

RECOMMITMENT AND SHARED INTERESTS

PROGRESS AND THE FUTURE OF AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY

DAVID D McKIERNAN

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been engaged in Afghanistan for over seven years. The perception of a growing insurgency has caused some commentators and nations to question the mission, challenge the financial costs or become weary of the fight. Others believe the success of ISAF's strategy in Afghanistan is not only possible, but likely with the steadfast military, political and economic support of NATO and the international community. The Commander of ISAF, General McKiernan, argues for a recommitment by NATO to the goals of the mission, an acceptance of long-term responsibility, and a realisation that the solution requires more than just military means to secure the region.

Earlier this year the Afghan National Army (ANA), with assistance from their mentors in the 1st Battalion The Rifles, destroyed a Taliban stronghold in Spin Masjid in central Helmand province. From this base, insurgents had repeatedly attacked ANA and NATO forces, murdered locals who supported the Afghan government and propagated a growing sense of fear among the population. The combined operation was conceived, planned and executed by the ANA along with British explosive ordnance disposal teams and skilfully achieved all operational objectives with minimal casualties suffered by security forces and the local residents.¹ This mission successfully eliminated a safe haven for the Taliban. It also previewed what the Transfer of Lead Security (TLSR) process will look like at the national level with a sustained commitment by NATO to the mission and the desired end state in Afghanistan.

Despite clear signs of progress in Helmand Province and other regions in Afghanistan, recent conclusions drawn

by think tanks, journalists, and opinion leaders include the following: 'the insurgents in Afghanistan are winning'; 'the Taliban are gathering at the gates of Kabul'; and, 'the insurgents now control vast stretches of the country'. Other pundits, noting an increase in violence in the country, suggest this spike is a clear indicator that very little progress is achievable in Afghanistan and that the situation is getting worse not better. The view from the military on the ground is quite different. The insurgents are not winning. The Afghan people do not want the Taliban back in power. The resolve of the international community remains

The insurgents are not winning

strong. The insurgents have de facto control of limited rural or mountainous areas. They do not currently control a single city or provincial capital. The capital city of Kabul is increasingly safer after lead security responsibility was trans-

ferred to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in three quarters of the province this year. Across Kabul City and Province, violence is down from the previous year by 51 per cent and 18 per cent respectively.

The increase in violence in the rest of Afghanistan in 2008 was largely driven by several important factors: a sustained increase throughout 2008 in the number of ANSF and ISAF forces deployed more broadly around the country; a large increase in the number of ANSF/ISAF offensive operations taking the fight to the enemy; the continued existence of insurgent sanctuaries across the Pakistan border; and the increased use of asymmetrical attacks (for example, improvised explosive devices) by insurgents. However, these facts do not equal a spreading of the insurgency. Violence remains largely concentrated in the south and east: indeed, 70 per cent of the violence continued to occur in only 10 per cent of the districts in 2008.

Thousands of troops will deploy to Afghanistan in the next few months.



An ISAF soldier, along with his ANA counterparts, pauses during Operation *Aabi Toorah* which took place in central Helmand in March 2009. Photo courtesy of ISAF.

The arrival of new troops does not immediately translate into a decrease in insurgent activity. On the contrary, it is likely that another sizeable increase in kinetic activity will occur in 2009 as the fresh troops move into new areas to help protect the population and engage the enemy. This potential increase in kinetic activity plus the tendency of the insurgents to mount operations from amongst civilians may result in a regrettable increase in casualties, both for civilians and ISAF forces. These conditions do not indicate a deteriorating security situation, however. To illustrate, in May and June 2008, the Garmsir District in central Helmand Province was freed from insurgent control and influence by the actions of the US 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit. After an initial sharp rise in violent activities lasting almost a month, the Marines witnessed a dramatic drop in direct attacks, which continues to this day. Within a month or two after the arrival of the Marines, the town's bazaar

opened, produce and goods began to trickle in, and village elders convened a meeting of local leaders and tribal elders (*shura*) for the first time in three years. The ANA subsequently assumed primary responsibility for security and a cautious sense of stability returned to the area. With additional international forces and a growing ANSF, we will have additional opportunities to replicate this operation in many other key areas in 2009.

