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Creating Conditions for the Defeat of the Afghan Taliban: A Strategic Assessment

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Abstract

This paper assesses the prospects for a military victory for the Coalition against the Taliban in Afghanistan. While it argues that a refocused counterinsurgency approach is one essential component of the campaign in Afghanistan, it stresses the importance of longer-term strategies. These include establishing a professional security sector, creating conditions across the country for better governance and aid delivery and, critically, understanding and encouraging Pakistan to involve itself in ways impossible for external powers.

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Ninety percent of the people you call 'Taliban' are actually tribals. They're fighting for loyalty or Pashtun honor, and to profit their tribe. They're not extremists. But they're terrorized by the other 10 percent: religious fanatics, terrorists, people allied to the Taliban leadership shura in Quetta. They're afraid that if they try to reconcile, the crazies will kill them. To win them over, first you have to protect their people, prove that the extremists can't hurt them if they come over to your side.¹

Introduction

The current situation in Afghanistan is the result of decades of internal conflict and has no short-term solution. The Coalition forces, in partnership with the developing Afghan Government and security forces, have the ability to change the tide in Afghanistan. However, the likelihood of a successful outcome remains uncertain. The lack of a robust Afghan Government, and a continued volatile security environment, inhibit basic development and the rule of law. Both understanding the problem and providing an acceptable path to the future are difficult. The creation of a resilient moderate state under a legitimate government, which can resist corruption and the pressures of the Taliban, poses significant challenges. In order to be successful, this counterinsurgency campaign will require a sustained long-term approach by the Afghan Government, the Afghan people, as well as a Coalition with realistic goals.

The centre of gravity for counterinsurgency campaigns is almost always linked to the popular support of the people, and this conflict is no different. The Taliban, unlike the political elite in Kabul, discovered this through years of warfare. The cost of failure for the Coalition in Afghanistan is high if success is defined as the defeat of the Taliban. This is also an improbable outcome. For a campaign that is now in its eighth year, the Coalition has achieved a great deal, but much more is still required. A new strategy is needed to combat the lack of progress and ineffectiveness of the Afghan Government, and to make the best use of Coalition forces.² A campaign approach and an agreement on the composition of a realistic end-state are both essential. It is unlikely that extremist elements of the Taliban can be 'won over'; however the broader Pashtun population, who provide incidental support to the Taliban, and indirectly to the Al Qaeda leadership, can be provided with viable alternatives. Some commentators are calling for a long-term approach of more than a decade to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan. The reality of achieving a solution in the next ten years may be

¹ David Kilcullen. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, Oxford University Press, NY, 2009, p. 39.

² The lack of troop numbers within the Coalition, Afghanistan's Army and the Police has greatly limited the effectiveness and progress on the ground. The simple ratio of troops to tasks over such a dispersed population in excess of 20 million has failed to create an effective security environment. Most Coalition forces have either been involved in fighting the counterinsurgency directly, providing security to their own forces or attempting to provide reconstruction in high-threat environments.

optimistic unless significant changes can be realised in the 12–18 months following the 2009 Presidential election and provincial council polls.

Afghanistan – Where Are We Now?

The Taliban are a very capable adversary who are winning the propaganda war. They are undertaking increasing activity in the Pakistan tribal areas, which is accompanied by rising Coalition casualties (particularly in Helmand Province).³ Since the start of 2009 there has been a 33 per cent increase in security incidents; reported improvised explosive device (IED) detonations have increased by 27 per cent; and civilian casualties are up 40–56 per cent.⁴ The Taliban tactic of employing low-level fighters to conduct activities such as ambushing and sporadic targeting with IEDs has overwhelmed the Coalition to a point where it is not able to guarantee the security of the local population, government officials or aid workers, despite the increased tempo of operations against Taliban strongholds.⁵

From the 1970s the Taliban grew with the support of the Pakistan Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI), and later gained tacit backing from the United States in an attempt to hedge against Iran prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁶ The switching of support and finance between the Mujahideen and the Taliban ultimately aided the development of Al Qaeda that culminated in the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Despite being subsequently overthrown in 2001, the Taliban was never defeated; along with the Al Qaeda leadership, it merely regrouped in Pakistan.

It is believed that Taliban militants and Al Qaeda used the Swat Valley in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) several years ago to develop a safe haven, away from the dangers of south-west Afghanistan border. The Pakistan military has claimed to have regained control of this region, but it is unlikely that any recently-won victories will have long-lasting results. With over 8,000 Pakistan Taliban seasoned fighters still

³ William Maley. *Stabilizing Afghanistan: Threats and Challenges*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, October 2008, p. 5, available at:

<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22337>>, accessed 14 July 2009.

⁴ NATO Afghanistan Report 2009, Belgium, 31 March 2009, available at:

<http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2009_03/20090331_090331_afghanistan_report_2009.pdf>, accessed 8 July 2009, p. 9.

⁵ While many of the tactics, techniques and procedures used in Afghanistan flow from those developed in the Iraq conflict, the transfer of simple technology such as remotely-initiated IEDs normally occurs approximately six months after first used in Iraq. The majority of the techniques and devices used by Taliban forces were in vogue during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

⁶ Steve Coll. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, Penguin Group, NY, 2004, pp. 438–444.

active in the NWFP, a solution is likely to require a political compromise, rather than continued conflict with the Pakistan security forces.⁷

The effectiveness of the Taliban has been their resolution to defend and remain in Afghanistan aided by local support. Their use of physical threats and intimidation of the local population has effectively reduced the level of the population's cooperation with Coalition forces. Further, each successful act of random violence against the Coalition reinforces the message, at village and regional level, that the Coalition is ineffective.⁸ Local power is exerted through the rule of the gun and those that maintain influence are the individuals who control the ground by keeping a constant presence. This does not necessarily equate to popular support for the Taliban or Al Qaeda: villagers are often left without a choice, and will side with the Pashtun Taliban for fear of facing retribution.

The British and the Soviets learnt many hard lessons in Afghanistan, yet now the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Coalition partners seem to be failing to learn from the past. The British failures in the first and second Afghan wars focused on efforts to control Kabul and the central government of Afghanistan. The Soviet method was to use force, which was characterised by a failure to understand the society, culture and terrain in which they were engaged. These weaknesses have been associated with the current United States-led Coalition effort in Afghanistan, which has been criticised as being both 'extreme minimalism'⁹ and with a 'complete lack of comprehension of Afghanistan's tribal, ethnic, and religious realities'.¹⁰ The effectiveness of the Karzai Government is limited at best, and many say that Hamid Karzai's control rarely extends outside of Kabul—hence, he is often referred to as the 'Mayor of Kabul'.

Afghan society is unaccustomed to governance by a central authority. For the last eight years, the Afghan Government has been based on 'patronage networks'.¹¹ The country has a Pashtun-dominated Taliban, numerous warlords and corrupt local and state government officials and politicians, many of whom are related through tribal links. There are also multiple ethnic groups¹² and criminal gangs. A weak culture of

⁷ Ahmed Rashid. 'Pakistan on the Brink', *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 56, No. 10, 11 June 2009, available at: <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22730>>, accessed 31 May 2009.

⁸ Karl A Slaiken. 'Winning the War in Afghanistan: An Oil Spot Plus Strategy for Coalition Forces', *Small Wars Journal*, 20 April 2009, available at: <<http://smallwarsjournal.com>>, accessed 1 May 2009, p. 2.

⁹ Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (eds). *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2008, pp. 316 and 325. The security force soldier-to-civilian ratio has been far below that found in other stabilisation missions (for example, Iraq and Kosovo).

¹⁰ Michael Scheuer. *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*, Brassey's Inc., Dulles, VA, 2004, p. 29.

¹¹ William Maley. *Stabilizing Afghanistan: Threats and Challenges*, pp. 2 and 5.

