

Defining the Mission

The US Engagement in Afghanistan

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Shot of multinational flags at
ISAF HQ in Kabul. Photo:
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Intra-alliance Analysis: Policies and Approaches of NATO Allies in Afghanistan

A CMI-PRIO study of the US, the UK, Germany and Norway

The growing difficulties facing the NATO mission in Afghanistan had by mid-decade led to increases in commitment and innovations in policy. Pressure on allies to make more robust military commitments mounted, coupled with policy innovations designed to meet the growing insurgency with more appropriate strategies and better use of resources. The 2006 Riga summit endorsement of a strategy that stressed the integration of military and civilian policy elements was an important step in this development. While the terminology and its implications differed (American policy-makers were already talking of 'counter-insurgency', while their European counterparts preferred 'comprehensive', 'integrated' or 'whole of government' approach), the Riga meeting signified a broadening as well as a deepening commitment of the alliance. In the years that followed, each NATO member and other allies struggled to adjust their policy to deal with often conflicting contexts and demands – a worsening situation on the ground, demands for alliance solidarity and awareness that NATO's prestige was on the line in Afghanistan, an increasingly critical public at home as casualties were rising, and growing concern over the economic costs of the war.

The papers in this series examine the strategies of four NATO members in this regard. Each case study first contextualizes their Afghanistan engagement in light of the broader foreign policy concerns of the country concerned, and then focuses on the development and adjustment of military strategy in relation to other components of the engagement. In this respect, special attention is given to the importance of realities on the ground in Afghanistan, organizational (NATO) interests, and domestic factors. The story is taken up to the NATO Lisbon summit meeting in November 2010, which marked the counter-point to Riga by announcing that security responsibility would be transferred to Afghan forces by the end of 2014.

What are the implications of this analysis for NATO's role in out-of-area, unconventional engagements? This question is addressed in a separate series of Policy Briefs presented as part of the project.

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“The military is a special instrument.....it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society.”

1. The initial response: A narrow focus

The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was in a sense a curious accident of history. Enraged by the attacks on New York and Washington, the Bush Administration invaded a country where the US previously had demonstrated only limited and vicarious interests. Central Asia was of peripheral concern to the neo-conservatives who dominated the strategic thinking of the Bush Administration. Yet strategic considerations in a broader sense were evident. Responding to the 9/11 attacks by going to war in Afghanistan was in line with the Administration's national security doctrine that celebrated *Realpolitik* and the importance of military power in the conduct of US foreign policy. The Administration's decision to remove the Taliban regime, rather than take focused, punitive measures against Al Qaeda alone, in turn proved to be a critical juncture. The stage was now set for a wider war, which quickly developed from the step-wise interaction between hostile forces.

When Al Qaeda struck at the US in September 2001, the Bush Administration initially defined its role in narrow terms. There was a pro-forma acknowledgement of the so-called abandonment thesis – that the world must not again walk away from Afghanistan as it had done after 1989 – but a US lead role in constructing a post-Taliban order was ruled out. In this regard, the Administration carried forward earlier themes in US policy. During the Cold War Afghanistan, like many other countries in the developing world, had been an arena for superpower rivalry, but in itself lacked economic, political or strategic interests to warrant long-term engagement. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 had occasioned only limited debate in Washington, between 'the bleeders' who wanted to continue an uncompromising anti-Communist policy towards Kabul to punish the Soviet Union; the 'dealers' who wanted the United States to use its influence to support an inclusive settlement among Afghan factions that included moderate Communists; and 'the disengagers' who advocated 'systematic disengagement from wars that were seen as unattractive, unpopular, unsellable, expensive, messy and entangling,' as a later report noted.¹ When the Soviet Union finally collapsed at the end of 1991, the disengagers won out and cited with approval an editorial in *The Times* of London: 'The world has no business in that country's tribal disputes and blood feuds.'²

In 2001, the theme of the disengagers initially framed policy towards Central Asia. The Bush-team adhered to a view of US national interests that celebrated the logic of power politics, laid out by the President's National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice in a much-cited article in *Foreign Affairs*.³ In this calculus of conventional *Realpolitik*, husbanding and projecting power on prioritized goals is a principle of first order. Relations with other large powers are most important. Next comes supporting allies, while 'rogue regimes' and hostile powers must be dealt with 'decisively' at all times, Rice wrote. Hitting hard to eliminate the Taliban and Al Qaeda after the attacks on the United States flowed logically from this view; staying on in Afghanistan to reconstruct a new order made little sense. Even in late September 2001, when the US Air Force was preparing to pulverize the Taliban, Bush held to a minimalist objective: 'We are not into nation-building. We are focussed on justice,' that is, killing or capturing Al Qaeda and Taliban members, above all Osama bin Laden.⁴ In internal White House discussions, considerations of

¹ Doug MacEachin and Janne E. Nolan, 'The US and Soviet Proxy War in Afghanistan, 1989–1992: Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?' Working Group Report no iv, November 15, 2005 (Georgetown University). http://www12.georgetown.edu/sfs/isd/Afghan_2_VR_report.pdf, p. 10.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ Condoleezza Rice, 'Promoting the National Interest,' *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 1 (2000), pp. 45-62. The essay was written while George W. Bush was a presidential candidate.

