

Counterinsurgency and «micro-strategy» approach

Societies, Cultures and Conflicts of Contemporary Afghanistan: beyond the “culture awareness” course

by Claudio Bertolotti*

Claudio Bertolotti

CeMiSS - Military Centre for Strategic Studies
University of Torino

Claudio Bertolotti is a former Nato-Isaf counter-intelligence analyst (2003/2004 NRF(L) Brigade, 2005/06 – 2007/08 KMNB and RC-C Counterintelligence Section Chief) and currently military research fellow at Italian Military Centre for Strategic Studies and PhD candidate at the University of Torino (conducting research on Suicide terrorism and Opposition Armed Groups in Afghanistan). Since 2008, he has been teaching “*History, Societies, Cultures and Conflicts of Contemporary Afghanistan*” for Italian Isaf staff, Omlt and military personnel; he has also authored several articles, researches and a book on suicide terrorism in Afghanistan.

Introduction

Military units deployed in Afghanistan need adequate cultural skills to approach to different Afghan realities; this is the focus of the article which represents the introduction to an important project conducted – after an initial testing phase which involved Italian Brigades *Taurinense* and *Folgore* – in collaboration with «Italian Army - Centro Addestramento – Scuola Militare, Aosta» (Italian Omlt – *Operational mentoring and liaison teams* – Training Center).

Topic here addressed, beyond military strategies and political solutions, wants to focus on efforts to achieve a more adequate cultural capability of personnel employed in contact with local populations and against an enemy which knows little and which underestimates the insurgency capability to penetrate and to be part of afghan communities.

«Micro-strategy» cultural approach – a mix of bottom-up and top-down processes – applied by Italian Omlt personnel¹ represents the result of a conscious commitment to prepare military personnel with specific and defined cultural *criteria* required to operate efficaciously.

This article (starting point of a critical discussion) wants to focus on socio-cultural approach methodology to contemporary Afghanistan – not seen as mere «battlefield» but as «human terrain» – and on a “method” which could support intelligence process.

Following the «Coin Qualification standard», defined in accordance with Isaf’s requirements and directives, an interesting experiment is the new training methodology focused on “human terrain approach

¹ Test phase applied to contingents Omlt XI, XII and XIII; methodology not adopted by Italian Army.

capability” applied by Italian Omlt. In brief, a focus on afghan micro-level through operative concept defined «micro-strategy».

«Micro-strategy» approach could achieve long-term objectives through individual effort; it obtains, consequentially, a balance with some “physiological” methodology’s military limits.

Specific study programs in accordance with roles and responsibilities, seminars directed and managed by specialists and academic researchers with direct experience, are the basis of this new way of understanding “the bring into play” of the military. (See detailed Program in the Text box)².

Changing approach: from «tribal» to «local»

Particular attention has been given to change the erroneous perception of the afghan reality, not to be merely defined as «tribal» but, correctly, as «local» - different from place to place, without common relations with original tribe-ethnic’s membership; the “simplified tribal approach” represents an explanation which is at the origin of the partial and often counterproductive results obtained in the dialogical relationship with the multiple forms of power and with different forms of local conflicts not linked with ethno-tribal dynamics.

Afghan dynamics are «local» and «local» must be the approach based on comparison and assessment of each single event, phenomenon or process.

Unconscious ignorance of local cultures and needs is at the origin of partial inability to recognize the forms of traditional local powers and, consequentially, lack of ability in involvement of local community leaders in decisional processes and, furthermore, in Key leaders engagement activities.

Basic/advanced Cultural training Program

Module 1: Scenario

1. Afghanistan and geopolitics between collaboration and regional competition.

Module 2: Focus

2. Societies and Cultures of Afghanistan

- 2.1. *Comprehensive approach*: understand cultures (cultural gap, cultural shock, adaptation, education);
- 2.2. Afghan Islam;
- 2.3. Societies (social structures, local power and social rules, gender);
- 2.4. Cultures (cultural characteristics, identities, values, belief system)
- 2.5. Afghan ethnics;
- 2.6. Pashtuns and the others;
- 2.7. Intercultural communication (communication levels, direct communication, time perception, contractuality, individual and group, emotions, non verbal language).
- 2.8. From «battelfield» to «human terrain»: changing point of view.

Module 3: Focus

3. Insurgency(-es) between common characteristics and threat levels.

4. Problem analysis

- 4.1. Insurgency phenomenon’s evolution (2001-2011)
- 4.2. Opposition Armed Groups: Insurgency and counterinsurgency (Single subject and community, political-ideological reasons and religions’ role);
- 4.3. Ethnic environment: domestic and external support;
- 4.4. «Counter-counterinsurgency»: adaptation and *modus operandi*;
- 4.5. Taliban’s policy;
- 4.6. Asymmetric conflict.

5. Organization, policies and insurgency’ strategies

- 5.1. Recruitment;
- 5.2. Insurgency founding sources;
- 5.3. TTPs: reasons of a success;
- 5.4. Shadow Government.

² Detailed Courses program available on <http://www.wix.com/brav91/afghanistansguardieanalisi>

In accordance to this, Author of this article wants briefly to elucidate – on the experience as counter-intelligence section chief and academic researcher – what does «micro-strategic cultural approach» means, in order to help to neutralizing the cultural gap spreading, at the same time, an applied and constructive theory.

