The War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014:
Key Lessons
for Counterinsurgency

Theo Farrell,
Professor of War in the Modern
World, Head of the Department of
War Studies, King's College,
London, UK

TRENDS
Research & Advisory

The War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014: Key Lessons for Counterinsurgency

Theo Farrell, Professor of War in the Modern World, Head of the Department of War Studies, King's College, London, UK

Introduction

The West's war in Afghanistan from 2001-2014 is rich in lessons for any state or coalition of states that is intervening in a conflict in support of a host state and against an insurgency. In this respect, there are important lessons that are applicable, for example, for the Saudi-led coalition intervening in the Yemeni Civil War. This paper focuses on the campaign conducted by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) against the Taliban and in support of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) from 2006-2014. The paper begins by reviewing the situation leading up to 2006, which was of a country ravaged by decades of war. In 2002, following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the international community undertook to help rebuild and secure Afghanistan; this proved to be a Herculean task. By 2006, the Taliban had returned to wage an insurgency against the new Afghan state and its western backers. The paper then identifies, and discusses in turn, the following four key lessons of the ISAF counterinsurgency campaign from 2006-2014:

1) Understand the 'object' and 'centre of gravity' of the campaign;
2) Develop an integrated civil-military campaign;
3) Focus on local governance;
4) Be prepared for peace talks with insurgents.

Afghanistan at War, 1978-2006

Afghanistan is a country shattered by war. It has been in a state of near-continuous armed conflict since a coup by Afghan communists in April 1978, resulting in very high levels of political violence and armed resistance by tribal communities in the conservative Pashtun rural heartland, and eventually leading to the Soviet invasion in December 1979. The mujahideen war against the Soviet Army plunged Afghanistan into a brutal decade-long war of attrition; the Soviets departed Afghanistan in 1989, having failed to defeat the mujahideen insurgency, and the client communist government they left behind fell three years later.[1] Afghanistan then experienced the darkest of times, when the country descended into civil war as the mujahideen parties fought for control of territory and the capital. Predation by warlords and armed groups against civilians was terrible, especially in the south and east. In

this context, the Taliban emerged in Kandahar in 1994, and rapidly expanded across the country, as a movement dedicated to imposing Sharia law. An exhausted and weary people welcomed the order brought by the Taliban, however harsh their rule; the Taliban were also very effective at intimidating or buying off rival Pahstun armed groups. Within two years, the Taliban was in control of 90 percent of the country; only the Northern Alliance of Tajaki and Uzbek mujahideen groups held out against the Taliban.[2]

The Taliban did not invite Osama bin Laden to Afghanistan, rather they inherited him when they expanded eastwards and discovered him as a guest of one of the Pashtun warlords. They agreed to provide sanctuary to him as his terrorist organization, Al Qaeda, provided material support, including funds and a steady stream of well-trained foreign fighters for the northern front. This was to prove a critical mistake. On 11 September 2001, Al Qaeda launched a coordinated series of terrorist attacks against four targets in American, destroying the World Trade Centre in New York and damaging the Pentagon in Washington DC. America's retribution was not long in coming. On 7 October, US warplanes started to bomb Afghanistan, and US spies went in to link up with and support the Northern Alliance. US special forces followed, and with American support, especially US airpower, the Northern Alliance were able to overrun Taliban defensive positions. The United States also supported the return of anti-Taliban Pashtun warlords. By the end of the year, the Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies had been comprehensively defeated.[3]

There followed a period of state building in Afghanistan from 2001-2005. Unlike the war to defeat the Taliban, which was US-led with some military support from Britain and Canada, the effort to rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan was a wholly international effort. At the Tokyo conference in 2002, the international community pledged five billion dollars of development assistance for Afghanistan, and a lead nation framework was adopted giving different states the lead responsibility for supporting key areas of state building; the United States for developing the Afghan army, Germany for developing the Afghan police, Italy for the judicial system, Japan for disarmament and demobilization of the various non-state armed groups, and Britain for counter-narcotics. Progress was slow to pitiful in all these areas and, with the exception of the United States, the international partners proved quite incompetent as lead nations for their respective areas of development. Adding to the problem, by this stage US

attention had already turned to the impending war against Iraq; as early as November 2001, US Central Command was instructed to develop the war plan for Iraq.[4]