¹² Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, available at: <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/AF.html>>, accessed 8 July 2009. The

national military service and lack of a middle class who understands and seeks out the advantages of peace and stability both inhibit development. Thus the very nature of the country, and the often uncoordinated Coalition approach, adds further to the complexity of the problem, while the harsh climate and terrain mean that tactical and operational successes remain elusive. The recent aid effort in Afghanistan has been the lowest per capita committed to a stabilisation environment since the Second World War.¹³ Since late 2001, the Afghan Government and international community have made little progress, despite billions of dollars pledged in aid, almost 50,000 Coalition troops committed, and thousands killed and wounded on all sides.

The Afghan Government relies upon international assistance to provide almost all of its public expenditure. Unfortunately the distribution of aid has been wasteful, ineffective and insufficient, and it has become extremely difficult for non-government agencies to make inroads with development assistance, due to both real and perceived dangers throughout the country. Often the aims of aid programmes are not coordinated with those of the military who are attempting to provide a secure environment. The military are regularly engaged in fights that result in the killing and wounding of insurgents and, all too often, civilians—situations that do not offer a sound development platform.¹⁴ Of the US\$39 billion in pledged aid between 2002 and 2011, less than 40 per cent has been spent to date. This is largely due to the security problems noted above, but also the prescriptive nature of aid being driven by donor countries. It is estimated that two-thirds of aid bypasses the Afghan Government, with the consequent perception that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are blurring the boundaries between the role of the military and that of aid agencies.¹⁵ The PRTs distribute the bulk of aid to high-threat areas such as Nimroz, Helmand, Zabul, Kandahar and Oruzgan. Such a priority means that lower-threat areas receive minimal aid, allowing the Taliban to use propaganda very effectively in these areas.

ethnic make up of Afghanistan includes: Pashtun 42%; Tajik 27%; Hazara 9%; Uzbek 9%; Aimak 4%; Turkmen 3%; Baloch 2%; and other 4%.

¹³ Thomas H Johnson and Chris M Mason. 'No Sign until the Burst of Fire—Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier', *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Spring 2008, p. 84.

¹⁴ John Frewen. 'Contested Nation-Building—The Challenge of Countering Insurgency in Afghanistan in 2007', *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Autumn 2008, p. 21.

¹⁵ Matt Waldman. *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*, ACBAR Advocacy Series, Oxfam, March 2008, available at:

<http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/ACBAR_aid_effectiveness_paper_0803.pdf>, accessed 18 May 2009, p. 2. ACBAR is the Agency Coordinating Body of Afghan Relief. This paper quotes a US\$10 billion shortfall in aid, with pledges since 2001 estimated at US\$25 billion. Forty per cent of aid returns to donor countries as corporate profits and consultant salaries. The Afghan Government does not know how a third of all aid since 2001 has been spent (some US\$5 billion). Over half the aid is tied to donor countries and profit margins for international and Afghan contractor companies can range from 20 per cent to 50 per cent.

It is true that 'effective military action may deny victory to the insurgency ... only effective governance will defeat it'.¹⁶ Yet, the Afghan Government has failed in its attempt to appropriately address core areas such as corruption, human rights violations, disarmament and the justice system. The bulk of the population remains unconvinced that the central administration is any more effective than previous administrations. This clearly indicates the necessity for major reform. Afghanistan is not merely an internal counterinsurgency; external players, not least Pakistan, have a tangible impact on the country. Pakistan's links are related to the artificial tribal borders of the Pashtun Taliban, who pay little respect to the national borders apart from gaining sanctuary from the Coalition on the Pakistan side of the border.

A further key link to the conflict is opium cultivation and trade. Much of the funding for the insurgency is provided through revenues gleaned from the production and trafficking in narcotics. The production of opium poppies by villages across large portions of Afghanistan and the 'taxes' imposed by local warlords are a source of funding for Taliban and Al Qaeda operations.¹⁷ However, Gretchen Peters argues that the drug culture and linked problems are also 'embedded' in a complicit government structure and that the problem is actually worse within the Afghan Government than the Taliban.¹⁸ Production levels of opium are controlled by the Taliban, which in 2009 was said to account for an astounding 90 per cent of the world's production.¹⁹ Slight reductions are expected in 2009 due to the harsh winter and poppy eradication programmes that claim success in approximately 22 provinces.²⁰ The majority of

¹⁶ Mark Schneider. 'Strategic Chaos and Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan', Senior Vice President, International Crisis Group testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, 2 April 2008, available at: <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5370&l=1>>, accessed 15 June 2009. The Afghan Government had committed through the Afghanistan Compact in January 2006, together with the interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy through the creation and demise of the Special Consultative Board for Senior Government Appointments, to improve a variety of areas, including all senior official appointments.

¹⁷ Although Bin Laden's location remains unconfirmed, he is suspected to be located in the North West Frontier region of Pakistan. Bin Laden and Al Qaeda central have been greatly affected in Afghanistan through a highly sophisticated targeting campaign mounted by the United States Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Tier 1 US Special Forces have mounted numerous attacks on high-level leadership in both Al Qaeda and Taliban, rendering the leadership somewhat disjointed in Afghanistan. It is believed that higher-level leadership decisions for coordination in Afghanistan are initiated from the safety of Pakistan.

¹⁸ Gretchen Peters. *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al Qaeda*, First Edition, May 2009, Thomas Dunne Books, NY, p. 209.

¹⁹ Peter Griffiths. 'Afghan 2008 Opium Crop Was Second Biggest: UN Report', Reuters, 19 February 2009.

²⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Afghanistan: Opium Winter Assessment*, January 2009, available at: <http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/ORA_report_2009.pdf>, accessed 9 July 2009. Figures vary from 80 per cent to 90 per cent during the period 2007–2008 and are unavailable for 2009. Survey data in high threat areas is either not collected or unreliable.

production occurs in the south-western provinces—the heartland of Coalition deployments—with 97 per cent of farmers in the southern region paying taxes to anti-government elements.²¹ However, the poppy eradication or replacement programmes have proved largely ineffective, as the only people suffering under these programmes are the farmers who lose their principal income stream and become further indebted to either the Taliban or the warlords.

When local authorities are seen publicly to support anti-drug trade initiatives, seized drug shipments are often found to be rapidly dispersed back into the community by corrupt local officials. Unless drug shipments are destroyed at the point of seizure, they rapidly find their way outside Afghanistan, and onto world markets.²² In 2009, however, the Afghan Government moved from the inefficient process of poppy eradication to flooding the market in an attempt to reduce prices and attract farmers to alternative cash crops such as wheat. Iran, with over one million heroin addicts, is strengthening its borders in an attempt to reduce trade.²³ Sealing off its border with Afghanistan is difficult and results will be limited at best. The widespread narcotic problem is reflective of the deeply-ingrained issues that plague Afghanistan and demonstrate that there are no simple solutions.

Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason claim that the insurgency continues due to three inter-related factors: the lack of a state apparatus and the inability of the government to exert a national level of control; the failure of both Coalition troops and the emerging Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) to secure the rural areas to facilitate development and reconstruction; and the lack of any real progress made to help the majority of the Afghan people, particularly those in the south and south-east.²⁴ Persistent security issues marginalise the gains that are being made and have the potential to jeopardise the legitimacy of the upcoming elections in August 2009. Surrounding countries complicate the situation even further, with China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia all vying to exploit Afghanistan's weaknesses and seeking to identify opportunities in terms of resources, trade and control for their own self-interest.

The approach taken by Coalition troops has resulted in varying degrees of success. The Coalition is composed of 42 contributing countries, with the bulk of the fighting

²¹ George Friedman. 'Strategic Divergence: The War Against the Taliban and the War Against Al Qaeda', *Geopolitical Intelligence Report*, 26 January 2009, available at: <<http://www.stratfor.com>>, accessed 5 March 2009.

²² See for example Nick Grono and Joanna Nathan "Defeating Afghanistan's Drug Fix", *The Christian Science Monitor*, online, 31 May 2007.

²³ Jon Boone. 'UN wants "flood of drugs" in Afghanistan to devalue opium', *Guardian*, 25 May 2009, available at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/25/drugs-united-nations-afghanistan>>, accessed 16 June 2009.