As the NATO mission in Afghanistan enters its eighth year, it is critical to assess the mission's progress, understand the challenges that confront us and examine the necessary steps to achieve campaign objectives. ISAF does indeed confront many challenges and progress is clearly uneven along the three primary lines of operation. In addition to security concerns in the south and the slow development of the police, corruption is widespread throughout and hinders efforts to help connect the government with the people. Public perception of the

central government's legitimacy remains tenuous, particularly in many rural areas. Given the shortage of trained and experienced staff and often-required ministry representatives, good governors are

Across Kabul City and Province, violence is down from the previous year

so important to a province that they can be a single point of failure. Meanwhile, development efforts are often-times poorly co-ordinated and subject to national priorities and influence in capitals far from Kabul.

Yet, there are several important reasons to be optimistic in 2009. President Obama's recent decision to send over 17,000 additional troops from the United States will allow ISAF and ANSF to operate from a position of strength

in more areas of the country and take the fight to the insurgents. A proposed plus-up in the civilian presence by several coalition partners – the US, Canada, Great Britain and the Netherlands – will provide critical and tailored expertise in governance, development and rule of law to build Afghan capacity. Recent reforms within the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan are now strengthening the ANP and ANA, delivering security to more areas, while central government programmes are gradually extending down to the district level to improve the lives of those who matter most – the people. Afghanistan is now working closely with Pakistan to combat extremists in border areas and international forces are helping to provide better co-ordination, intelligence, and training needed to defeat insurgents in these areas. Afghans will go to the polls this August to elect a president and provincial councils; a process that strengthens the connection between Afghans and their government. The recently completed nationwide government-led voter registration programme was highly encouraging. Prior to the process, the Afghan Independent Election Commission expected about 2 million Afghans to register, yet over 4.5 million new Afghan voters had registered by the end. These new voters are in addition to the approximate 11 million who registered to vote in 2004. With the election scheduled for 20 August, UN Assistance Mission Afghanistan (UNAMA) and ISAF are ready to provide assistance at the government's request. These are all positive steps that are worthy of NATO's attention and resources, but only with a sustained commitment will they be anything other than temporary effects.

Security and Governance: The Criticality of the ANSF

The mere presence of the UN-approved international forces feeds the misperception spread by the extremists that the Afghan government is propped up by 'foreign invaders'. A counter to this propaganda effort is the fact that the ANSF have reached a point where most of the security presence here is Afghan rather than international. Indeed, the ANA continues to grow and develop into

a competent army and the ANP continues to improve through better training and the application of reforms. As of February 2009, 61 per cent of fielded ANA *kandaks* (battalions) are fully capable of performing independent operations or with only minimal international support. This is a great success story. In the midst of an active counter-insurgency campaign, the ANA has grown from nil to 80,000 soldiers in just over five years. However, this success story may be short-lived if NATO is not able to provide the trainers and mentors necessary to keep up the pace of expansion.

At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, NATO heads of state and government reaffirmed the Alliance's commitment to support the development of a self-sufficient ANSF. Since this commitment, it has become clear that ANA development will only proceed at the

Violence remains largely concentrated in the south and east

required rate if we simultaneously partner and provide mentoring, institutional training, equipment and sustainment capabilities to the ANA. To do this, more money and more people are required. The fielding of *kandaks* for the ANA continues apace but the initial training period must be reinforced with ongoing partnering and mentoring activities and, for an army that is in the midst of a fierce counter-insurgency, that mentoring must occur when the *kandak* is fielded and during active operations.

High quality operational mentoring and liaison teams (OMLT), which embed with ANA *kandaks* and smaller formations, provide hands-on skills development, mentoring, and coaching while ensuring access to key ISAF enablers such as air support, intelligence and medical evacuation. As we expand the ANA to 134,000 by late 2011, we will need more OMLTs (or equivalent US embedded training teams) to support the additional *kandaks* in the field. The current NATO requirement is for sixty-two OMLTs, rising to 102 by December 2011. There is already a shortfall of ten teams and the

projection is for that shortfall to quadruple in the next three years. At the level of the individual NATO soldier, working in an OMLT is professionally demanding and rewarding. The soldiers enjoy seeing the professional development of their Afghan colleagues, knowing that their support is a significant driver in that progress. At the operational level of command, OMLTs are essential to the security line of operation and have an impact and effect well in excess of the numbers of troops involved. At the Alliance level, OMLTs demonstrate NATO's commitment to developing a sustainable Afghan state and responsible security partner. The current level of commitment from NATO nations is disappointing and suggests that the importance of OMLTs is misunderstood. They are, in fact, one of the keys to making real progress in NATO's shared endeavour in Afghanistan.