The international community failed to take charge of the development of Afghanistan. In particular, alarmingly slow progress was made in developing the Afghan security forces, both in terms of number and quality. The new Afghan leader, Hamid Karzai, had little choice but to bring the old mujahideen warlords into government as provincial governors and chiefs of police; this was the only way to extend the writ of government beyond Kabul and to avoid a return to civil war. However, it meant that in many areas the very warlords that the Taliban had rose up to dispose for preying on civilians, now returned to power. This led to many rural communities turning against the new government. US counter-terrorism operations made matters worse, as these resulted to many innocent people being imprisoned and abused by US and Afghan security personnel; the US also offered bounties for Taliban leaders, and this made it impossible for the Taliban to reconcile with local elders and remain in Afghanistan.

> *There is no example in history of a counterinsurgency campaign that is successful when the insurgency is supported by a neighbouring state.*

This set the scene for the return of the Taliban from 2004 onwards; vanguard teams infiltrated into districts and laid the groundwork for large groups of Taliban to return to rural districts across southern Afghanistan in 2005-06. Many Taliban leaders and groups returned from refugee camps just across the border in Pakistan, with weapons, training and advisors provided by the Pakistan intelligence service. Thus by 2006, the Afghan government was facing a full-blown Taliban insurgency across the south and east of the country.[5]

This, then, provided the strategic and operational context for the ISAF counterinsurgency campaign. Afghanistan was (and remains) an ethnically divided country, with a highly corrupt government that was failing in large parts of the country to provide security and basic public services. In many rural areas, the 'government' that ISAF sought to protect was the local predatory warlord, and the 'police' who ISAF were operating alongside was his militia who extorted and abused the local population. Complicating matters was the porous border with Pakistan, and Pakistan material support to the Taliban, which ISAF was unable to do anything

about. There is no example in history of a counterinsurgency campaign that is successful when the insurgency is supported by a neighbouring state.

The ISAF Counterinsurgency Campaign, 2006-2014

ISAF had started off in December 2001 as a British-led mission to secure Kabul. In 2003, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) took over responsibility for generating the headquarters and forces for ISAF, and in 2004 NATO agreed to expand ISAF beyond Kabul to provide security in the provinces of Afghanistan, starting with the more secure north and west of the country, expanding in 2006 to the more conflict prone south and east; ISAF created five regional commands (RC) to manage the war, RC-North led by the Germans, RC-West led by the Italians, RC-East led by the Americans, and RC-South led in rotation by the British, Canadians, Dutch and Americans. The ISAF mission was NATO's first overseas mission involving combat operations and was a key test of the alliance's role as a global security actor. For most NATO member states, it involved the longest and most intense military campaign since World War II. The Afghanistan campaign has had a profound impact on NATO militaries, especially on doctrine and thinking regarding the conduct of military operations. Four key lessons, in particular, stand out.

Lesson 1: Understand the 'object' and 'centre of gravity'

In military doctrinal terms, the 'object' is the thing that war is being fought over, and the 'centre of gravity' (CoG) is the key thing that will 'unlock' success in a military campaign. In conventional war, the object is territory, specifically to seize and hold territory, and the CoG is defeat of the enemy's forces. Things are very different in counterinsurgency. The object is not territory, as insurgents will operate across ground that they may hold, that may be contested, and the government side may hold. Instead, the object is the people, specifically to secure the population from intimidation and danger, and thereby win their support for the government side. Defeating enemy forces is not the CoG because insurgent groups will usually avoid direct battle against state forces (which invariably are more powerful) and often therefore insurgents will hide amongst the population. Excessive use of force to root out and destroy insurgents that are operating amongst the people risks alienating the population, and

turning them against the government. Thus, a counterinsurgency campaign focused just on military action against insurgents can often end up generating more insurgents. Accordingly, it has long been understood that a counterinsurgency war is mostly about political activities; as the French expert, David Galula, noted 'revolution war is 20 per cent military action and 80 per cent political' and so any campaign to counter an insurgency must reflect this kind of ratio.[6] Counterinsurgency doctrine has therefore traditionally identified the CoG to be 'winning the hearts and minds' of the population.

