

DESIGNER'S RESPONSE

I would like to thank Glenn Gibson very much for her kind and very complete review of *Kandahar*. I'm very glad to see that she and others were prepared to spend considerable time with the game, and that it was not too difficult to learn considering the large number of "moving parts" in the design.

I'd like to respond to a few points raised in the review, organized by topic:

Objectives and "Winning"

Kandahar was intended to be an exploration of some, but not all, aspects of the security situation in that province of Afghanistan, roughly as it was in 2007-09. It was not intended to be an artificially balanced, competitive or inherently "fun" experience for the players (I usually think players have to bring their own "fun" to any game, for the most part). I absolutely agree with the thread running through the review that the value of (at least semi-) serious games like these lies in a good debriefing after the game. The first concern of the designer should be that the mechanics of the game are sound and do not get in the way of players learning and interacting, once he is satisfied on that point he should be prepared to take a back seat to the main and most valuable point of the exercise – the reflective discussion of what happened in the game, in the context of what could have happened and/or what did happen in real life.

Hence, the lack of emphasis on who exactly "wins" the game outright; the important part is how the major players can win. Both the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) and Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) are seeking wider acceptance of their legitimacy to rule, through higher rates of political support, favourable local popular attitudes and a large number of base organizations. Both are also moderately concerned with the level of criminal gang activity, since the player who might have won the game sees his Victory Points (VP) reduced by half of the criminals' VP total, possibly handing the win to the other player. The GoA is further concerned with fostering a quieter atmosphere in which economic activity can continue. Glenn does point out there are no concrete objectives for other players – notably the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) – to pursue; I did not write rules for such at the time of designing the game, reasoning that since both are certainly more in support of the GoA than the QST, they should be thought of as contributing to and sharing in a GoA victory. Post-game discussions could and should include an exploration of how these organizations worked during the game, to secure a victory or mitigate a loss.

Game actors

Glenn writes about the effectiveness and limitations of the subordinate actors in the game:

Orange

Represents non-state militias, private security contractors, vigilantes etc.. The issue of security forces who answer neither to government nor insurgent is usually ignored in what few commercial games have appeared on recent conflicts, and I thought it important to try and include some reflection of it in this design. Orange units appear automatically in response to high levels of violence, or when large amounts of foreign non-military assistance arrive, and act autonomously to attack the QST or criminals in their area. They are shown in the game only as armed combat units; I left out any kind of base or mass support organization they might have as a simplification. Similarly, because these units represent a highly diverse and probably temporary arrangement of violent non-state actors that would not work in any coordinated way, there is no separate human player to control Orange and such units are not allowed to leave the area they set up in. The GoA has the option to disarm them, but at a penalty in political support because the local perception would be of an ineffective government denying the population the ability to defend itself. To further Glenn's remarks about the Random Events Table, I would probably add an event that would see a random Orange unit change alignment to join the QST or, more likely, become a criminal gang in its own right – sometimes the Seven Samurai don't just walk off into the sunset!

White

Represents NGOs conducting humanitarian and development work. Glenn's point is well taken that in reality major NGOs do not permit their workers to operate far "outside the wire" of areas securely controlled by the GoA or ISAF. However, I did not write a rule simply preventing players from placing the NGOs in harm's way; I don't like to write such rules when the structure of the game can do it for the players. Instead, there is an incentive for the QST or criminal elements to attack the infrastructure of areas containing White units, resulting both in loss of Civic chits and White units (which incurs a further political support penalty). This incentive is mitigated by placing GoA or ISAF units on patrol in the area, and creating Informer units (which is much less costly if the area is pro-government). Even then, violence may and does find its way to White; Glenn points out that in 2010 the United Nations did indeed shut down its operations in Kandahar, in response to the QST's efforts to oust them.

Green

Represents ISAF military units and training cadres. Glenn explains well the nature of the tradeoff in ISAF's involvement in creating and maintaining security in the province. The GoA player needs to consider the short-term benefits of substantial ISAF intervention versus the short and long-term penalties he will have to pay in political support. Certainly, discussion of the role of non-Afghan militaries should be an important part of the debrief at the end of the game.

Black

Criminal activities are a constant undertone in modern conflicts, but again rarely get much notice in wargames. The Black player is not concerned with political support or positive popular attitudes, instead he seeks Operations Points (representing money, goods, or the "muscle" to operate illegal networks for distribution and sale of narcotics or human beings). Both the GoA

and QST ignore criminal activities at their peril: if Black is allowed to flourish and has the highest number of VP at the end of the game, Kandahar has become a “failed province”.