Through much of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 the ANA effectively led the majority of all combat operations in the country.² Five ANA corps headquarters are currently planning and supporting ongoing operations and engaging anti-government elements with singular purpose and high motivation. These achievements reflect not merely a quantitative measure – although that is important in its own way – but also a qualitative measure of their performance. The number of Afghans recruited into the ANA, the formal military training, and the execution of successful complex modern combat manoeuvres is impressive for a country long accustomed to warfare waged primarily by irregular forces.

Similarly, qualitative improvements are needed of the ANP. ANP units are in desperate need of professional police training and partner units to mentor and assist in paramilitary operations. The ANP are the first line of security for most Afghans. A more competent and less corrupt police force means improved security and a stronger nation. The ANP provide an important aspect of effective governance and rule of law, ensuring the presence of the Afghan government in the towns and villages outside of major cities and provincial capitals. Daily police presence is an enabling force that creates the conditions for stable Afghan



ISAF Commander, General David D McKiernan, shakes hands with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai. *Photo courtesy of ISAF.*

communities that can resist insurgent influence.

The remote location of many police outposts and the slow progress in the development of their capacity and capability make them particularly vulnerable. In a counter-insurgency, the police must also be capable of carrying out paramilitary tasks and joint operations with other security forces. Most ANP are inadequately equipped and trained to do so. The current Minister of Interior, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, has been energetic in identifying his priorities and effective in driving needed reform. However, much remains to be done and more resources are necessary to accelerate reform and ensure lasting results.

Trainers and embedded mentors from ISAF, EU Police Mission Afghanistan (EUPOL) and primarily the US-led Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) have made significant contributions professionalising the police force and deterring corruption during the past year, but the large major-

ity of police districts are still in need of some level of training and reform to be fully effective. Today, the ANP are in the middle of a comprehensive training and reform programme called Focused District Development (FDD). FDD is ongoing in fifty-two districts, but police from over 300 other districts are still in need

ISAF confronts many challenges, and progress is clearly uneven

of some level of training and reform to be fully effective. A parallel programme called Focused Border Development is underway for elements of the Afghan Border Police (ABP). A chronic shortage of police trainers and mentors slows these necessary reforms. Police training is an excellent mission to which experienced police officers from Europe and the United States could contribute. In

addition, NATO military units and trainers could develop or enhance the ANP's paramilitary role through tailored training programmes and partnering.

A Work in Progress: Critical Capabilities, Unity of Command and Unity of Effort

The NATO mission in Afghanistan requires a full commitment by those with the capabilities and capacity to fight an elusive enemy in very challenging terrain. While the ANSF continues to grow and build, ISAF forces must provide both the requisite partnering forces to create a secure environment as well as the enabling capabilities for which the ANSF is not yet manned, trained or equipped. Regrettably, ISAF continues to lack sufficient forces and enabling capabilities in several key areas (such as aviation, ISR, medical evacuation, engineers). The lack of these capabilities significantly reduces ISAF and ANSF's ability to protect the Afghan people, seize the initiative in critical battlegrounds, and even, at times,

secure themselves. While the uplift in US forces in 2009 will partially mitigate some of the shortfalls, it is imperative that all NATO nations strongly consider how they can help us to fill the manning and capability shortfalls.