From 2006 to 2008, ISAF conducted a remarkably conventional war focused on defeating the Taliban through military operations. The ISAF commander who led the expansion of NATO forces to the south and east of Afghanistan, British General David Richards, understood the importance of developing government capacities and improving public services both at the national and subnational levels, in order to connect people with the Kabul government. All the same, much of his energies went into leading a major military offensive (called Operation *Medusa*) to clear Taliban forces out of Kandahar province. Similarly, the national task forces – British in Helmand, Canadians in Kandahar, Dutch in Uruzgan in RC-South, and the Americans in RC-East – all focused on conducting combat operations against insurgents. The British experience is instructive here. From 2006 on, Britain committed a brigade-sized task force to Helmand, with each deploying on a six-month tour. The first three task forces led in turn by 16 Air Assault Brigade, 3 Commando Brigade, and 12 Mechanised Brigade, each tried to militarily defeat the Taliban. Analysis of the brigade plans shows that in each case the command staff understood the importance of supporting the delivery of public services by the provincial government, but given the intensity of the armed insurgency in Helmand, the brigades felt that they had to focus on fighting the insurgents. The result was months of pitched battles in the northern districts of Helmand, as British forces relied on airpower and artillery fire to keep insurgents from overrunning their bases, causing heavy damage and civilians to be displaced from several district centres. The British campaign in Helmand changed in 2007-08, with the deployment of a task force led by 52 Brigade that was far more focused on securing the population and supporting the provincial government. Thus, the new brigade commander banned insurgent body counts as a metric of success, and he deployed units to districts for the duration of the tour so they could build up relationships with local communities. [7]

However, the mindset remained very conventional in ISAF Headquarters under Richards' successors, US General Dan McNeill followed by US General David McKiernan. It took the appointment of a new US President in 2009, Barak Obama, to change this. The Obama team was not at all impressed with McKieran's leadership, believing the war to be 'on autopilot', and he was relieved of his command. In his place was appointed the man who had led the US special operations campaign in Iraq and was a proven innovator, General Stanley McChrystal. In his confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee in June 2009, McChrystal noted that 'central to counterinsurgency is protecting the people.' He emphasized:

> "This is a critical point. It may be *the* critical point. This is a struggle for the support of the Afghan people. Our willingness to operate in ways that minimize casualties or damage, even when doing so makes our task more difficult, is essential to our credibility. I cannot over-emphasize my commitment to the importance of this concept."

Hence, he elaborated, 'although I expect stiff fighting ahead, the measure of effectiveness will *not* be the number of insurgents killed, it will be the number of Afghans shielded from violence.'[8] As part of his a new 'population-centric' counterinsurgency campaign, McChrystal issued new restraints on the use of force by ISAF and encouraged ISAF troops to show 'courageous restraint' when conducting military operations near or among civilians.

'central to counterinsurgency is protecting the people.'

This is not to suggest that major combat operations have no place in counterinsurgency, nor indeed that ISAF under McChrystal stopped trying to inflict military defeats on the Taliban. Combat operations are necessary in counterinsurgency in order to create the security necessary for state government to function, and in order prevent insurgents from establishing shadow government and winning over local support.[9] This was clearly understood by the McChrystal command. Moreover, ISAF combat operations increased under McChrystal as the United States poured more troops into Afghanistan under President Obama. However, McChrystal appreciated the critical importance of conducting operations in such a way as not to create yet more insurgents, and that the purpose of military operations was to enable the

Afghan government to deliver services and connect with the people. Thus in the two major ISAF offensives in RC-South in 2009-10, Operation *Moshtarak* in Helmand and Operation *Hamkari* in Kandahar, huge effort was put into minimizing the risks to civilians, and combat operations were rapidly followed by measures designed to improve the presence of government and the delivery services on the ground, albeit with mixed results.[10]