²⁴ Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason. 'No Sign until the Burst of Fire—Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier', p. 72.

troops provided by the United States, United Kingdom and Canada.²⁵ The country has been divided into five regional commands based on geographical and provincial boundaries. This includes over 26 national PRTs.²⁶ Many of the troop-contributing nations provide forces with restrictive national caveats that reduce the Coalition's effectiveness and place additional burdens on those prepared to accept the risks in high-threat areas. The lack of a fully-integrated approach results in a number of unacceptable outcomes.

Can the Taliban maintain Their Influence within Afghanistan?

The deep traditions of the tribal Pashtuns and their well-established links with the Taliban are issues with which the Coalition forces struggle to understand, particularly in Kandahar, Helmand, Oruzgan and Zabul Provinces. The Pashtuns will continue to be the greatest concern in Afghanistan, and the problem they pose is linked to the lack of security on the Pakistan border. The Taliban's support base in Pakistan is multidimensional and highlights the Pashtun influence across both countries. Small tactical victories may well be achieved; however strategic victory by the Coalition in military terms will prove difficult.

While international boundaries are fixed by international law, the notion of this conflict being isolated to Afghanistan is inaccurate, and the Taliban issue in Pakistan is becoming more central to the problems in Afghanistan.²⁷ The inability of Pakistan to target the 'Quetta shura'²⁸ in Balochistan near the border with Afghanistan east of Kandahar highlights the difficulty faced in eradicating an insurgent safe haven, and serves as a reminder that Pakistan's priorities are to deal with its own internal issues first.

²⁵ The International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) primary role is to support the Afghan authorities in bringing peace and security to the people of Afghanistan. Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) is the US name for its commitment to Afghanistan and comes under the umbrella of the US Global War on Terror (GWOT) now renamed 'Overseas Contingency Operations'. The United States retains command of Counter Terrorism forces under OEF, whilst US PRTs and nation-building force capabilities reside under ISAF. The senior US Commander General Stanley McChrystal is the ISAF commander and retains command of OEF forces, at total force of almost 90,000 over 42 countries.

²⁶ Mark, L, Schneider, 'Strategic Chaos and Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan'.

²⁷ See for example, William Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006, pp. 60-62; and Barack Obama, "Obama's Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan March 2009", *Council on Foreign Relations*, online, 27 March 2009.

²⁸ The Afghan Taliban's most important leadership council is based in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan Province. The key Taliban leadership have often used Quetta as a planning, training and rest and recreation location when it has been unsustainable to operate in Southern Afghanistan, and have been able to do so with relative impunity.

Until the recent Pakistan-led offensive operations in the Swat Valley, Pakistan's Army and the ISI have provided open support to the Taliban in Afghanistan.²⁹ A number of sources linked to the ISI claim that Pakistan, through its contacts with the Taliban, has the ability to bring Mullah Omar and other commanders to the negotiating table with the United States. As the Taliban's request for the withdrawal of Coalition forces from Afghanistan is not necessarily a given,³⁰ opportunities may arise to move forward using non-military means.

Both Taliban elements in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda insurgents have used safe havens and the goodwill of the Pashtuns under 'Pastunwali'³¹ to train, plan and provide leadership for insurgent activities in both Afghanistan and further afield. These fighters have managed to avoid conflict with Pakistan's force in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as this largely remains an internal Pakistan Taliban and Al Qaeda issue, and it is not specifically designed to target the Taliban in Afghanistan.³² The Pakistan Government and military have been heavily committed to the country's offensive against such extremists, which has focused principally on the north-west provinces and specifically the Swat Valley. The decision to undertake major combat operations in 2009 stemmed from a realisation within the Pakistan Government that it risked losing large areas of north-west Pakistan to Taliban influence.

Two key issues continue to prevent Pakistan from making decisive gains against Islamist militants and their transnational allies. First is a lack of domestic support in Pakistan, which arises from the widespread feeling that Pakistan's insurgency is a result of its leadership fighting a war caused by the United States, and that the foreign intervention is destabilising the country. Second, and more critically, the Taliban in Pakistan have now declared war on the ISI. This has left the ISI and the government with little choice but to discard its Taliban links. The ISI may well be required to transform itself from an organisation that used insurgents to achieve its ends in

²⁹ See, for example, William Dalrymple. 'Pakistan in Peril', *New York Review of Books*, 15 January 2009, 'Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia' by Ahmed Rashid, Viking, available at: <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22274>>, accessed 19 May 2009.

³⁰ Michael Ware, 'Pakistan can help broker US-Taliban talks', CNN News, 11 July 2009, available at: <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/07/10/pakistan.taliban.omar/index.html>>, accessed 18 July 2009. Key sources for this interview include former head of the ISI, Lieutenant General (Retd) Hamid Gul and director general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations, Major General Athar Abbas.

³¹ Thomas H Johnson and Chris M Mason. 'Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan', *Orbis*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Winter 2007, p. 64. 'Pastunwali' translates as 'way of the Pashtun'. This provides a Pashtun ethical framework for behaviour and its core tenets include self-respect, independence, justice, hospitality, forgiveness and tolerance.

³² Shuja Nawaz. *FATA—A Most Dangerous Place, Meeting the Challenges of Militancy Terror in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, January 2009.

Afghanistan into an intelligence service that can use its resources to fight non-state actors.

The principal aim of the 'global war on terror' after the intervention into Afghanistan was to destroy Al Qaeda and unseat the Taliban from power. The United States fully committed itself to this goal. The US Administration's plan was to destroy Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and curb its ability to conduct operations from Pakistan into Afghanistan.³³ When the Taliban were initially driven out of Afghanistan in late 2001, the Al Qaeda leadership relocated to Pakistan where it gained tacit support from Pakistan through the ISI.³⁴ However, it still remains unclear if 'Al Qaeda Central' has a strong desire to be engaged in Afghanistan for as long as the Taliban prove to be effective.³⁵ The reality is that Al Qaeda achieved a core goal through the United States invading Afghanistan and the launching of a *jihad* against the Coalition, even though this has not required direct Al Qaeda involvement.

If we assume, as George Friedman does, that Al Qaeda's effectiveness has been reduced in Afghanistan through a long campaign focused on leadership nodes, then it may well be correct to surmise that while 'the primary reason for fighting the Taliban is to keep Al Qaeda prime from having a base for operations in Afghanistan, that reason might be moot now as Al Qaeda appears to be wrecked'.³⁶ Yet the question must still be asked: Is the Coalition's desired end-state destroying Al Qaeda, or is it rebuilding Afghanistan and dealing with the Pashtun issue? If the answer is destroying Al Qaeda, then this problem does not require tens of thousands of Coalition troops but, rather, specialised intelligence networks supported by high-end Special Forces to target accurately the small numbers of 'Tier 1' Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership who remain within Afghanistan.³⁷ The Coalition must avoid being perceived as failing in Afghanistan if it is to prevent a huge 'inspirational' benefit accruing to the Taliban in a nuclear-armed Pakistan. The Coalition's high-end focus on Al Qaeda through aggressive time-sensitive targeting, indiscriminate raids and

³³ George Friedman. 'Strategic Divergence: The War Against the Taliban and the War Against Al Qaeda'.

³⁴ Mark J Roberts. 'Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate: A State within a State', *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 48, 1st Quarter 2008, available at: <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i48/25.pdf>, accessed 14 July 2009, pp. 107–109.

³⁵ James Phillips. 'The Evolving Al-Qaeda Threat', *Heritage Lecture No. 928*, Heritage Foundation, Washington DC, 17 March 2006, available at: <<http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/hl928.cfm>>, accessed 5 March 2009.

³⁶ George Friedman. 'Strategic Divergence: The War Against the Taliban and the War Against Al Qaeda'.

³⁷ John Frewen. 'Contested Nation-Building—The Challenge of Countering Insurgency in Afghanistan in 2007', p. 27. The targeting of high end Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership remains a critical role under Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Time-sensitive targeting is coming under greater scrutiny by President Hamid Karzai, the world media and the general populous who, with every poor act of targeting, are starting to feel that Karzai and the Coalition are no better than the Taliban.

detention of suspects in Pashtun heartlands is failing to reduce extremism; instead it is fueling further violence and local discontent.