⁴ Justine Smith, 'War on Terror. Bush's Pledge: Smoke'em Out,' *The Mirror*, 26 September 2001.

what would happen after the Taliban regime was removed had appeared as an afterthought. On 4 October, just after the US had started bombing Afghanistan, Bush had famously asked: 'Who will run the country?'⁵ None of his advisers appeared to have any answer other than 'let the UN do it'. The Administration's rapid shift in attention to Iraq was another, and at the time unstated, reason for letting the UN take responsibility for 'nation-building' in Afghanistan. More generally, the assumption that the US military would create regime change while leaving allies and international organizations with the task of picking up the pieces was not unique to the Bush Administration. The Clinton Administration had promoted a similar division of labour between the US and the European Union in Kosovo.

Nevertheless, institutional pressures worked in favour of some long-term engagement. US aid agencies had been developing a capacity for post-conflict assistance during the 1990s, and started to plan in early October for ways to aid the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan. Expecting that there would be 'nation building on a huge scale', a cabinet meeting at the level deputies began discussing aid programmes in food production, health, education for women and small-scale infrastructure projects. They also planned to ask other major donors and the international financial institutions to make 'multi-billion dollar' commitments.⁶

In political terms, Washington had two main concerns.⁷ One was to ensure that an acceptable and trusted leader would be installed in Kabul. Although the Northern Alliance had been the principal partner of the US military during the invasion, its minority composition (Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, with a core Tajiks from the Panjshir valley) made it necessary to bring in Pashtun in leading positions. The point was stressed by the CIA in particular, citing the traditional ruling role of the Pashtun and their status as the single largest ethnic group in the country. There were also foreign policy considerations. During the civil wars of the 1990s, the Northern Alliance had developed links with Iran, Russia and Turkey, but had much less contact with the United States. The CIA's somewhat limited involvement with anti-Taliban forces in this period had mainly been with Pashtuns in the southeast. Washington consequently looked in this direction for a candidate to head an interim government, and found him in Hamid Karzai. It fell to the State Department's newly appointed 'ambassador to the Afghan opposition', James Dobbins, to promote Karzai's candidacy in the UN and to the Northern Alliance.⁸

The second main issue was the impact of security arrangements during the transitional period on US military operations against Taliban and Al Qaeda. It had been clear from the outset that US forces would not contribute to an international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan. During the 1990s US forces had participated in several 'stabilization' or 'peace enforcement/peace keeping' operations – in Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia – and had frequently undertaken humanitarian missions, the Bush Administration turned a new page.⁹ The function of US military forces was not peacekeeping or nation-building, but combat and deterrence in defence of US vital national interests. In the words of Condoleezza Rice: 'The military is a special instrument. It is lethal, and it is meant to be. It is not a civilian police force. It is not a political referee. And it is most certainly

⁵ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 195.

⁶ Woodward (2002), p. 193.

⁷ The State Department had established a high-level inter-agency team to deal with transitional issues. In mid-October, Colin Powell appointed the head of the Policy Planning Department in the State Department, Richard Haass, to be special coordinator for Afghanistan policy and the counterpart to Brahimi at the UN. Similar reassignments were made in the National Security Council, where two persons were given special responsibility for Afghanistan, including the Afghan-American Zalmay Khalilzad, later Ambassador to Afghanistan. In early November, James Dobbins was appointed as 'ambassador to the Afghan opposition'. The main task for Dobbins, a career diplomat with experience from European affairs, was to bring the various Afghan factions to form a government.

⁸ James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008).

⁹ See e.g. Congressional Research Service, *Peacekeeping and Related Stability Operations: Issues of U.S. Military Involvement*. Report to Congress. May 2006. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IB94040.pdf>

not designed to build a civilian society.’¹⁰ Beyond this, opinion was sharply divided. The State Department actively promoted the establishment of an international peacekeeping force formed by other nations in order to ensure, at a minimum, that Kabul would not be controlled by any one of the armed factions.¹¹ In mid-November, when the Northern Alliance forces were on the outskirts of Kabul, Colin Powell called for the formation of a ‘coalition of the willing’ to send a force, and the Department’s special coordinator for Afghanistan, Richard Haass, actively promoted the idea of an international peacekeeping force among allies.¹² The US military had strong objections, however, arguing that such a force would get in the way of their main objective – to eliminate Al Qaeda and Taliban.¹³

Refusal by the US military in 2001-02 to even support a multinational force by assisting with logistics and rescue was a main reason why ISAF’s initial mandate was limited to Kabul. The US military only withdrew these objections when faced with the demands of its other war in Iraq and the growing unrest in Afghanistan. These developments, as well as mounting pressures from the international aid community, led the UN Security Council in October 2003 to authorize the expansion of ISAF to ‘areas of Afghanistan outside of Kabul’ (Res. 1510).

2. US military strategy: Successive adaptations

Military objectives related to the fight against Taliban and Al Qaeda thus defined the initial US engagement in Afghanistan as well as the early role of ISAF. Military priorities to a large extent shaped political strategy as well during the decade that followed, even when Washington shifted policy to embrace ‘nation-building’, as we shall see below. On the tactical level, the military tended to emphasize kinetic operations, in line with the institutional and traditional understanding of the role of the US military. As Condoleezza Rice had written, the military ‘is lethal, and it is meant to be.’ Of the four distinct approaches that the US military adopted in Afghanistan after 2001, only one – a counter-insurgency strategy (COIN) – was premised on a close integration of civilian development efforts and kinetic military operations. The primacy of COIN doctrines and practice lasted only for a short time. ‘Integration’ in this period was basically determined by military objectives and force levels.

To better understand the emergence of COIN in the Afghan context, a brief review of the other approaches is helpful.