Between 2007 and 2009, the British military began to develop a new approach to military operations in counterinsurgency that emphasized the importance of 'influence' – that is to say that the purpose of military activities was to achieve influence with respect to opponents (either to deter or coerce opponents) and with the host nation and civilian population (e.g., reassurance). Achieving influence may involve 'kinetic' activities (i.e., combat operations), but the purpose of this new approach was to emphasise 'kinetic' activities that military forces could engage in to achieve the desired effects without risking collateral damage and alienating locals. Thus, a military show of force – such as a flyover by a ground attack jet – might be sufficient to deter an insurgent attack and would be preferable to dropping a 2,000 lb bomb. 52 Brigade was the first British brigade to experiment with this new approach in Afghanistan, creating company-level non-kinetic effects teams (called NKETs) as well as an influence cell within the brigade headquarters. This new emphasis on 'influence' was subsequently codified as the 'Central Idea' in UK joint military doctrine on stabilization operations, and was also highlighted in British Army doctrine on counterinsurgency.[11]

Lesson 2: Develop an integrated civil-military campaign

Ultimately, defeating an insurgency depends on delivering security and public services for the population, so as to persuade them that they are better off supporting the government than the insurgents. This leads onto the second key lesson concerning the importance of integrating the civilian and military lines of operation in any counterinsurgency campaign. Following correct analysis of the object and centre of gravity, the primary purpose of military operations should be to support the establishment of legitimate government, the development of infrastructure, and the delivery of public services. It is possible, likely even, that in the early stages of a counterinsurgency campaign it will be necessary to focus military operations on defeating insurgents in order to create sufficient minimum security conditions

for the conduct of civilian operations. This was certainly ISAF's experience when it expanded to the south of Afghanistan in 2006, and the Taliban responded by surging forces from Pakistan into Kandahar and Helmand provinces. US forces in Afghanistan and ISAF responded with counter-offensives designed to signal resolve and prevent the Taliban from threatened Kandahar City.[12] Once minimum security conditions are established, then military forces play many vital roles in providing security, planning and logistical support to civilian operations.

> *The primary purpose of military operations should be to support the establishment of legitimate government, the development of infrastructure, and the delivery of public services.*

This notion is not exactly new for the British Army. Throughout its long counterinsurgency campaign in Northern Ireland (from 1969 to 2007), the British Army's role was to provide military support to the civilian powers. In this arrangement, the civilian authorities were the *supported* arm of the campaign, and the military were the *supporting* arm. Similarly, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) II operation in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was the lead agency. The peacekeeping forces provided by a coalition of nations, with the largest and most military contingents from Britain and France, acted in support of UNHCR operations to provide humanitarian relief to civilians trapped in the middle of the conflict. In both these cases, however, military support to civilian efforts was limited in scope. In Northern Ireland, it was limited to supporting the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and in Bosnia, it was limited to escorting aid convoys and patrolling designated areas, and only latterly to taking military action to deter attacks against UNPROFOR and civilians.[13]

It was increasingly evident that state fragility and civil wars were emerging as significant security problems for western states in the post Cold War world. This, combined with the emerging state practice of humanitarian intervention, meant that there was growing political pressure in the west for military intervention to help stabilize failing states and do something for civilians trapped in conflict.[14] This in turn meant that western militaries had to prepare to operate alongside a range of civilian partners and amongst civilian populations, and to support broader range of tasks that they had hitherto undertaken.

This more ambitious approach to civil-military cooperation was retarded by the usual bureaucratic politics and inter-departmental competition that hinders cross-government activity in most countries, compounded by the differing cultures of the military and civilians in government. For civilians, the military literally spoken a different language, which they did, peppered with military acronyms and doctrinal terms that were meaningless for civilians. An added problem was the natural distrust of aid workers towards militaries of any side or nation; since the Department of International Development (like similar departments in other countries) recruited many staff from the aid sector, this was not an insignificant problem since, as Bosnia suggested, the military and development officials would have to find a way to work together.

