

AFGHANISTAN - STATUS AND PROSPECTS IN 2011

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The year 2010 ended as one of the most significant years in the latest conflict in Afghanistan, which has now been running for almost a decade. For the United States, a formal review of the NATO campaign in December 2010 tried its best to cast a positive light on the situation. President Obama's statement noted that "the strategy is showing progress across all three assessed areas of al-Qaida, Pakistan and Afghanistan". On the question of the counter-insurgency, the report was bullish, noting that "the momentum achieved by the Taliban in recent years has been arrested in much of the country, and reversed in some key areas"². The troop surge that began in July 2009 had "enabled progress", and laid the groundwork for the proposed commencement of a drawdown of US troops from July 2011 onwards. The NATO plan for complete handover of security responsibility to the Afghan government by 2014 was still, it was reported, on track.

The statement followed a major NATO summit in Lisbon the month before, in which the heads of government of the 48 nations contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan reiterated their commitment to the plan. The NATO Secretary-General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, opened the summit with the stirring words: "Here in Lisbon we have launched the process by which the Afghan people will once again become masters of their own house"³. The summit noted that plans were on track to increase the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to the target figure of 300,000 by the end of 2011, and that these forces were "improving in quality, notably through the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan"⁴.

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² The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2010, December 16) *Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review*. From <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review> accessed 29 January 2011

³ NATO (2010, November 20) *NATO and Afghanistan launch transition and embark on a long-term partnership*. From http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_68728.htm accessed 29 January 2011

⁴ Ibid

These official statements from the leaders of the Afghanistan operation aim to give the impression that all is proceeding largely according to plan (even if President Obama recently conceded that the project was “very difficult”). An adjustment to military strategy at the beginning of 2010 to deploy a further 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, was assessed by the December 2010 review by the White House to be starting to have the right effect. Selected news reports from the battlefield suggested that the troop surge was clearing Taliban from areas in which they had held sway for some time, and forcing them to fall back on a policy of planting Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) rather than take on the ISAF forces directly⁵. Ahead of the December 2010 review, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates claimed that there was “no denying that the security climate is improving and that the sacrifices of Afghan and coalition troops are achieving greater safety and security”⁶.

For all these positive statements on the ISAF operation in Afghanistan, however, there have been a growing chorus of voices suggesting that all is very much not well in Afghanistan. 2010 was the deadliest year yet for the coalition forces fighting in the country, with 711 troop deaths among the foreign forces. A little over two-thirds of these have been US troops. This could, of course, mean that the coalition is taking the fight more aggressively to the enemy, but it certainly suggests that the Taliban are far from being defeated. In a number of coalition partner countries, voices of dissent have been rising among the population, and calls to bring the troops home have been rising. Certain areas of Afghanistan, and notably Helmand Province in the Pashtun belt in the South, have proved particularly intractable and deadly.

In the run-up to the release of the official White House statement in December 2010, two other reports painted a very bleak picture of the progress of the operation. The Red Cross noted in a statement in December 2010 that “in a growing number of areas in the country, we are entering a new, rather murky phase in the conflict in which the proliferation of armed groups threatens the ability of humanitarian organizations to reach the people who need their help.”⁷ Civilian casualties from the conflict had risen again in 2010 as the conflict intensified and spread into more parts of the country. One Red Cross health coordinator working in the country had said that the number of mothers coming in with children dying from easily preventable diseases was “staggering”⁸. The ability of doctors to reach many parts of the country was becoming increasingly difficult in the face of the worsening security situation.