2.1. The Afghan model

The invasion force (Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF) adopted what soon became known as ‘the Afghan model’.¹⁴ Launched in October 2001, OEF was based on a combination of US airpower and Afghan militias, with a very light contingent of US ground forces. The advance party in late 2001 consisted of Special Operations Forces and around 1000 Marines. More US forces were added in early 2002 to mop up remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban but General Tommy Franks, head of the Central Command, was very clear. He wanted a ‘small foreign footprint...We

¹⁰ Rice, *op. cit.*, 53.

¹¹ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 110.

¹² Ewen MacAskill, ‘Special Envoy Arrives for talks in Pakistan,’ *The Guardian*, 27 October 2001. Haass had also favoured a large, joint US-NATO invasion force. James Traub, *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), p. 163.

¹³ Dobbins, *op.cit.* pp. 125-30.

¹⁴ S. Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 2002).

don't want to repeat the Soviets' mistakes'... ." ¹⁵ For the mopping-up operations he envisioned 'a total of about 10 000 American soldiers, airmen, special operators, and helicopter air assault crews, along with robust in-country close air support'. A force much larger than that, it was feared, would appear as an invading force and mobilize resistance far beyond the militants. ¹⁶ More fundamentally, the wounds of the Vietnam War had never healed; the US military had no taste for another land war in Asia.

The combination of US airpower, Special Forces and Afghan militias proved 'powerful and robust' in defeating the Taliban regime, as US experts noted. ¹⁷ It proved much less effective in hunting down Al Qaeda and Taliban members who had escaped towards the mountainous border region with Pakistan. For security reasons, American advisers had not informed the Afghans in advance of the operation, giving them little time to prepare. One local commander said he was given notice only a few hours before the offensive started: 'My father told me, "just go", so I ... took 700 soldiers. We got there, but I don't know for what. We had no food or anything'. ¹⁸ More important were motivational factors. Having routed the Taliban from Kabul and provincial strongholds, Afghan commanders were inclined to consider the war as over. They had little interest in pursuing a few Taliban leaders or even 'the Arabs', as foreign fighters were called, preferring to stay at home 'to stake out their own turf', as one American military adviser reported. In the local calculus of power, this was more important than joining the Americans to chase Islamic militants. Another American adviser recalled that he had to 'sit down and negotiate with General Hazrat Ali [a commander in Nangarhar] and convince him to stay in the fight'. The willingness of the Afghans to pursue Al Qaeda, in short, was 'built on U.S. diplomacy and cash, not internal motivation'. ¹⁹

As became clear later on, the campaign to cut off and destroy the retreating militants failed. Analysts writing from the perspective of the air force continued to consider the model a success, but its main weakness was the assumption that the local Afghan allies and the intervening force shared the same objectives. The reliance on militias had another other long-term and widely recognized problematic aspect by empowering local commanders and 'warlords' regardless of their attitude towards the central government being established in Kabul, or towards the population in the territories they ruled. As many militia leaders were deficient in both respects, the long-term effect of the 'Afghan model' was to weaken two central pillars of the post-Taliban peacebuilding project – building a central state and promoting good governance.

2.2. The American model

The mixed value of Afghan militias in the theatre contributed to the subsequent Americanization of the war. Initially, this meant that American forces took the lead in what was expected to be mopping-up operations in 2002-2004. American force levels rapidly increased to 8-10 0 000 – the ceiling recommended by General Franks for this phase – and to almost the double in 2004. This was an election year in both Afghanistan and the United States, and the Bush administration wanted to produce proof of success. Additional forces were dispatched to add pressure on the militants and provide security for the elections.

¹⁵ T. Franks, *American Soldier*. New York: Regan Books, 2004, p. 324.

¹⁶ S. M. Maloney, 'Afghanistan: From here to Eternity?', *Parameters*, Spring 2004.

¹⁷ R. B. Andres, C. Wills, and T. E. Griffith, Jr., 'Winning with Allies. The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model', *International Security*, vol. 30, no.3, Winter 2005/6, pp. 124–60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁹ This account and citations in this paragraph are from Andres et al. op.cit., pp. 147–48.

While the US had established its first Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Gardez in Paktyia province in November 2002, and other PRTs soon followed, the bulk of the US forces were engaged in a string of counter-terrorist operations, which in these early years were focused on the eastern border area and southern Uruzgan, the home province of Mullah Omar.²⁰ These were primarily cordon-and-search operations with close air support designed to eliminate suspected terrorist hideouts. The limitations of the strategy soon showed, however. While the 'Afghan model' had suffered from weaknesses of motivation and organization, the 'American model' was limited by cultural and political insensitivity and –indirectly– by technological superiority that encouraged reliance on close air support.

Operating in the rural Pashtun heartland, US forces created fear and antagonism that resonated beyond the circle of militants and fuelled recruitment to their cause. The coalition forces were infidels in a society that was tribal in social structure, culturally conservative and closed to outsiders who had not been invited. They behaved on all accounts like an occupation force. They moved at will anywhere their operational plans required and searched villages without asking permission or informing local authorities. They detained Afghans suspected of being terrorists or of supporting terrorism, transporting many to Bagram air base, with its special detention centre, or to other detention centres operated by American forces on Afghan soil.²¹ Tribal elders in vain sent delegations to Kabul to protest that foreign forces did not consult them before entering their villages, and killed or took away their relatives.