In 2006, the UK military produced a 'discussion note', laying out a new framework for civil-military cooperation, which it called the 'Comprehensive Approach.' Essentially this involved integrating all lines of operation – diplomatic, development and military – in a coherent approach to a campaign.[15] The Comprehensive Approach failed to gain traction in wider UK government as it was rejected as a 'military idea.' In spite of the failure to produce a more joined-up approach in central government to civil-military cooperation, there was gradual progress on this front on the ground in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) became the main platform for civil-military cooperation. The British established one of the first PRTs in Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan in July 2003 and staffed by around 100 troops from the Royal Anglican regiment, supported by a number of SAS reservists; a smaller, 50-strong British PRT was set up in Maymaneh, the capital of nearby Faryab province, in May 2004. There was no civilian presence in these early PRTs, which focused on supporting demobilization and disarmament of the warlord militia in northern Afghanistan. In contrast, the British-led PRT established in Helmand was designed from the beginning as a civilian-lead organization, and to have a broad remit to support the development of sub-national government, infrastructure and public services in Helmand. Initially small, the PRT grew to well over 100 hundred civilian staff by 2008 drawn from the British Foreign Office, Department of International Development, and Ministry of Defence, as well as a small number of US and Danish staff. Eventually the number

of PRTs in Afghanistan grew to 26, covering most of Afghanistan's 34 provinces; half were American, and the rest were national PRTs from NATO countries including Canada, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France. Unlike the British PRT, all the rest were military led, but all had substantial numbers of civilian political officers and stabilization advisors drawn from respective foreign services and international development ministries. Moreover, like the British PRT, all had broad responsibilities for supporting the development of government, infrastructure and services in their respective provinces.

In was pressure from the field and not pressure from Whitehall (the seat of UK government) that resulted in improved civil-military cooperation in Helmand. Initially cooperation between the UK military task force headquarters and the British PRT was poor. But it improved overtime with the task force headquarters moving from Camp Bastion in the Helmand desert to the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, were the PRT was based; from 2008, the task force planning cell moved right into the heart of the PRT, further improving civil-military integration. As more civilian stabilization advisors were deployed on the ground in Helmand, another important development was the creation of civil-military District stabilisation teams from 2009 on, bringing together civilian advisors and military personnel assigned specifically to support development activities.[16]

This significant improvement between the British task force and PRT was not matched with improvement in the coordination between civilian and military actors at the campaign level. A major problem that dogged the entire international effort to rebuild and stabilize Afghanistan was the sheer plethora of civilian agencies – international, government, and non-governmental – operating in the country, and related to this, the failure to coordinate national donor programmes. This made it nigh on impossible to achieve unity of effort in the campaign. Thus, whilst unity of command and effort did greatly improved with the creation under General McCHrystal of a new three-star headquarters to run the war, ISAF Joint Command, unity of command was non-existent and there was no improvement in unity of effort on the civilian side. Thus, in Helmand in 2010, the US Marines Command, the US Embassy's Regional Platform, and the British PRT, were actually competing with each other through their various development programmes when they should have been coordinating and cooperating.[17]

Lesson 3: Focus on local governance

Insurgencies are built on local grievances towards those in power, and it follows therefore that improving local governance is critically important to the success of any counterinsurgency campaign. This is clear in the Afghan case. Indeed, the Taliban rose to power in the mid 1990s in response to the abusive and predatory rule of warlords in Kandahar. Equally, popular disillusionment with the return of the warlords under Karzai, which aggravated old tribal rivalries, provided fertile ground for the Taliban to return from 2004 on. Outside assessments of the Afghanistan war have created a binary view of the conflict as between the legitimate Afghan government and its international backers on the one side, and the Taliban and its terrorist allies on the other. Such a view distorts the reality of the conflict, which is actually of hundreds of local level rivalries and violent disputes, where local parties attach themselves to either the government or the Taliban side, and gain legitimacy and resources from some an attachment.[18]

At the same time, it is all too clear that the Taliban is a hierarchical movement, and that there has been and remains a centrally directed military campaign by the Taliban against the government, just has the Afghan security forces are conducting an overall campaign, as was ISAF up to the end of 2014. In addition, the Taliban has also sought to develop its own shadow government, and to provide public services for locals in areas that it controls. The Taliban is effective in providing judicial services and collecting taxes, and these are both areas where the Afghan government has largely failed; however, the Taliban is not effective at delivering other public services.[19]