Game concepts

Violence and dissipation of its effects

Wargames are all about violence, but few of them model its aftereffects beyond placing counters representing smoking tank wrecks. Neither side can play the game effectively without ever resorting to violence, no more than they can by conducting exclusively kinetic missions, but they have to be mindful of the long-term effects of what firepower they do unleash. Glenn is right to point out the unlikely speed with which local populations are assumed to forgive and forget, especially when one game-turn can represent anything from a week to several months, but I did not want the map to be inundated with Violence chits. Her suggestion that chits would be removed in areas where the matching colour player did not conduct any kinetic missions that turn is a good one and if players or the umpire were prepared to take on that level of record-keeping, I would recommend it.

Cohesion and training

The effectiveness of combat units on both sides is critical to their success. All units start at Recruit - as such they are a slight political liability and must be trained beyond that level. (I liked Glenn’s suggestion that using Recruit troops also incur a negative operational modifier, and will amend the game rules to that effect.) Conducting training will also raise the Cohesion level, which allows the player to conduct more missions more effectively. However, this can take a great deal of time and resources, and I wonder if this should not be even more so for the GoA player: as Glenn points out, billions of dollars and much organizational effort have been poured into improving the Afghan National Army and Police for years now, to very little apparent effect.

Maintenance, depreciation and corruption

Separately from Operations Points (OP) expended to conduct discrete missions, players must maintain a reserve of OP to pay for the administrative and logistical overhead of their forces – standing armies still need to eat and get paid, even if all they do is stand. Low levels of political support and cohesion (representing corruption through rampant self-interest, creative incompetence, and lowered discipline) will eat into this reserve through depreciation, further challenging a player’s ability to act, and eventually his ability to even keep his forces in the field. Corruption and its attendant network of patron-client relationships is a fact of life in Afghanistan, and I accept Glenn’s comment that this is not completely modelled in the game. Certainly, in designing such a game, certain simplifications had to be made and this was one of them. A post-game debrief should definitely include discussion of this aspect.

Other aspects of the game

Glenn also remarks near the end of the review on the “Blue/Green”-centricity of the design, in that it tends to explore the problems of the GoA and ISAF more than the difficulties faced by the QST. I certainly did not mean to imply that the Taliban are supermen, and the “Pakistan box” sanctuary is an abstraction, though no more than the notional “Training Camp” the GoA player uses to improve his units. Similarly, the many levels of military and political leadership on both sides have been abstracted out for ease of play, and are subsumed in the players themselves.

But I was aware that much of the interest in the game would be from people interested in solving the problem for the COIN side, and that these games normally do not have enough players on both sides to do the problem justice. Her suggestion of multiple Red (QST) players is excellent, and if there were enough players to go around, I would encourage them to be as difficult to each other as they would to the GoA – perhaps by assigning different sectors of the map to different QST players with a separate “Inter-Services Intelligence” player for Pakistan, or giving one player control of all the static (auxiliary and base support organizations, generally non-combatant) units and another the mobile, or allowing players to communicate only through notes or periodic conferences. I also included optional rules for a Pink faction (created in response to foreign intervention), a Purple faction (representing foreign helpers from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Chechnya, etc.) who aid the QST but at a price in political support, and sketched in rules for Taliban leader counters, whose presence would be required in an area to conduct more ambitious missions.

Glenn also mentioned that the QST governance efforts went unreflected in the game; of course it’s true that the Taliban have made great inroads on the population by out-governing the GoA as well as outfighting it. I did model this in that there are optional rules for “Red Civic Chits” that would both suppress criminal activity and shift local popular attitudes towards the Taliban, and recommend that this concept be used in further plays of the game.

The problem is that as you keep adding bits and bobs to the game, playing it becomes more and more of a rules-memory and record-keeping exercise for the players – which is why an umpire who knows the game well, and perhaps even has his own staff, is necessary for better play. Glenn notes the overall complexity of the game, and a fair comment it is. The game system used in *Kandahar* is derived from *Virtualia*, an urban COIN game I designed a couple of years ago using a thinly-disguised post-Chavez Venezuela as the framework for the action. At first, Dr. Brynen had considered using *Virtualia* for the class, and I broke that game apart into basic, intermediate and advanced versions. This works to teach the game and its subsystems progressively, but it also requires that the game be played at least three times, and normally there is not enough time for that. Fortunately some of the students had already learned and played *Algeria*, a game that uses a related system, so this somewhat more intricate design went down a bit more easily.

Finally, another fair comment from Glenn on the absolutely Spartan nature of the game’s graphics! I admit the very plain and schematic look of my games has often been cited as a

drawback – I wish I had the time, resources and knowledge to do a better job in this regard. Certainly, simply increasing the physical size of the map would be a good first step.

Once more, I would like to thank Glenn and the other players of the game for giving *Kandahar* a chance. I'm very pleased and gratified that they found playing it a good learning experience, and concluded that it has potential value in a classroom setting.

- *Brian Train, 27 April 2011*