While recognizing the need for speed and surprise in operations of this kind, American military leaders early on saw the downside as well. Gen. David Barno, who arrived in October 2003 to command the US-led coalition forces, was scathing in his criticism. Lacking an updated counter-insurgency doctrine, the first contingents of US forces had followed what Barno called an 'enemy-centric raid strategy'. Acting on intelligence tips, conventional units would encircle a village and systematically search for weapons and suspects. The results were predictable. 'Tossing whole villages in a cordon-and-search operation based on an intelligence tip, regardless of its accuracy, could quickly alienate a neutral or even friendly populace', Barno warned.²² The alternative promoted by Barno was a 'people-centric' approach based on respect and tolerance. The general crystallized the principles in a fifteen-point list of 'do's and don'ts' which he issued to the troops.²³

Barno likewise addressed the enormously sensitive issues and political costs of reliance on close air support that led to civilian casualties. To improve the situation he disallowed air strikes based on technical intelligence, limiting the use of airpower to situations of close combat and when called in by troops on the ground, even if this meant some tactical sacrifice. A large margin for error nevertheless remained in a conflict where militants merged with civilians, political alignments were fluid, and the 'the fog of war' closed in to create mistakes and

²⁰ The first large operation, 'Anaconda' (March 2002), was followed by 'Operation Mountain Viper' (August 2003); 'Operation Avalanche' (December 2003); 'Operation Mountain Storm' (March-July 2004), 'Operation Lightning Freedom' (December 2004-February 2005); and 'Operation Pil' (October 2005). K. Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, US Congressional Research Service, July 21, 2010, p. 28

²¹ M. Cherif Bassiouni, "Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan," (New York: United Nations. UN E/CN.4/2005/122, 2005). The Bush administration reacted to the report by forcing the UN to dismiss Bassiouni, a prominent professor of law at DePaul University, Chicago.

²² David W. Barno, "Fighting 'the Other War'. Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan. 2003–2005 " *Military Review*, no. September-October (2007).p. 33.

²³ The points are as revealing in what they forbid as in their hints of situational constraints on good intentions. For instance, US soldiers were not to search Afghan national government property without prior approval from the US command structure, and not to search Afghan government officials without another government official present. In local searches, police or government officials should be forewarned 'unless there is a compelling and time sensitive reason'. Similarly, soldiers should 'when possible' ask villagers to unlock doors rather than using forced entry, and should not cuff or bind hands of suspects 'unless necessary for security'. When detainees proved innocent and were released, troops should pay reconstruction money to their villages. Barno, *op.cit.* p.39.

misunderstanding. The ready availability of airpower that could decisively limit casualties among the coalition forces encouraged its use. All of Barno's successors tried to address this problem as well, but with limited success even when adoption of a counter-insurgency strategy underlined the importance of 'winning hearts and minds'.

2.3. The counter-insurgency model

Increasing force levels and modified tactical directives from the commanding general did not have an appreciable impact on the insurgency. The seriousness of the situation had been noted by Lakhdar Brahimi already at the end of 2003 as he was leaving his position as head of the UN Mission in Kabul (UNAMA). Unless security improved, he warned, the UN might have to abandon its efforts to stabilize the country.

In NATO, which had taken command over ISAF in March 2003, discussions were underway in 2005 on new approaches to deal with what was increasingly recognized as an insurgency. The work was spearheaded by two countries that were preparing to deploy to Afghanistan – Denmark and Great Britain – and was put to the summit meeting of the alliance in Riga in November 2006. The summit formally adopted a 'comprehensive approach' that stressed the importance of integrating civilian development efforts with military operations (see next section on the UK). Yet there was little agreement on what the term meant in practice, and each country seemed to follow its own plans and pace of implementation. The British, as we shall see, deployed to Helmand in April 2006 with a plan for integrating civilian and military efforts. Developed in 2005, the plan was explicitly modelled on the counter-insurgency strategy used in Malaya almost 50 years previously.

In the United States, parallel work was underway to update the field manual of the Army and the Marine Corps for counter-insurgency. The new manual (FM 3-24) was completed in June 2006, the first update since the Vietnam War.²⁴ Armed with an updated manual and the principles of the Riga summit, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, went to work on what in slightly different language was billed as an 'integrated approach'. The aim was to bring the various elements of the allied presence in Afghanistan together in a coherent counter-insurgency strategy. Reconstruction, development and counter-narcotics activities would now be coordinated with security aspects in a common framework with clear objectives, timelines and benchmarks. In part, it was an effort to streamline the growing activities of the allies. It was also a recognition that military force alone would not bring the insurgents to their knees. The dominant narrative in the international community by this time held that poor governance, lack of justice, and poverty were feeding the insurgency. Hence, a 'comprehensive approach' was required to defeat the Taliban. In Washington, a 'comprehensive approach' was equated with counter-insurgency, as US officials told their NATO allies.²⁵

Launching a new approach was also useful – perhaps necessary – to convince US allies to contribute more troops to Afghanistan. The Bush Administration had since 2004 been pressuring its allies to contribute troops. As the war in Iraq placed growing demands on US forces, Washington increasingly looked to its allies to meet the troop requirements in Afghanistan as assessed by ISAF or its own military command. By late 2006, when NATO had rolled out its structure of four regional commands, US allies had only contributed around 7-8000 troops, and the US asked for more. Allied contributions were a major theme at the Riga summit in November

²⁴ A version with foreword by General David H. Petraeus, Lt. General James F. Amos, Lt. Colonel John A. Nagl and an introduction by Sarah Sewall was published by University of Chicago Press in 2007.

²⁵ Peter Viggo Jakobsen, "Nato's Comprehensive Approach to Crisis Response Operations," (Copenhagen: DIIS, 2008), 15.