Understandably the main focus of the international community has been on capacity building of the central Afghan government. At the Tokyo conference in 2002, the international community pledged $5 billion in development assistance for Afghanistan, and a further $5 billion at a follow-up conference at Berlin in 2004. However, the Afghan government simply lacked the capacity to spend all this aid. Most Afghan government ministries had been hollowed out by the civil war and the Taliban rule of the 1990s. Most educated Afghans had long since fled Kabul. Those that remained struggled to survive on meager public salaries. This along with an administrative culture that is highly bureaucraticised, created the incentives

and opportunities for corruption to flourish. In effect, Afghanistan was being overfed, and the failure to attach appropriate conditions on aid meant that no pressure was exerted on the Afghan government to tackle corruption. Within a decade the international community had created the best kleptocracy that money could buy.[20]

Complicating matters is that typical of countries that have predominantly rural populations, central government has little meaning for most people outside of Kabul. Reinforcing this is Afghan political culture; in Afghan history, the country's leaders have faired poorly in exerting their authority much beyond Kabul.[21] Thus, as important as improving the capacities and competence of central government in Afghanistan, has been improving sub-national government; this is the government experienced by most locals in their daily lives.

Improving local governance is critically important to the success of any counterinsurgency campaign.

From the beginning, the British PRT sought to strengthen the capacities of provincial government. Thus, the British government insisted that the highly corrupt provincial governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, was replaced with somebody they could work with; his replaced, Mohammad Daoud, was a fairly capable technocrat not corrupted by Helmand politics. However, for most Helmandis, who consider fellow Helmandis from the neighbouring district to be foreigners, even provincial government is too remote. In other words, the key to connecting people with the government, was to do so at a really local level.

This point was well understood by McChrystal's team. They began to talk about the importance of local governance. Use of the term 'governance' as opposed to 'government' was deliberate, to emphasise the importance of informal government entities and practices, such as councils of local elders, as well as the formal structures of local government (the District Governor and his officers). This was especially important in giving communities a stake in the projects funded by international development assistance. The US military spend vast sums on funding local projects under the Commanders Emergency Response Programme, with the intent of 'winning the hearts and minds' of local communities; in this respect, US Army doctrine treated 'money as a weapon system.' In Helmand, the PRT similarly directly

commissioned rebuilding works and other projects. However, extensive field research in Helmand clearly showed that projects commissioned by international agents – be they military commanders or PRT stabilization advisors – did not win over local communities, but rather such projects were seen to favour one group at the expense of another.[22] From 2009, the British deployed political advisors to support district governors and the constitution and effective operation of district councils, and British development assistance was rooted through these district councils to ensure that local communities decided how the funding was spent. In this way, local communities were empowered and had a larger stake in the success of projects funded by international funding. Thus, whilst at the strategic level the western effort has been an unmitigated disaster in terms of creating a kleptocratic state, at the local level, there have been some significant successes in terms of improving government, services and infrastructure.

Lesson 4: Be prepared for peace talks

Most insurgencies that do end do so following peace talks. However, unpalatable this may be, it is a simple fact. Indeed, this is a logical corollary of the impossibility of military victory in counterinsurgency. From this perspective, the purpose of military operations is not only to create the security conditions for government to connect with the people, it is also to create incentives for insurgents to enter negotiations with the government.