Other initiatives are helping as well. Last October, after receiving agreement from NATO and the Afghan government, all non-ISAF US forces were consolidated under a single command structure entitled US Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A). More importantly, the new command and control structure enabled unity of effort in the fight against the insurgents. A single commander for ISAF and USFOR-A provides singular intent, unifying priorities and shared purpose. Some specific

Public perception of the central government's legitimacy remains tenuous

missions continue to be executed by American forces under Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF), but the vast majority of US forces remain under NATO command. If the ISAF counter-insurgency campaign is resourced and executed properly, the Afghan people will increasingly recognise that the international soldier is present to support and assist the ANSF and help protect the local population – not to dominate them or to take away their freedoms.

Just as overall command, co-ordination and control of military operations are synchronised to deliver desired effects, the same unity of effort is sought with our key partners in Afghanistan. While ISAF is currently leading the effort for security, it also plays a key support role in the other two lines of operation (governance and development) led by the Afghan government and assisted by UNAMA and other international partners. As the government continues to develop capacity, it will gradually be able to assume more and more responsibility. Until then, a comprehensive and integrated approach by the government and its two partners, adopted by all three in

late 2008, co-ordinates planning along the three lines of effort. The approach also enables the re-directing of precious resources to specifically targeted 'action' districts to achieve the greatest effects. As Afghans in neighbouring districts and provinces observe improvements, this process can be expanded contingent upon the availability of additional resources and capacity.

It is also critical to achieve unity of effort with Afghanistan's regional neighbours – notably Pakistan – who have a key role to play in achieving a successful end-state for the mission in Afghanistan. Insurgent sanctuaries across the southern and eastern borders allow militants to harass and attack the Afghan people, ANSF and ISAF with relative impunity. Pakistan's military must take the lead in removing these extremists, as they are a growing existential threat to the Government of Pakistan as well as a threat to Afghanistan and the region. NATO and regional stakeholders simply cannot allow the Northwest Frontier Provinces (NWFP), Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan to remain areas of sanctuary for extremists and places for planning and training global terrorists.

A foundation for regional co-operation was started by the re-invigoration of the Tripartite Commission in October of 2008. This process quickly resulted in significantly enhanced co-ordination, complementary operations on both sides of the Durand Line, and improved intelligence sharing between ISAF, the ANA and Pakistan's Army and Frontier Corps. Through the tripartite process, all partners have agreed to the construction of border co-ordination centres manned by military officers from ISAF, the ANA and the Pakistan military, and to monthly flag officer meetings that improve co-ordination in the border region. This process allows for a more effective campaign against cross-border militant activity. However, additional steps are clearly required. NATO and EU diplomatic, political and economic efforts should build upon this foundation of co-operation to address the fundamental problems of security, governance and development confronting the Pakistani government in the NWFP and FATA. If NATO and other

international actors can achieve a coherent regional approach and synchronise efforts, we will achieve unity of effort on a larger scale and with greater effects in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Civilian Expertise

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are an important component of ISAF stability operations and are comprised of civilian and military personnel whose primary purpose is to help facilitate Afghan government ministries, international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the delivery of reconstruction and stabilisation assistance programmes to the people of Afghanistan. NATO nations together provide military/civilian manpower and funding support for twenty-four of the twenty-six PRTs in Afghanistan. However, the PRT lead nations have acknowledged that greater emphasis must be placed on the integration and harmonisation of PRT core functions and objectives to ensure they are properly aligned with the priorities of the Afghan government and supportive of civilian and military objectives.

The PRTs have been extremely successful in bringing needed services to rural areas and rebuilding infrastructure where it is most needed. Through PRTs, partnerships with community leaders, tribal elders and local district and provincial officials have been forged, providing a badly needed linkage between the people and sub-national governance. However, PRTs are under-resourced to address the severe shortage of public administration expertise and specialised skills that inhibits rapid progress in a largely illiterate society. A long-term commitment to building Afghan human capacity in many areas is required. It does little good for the PRT to build a school without teachers, a district court without a trained or literate judge, or a health clinic without trained physicians and nurses. A sustainable model that includes building infrastructure, providing education and developing human capacity is clearly a cross-cutting long-term solution. NATO civilian resources can be just as effective improving governance and development as the military

instruments of NATO are when applied to security. An expansion of the civilian effort by the NATO and ISAF Partners will strengthen Afghan government capability, increase its effectiveness and improve its legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people.