2006, and the development of a new strategy helped Washington to convince an increasing number of sceptics. By the time the next NATO summit was held in Bucharest in April 2008, the new Comprehensive Strategic, Political, Military Plan for Afghanistan was ready for approval.

The adoption of a new strategy also made it easier for the Bush Administration to meet the demands of its own commanders. As a lame-duck president after the November 2008 election, Bush approved an increase of 20 000 combat forces. Larger increases soon followed under president Barack Obama: first 21 000 (announced in February 2010) and another 30 000 (announced in December 2010). At the same time, the centrality of a counter-insurgency approach was underlined by the appointment of General McChrystal in June 2009 to command ISAF and US forces, most of which by then were under ISAF command.

For the past two years, Pentagon sources had described US strategy in Afghanistan as ‘a comprehensive counterinsurgency’ based on concepts of clear, build and hold,²⁶ but McChrystal went a few steps further to suggest fresh approaches and new hopes. Resources would be concentrated on densely populated areas in select key districts that were most vulnerable or contested. The ‘clear-hold-and-build’ doctrine was revised to ‘shape-clear-hold-and-build’. McChrystal’s own reputation as an unconventional general with a background in Special Operations added expectations that a turn-around was possible. At a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Istanbul in February 2010 McChrystal was greeted with relief and enthusiasm when he presented his counter-insurgency plan. His presentation got almost ‘a hallelujah’ response’, a participant later recalled.²⁷

By this time, momentum was building towards a major new offensive. In part it was driven by the time-table set by the new administration in Washington. With a withdrawal of US forces announced to start in July 2011, the military had to produce at least some tactical victories before that time. At best, this would significantly weaken the Taliban and, with or without a negotiated settlement, permit NATO to start a withdrawal that did not resemble defeat. At the very least, it would demonstrate the power of Western forces and validate the counter-insurgency campaign, thus enabling the military to call for continued engagement to turn the tide.

2.4. Kill-or-capture

The first major test of McChrystal’s counter-insurgency strategy was not a success, however, as we see below. Rather, it was so resource intensive and produced such limited results that it soon gave way to a simpler strategy – a change that was hastened by the abrupt removal of McChrystal after a public indiscretion.²⁸ The new ISAF commander, General David Petraeus did not formally announce a new strategy, but the emphasis shifted from a classic counter-insurgency approach to win the support of the population to an equally classic counter-terrorist approach that prioritised targeted killing or capture of insurgents. The change was accompanied by stepped-up drone attacks in both Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. As Petraeus told the US Congress:

Over the past year, in particular, ISAF elements, together with our Afghan and international partners, have increased all the activities of our comprehensive campaign substantially. We have, for example, stepped up the tempo of precise, intelligence-driven operations to capture or kill insurgent leaders. In a typical 90-day period, in fact, precision

²⁶ US Department of Defense, "Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan. Report to Congress," (Washington, D.C.: 2009), 17. See also *American Forces Press Service*, 28 July 2006.

²⁷ Personal communication to author, 23 July 2010.

²⁸ An interview with the magazine *Rolling Stones* where he criticized and ridiculed civil leaders who formally were his superiors, including the Vice President.

operations by US special mission units and their Afghan partners alone kill or capture some 360 targeted insurgent leaders.²⁹

The strategy was still called ‘comprehensive’, but the metrics of success had shifted from development indicators and friendly villages to body counts and numbers of night raids. It was a recognition that classic counterinsurgency was an extraordinarily demanding operation – eating soup with a knife, as T.E. Lawrence once put it – that at the very least required time, patience and an institutional culture where the military was not exclusively a lethal instrument. As it was, the US military had in effect been given a very short timeline by Obama to produce results, it had limited experience of working in reconstruction or stabilization operations, and its only other significant counter-insurgency operation in modern history, in Vietnam, had ended in failure.

3. COIN in practice

The principal test of the refined counter-insurgency doctrine elaborated by General McChrystal was the February 2010 major offensive in Marjah. It is unclear why McChrystal chose to make his stand in Marjah - a cluster of villages in Helmand a little southwest of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah where Taliban for some time had strengthened their presence. A massive force assembled, spearheaded by US Marines, followed by British troops, the Afghan National Army and smaller numbers from other coalition partners (Canada and Denmark). The size of the force was variously estimated to be 15 000 or more. Even the lower figure was formidable relative to the target – a rural community of some 60 000 persons.

The offensive was announced well in advance, enabling many villagers to flee. So, apparently, did the Taliban, because the invading force took the town in February 2010 without meeting much resistance. Reconstruction, development and local administration were to follow in the framework of NATO's comprehensive approach as announced at Riga and further refined in an operational plan for the alliance's Bucharest meeting. In practice, the civilian elements appeared to have been given much less thought and preparation than the military offensive. The reference by McChrystal to the civilian component as ‘government in a box’ seemed symptomatic. A ‘box’ of government officials were indeed flown in from Kabul after the military had secured the town. In the ‘box’ were officials from the principal central government ministries as well as numerous British and American technical experts and ‘stabilizations advisors’. An Afghan district governor had been located among the Afghan diaspora in Germany and was flown in as well. Haji Zahir had been outside Afghanistan for about 30 years and as an outsider knew little of the local patterns of amity and enmity. While this placed him above the fray, it also meant he could not navigate in the sensitive and – given the war – high-stake, local politics, nor mobilize support. He did not even have a strong reformist profile; rather, he had spent four years in a German jail for having stabbed his stepson (who had admonished him for beating his wife). Haji Zahir did not last long in the job. Already in mid-July, four months after the invasion, he was replaced by a man set down from Kabul and described by coalition spokesmen as having more managerial capabilities.