A number of implications follow from this. The first is that one must be prepared for the possibility of peace talks. The Americans were not when they invaded Afghanistan following 9/11. By December 2001, the Taliban's northern front had collapsed, Kabul had fallen to the Northern Alliance, and the regime leaders had retreated to Kandahar. As anti-Taliban Pashtun forces were converging on Kandahar City, backed by US special forces and airpower, and led by Karzai as the newly appointed interim leader of Afghanistan, the Taliban sent a delegation to negotiate with Karzai. A meeting took place on 5 December 2001, at which the Taliban agreed to surrender Kandahar, and in exchange Karzai agreed to allow the Taliban to return peacefully to their homes, and even discussed the possibly of state pensions, bodyguards and cars for Taliban leaders. Deal making of this kind is integral to the Afghan way of war, which seeks to avoid bloody fights to the finish. In effect, the Taliban were 'recognizing the new

dominant power.' The custom is such situations was for the losing side to 'surrender their weapons and vehicles in the expectation that some of these weapons and vehicles would be handed back.' [23] However, when the terms of this deal were passed on to US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, he rejected it out of hand, ruling out the possibility of allowing Omar 'to live in dignity' in Kandahar. [24] It would seem that the idea of peace talks with the Taliban had never occurred to Americans. Perhaps this is unsurprising, as the American way of war, as practiced in the American Civil War, World War Two, and Vietnam, has a proclivity towards unlimited war aims and the utter defeat of opponents.[25] All the same, this was a missed opportunity.

The purpose of military operations is not only to create the security conditions for government to connect with the people, it is also to create incentives for insurgents to enter negotiations with the government.

Within any insurgent movement, one may expect to find pragmatists and hardliners. So it is with the Taliban. Indeed, this was reflected in the Taliban Emirate of the late 1990s. Formally the Emirate was ruled by Mullah Omar and his court of ideologues based in Kandahar, whilst Afghanistan was actually governed by the more pragmatically minded Taliban administrators based in Kabul. Today, the Taliban is governed by a leadership council, commonly called the Quetta Shura, under which sit a dozen commissions covering different functional areas, including military, political, financial and cultural commissions. Pragmatists are concentrated in the Political Commission, whose remit is to act as the foreign affairs department of the Taliban. Since 2013, the Political Commission has had a formal delegation based in Qatar, and with whom attempts have been made by various western parties to explore the possibility of peace talks. Formally, the Taliban have said that talks could only take place after all foreign troops had left Afghan soil. Informally Taliban pragmatists indicated a willingness to enter talks while US forces remain in Afghanistan, and also to renounce ties with Al Qaeda as negotiated outcome, this being a condition for the United States.[26] However, by 2013 it was too late; with ISAF scheduled to end in December 2014, the Taliban had every reason to continue its military campaign, confident that it would fair better when US and European combat forces had left Afghanistan.

The most prominent academic theory on negotiations in armed conflicts holds that the parties to a conflict will move towards negotiations when there is a 'mutually hurting stalemate', that is when both sides are worn out by the conflict and there is no prospect of a strategic breakthrough.[27] This makes intuitive sense; it is illogical to continue the fight in such a situation. However, in practice it is difficult for both sides to perceive themselves at the same time to be locked in a stalemate. Invariably, one side or the other will have the upper hand, or believe themselves to have the upper hand, in terms of military momentum. Accordingly, the side that is enjoying more military success will be motivated to continue the fight in the hope that it can defeat its opponent.

This dynamic has played out in Afghanistan since at least 2009, when the Obama administrated surged US military forces into the country. Whilst ISAF under McChrystal was pursuing a multifaceted campaign aimed at improving governance and protecting civilians, the primary objective was to inflict a military defeat on the Taliban. The major ISAF offensives launched in the south were intended to inflict a 'strategic defeat' on the Taliban. Since 2013, military momentum has been with the Taliban. Over 2013 and 2014, NATO forces progressively withdrew from the field in preparation for the ending of ISAF. Over this period, the Afghan national security forces increasingly had to operate without NATO support. The result has been all too predictable. The Taliban had made major gains, especially in the south and also in the north. In late 2015, the Taliban seized the city of Kunduz and had taken control of most of Helmand province. The Afghan security forces retook Kunduz after two weeks, and have regained some ground in Helmand. However, it is clear that momentum in the war is with the Taliban. In this situation, the Taliban may be forgiven for believing, as ISAF had in 2009-10, that victory is possible. In reality, it is not. For all their considerable shortcomings, the Afghan security forces are simply too large and capable for the Taliban to defeat outright. Equally, if the Afghan security forces working with ISAF were unable to beat the Taliban, then there is no prospect of their doing so now.[28]