Micro-strategic cultural approach’s program is based on a basic cultural training set on complementary study-modules of specific theoretical lessons, which is accompanied by Academics (anthropologists, sociologists, historians, connoisseurs of local language, etc) and scientists’ contribution (MA/PhD) for a basic and advanced training; next step is represented by a learning phase in “theater” (*on the field ongoing learning*) followed by a fully-critical experience sharing and, at the end, the analysis of the experience-reports and the consequentially “training standards revision”³ (See Fig. 1).

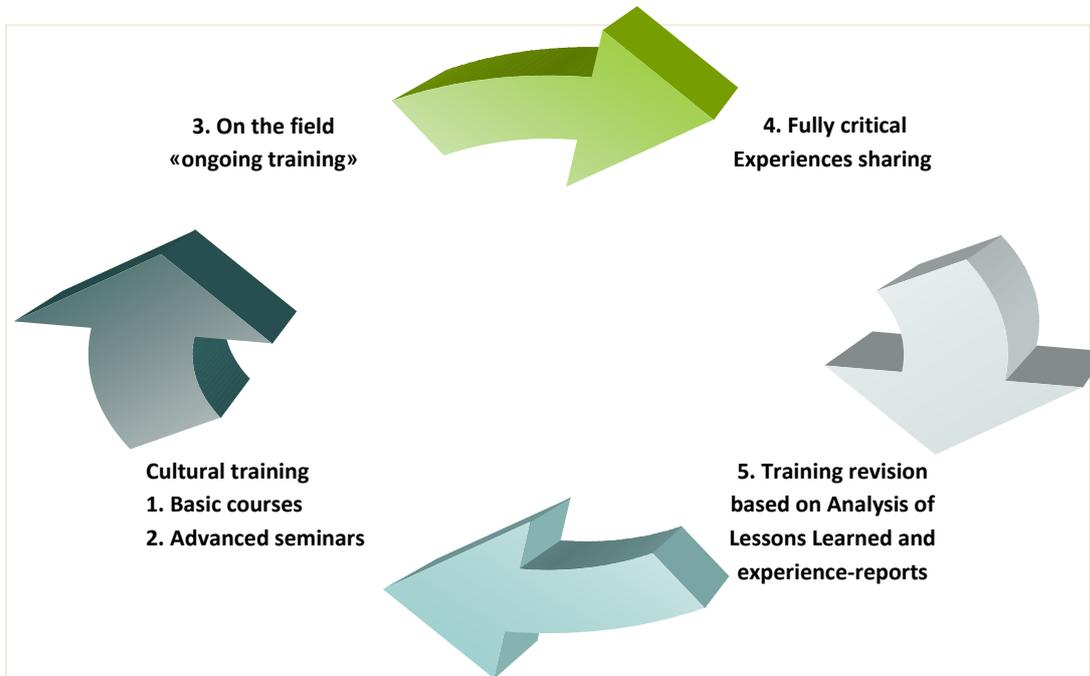


Fig. 1 Cultural training cycle.

Cultural training program

Initiative’s peculiarity is the change of teaching methodology – top-down process – (mainly academic supported by role games and simulations), and the use of “experience reports” compiled at the end of the mission – bottom-up development.

At the end of complete «cultural training», students are able to understand Afghanistan in a historical, social and geopolitical context; in particular they are able to:

- Acquire a correct approach to afghan culture;
- Understand local dynamics, social and operating context;

³ These preliminary activities took about a year – first phase of planning, study, field research and use of techniques as *focus group* and semi-structured interviews – and a second experimental phase lasting a further year – courses, lessons, discussions, analysis.

- Improve their knowledge through direct interaction with local level rules and traditions (*on the field ongoing learning*);
- Recognize the forms of struggle for "local power", or tribal tensions, from insurgency's activity;
- Through social dynamics' study and knowledge of socio-cultural “common senses”, really understand who's the subject “*insurgent*” and which are the characteristics of afghan insurgency phenomenon in its complex (motivations, politics and ideology, socio-cultural context in which it moves and from which it feeds, such as applied techniques for offence-defense-recruiting-propaganda, etc.);
- Contribute to the effectiveness of intelligence process operating on the *human terrain* (organization and local economic dynamics, informal leadership, forms and expression of local powers, etc.), along with HUMINT units;
- provide, at the end of the mission, an immediate feedback to adjust the later stages of cultural training.

In brief, the course *Cultural Awareness – Societies, Cultures and Conflicts of Contemporary Afghanistan* is structured on flexible modules – main and complementary – and represents the ongoing project involving military of all roles and tasks, from rank of private to high levels commanders.

**The views of the author in this publication are his own and do not reflect the positions or policies of the Italian Ministry of Defense and/or Italian Army.*



© 2012 Claudio Bertolotti

This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits re-use of the content when proper attribution is provided.

This means you are free to copy, display and distribute this paper, or include the content in derivative works, under the following conditions:

Attribution. You must clearly attribute the work to the Author.

Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from the Author.

Share Alike. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.