Other aspects of the campaign did not go well either. After falling back rather than confronting the massive, high-tech invasion force, the Taliban slowly crept back. In June, fighting was occurring almost daily, with coalition casualties exceeding the level during the invasion.

²⁹ General Petraeus' Testimony to Congress, 15 March 2011. Full text retrieved from *The Long War Journal*, website: http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2011/03/full_text_of_general_petraeus.php. Cited in Kate Clark, *The Takhar Attack*, Afghanistan Analysts Network, Kabul, May 2011.

Reconstruction stalled, paralyzed by fear of Taliban retaliation. Anyone found to have installed water pumps distributed by USAID, or being in the possession of dollars, was vulnerable to retaliation. USAID's employment-creating projects had funds to hire 10 000 residents, but only 1200 villagers had signed up, and only a quarter of the 4 000 water pumps had been distributed.³⁰ Afghan government officials who had been flown in from Kabul were fearful as well. Almost all chose to stay in the provincial capital rather than move to Marjah - four months after the offensive, only 1 of 15 line ministries had done so. The area had become a garrison town.

If some 15 000 troops could not provide security to a community of 60 000 persons - an astounding ratio of 1:4, and much higher than standard COIN density recommendations -³¹ then clearly the problem was more complex. For a start, the invasion had created a lot of local enemies. In addition to the Taliban, potential enemies included previous power holders who had accommodated the Taliban prior to the most recent invasion. Villagers who had lost relatives or property during the invasion, or whose families had been forced to flee, were hardly positively inclined. A survey conducted in Marjah five months later by an NGO with good networks in the area found that only one of 97 villagers interviewed said the change in government had been a good thing.³²

Another major problem was establishing a government-friendly system of law and order. The local police had been dismissed on suspicions of involvement in the drug trade and/or collaboration with the Taliban. A new contingent from the national police force (ANP) was flown in. The new policemen were from non-Pashtun minorities, mostly Tajik. They did not speak the local language (Pashto), and their presence touched a raw nerve. Ethnic tensions had divided the country during the civil war of the 1990s and afterwards, culminating in the victory of the Tajik-led Northern Alliance over the mostly Pashtun-based Taliban. One result was that the Tajik were overrepresented in the ANP on both the central department level and among the rank and file. An ANP contingent from the outside would thus most likely be a non-Pashtun force. The introduction of a Tajik police force in the Pashtun heartland, however, provoked such protests from the elders in Marjah that it had to be withdrawn. As a back-up solution, new policemen were recruited locally, armed by the coalition forces and, as they initially lacked uniforms, given a yellow belt to signify their position. Apart from the yellow belt, it was not clear that the new police force was qualitatively different from the old one, or – as a yellow belt easily could be traded – who the members were.

Altogether, the operation revealed underlying weaknesses, some of which appeared fundamental. Most critically, the invasion force did not know who the enemy was, and the population had no incentives to provide information, knowing or expecting that the foreigners would leave in due course. There were no links of trust or legitimacy between the local population and the government for a start, and flying in a 'government in a box' was not likely to create such trust in a society where local autonomy was highly valued. That the new government representatives were either absent or ineffective made matters worse. By mid-2011, coalition forces and Afghan security still held Marjah, but it required a major force presence of several thousand Afghan and US troops. In addition, the US Marines set up a local militia to support the conventional forces, consisting of 1000 men and costing about 250 000 dollars a month.³³

³⁰ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, 'War the old-fashioned way.' *Washington Post*, 20 February 2010.

³¹ <http://www.army.mil/news/2010/03/25/36324-a-historical-basis-for-force-requirements-in-counterinsurgency/index.html>

³² ICOS (formerly the Senlis Council), reported in IPS <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=52658>

³³ Author's interview with US military official, 8 May 2011 and a British civilian advisor attached to Regional Command southwest, 7 May 2011.

4. A comprehensive strategy?

The concept ‘comprehensive’ strategy adopted in principle at the Riga summit appears as an exercise in what is sometimes called constructive ambiguity. While implying integration of the various components of policy in a particular engagement – what the Canadians called 3Ds (defence, diplomacy, development) - it says little about the balance between the various components. In the US case, kinetic operations dominated the military engagement, as illustrated in the Marjah operation. Similarly, military objectives for a long timed framed policy on the macro level as well, and when efforts were made to connect civilian and military affairs on the ground in the form of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), the teams were embedded in combat units, led and mostly staffed by military men, and mainly engaged in security-related tasks.

4.1. The military-political nexus on the policy level

National security interests as defined by the Bush Administration did not initially prioritize ‘nation-building’, as we have seen. More narrow military objectives defined not only the US engagement, but also the role of ISAF, as we have seen. The prospect of elections in 2004 – Bush was up for re-election and Hamid Karzai who was leading the transitional administration was up for popular elections – changed matters somewhat. Having to demonstrate some progress in the two wars in which it was engaged, Afghanistan was the more promising of the two. The Taliban had raised their heads, but not much more. The political transition agreed to in Bonn had so far proceeded largely on schedule. The US intervention continued to command broad international as well as domestic support – Afghanistan was still ‘the good war’. A team of Administration officials started in August 2003 to develop a strategy that could produce further indicators of progress ahead of the elections.