Thus, the logical thing is for both sides to explore the possibilities of peace talks. A major mistake up to now has been to focus on one channel for peace talks. In 2013, when the US began to show interest in peace talks, as the ISAF campaign was losing momentum, it focused all of its efforts on engaging with the Taliban office in Qatar. The risk with such an approach

is that the channel may collapse, as indeed happened in Qatar. Since his inauguration as Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani as attempted to create a new channel working through Pakistan, which has signaled a new willingness to put pressure on the Afghan Taliban to make peace. However, the west and indeed Afghan government cannot know how much leverage Pakistan is able and truly willing to exert on the Taliban. Thus, this channel is fraught with risk. A sensible approach would be to pursue multiple lines of communication, formal and informal (such as Track II talks), to develop a habit and practices of talking, and for each side to develop better understanding of the political agenda of the other and therefore of the 'negotiating space' for peace talks. Both sides must also accept that talks may occur alongside fighting. Such an approach is more complex and offers less apparent certainty than working through a single channel, and policymakers may find this uncomfortable, but this more realistic and offers better prospects of peace.[29]

References

[1] Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsky: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

[2] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created* (London: Hurst, 2012).

[3] Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*; Yaniv Barzali, *101 Days of War* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2013).

[4] Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

[5] On the return of the Taliban, see Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012,' *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 3 (2013), pp. 845-871.

[6] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006 [1964]), p. 63.

[7] For discussion of the British campaign in Helmand see Theo Farrell, 'Improving in War: Military adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006-2009,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 33, no.4 (2010): 567-594.

[8] See General Stanley McChrystal testimony at http://www.c-span.org/video/?286758-1/military-nominations-hearing

[9] This is argued in Christopher Griffin, 'Major Combat Operations and Counterinsurgency Warfare: Plan Challe in Algeria, 1959-1960,' *Security Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2010), pp. 555-89.

[10] For an assessment of Operation Moshtarak, see *Appraising Moshtarak: the Campaign in Nad-e-Ali District, Helmand*, Royal United Services Institute, June 2010, 13pp, at http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Appraising_Moshtarak.pdf

[11] Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution* (2009), chapter 3; Land Warfare Command, Army Field Manual, *Countering Insurgency*, AC 71876 (2009)

[12] General David Richards, *Taking Command* (London: Headline, 2014), chapter 13.

[13] Army General Staff, *Operation BANNER: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland*, AC 71842 (2006);

[14] For brilliant analysis on this, see Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2007),

[15] Joint Doctrine Concepts Centre, *The Comprehensive Approach*, Joint Discussion Note 4/05 (2006).

[16] The author undertook an assessment of the Helmand PRT for the UK government in late 2009.

[17] This was a major finding of a campaign wide assessment undertaken for ISAF Joint Command by the author in October 2010.

[18] Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2014); Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (London: Hurst, 2012).

[19] Antonio Guistozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2007); Farrell and Guistozzi, 'The Taliban at War'; Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years on the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2013).

[20] Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015).

[21] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[22] Stuart Gordon, *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan's Helmand Province* (Medford, MA: Tufts University, Feinstein International Center, 2011).

[23] Interview with Michael Semple, London, 28 April 2015. See also Fotini Christia and Michael Semple, 'Flipping the Taliban,' *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, pp. 34-45.

[24] Brian Knowlton, 'Rumsfeld rejects plan to allow Mullah Omar to "live in dignity": Taliban fighters agree to surrender Kandahar,' *New York Times*, 7 December 2001.

[25] The classic work on this is Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997 [paperback edition]).

[26] Michael Semple, Theo Farrell, Anatol Lieven and Rudra Chaudhuri *Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation*, Royal United Services Institute, September 2012, 14pp at http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Taliban_Perspectives_on_Reconciliation.pdf

[27] William I. Zartman, 'Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond,' in Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman, eds., *Conflict Resolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), pp. 225-250.

[28] This is argued in Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, 'Making Peace with the Taliban,' *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 6 (2015), pp. 80-87.

[29] For discussion on these points, see Farrell and Semple, 'Making Peace with the Taliban,' pp. 88-110