Although the Taliban are closely aligned to the Pashtuns, they receive minimal support among the general Afghan public who have grown weary of conflict. The support for the Taliban, often only based on fear, provides a vital link to intelligence and support to what is essentially a guerrilla campaign.³⁸ The Taliban do not need to launch major attacks to be successful in this campaign; they only need to concentrate their attacks on the weakest points. Roadside bombs, suicide attacks, attacks on resupply convoys and lines of communication, and on the Afghan people who support the Coalition, are all popular means of countering the effectiveness of Coalition and government forces. The Taliban have had the upper hand in the area of information operations for many years, with their ability to report on the Coalition's errors, exaggerate civil casualties, and draw the fight into urban areas so as to deliberately place civilians at risk. Many incidents of civilian casualties are often incorrectly blamed on the Coalition. Some responses have been too slow to counter this propaganda, with Australia also falling victim to this.³⁹

The Taliban have been most successful when operating out of Pakistan's sanctuary areas. The leadership's knowledge of the Pashtun landscape, which also aids in deciding whether to co-opt, discard or assassinate rivals, has been critical to Taliban domination in these areas. As David Kilcullen identifies, the conflict in Afghanistan is not a traditional counterinsurgency where the insurgents' aim is to seize government; rather, the insurgents' desire is to expel the foreign troops or outlast the contributing government forces. They also seek to discredit the current regime, and show little desire to replace it.⁴⁰ Indeed, the Taliban dismantle and manipulate rival power structures 'instead of focusing on creating the image of state'.⁴¹ This presents a dilemma for the Coalition whose desire is both to consolidate its successes and to make further progress against the insurgent elements. Achieving this aim is especially difficult given an opposition who fights on many fronts and has proven resilient to conventional warfighting strategies.

The Taliban has advantages in this type of counterinsurgency warfare, with perhaps the prime one being the freedom to manoeuvre. Knowledge of the Coalitions' tactics, techniques and procedures, gleaned from both years of experience and a complex network of informers, means the Taliban cannot be crushed by a conventional military

³⁸ International Crisis Group. 'Afghanistan: New US Administration, New Directions', *Asia Briefing No. 89*, Kabul/Washington/Brussels, 13 March 2009, available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1179&l=1>, accessed 3 April 2009.

³⁹ John Frewen. 'Contested Nation-Building—The Challenge of Countering Insurgency in Afghanistan in 2007', p. 35.

⁴⁰ David Kilcullen. 'Counterinsurgency Redux', *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 4, December 2006, p. 4.

⁴¹ Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi. *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, p. 83.

campaign. The solution is likely to lie somewhere between the two extremes of defeating the Taliban and reconciliation with them. As the Coalition cannot afford this conflict to deteriorate much further, it is likely to continue its focus on the high-end counter-terrorist capability, while facilitating elections in 2009 and beyond. This must eventually be followed by a focus on training and improving the indigenous security capacity so as to ease the Coalition's military commitment, as well as support for a transition of power to the local authorities.

The Coalition's Dilemma

The Coalition understands the potential stalemate at most levels and the new commander, General Stanley McChrystal, has been sent to Afghanistan in order to change the current strategy, with a focus on 'respecting and protecting the local population'.⁴² Operations such as *Khanjar*, launched in early July 2009, have seen a combined 4,650 Marines, ANA and ANP mission deploy deep into the Helmand Valley with the specific aim of providing security, engaging with locals and sending a clear message of domination to the estimated 500 Taliban fighters. Unlike the traditional cordon, search and redeploy missions, this Operation sees 13,000 Coalition troops deployed within the Helmand Province. The Pakistan Army has also deployed troops to its country's border to block Taliban exfiltration routes.⁴³ The motivation behind Pakistan's offensive operations, that claim to have an aligned effect on the Taliban in Afghanistan, remains questionable. Combined Coalition and Afghan missions like Operation *Khanjar* have the potential to demonstrate the Coalition's resolve, provided troops remain on the ground to maintain a secure environment in order to hand over responsibility to the ANA and the ANP. Further, it is worth noting that the Coalition forces are attempting to develop 'a comprehensive border strategy, eliminating corruption, developing an effective and functioning government, defining the role of the Afghan National Police'.⁴⁴

Yet, coordinating a campaign that is aligned to common outcomes and the expectations of the international community is proving difficult to achieve, and the

⁴² 'US Strike Kills 5 Civilians Afghans Say', *New York Times*, 16 July 2009, available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/world/asia/17afghan.html?scp=3&sq=General%20McChrystal%20-%20new%20Afghanistan%20Policy&st=cse>>, accessed 23 July 2009. General Stanley McChrystal has called for all forces in Afghanistan to make a 'cultural shift' in their approach to the insurgency in Afghanistan and focus on respecting and protecting the local population. On 2 July 2009 McChrystal issued his tactical directive, which limits operations that are likely to produce civilian casualties. In particular, his focus is on reducing the unnecessary use of air strikes.

⁴³ 'The US in biggest airlift since Vietnam', *The Australian*, 2 July 2009, online. Traditional cordon and search missions are generally aimed at capturing or killing insurgents, rather than on the provision of security.

⁴⁴ Trent Scott and John Agoglia. 'Getting the Basics Right: A Discussion on Tactical Actions for Strategic Impact in Afghanistan', *Small Wars Journal*, 11 November 2008, available at: <<http://smallwarsjournal.com>>, accessed 1 May 2009.

military strategic and political constraints of Coalition partners are multifaceted.⁴⁵ It is somewhat easier to identify problems at the tactical level—from Battle Group and higher up to Task Force and Regional Command.

The quickest way to lose popular support in a Coalition partner's home country is through injury or loss of life. Since the invasion of Afghanistan, the Coalition has lost more than 1,268 killed in action.⁴⁶ This has tended to reinforce the sense that although most members of the Coalition agree that a contribution to Afghanistan is necessary, very few countries are prepared to sign up unconditionally to a regional campaign plan and even fewer are willing to extend commitments as part of the US troop surge. For the United States, Afghanistan is a 'war of necessity', while for the majority of troop contributing nations the conflict is a 'war of choice'.⁴⁷

The removal of General David McKiernan in May 2009, and the appointment of US Special Forces officer General Stanley McChrystal, signalled a change in direction and strategy by the Obama Administration and an attempt to adopt a new counterinsurgency approach with limited likelihood of additional troops.⁴⁸ Many lessons have been learnt by forces fighting the insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan. From a military perspective, victory would occur when Afghanistan's security forces achieve a level of operational self sufficiency and then developed a strong core of institutions permitting a significant reduction in Coalition troop numbers in Afghanistan.

The appointment of McChrystal may signify an increase in targeting by special forces. Hopefully his focus will be on key strategic areas, including populated urban regions and routes to these areas, and will encourage and support Afghanistan's critical institutions to become self-sustaining.⁴⁹ The combination of targeting Taliban leadership and the provision of effective security will tend to neutralise the desire of the Taliban to continue their activities against foreign troops.⁵⁰ In essence, the

⁴⁵ Many contributing countries provide national limitations and constraints in capability and employment.

⁴⁶ *Casualties in Afghanistan*. available at: <<http://www.icasualties.org/oef/>>, accessed 26 July 2009. The United States (753), the United Kingdom (189) and Canada (125) incurred the greatest number of coalition troops killed in action at time of writing. Australia to date has lost 11 soldiers killed in action.

⁴⁷ Wars of Necessity refers to those states who take lead-nation status, for example the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. For these states, the imperative to win is significantly higher than other allied states. Wars of choice allow those contributors to play a greater political role and have greater flexibility in relation to force numbers, where and how they are employed.

⁴⁸ It is widely believed that General David McKiernan had adopted sound strategies and was extremely well regarded in theatre. However, the new Obama Administration could not be seen to be aligned with his desire for additional troops and perceived lack of progress.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that similar tactics were used in part by the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

⁵⁰ Gilles Dorransoro. *Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, January 2009, available at:

requirement to provide a secure environment requires a return to the counterinsurgency operations that were conducted between 2003 and 2005. This, linked with reform of the Afghan Government, will assist greatly with a population of whom 82 per cent oppose the Taliban.⁵¹ The ultimate aim for the Coalition is achieving its exit strategy.