The President’s principal adviser on Afghan affairs, Zalmay Khalilzad, was dispatched as Ambassador to Afghanistan with an additional \$1.2 billion in aid and a free hand to ensure that the elections would result in victory for Karzai. A large number of senior American advisors – news reports spoke of one hundred – were sent to work with Afghan ministers to strengthen ‘statebuilding’ at the central level. In Washington, the responsibility for managing reconstruction aid was moved from the State Department to the White House, an important indicator of changing priorities. Yet it was ‘state-building lite’ - a short-term and shallow basis for investing in institutional reforms and reconstruction. As a fitting metaphor for a hasty policy, many of the buildings constructed in the pre-election rush soon cracked or fell down.³⁴ In the area of political reforms, there was much rhetoric about democracy development, but policy was mostly designed to develop a stable and effective client that could be a reliable partner in the war against Taliban and Al Qaeda. The Bush Administration emphasized the establishment of a strong presidency and an election system that sharply limited the role of political parties, and played an important role in bringing about both developments.³⁵ At the time, both measures seemed to promise that ‘there would be no uncertainty about who held legitimate executive power in Kabul, and Washington would retain the benefit of having a clearly identifiable Afghan partner whom it would know well and indeed preferred,’ as American analyst Barnett Rubin wrote.³⁶

By 2004, policy was arguably more ‘comprehensive’ than before, but with a marked tilt towards military objectives that shaped its overall architecture. This was reflected, for instance, in the

³⁴ Joe Stephens and David Ottaway, "A Rebuilding Plan Full of Cracks," *Washington Post*, 20 November 2005.

³⁵ See Astri Suhrke, "Democratizing a Dependent State: The Case of Afghanistan," *Democratization* 15, no. 3 (2008).

³⁶ Barnett R. Rubin, "Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 3 (2004): 12.

failure to support transitional justice mechanisms and, most strikingly, in the empowerment of local commanders and ‘warlords’ who worked with US military forces during the invasion and afterwards regardless of their record on governance, human rights, corruption and criminal activities. This alliance was maintained and even developed during the second half of the decade when the importance of ‘good governance’ in fighting the insurgency became a widely accepted principle in the international community.

Priorities were re-aligned under the new Obama administration. The strategic review undertaken in the second half of 2009 gave more weight to the political, economic and human costs of the war, and the very limited achievements on the military side. The outcome signalled a relative devaluation of the military dimensions of national security were relatively speaking devalued. In the short-run, i.e. up to 2014, resources were increased to achieve military objectives and underpin negotiations, but it was clear that the war itself was no longer considered sufficiently significant to justify continued US combat presence. Instead, longer-term military objectives in the region were redefined to prioritize the defeat of international terrorism and projection of American strategic power.

4.2. Civil-military relations on the ground: the PRT

The PRTs were part of a larger category of civil-military operations (CMO) that traditionally had been undertaken by the US military in a wide range of situations. The main aim of these operations according to the first CMO doctrine, published in February 2001, was to promote ‘positive relations’ between US forces and the civil authorities and the general population in the area of operations ‘in order to facilitate military operations and to consolidate and achieve US objectives.’³⁷ Specific operations could include emergency assistance and humanitarian relief, population and resource control, winning the support of the local population, and assisting national military and civilian agencies. Military civil affairs personnel were to ‘bridge the gap between the military and civilian environment’, both for ongoing operations and to help shape the environment to permit ‘a successful military exit.’ The doctrine formalized evolving practice of US participation in stabilization and peace operations in the 1990s and set the framework for the early US PRTs established in Afghanistan.

The instructions to the officers planning the first PRTs in late 2002 stressed the part of the doctrine relating to exit strategy. The teams were to stabilize the situation within a short-term time horizon in the expectation that allied forces would come in an enable US forces to withdraw. Attempts by the planner to add a longer-term ‘window’ in their charts that included quick impact project of a development nature were rejected higher up in the command structure.³⁸ This was to be a quick-transition operation. As a result, the first US PRT in Gardez set itself relatively modest aims of reducing violent incidents in the provincial capital by patrolling, separating potential rivals and, with the aid of some resources, lining up behind the formal authorities. The key metric of success was the flow of traffic on a stretch of the main road.

Five years later, the US had 13 PRTs in Afghanistan. They were larger – averaging between 80 and 100 persons. They were all led by a military commander and most of the personnel were military. Their main function was related to security. An assessment by the US Institute of Peace at mid-decade found the teams ‘excelled at providing a security presence’ including assisting with disarmament, demobilization and de-mining, as well as training and support for Afghan police

³⁷ *Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Operations*. 8 February 2001. p. vii. Available on <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/jp3-57.pdf>

³⁸ Author’s interview with US Col. Michael Stout, Washington, DC, 14 May 2010.

and military operations.³⁹ The PRTs also had military civilian affairs officers and civilian officials seconded by the State Department, AID and the Department of Agriculture. As a rule, however, these were few in numbers, junior in rank, and lacked language and local area training. The PRTs mostly had their own force protection and support services, or were embedded with a larger military unit.