Greater and More Effective Presence

Effective counter-insurgency demands a presence throughout the country – from the northern borders to the base of the Helmand River, from the Pakistani border in the east and south to the Iranian border in the west. In the end, we need to develop the ANSF capability such that they can hold this vast and rugged country by themselves. In a few years, the Afghan security forces will be in a position to do this, but in the meantime, it is critical that we sustain our assistance efforts as lead security responsibility is transferred to the ANSF in a growing number of districts and provinces. We need our allies and partners in this effort, without reservation.

Earlier this year NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer identified the need for more military forces and specifically for more European forces. He said that the danger is not just one state, but also a region; and that this threat would grow unless substantially more resources, and indeed, more commitment, was made by the European NATO members.³ Four nations currently perform the bulk of the difficult work of engaging insurgents, but this does not in and of itself mark a split in the mission or amongst member states. NATO cannot become a two-tier alliance, with the US and a few willing allies as the only contributors for combat operations. The combat capabilities of the other states would steadily wither away and disappear. The insurgency in Afghanistan represents the greatest challenge to the Alliance since the end of the Cold War, and the Alliance must not bend before it. If NATO remains

steadfast, gathers strength (civilian and military) and seizes the initiative, it will set the conditions for success.

The issue of 'national caveats' has been a controversial one. Policy statements by national governments that restrict the employment and use of forces, permitted under NATO doctrine, are usually implemented to protect a nation's military personnel from increased danger or from committing potentially illegal actions. Often what they really achieve is increased danger for the very same forces the caveats are intended to protect. By limiting soldiers' freedom of action to conduct reconnaissance patrols, gain local intelligence, gain geo-physical situational awareness and, most importantly, employ the full range of offensive and defensive firepower, the caveats cede an enormous tactical advantage to the enemy. For example, a group of soldiers who emerge from a forward operating base to conduct a logistics movement with rules of engagement that hinder the use of all the tools for self-protection are at a significant disadvantage compared to the insurgent.

From an operational perspective, it is also extremely difficult to achieve security objectives in a given province when manoeuvre forces are confined to the relative safety of their walled fortifications. For military commanders, caveats inhibit the flexibility to employ scarce forces for maximum effectiveness, again ceding an advantage to the insurgents. Most importantly, when a nation employs caveats to limit the use of its forces, it sends an unambiguous signal to Afghan government and people that its participation in the mission to help Afghanistan is half-hearted at best. This is not to imply that those ISAF forces involved in non-combat or otherwise limited roles are not useful. As noted previously, the problems of Afghan security will not be solved solely with more bombs or bullets; but neither will they be solved by constrained forces ensconced

in fortifications, limited in their ability to partner with the ANSF and protect the Afghan people.

History has proven that counter-insurgencies most often succeed through political solutions with military support. The political solution that the government needs will only be made possible by a fully functioning security structure that allows it to bargain from a position of strength. This structure is something

Afghanistan is now working closely with Pakistan to combat extremists

that NATO must nurture. NATO's mission in Afghanistan remains a serious challenge – but not just for a few countries. While Afghans must rise to the challenge of rebuilding their nation, NATO and the international community must also rise to the challenge of helping them, not only to secure peace for Afghans, but for the region and beyond.

2009, NATO's sixtieth anniversary year, will be a pivotal one for the Alliance, for ISAF's mission and for Afghanistan. By partnering and mentoring Afghan security forces (ANA and ANP), improving governance by working with the Afghan government and UNAMA in an integrated approach, increasing emphasis on capacity-building, reconstruction and development, and marshalling our collective resources to address our shared counter-insurgency challenge we shall prevail. While the challenges are difficult and many, our hard won success will directly benefit Afghanistan and every one of the nations engaged in this noble mission. ■

General David D McKiernan US Army is Commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

NOTES

1 Sean Rayment, 'Taliban Stronghold Destroyed by British and Afghan Forces After 10 Day Battle', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 7 February 2009.

2 NATO Report, 'Metrics Brief, 2007–2008', *ISAF Strategic Communications*.

3 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, 'Transatlantic

Leadership for a New Era', speech by NATO Secretary General at the Security and Defence Agenda, Brussels, 26 January 2009.