Nonetheless, Afghanistan has a number of unique differences that challenge the Coalition. Colonel John Frewen makes three key points when comparing Afghanistan to other counterinsurgencies. First, the Coalition does not have the ability to direct the Afghan Government to impose laws and set priorities; second, NATO partners provide a wide variety of force compositions and national agendas; and, third, the Coalition is required to support a difficult democratic election process while being expected to defeat a resilient insurgent force.⁵² The above factors are compounded when analysing troop to population or 'troop density ratios'.

The US Army and Marine Corps doctrine for counterinsurgency operations claims that 'troop density ratios' should fall between 20–25 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 in the population to permit a successful conduct of a campaign.⁵³ During the surge in Iraq the troop ratio rose from 6:1000 in 2003 through to 28:1,000 at the height of the surge. By the end of 2009 in Afghanistan, when the authorised additional 21,000 US troops have arrived in theatre, the ratio will only be 9:1000, up from 7:1,000 at time of writing.⁵⁴ If doctrine is used as a basis for success, then the Coalition and developing ANA and ANP are seemingly well short of the operational requirements needed to overcome the difficulties of achieving an improved security environment. It can be

<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22619&prog=zgp&proj=zsa>>, accessed 1 March 2009, p. 2.

⁵¹ Ashley J Tellis. *Reconciling With The Taliban? Toward an Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, April 2009, available at:

<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/reconciling_with_taliban.pdf>, accessed 17 July 2009, pp. 91-95.

⁵² John Frewen. 'Contested Nation-Building—The Challenge of Countering Insurgency in Afghanistan in 2007', p. 29.

⁵³ *The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, paragraphs 1–67. The troop density ratio is a rough estimation of what commitment is required in order to provide the levels of security and protection for the general population, while focusing on the insurgent threat.

⁵⁴ Jim Molan. 'How much is enough in Afghanistan', personal communication with author received via email on 1 July 2009; Molan's article on this subject is due to be published in the *Australian Army Journal*, Winter edition 2009. In Molan's email, he quotes General David Petraeus (Commander Central Command) during a hearing at the US Congress House Armed Service Committee, where he estimates the Afghan population at 20 million for calculation purposes and uses the figure of 140,000 as the effective force: 62,000 foreign troops now, rising to 90,000 by the end of 2009, with the balance provided by indigenous army and police being assessed as effective. Doubts surround the methods used to estimate aggregate population levels, and the difficulty in assessing levels is compounded due to a lack of security and inability to conduct any accurate census.

argued that 'troop density ratios' fail to recognise the quality of the soldier's relative advantage through superior capability, firepower and intelligence, compared to the complexity of the terrain, the support of the population and the capability of the insurgents.⁵⁵ Yet, taking these into account, there will remain considerable shortages in personnel to achieve all tasks required of the mission.

Many parallels have been drawn between the counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. Major General Jim Molan (Retd), an Australian officer deployed during the surge in Iraq, has identified three key similarities between Iraq and Afghanistan: the provision of adequate troop numbers that allows for Coalition and indigenous forces to operate together; the development of a secure environment; and the confidence of the people in the local government.⁵⁶ The exit strategy in Iraq was developed through the perceived creation of a self-sufficient security apparatus. This occurred through a long process of 'train, mentor and supervise', which took over six years to achieve and will still require US forces to remain in Iraq until 2011.

The Afghanistan model has been even slower to develop; seven years after their training the ANA still does not have the capability to conduct independent operations without Coalition support. Particularly problematic is the lack of capacity-building for command and control nodes and the focus on urban areas. The situation with the ANP is even worse, the result of initial failure by the Germans who were tasked with raising the policing capability. In urban areas especially, the police are even considered 'the main source of insecurity'.⁵⁷ The ANP was recruited and trained quickly and somewhat poorly, and has lacked the mentoring required to resolve endemic problems of corruption and tribal loyalties.⁵⁸ This adds further complexity to the fluid security situation, and the lack of trained soldiers on the ground is permitting the Taliban to exploit vulnerabilities and undermine current Coalition endeavours.

⁵⁵ Major General Mike Hindmarsh (Retd). Personal communication with author received via email on 14 July 2009. Hindmarsh served as Commander Joint Task Force 633, Australian Forces Middle East during 2008.

⁵⁶ Jim Molan. 'How much is enough in Afghanistan'.

⁵⁷ Gilles Dorransoro. *Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ The type of mentoring that has occurred with the ANA is required to the same extent with the ANP. This can only occur in areas that are relatively secure and with the support of both the Coalition and the ANA. The mentors for the ANP should be principally concerned with supporting law and order, rather than with their own security.

How Can Australia make a Difference in Afghanistan?

*Success in Afghanistan will require the implementation of a genuinely integrated political-military strategy to address security, economic reconstruction and development, and political governance issues, coupled with the conduct of effective counter-insurgency operations and the building of capable indigenous security forces. This will require sustained and coordinated engagement on the part of coalition nations, which includes Australia, assisting Afghanistan.*⁵⁹

In mid-2006, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) commenced its Reconstruction Task Force efforts in partnership with the Dutch. The Australian Special Operations Task Group (SOTG)⁶⁰ was withdrawn following an assessment by the government that at that time, Australia's national interests in deploying the SOTG had been met. The Dutch, under Task Force Oruzgan, did not initially focus on a counterinsurgency campaign that would effectively provide the local population with confidence in its ability to inhibit the activities of the Taliban. Positive results only occurred with the deployment of the Mentoring Reconstruction Task Force (MRTF)⁶¹ and the increased efforts by the Dutch to train and mentor indigenous security forces. This also coincided with the return of the SOTG for the third time in late 2007 due to the Australian Government's assessment that Australia's national interests could again be served by a further deployment.

As the forces in Oruzgan continue their efforts as part of the summer campaign in 2009, substantial local achievements have been made toward ensuring a more secure province. Many Coalition partners view the Australian 'ink spot' methodology as a benchmark in how to conduct counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.⁶² However, the 'ink spot' approach is only effective if undertaken across the full spectrum.⁶³

⁵⁹ Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*. Defence White Paper 2009, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, May 2009, p. 37, available at : <www.defence.gov.au>, accessed 14 July 2009.

⁶⁰ The primary focus of the SOTG was and is leadership interdiction in order to provide a secure environment for the conventional forces based in Oruzgan Province. The first SOTG was deployed to Afghanistan in late 2001, but was withdrawn at the end of 2002 as the Australian Government assessed Australia's national interests would be better met through supporting the intervention into Iraq in early 2003. Between 2002 and 2005, only one Australian soldier remained in Afghanistan. Three SOTG rotations based out of Oruzgan occurred for a 12 month period between September 2005 to early September 2006. Due to the security situation on the ground in Oruzgan, the SOTG was redeployed in late 2007 and remains in country at time of writing.

⁶¹ Originally known as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams or PRTs.

⁶² Mike Hindmarsh. Personal communication with author received via email on 14 July 2009.

⁶³ In particular, the lack of rotary-wing aircraft for the conduct of resupply and the provision of aero-medical evacuation has limited the operational radius of both Dutch and Australian forces from their major bases within Oruzgan.