The American 'PRT model', in other words, was primarily a military unit with a few civilians attached. The civilian 'surge' ordered by Obama in 2010 only marginally increased the civilian component. As the doctrine made clear, the PRT was an instrument of military power. Yet it had significant financial resources to influence the environment. Already by mid-decade the USIP report noted what it considered an unwise balance favouring the military in this respect. With the military in lead, the money was not always spent in ways informed by development or governance perspectives, and dispensed by personnel on short rotation (6 months to a year) with no local language training. By the end of the decade, the problem had magnified with the massive growth of discretionary money available to the PRTs and military commands. In 2010-11 alone, an estimated 1.5 billion USD was budgeted for PRT and CERP (Commanders Emergency Response Program). In Kandahar, the US military had a \$656 million budget for such purposes in 2010-11.⁴⁰ It was an astounding amount of money for a province with an estimated population of half a million people, equivalent to \$650 per head per year if it were evenly distributed, which most certainly would not be the case. Rather, discretionary spending of this kind was often wasteful or worse as it encouraged local conflict between the favoured recipients (who flexed their muscle) and those left out (who wanted 'their' share).⁴¹

These and other weaknesses of the model were recognised by civilian critics. The USIP report, for instance, argued that the civilian component should be strengthened and held up a similar program during the Vietnam War as an alternative. A joint military-civilian operation, that program had been integrated under a civilian leadership, had mostly civilian personnel (who received four months of local language and area training and were assigned for an eighteen to twenty-four months period) and USAID was the lead agency.⁴² Its strong civilian profile notwithstanding, the program operated in deeply insecure areas.

In Afghanistan, by contrast, the US military effectively appropriated the PRT and included it as a standard item in its inventory of civil-military operations, as evidenced by the lengthy and positive discussion of the PRT in the revised CMO doctrine issued in July 2008. 'PRTs are tools for achieving objectives to stabilize and enable civil authority phases of the joint operation. Interagency planning, organization, and training of a PRT should take place during the initial planning and execution stages of an operation.'⁴³ The doctrine recognizes that structure will vary according to locality (in Iraq the PRTs were embedded with the military but led by a Foreign Service Officer), but as a sub-group of civil-military operations, the PRT was primarily a military tool in service of the military. CMOs as a whole, the revised doctrine stated, serve as 'a primary military instrument to synchronize military and non-military instruments of national power.' This formulation was also as a signal that the military would be the lead agency and as such the recipient of budgetary allocations for joint civil-military programs. Looking towards the future, the revised 2008 doctrine

³⁹ Robert M. Perito, "The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified," in *Special Report* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), 13.

⁴⁰ Data reported on <http://publicintelligence.info/afghanistan-commanders-emergency-response-program-cerp-spending-data-2010-2011/>.

⁴¹ Stuart Gordon, *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan's Helmand Province* (Boston: Feinstein International Centre, 2011). Part of a project led by Andrew Wilder.

⁴² Perito, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

⁴³ U.S. Armed Forces, Joint Publication 3-57, *Civil-Military Operations*, 08 July 2008, p II-31

further stressed the importance of CMOs in light of the changing nature of warfare: such operations are particularly useful ‘in support of stability, counterinsurgency and other operations dealing with asymmetric and irregular threats in the 21st century.’⁴⁴

5. Conclusion

The succession of models in US military strategy in Afghanistan can be read as an expression of learning-and-adaptation in a changing conflict. This produced numerous tactical victories, but by mid-2011 not sufficient strategic advantage to stabilize the situation on the terms of the US-led coalition. To a large number of critics, the main reason for this was a fundamental weakness in policy stemming from the long-time imbalance in favour of military objectives and instruments at the cost of political, social and developmental objectives, and the relatively limited room for non-military perspectives in the formulation and execution of overall policy.⁴⁵ The manifestations were evident on the macro level of policy as well as in the skewed integration of civilian and military efforts when joined on the ground. The militarization of policy, in turn, has deep and complex roots in American history and social institutions, a widely recognized phenomenon that has been explored most recently by Andrew Bacevich.⁴⁶ Yet the tendency to define a foreign policy problem in military terms, and to address it primarily through the application of military power, is in itself a variable, as the changing course of the Obama Administration towards Afghanistan indicates. While in the short run giving more weight to military power, the new policy emphasizes not only a political solution in Afghanistan but different interpretations of ‘national security’. Importantly, this includes ‘nation-building at home’, as Obama emphasized when announcing his new policy towards Afghanistan in December 2009: ‘I’m mindful of the words of President Eisenhower, who -- in discussing our national security -- said, “Each proposal must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs”.....Over the past several years, we have lost that balance.’⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Joint Publications 3-57, *op.cit.* p. iii.

⁴⁵ This view is held by many Afghan and international voices in what is commonly called ‘the civil society, and shared by some analysts who support the overall aim of the US-led coalition and have worked with the US military, but who strongly criticize the early empowerment of local commanders and warlords and lack of support for transitional justice mechanisms in order to gain support to defeat Al Qaeda and the Taliban. For an example of the latter, see e.g. Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue : Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism : How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Speech at West Point, 1 December 2009. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

Defining the Mission

The US Engagement in Afghanistan

The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was in a sense a curious accident of history. Enraged by the attacks on New York and Washington, the Bush Administration invaded a country where the US previously had demonstrated only limited and vicarious interests. Central Asia was of peripheral concern to the neo-conservatives who dominated the strategic thinking of the Bush Administration. Yet strategic considerations in a broader sense were evident. Responding to the 9/11 attacks by going to war in Afghanistan was in line with the Administration's national se-

curity doctrine that celebrated Realpolitik and the importance of military power in the conduct of US foreign policy. The Administration's decision to remove the Taliban regime, rather than take focused, punitive measures against Al Qaeda alone, in turn proved to be a critical juncture. The stage was now set for a wider war, which quickly developed from the step-wise interaction between hostile forces.

This paper is part of a series that examines the strategies of four NATO members in Afghanistan: The US, the UK, Germany and Norway. Each case study first contextualises their Afghanistan engagement in light of the broader foreign policy concerns of the country concerned, and then focuses on the development and adjustment of military strategy in relation to other components of the engagement. In this respect, special attention is given to the importance of realities on the ground in Afghanistan, organisational (NATO) interests, and domestic factors.