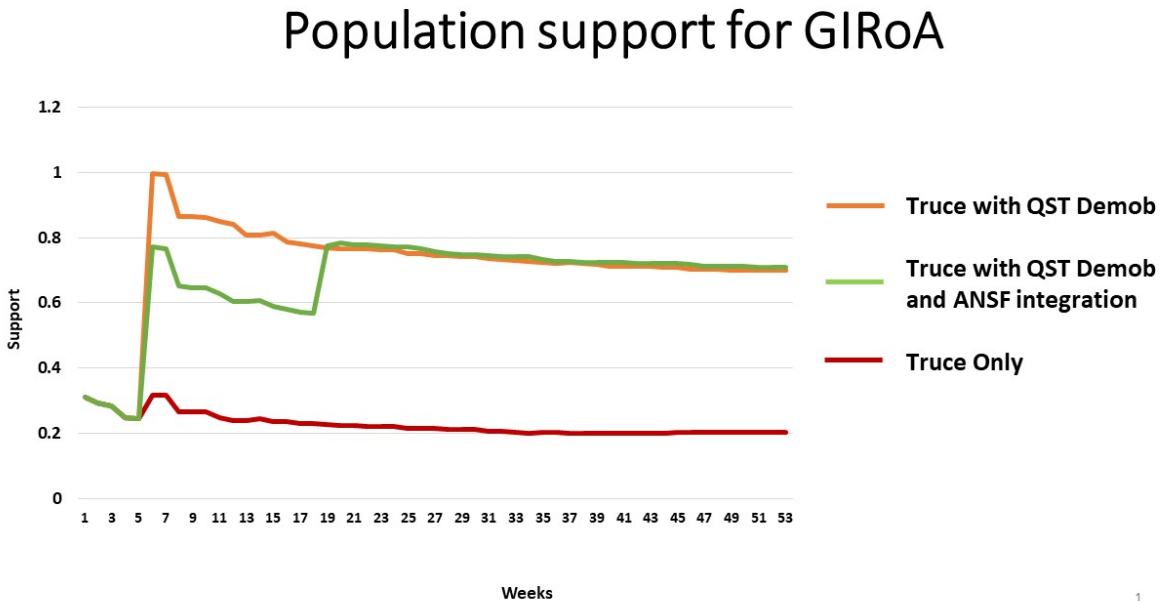
Population support for GIRoA

Figure 3: Both QST demobilization and demobilization combined with ANSF integration proved far superior to the QST remaining outside of Afghan Government control.

Conclusion: Both Phase I and Phase II of this study served to show how, regardless of permutation, two variables impacted potential post-negotiated settlement stability more than others. These were a decentralized (regional centric) government and demobilization of QST fighters. The first variable, a potential decentralized government showed modest improvement in the geographic area that GIRoA would effectively control while assuming risk that this government construct wouldn't devolve into chaos as the regional governments could potentially either ignore the central government or commence to fighting amongst themselves. The second variable, demobilization of QST fighters, was more pronounced. Regardless of what future scenarios were modeled, if the a majority of QST fighters were not demobilized (or reintegrated into the ANSF) that future did not show marked improvement in terms of Afghan Governmental control or popular support than the current baseline.

Department of Defense 1225 report (Dec 2017) stated "The objective of the campaign is to convince the Taliban that they cannot win on the battlefield. The war will end in a comprehensive, Afghan-led political settlement that will include all parties, including the Taliban." Athena analysis shows that if a political settlement takes place the key for GIRoA will be to demobilize, or integrate into the ANSF, the majority of QST fighters. If the QST fighters remain a force independent of GIRoA supervision, neither the area controlled by the Afghan Government nor their popular support will markedly improve.