Currently in Oruzgan the Dutch forces consist of 1,700 troops, with Australian numbers peaking for the August elections at 1,550 with an effective overall force of 3,250. The question again must be asked as to the effectiveness of a troop density of 7:1000 which may rise to 9:1000 when the US Army Aviation Battalion arrives later in 2009.⁶⁴ These figures still remain at less than half the recommended doctrinal norm as mentioned above. Major General Mike Hindmarsh (Retd) supports Major General Molan's view that Australians and their Coalition partners in Oruzgan have been effective. However he feels that, due to the current threat and terrain, combined with the effectiveness of the Australian troops, Australia can operate with less than the doctrinally-accepted ratio of troops in Oruzgan.⁶⁵

Oruzgan has traditionally been seen as a transit area to either Pakistan or Kandahar and it has been used as a sanctuary area for the Taliban, particularly in Gizab to the north and the Khod Valley to the north-east. The Australian forces focus their operations largely around the triangle from Baluchi Pass to the north (occasionally as far north as Chora), south toward Tarin Kowt, and some 20–30 kilometres to the east and west. The Dutch forces concentrate their efforts in the vicinity of Deh Rawood to the east of their main base in Tarin Kowt. The effects of both contributions remain localized, and it could be argued that there is little real security beyond the areas of operations.⁶⁶

The Dutch and the Australians are providing one critical role—the training and mentoring of the ANA's 4th Brigade. However, the situation remains uncertain, with the Australians planning to take over the mentoring of the growing Brigade by 2010 and the Dutch signalling that they will cease the leadership role and withdraw the majority of their troops in 2010. Australia is clearly indicating its unwillingness to assume the leadership role in Oruzgan, and yet the United States remains relatively disinterested in the province. A stalemate is emerging with a possible outcome that may force Australia into a compromise position, with US leadership and support provided from Helmand Province or Regional Command South.⁶⁷ It is currently

⁶⁴ Jim Molan. 'How much is enough in Afghanistan'. For calculation purposes, Molan assumes the population of Oruzgan is 500,000, which is slightly less than estimates of slightly over 600,000.

⁶⁵ Mike Hindmarsh. Personal communication with author received via email on 14 July 2009.

⁶⁶ In mid 2009 counterinsurgency specialist Dr Daniel Marston claimed that Australian troops were unwilling to leave Oruzgan Province and join heavy fighting in Helmand and Kandahar; his remarks being specifically directed against the mentoring teams working with the ANA. The Chief of the Defence Force responded to his remarks. See 'Houston touts Taliban kill, training efforts', ABC News. Interview with Chief of the Defence Force Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, 21 July 2009, available at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/07/21/2632274.htm>>, accessed 21 July 2009.

⁶⁷ The leadership issue of Oruzgan has been uncertain for some time. Australia has made it clear that it does not have the capacity to take on the task, while the Dutch have also made it clear that their command was for a fixed period. The United States has established a helicopter Aviation Battalion in Tarin Kowt, yet remain reluctant to lead. A compromise may see Oruzgan Province linked to Helmand for command and control.

planned that the 4th Brigade will reach operational maturity in three to four years. However, it is likely that specialist support will be required for a substantial period to enable growth of a full indigenous capacity.⁶⁸

From a broader Australian whole-of-government approach, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Australian Federal Police and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade personnel deployed to Camp Baker at Tarin Kowt struggle to maintain a presence. The current security environment precludes both the effective delivery of aid programmes and the effective support to the development of the ANP. With the benefit of hindsight, it could be argued that progress at least in Oruzgan would have been far greater if, in 2006, Australia had developed a balanced whole-of-government approach and a true counterinsurgency campaign in partnership with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The work of the PRTs and, more recently, the MRTF, through their added roles of training and mentoring Afghanistan's security forces, has in many ways taken away these responsibilities from local government. Almost three years along the road to recovery in Oruzgan, both the local government and aid agencies have achieved only limited success.⁶⁹

Yet the nature of Australia's commitment to this conflict raises many questions about the Australian Government's agenda toward Afghanistan. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper, *'Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030'*, highlights that 'it is not a principal task of the ADF to be generally prepared to deploy to the Middle East ... in circumstances where it has to engage in ground operations against heavily armed adversaries'.⁷⁰ Therefore, while it is prepared to commit small groups of Special Forces into this arena, the Australian Government has been less willing to employ larger conventional forces in warfighting roles without substantial build-up, and then has taken a longer-term cautious approach to deployment of those forces. Australians were making solid progress with mentoring, leadership targeting and reconstruction efforts in Oruzgan, and while some at the tactical level might have been critical of the limitations placed on Australian force elements,⁷¹ at official government levels, Coalition partners have consistently praised the size and nature of Australia's deployment. Many NATO troop-contributing countries also suffer severe limitations.

Regardless of the tactical achievements, Chris Snedden believes that that the conflict in Afghanistan is not worth the human cost, and challenges the arguments to justify the

⁶⁸ Mentoring to a mature level will require assistance with Command and Control, medical, support in calling in offensive Coalition fire support, and sustained Coalition rotary and fixed-wing aircraft support to enable operations.

⁶⁹ Matt Waldman. *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Department of Defence. *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, p. 56.

⁷¹ This was highlighted with the deployment of the Over Watch Battle Group in Southern Iraq and the specific operating restrictions placed on both it and the training team. Discussions with Coalition partners and Australian Army personnel deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan have routinely raised this tactical frustration at the constraints placed on forces, restricting tactical employment.

commitment beyond that of alliance maintenance.⁷² With the Australian Operation *Slipper* funding estimated at A\$1.2 billion for the 2001–2008 period, the current commitment will cost substantially more and detract from regional security commitments whilst inevitably costing more Australian lives.⁷³ This view is typical of that held by many Australians who are concerned that this conflict could develop into another drawn out and costly conflict, similar to the Vietnam War. For the moment, the general population accepts the situation and understands that the service personnel deployed in Afghanistan are doing so at the direction of the government, with bi-partisan political support. This attitude could change quickly if Australian troops were to suffer casualties at the same rate as US and UK soldiers.

Current planning is for Australia's main force commitment to end after the Afghan summer of 2012.⁷⁴ As noted above, Chief of the Australian Defence Force Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston hopes that Australian forces will complete their training mission of the ANA in three to four years.⁷⁵ If this cannot occur, then any further ongoing commitment should be questioned, as Australia could be drawn into a greater security dilemma as the Taliban and Al Qaeda networks expand their control further into Pakistan and the region.

What does Afghanistan Need Now?

Regardless of the progress made in Afghanistan, there is need for a much longer-term approach. Based on historical precedent and the current progress of the fight against the Taliban, many commentators believe that achieving a secure and stable Afghanistan is impossible. However, to walk away from this conflict has the potential to reignite the issues that resulted in the rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the first place and to once again see Afghanistan flourish as a breeding ground and 'safe haven' for Islamic extremism. The situation in Pakistan would also rapidly degenerate, presenting the region and the world with the dilemma of a nuclear-armed, radicalised territory.

This paper therefore argues for a review of the current strategies for the medium and long-term. Additional troops may be a required, however this option is unlikely to be supported in significant numbers by any Coalition partners due to wavering political support for troop increases. On the other hand, engaging with the Taliban will only produce limited success unless the right conditions are created prior to such

⁷² Christopher Snedden, *Should Australia still be in Afghanistan?* Unpublished paper, 2009 (copy held by the author), received 13 February 2009.

⁷³ Christopher Snedden, *Should Australia still be in Afghanistan?*, pp. 7–8. Operation *Slipper* is the operational name for Australia's contribution to the war in Afghanistan under ISAF.

⁷⁴ Christopher Snedden, *Should Australia still be in Afghanistan?*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ "Houston touts Taliban kill, training efforts", ABC News. Interview with the Chief of the Defence Force Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston.

engagement. The porosity of Afghanistan's borders further complicates the issue, particularly as Pakistan is preoccupied with its own internal Taliban-related problems.⁷⁶ A wider political strategy is therefore required to build the indigenous capacity of the Afghan Government to reinforce the loyalty of the population and provide greater security, and to enhance socio-economic support including reconstruction efforts. Military action alone will most likely only produce a stalemate, an outcome that is unacceptable to both the Coalition and the local Afghan population.

Further, the military response requires a revised Coalition counterinsurgency campaign. Such a modification will provide a greater emphasis on the security of the people, rather than on the conduct of offensive operations. Coordination of these operations must involve all levels of government and be enacted alongside the ANA and the ANP. It is critical that the emphasis on training and mentoring the ANA continues, along with a rapid human security approach to key populated areas. The conduct of offensive operations, with mounting civilian casualties, is diminishing the local support for the Coalition effort, both in Afghanistan and abroad. The ANP must adjust its focus to address internal corruption and to facilitate the provision of law and order so as to combat crime. To achieve this, the ANP need to be trained and mentored in a similar way as the ANA and must be provided with a relatively secure environment to perform their duties. Doing otherwise will result in a limited and ineffective policing function.

Critical to the Coalition's breakdown of Taliban influence are wider offensive operations and the targeting of Taliban leadership. Further, when the Afghan Government is in a position to guarantee security and basic services to its citizens, support for the Taliban will decline accordingly.⁷⁷ Mentoring at all levels is likely to become the most important task. It will require support to, and from, the Afghan Government and needs to take into account the desires of that leadership. These changes rely on a combination of force, security, cooperation and stability as well as economic development. They should go some way toward alleviating the current 'suffocating pattern of segmentary society',⁷⁸ including supporting the alignment and integration of the Pashtuns into Afghanistan's state system.

It is vital to restore confidence in the Pashtun majority and develop a political system that suits the diverse nature of the country. Although free and fair elections will be

⁷⁶ A delineation exists between the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Although each may coexist in the western borders of Pakistan, the Taliban in Afghanistan are less concerned and even less willing to become involved in the internal fight of the Taliban in Pakistan.

⁷⁷ International Crisis Group. 'Afghanistan: New US Administration, New Directions', p. 6.

⁷⁸ A segmentary society is a social system comprising numerous relatively small autonomous groups that generally regulate their own affairs, but who periodically come together to form larger groups and who, in some senses, may collectively appear to be a single large community. See Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi. *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, pp. 76–77. Segmentary societies tend to be agricultural societies living in small discrete areas of a larger identifiable territory.

tested again in August 2009, allegations of corruption are already rife. Karzai is likely to continue as president simply due to a lack of viable contenders. More relevant to the current challenges is to understand that resolving the problems of the Pashtun leadership is central to the solution. The Coalition has been overly focused on supporting the reach of a central government, rather than allowing the tribal elders to restore a more traditional balance to the governance of the country. One method suggested by Johnson and Mason would be 'to elect provincial governors and deputy governors directly, rather than the current method of having outsiders imposed upon the Pashtun provinces by fiat from Kabul'.⁷⁹

Further, the entrenched production and trafficking of opium presents major difficulties. Eradication programmes have proven to be counterproductive and, importantly, counter-narcotic programmes remain ineffective against the Taliban.⁸⁰ The only time production levels have been low was when the Taliban self-regulated in 2001. Even those who supported the Coalition continued to gain revenues from trafficking and were the first to replant their crop. The success for any eradication programmes remains limited as they divide communities, and are often in areas in which corruption is endemic.

The provision of a cash-crop alternative to divert the population from the production of opium seems to be the only solution. However, over a million casual labourers link their survival to income generated from poppy harvesting, and no other crop alternatives are able to generate similar levels of income. A positive reinforcement campaign is needed—one that focuses on the conduct of interdiction operations and the provision of alternative income streams.⁸¹ Financial rewards and a community desire to produce alternative cash crops will assist in the transformation of this illegal industry. The flow-on benefits will be numerous, not only within Afghanistan but with bordering states that thrive on the illicit opium industry. In the short-term, the area of greatest concern is how best to deliver aid to those communities that are ready to make a positive change.

Reforms in aid delivery are required, in conjunction with initiatives to improve the security, legal, political, economic and social environment. The delivery of aid needs to improve, with a focus on distribution to areas with improved security. This would send a clear message to opposition elements that they would receive tangible benefits if they were to stop fighting the government and Coalition troops. Greater levels of

⁷⁹ Thomas H. Johnson and Chris M. Mason. 'No Sign until the Burst of Fire—Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier', p. 74.

⁸⁰ George Friedman. 'Strategic Divergence: The War Against the Taliban and the War Against Al Qaeda'.

⁸¹ James L Jones, USMC (Ret) and Thomas R Pickering, (Co-Chairs). *Revitalizing Our Efforts Rethinking Our Strategies*, Afghanistan Study Group Report, Centre for the Study of the Presidency, released 30 January 2008, p. 14.

monitoring and accountability are required, with an Afghan ownership focus. This should be linked to true counterinsurgency operations where, ultimately, ANA forces are established into areas and take full control of areas along with the ANP.⁸² The use of contractors and technical assistance requires close monitoring to ensure that the aid funding is utilised effectively. PRTs should focus on their clear mandate of providing an interim role of developing a stable and secure environment. As villages and provinces become secure, the handover to local security forces, local government and UN agencies should occur, with the role of the PRTs scaling back and relocating to less secure regions. This more effective approach initially focuses on larger urban centres and the protection of key infrastructure, allowing for greater control and influence of state and local government, including the ANP. This will go some way toward building confidence in the future and permitting the Coalition to commence a staged drawdown.⁸³

Coalition and Afghan Government forces cannot permit the ongoing use of safe havens or sanctuary areas to conduct transnational attacks. Pakistan must be included in a regional campaign that can deliver effective resources into areas such as Quetta. The 'clear, hold and build' counterinsurgency approach requires an 'oil stain' model that achieves success before expanding steadily. Currently, Coalition forces are spread throughout areas, often of low threat and achieving little. A coordinated and supported campaign approach is required; however it is uncertain if both the Afghan Government and the Coalition can synchronise their efforts. Ultimately this approach requires the drawdown of troops and the visible ownership of the security and governance issues by the Afghan people in order to turn the *jihad* back against the extremist elements of the Taliban.

The border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan currently provide unwieldy buffer zones and sanctuary areas for extremists. Cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with support from the international community, should see the reduction or removal of such sanctuaries. The Government of Pakistan is currently demonstrating an outwardly hard-line approach to the Taliban-controlled regions of the FATA where greater and more immediate threats to Pakistan exist, and it is launching further military operations against Taliban militants in the Waziristan

⁸² The ANA and ANP are experiencing a period of rapid growth and capability development. As units come on line through the partnership and mentoring programmes, they should establish firm bases within Provinces (with Coalition assistance) so as to maintain continuous presence on the ground. The conduct of operations that see both Coalition forces or mentored Afghan forces maintain limited presence is counterproductive and provide the Taliban with access to the population and therefore a higher degree of control and influence.

⁸³ This paper does not permit a detailed explanation of the long-term reform requirements; however the author believes that to create the conditions necessary for this to occur will take at least a decade of support. This does not mean that Coalition military forces will be required to provide a dominant role for this extended period, but they are critical in working hand-in-hand with the ANA to create the conditions for change.

region. This is a logical build-up on the recent offensive in the Swat Valley. However, operations in these autonomous regions have previously proven difficult, and the mountainous terrain and lack of Pakistan military control along the border means that any pressure on the Taliban might force the militants into Afghanistan.⁸⁴

The current situation in Pakistan is a result of both pressure from the United States and a desire by Pakistan to resolve deepening internal conflict. However, whether Pakistan has the will to continue an inevitably unpopular campaign—one with high civilian casualties and a large number of internally-displaced persons—remains questionable. The Pakistan and Afghan Governments, through the United Nations and in cooperation with the Coalition, need to resolve the ‘Durand Line’⁸⁵ border issue and work toward achieving a more controlled, regulated and less porous border. If Pakistan were to exert wider diplomatic pressure and arrest the Afghanistan-based Taliban leadership in Quetta and surrounding areas, this would demonstrate its resolve to deal with the fundamental root causes of the conflict in both countries.

What is a Realistic End-State for Afghanistan?

*Let me be clear: The United States has made a lasting commitment to defeat Al-Qaeda, but also to support the democratically elected sovereign governments of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. That commitment will not waiver. And that support will be sustained.*⁸⁶

A timeline for success and a defined end-state for Afghanistan are political necessities, and both are highly desired by all troop-contributing states. However, rather than a specific timeline for victory, the Coalition should work toward an agreed ‘grand strategy’, or an aligned regional campaign approach. This would require an understanding of the long-term efforts required from both a civilian and military perspective, in order to reach an end-state that would set the conditions to achieve a safe and secure environment that does not support Islamic extremism.

⁸⁴ *Pakistan: Facing Down Waziristan*, Stratfor Intelligence Briefs 88/09, available at: <<http://www.stratfor.com/>>, accessed 24 June 2009.

⁸⁵ The Durand Line is the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The border was established after an agreement was reached between the British Empire and the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan of Afghanistan in 1893; to demarcate the border between Afghanistan and what was then British India (and currently Pakistan’s NWFP, FATA and Balochistan). This line remains the international boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is officially recognised by most countries, is an ongoing point of contention between the two parties.

⁸⁶ US President Barack Obama. Remarks at a White House Summit between Obama and Karzai, 7 May 2009, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-after-trilateral-meeting-with-President-Karzai-of-Afghanistan-and-President-Zardari-of-Pakistan-5/6/09/>, accessed 12 July 2009.

In 2008, the ISAF Commander, General Dan McNeil, stated that it would take the ANA and ANP until 2011 to be in a position to manage the country's security and allow for troop drawdowns.⁸⁷ Yet, with dwindling Coalition support and a heavy reliance on the United States to fill the void, the international community has failed to support this conflict with what was termed 'one twenty-fifth of the troops and one fiftieth of the aid per head in Bosnia'.⁸⁸ Talk of troop drawdowns appeal to the home audiences in what is becoming an unpopular conflict, but a lack of resources and commitment can only extend current progress and timelines to the right.

Yet as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently said: '[V]ictory was a 'long-term prospect' under any scenario ... However, U.S. forces must begin to turn the situation around in a year, or face the likely loss of public support.'⁸⁹ The Obama Administration has realised that it cannot achieve the ambitious promises of the previous Bush Administration's security plan. Consequently, it has adjusted its key objective to stop Afghanistan from being used and exploited as a launching pad for international acts of terror, with a specific focus on the Pakistan border regions.⁹⁰ Regional commitment will be vital; however, the recent elections and consequent political fallout in Iran, and bloody Pakistan-led military offensives in the FATA, have highlighted the difficulties ahead for regional players. It is likely that Pakistan and Iran will have critical roles to play as regional actors as the Coalition comes to realise that 'defeating' the Taliban is an untenable goal due to lack of capacity and time constraints.

Therefore, the likely best end-state for the Coalition will be threefold: (1) the provision of adequate security forces that can hold and reduce the insurgency fight; (2) the training of the ANA and ANP to levels of relative self-sufficiency where they have developed the capacity to operate independently; and (3) the creation of an Afghan government that has been mentored and supported by the international community to the point of achieving relative self-sufficiency.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Kenneth Katzman. *Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, 4 March 2009, available at: <www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>, accessed 3 May 2009, p. 38.

⁸⁸ Paddy Ashdown. 'Just the Man to Bang Heads together in Kabul', *The Times*, 2 February 2009, available at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article5634470.ece>, accessed 16 June 2009. The Bosnia example highlights that if you expect progress to emerge from conflict, you must both commit to it and resource it.

⁸⁹ Julian Barnes. 'Americans won't accept "long slog" in Afghanistan war', Gates says, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 2009, available at: <<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-gates19-2009jul19,0,477289.story>>, accessed 20 July 2009.

⁹⁰ Jo Coelmont (ed.) *End-State Afghanistan*, EGMONT, Royal Institute for International Relations, Academia Press, March 2009, , p. 20, available at: <<http://aei.pitt.edu/10881/>>, accessed 6 July 2009.

⁹¹ Jo Coelmont (ed.) *End-State Afghanistan*, p. 22.

Australia will deal with its own challenges in the province in which it operates, as it contends with both the Taliban and provincial leadership issues. Australia has clearly signalled that its desired end-state is to train the ANA 4th Brigade in Oruzgan to a stage whereby it can conduct independent security operations in the province. This being said, the key issue for Australia remains the maintenance of its principal alliance.

Visions by Major General Molan of 6,000 Australian troops on the ground in Oruzgan are not supported by the current leadership, nor are they sustainable beyond a single rotation. Unlike some of its Coalition partners, Australia has been relatively 'lucky,' having lost only 11 killed in action and yet to feel a major public backlash such as is occurring in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, where there is growing anti-war sentiment for the operation in Afghanistan. Through a mixture of good luck, adaptive counterinsurgency warfare and a lower threat environment than provinces such as Kandahar and Helmand, Australian troops, in partnership with the ANA, continue to make solid progress from a military perspective.

The greatest dilemma facing all forces is enabling a whole-of-government response beyond that of creating a secure environment on the ground in Afghanistan. But this paper argues that once the ANA and ANP are in a position to guarantee an acceptable level of security and a basic level of law and order, movement can then be made in other key areas of development. Aid projects can become wider reaching and the majority of the population will see the benefits, creating a flow-on effect. When clear progress has been made, conditions will be reached that will permit the Coalition to drawdown and hand over responsibility for the country to Afghanistan's authorities.

Conclusion

As recent history has demonstrated, the physical defeat of the Taliban will require more than purely military approaches. Importantly, Pakistan will play a critical part in any political or military solution. While it is clear that Pakistan must deal with its many internal issues, the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda elements utilise Pakistan's border areas with relative impunity. The Government of Pakistan must eliminate this tacit support.

Ongoing insecurity and criminal activities continue to hinder progress in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Government has a limited ability to generate revenues and is reliant on international assistance for support, yet how aid is spent has an enormous impact on the lives of most Afghan people and will determine the success of any reconstruction and development. As suggested by Matt Waldman, donors must take urgent steps to improve and increase their levels of assistance to Afghanistan,⁹² as aid

⁹² Matt Waldman. *Falling Short: Aid Effectiveness in Afghanistan*.

to date has been insufficient and, in many cases, wasteful and ineffective. The key question will be whether the Coalition can maintain its successes and prevent Afghanistan from state collapse even though the indicators for such an outcome are not reassuring. Problems with endemically-corrupt political and government officials, limited regional governance and the potential for failed elections are issues that remain problematic.

The end-state of a 'safe and secure' Afghanistan that permits a drawdown and the ultimate withdrawal of Coalition forces will take decades to achieve at the current rate of development. A clearer understanding of the requirements to adopt a coordinated campaign counterinsurgency approach, alongside Afghanistan's security forces, is a step in the right direction. The next 18 months will be a critical period for Afghanistan and the Coalition, as the country moves through its second election process and speeds up the development of its ANA and ANP.

However there are many ongoing challenges. Public support for the conflict is waning in several Coalition countries, aid agencies are frustrated at the lack of progress and the Taliban is seemingly unwilling to change its agenda. The stakes are high for the Coalition, and in particular the Obama Administration which is now the second US Administration to have attempted to control Islamic extremism. The effectiveness of Al Qaeda and the Pashtun Taliban influence has been reduced but not nullified. The solution lies in assisting the Afghanistan Government to develop a nation-state where the tribal areas have a degree of autonomy, and yet receive assistance from the central government. This will require a well-coordinated, long-term strategy where Coalition and Afghan support align to encourage the development of a modern Afghanistan. This cannot be done without regional support, and Pakistan in particular is a key partner in the way forward. Sufficient pressure must be applied to ensure progress, as Pakistan has the potential to offer the United States an honourable exit through its ability to exert influence on elements inaccessible to Western forces.⁹³

This paper finds that defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan by military means alone remains unlikely. However, the provision of an environment which by Afghan standards is 'safe and secure' will require the positive outcome of a number of steps. A secure environment must be established by Coalition forces, with the development of a strong government at both the central and provincial level that can work cooperatively internally and with its regional partners. The ANA and ANP must be well mentored and trained to professional standards, and a sound aid programme developed that leads toward a self-sustaining Afghanistan. Meeting these conditions will be an enormous task in which new or adjusted political and military approaches are essential. Compared with other counterinsurgency campaigns the chance of a

⁹³ Syed Saleem Shahzad. 'Everyone wants a piece of the Afghan war', *Asia Times Online*, 10 February 2009, available at: <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KB10Df01.html>, accessed 4 May 2009.

solution in the short-term appears remote. Even with the strongest possible action and cooperation at the national level, it is difficult to see solutions emerging in less than ten years unless proactive action is taken now. If such steps are not taken immediately, it is likely that international public support will evaporate, and Afghanistan's future security will continue to pose a problem for not only the country's leadership and citizens, but also the wider world.

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