At the same time, details of two US intelligence reports leaked to the New York Times on Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, also painted a somewhat downbeat picture. In particular, they suggested that any tactical gains made on the ground in Afghanistan will be negated as long as Pakistan continues to fail to quash the use of its western tribal areas as a safe bolt-hole for Taliban fighters. Major General John Campbell, the commander of NATO forces in eastern Afghanistan, said that “I’m not going to make any bones about it, they’ve got sanctuaries and they go back and forth across the border.”⁹ The effect is that insurgents cleared from areas in eastern Afghanistan, such as the region around Kandahar, can easily disappear into the mountains over the vague Durand Line separating Afghanistan and Pakistan. From there, they can rest and regroup among sympathetic or at least pragmatically

⁵ USA Today (2010, September 27) *IEDs show troop surge working, US officers say*. From http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/afghanistan/2010-09-27-surge27_ST_N.htm accessed 29 January 2011

⁶ G Whittell and M Evans (2010, December 10) *Don’t change course now: we’re taming the Taleban, Pentagon to tell Obama*. The Times, p.43

⁷ ICRC (2010, December 15) *Afghanistan: a people trapped between sides*. From <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/news-release/2010/afghanistan-news-2010-12-15.htm> accessed 29 January 2011

⁸ Ibid

⁹ E Bumiller (2010, December 14) *Intelligence Reports offer Dim View of Afghan War*. The New York Times. From <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/15/world/asia/15policy.html> accessed 27 January 2011

aligned local tribes, ready to launch their assaults on NATO forces again. The intelligence reports lamented that the billions of dollars of military aid provided to Pakistan to tackle the situation in the tribal areas did not seem to be addressing the problem, and that this was unlikely to change any time soon¹⁰.

Such differences in outlook reflect a variation in perspective between the military, and other parts of government such as the intelligence agencies, or indeed non-governmental organisations working on the humanitarian crisis. For the military, there is a certain political incentive to press ahead with the troop surge and the “clear, hold and build” tactic at the centre of General Petraeus’s counter-insurgency strategy. It is important for the military that any progress in these tactics is reported positively, not least so that they can keep the plan on the rails politically and not be deflected by premature moves to depart Afghanistan before the job is done. For General Petraeus personally, there is much incentive to repeat the apparent successes of his counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq. Credibility and continuity are very much at stake. Critical reports, such as those from the CIA and its intelligence partners, are generally dismissed by the military as being the work of officials who are not close enough to the daily realities of the conflict in the ground¹¹.

A number of reports from the region suggest, however, that military successes are somewhat localised, and that maintaining permanent security in areas cleared of insurgents remains stubbornly difficult. The capital, Kabul, has itself been a zone of relative calm and normality, although insurgents are continually trying to shatter this image and show that Karzai’s government at the centre does not have control of security even in its own backyard. At the end of January they achieved a success, with a suicide bombing in a supermarket opposite the British Embassy which killed at least eight people. This was the first major attack against foreign civilians in the capital for almost a year¹².

Even a short distance outside of Kabul, security can quickly fade away. In a report in late 2010 from the town of Charikar, the capital of Parwan Province to the north of Kabul, the BBC reporter Quentin Somerville noted that all was calm under the patrols of NATO-trained Afghan police. The bazaar was busy and stocked well, and people were able to go about their everyday business in relative normality. But just a ten-minute drive away from the bazaar towards the neighbouring Ghorband Valley, it becomes too dangerous to travel as Taliban insurgents are firmly in control¹³. A local member of the provincial council noted that “transferring power to Afghans in six years will be difficult, never mind six months”¹⁴.

The problem is that it may be relatively straightforward to establish control in a particular town or village with sufficient force, but the insurgents are well-versed in melting away to the hills until such time as they can return. And they have plenty of time on their hands, while NATO are eager to establish timetables for departing the country. Professor Anthony King of Exeter University has examined the British army’s operations further south from the capital, in the restive Helmand Province. He notes that the continual problem has been “attempting to turn recurrent tactical successes into strategic gains”¹⁵. Part of the problem may be a tactical one of concentrating forces in dispersed Forward Operating Bases (FOBs), with areas between policed periodically through patrols. The initial British deployment comprised a number of forces that was probably too small (at 3,500 troops in 2006) to cover the area

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² J Starkey (2011, January 29) *Civilians dies as Taleban suicide bomber brings terror back to the heart of Kabul*. The Times, p.39

¹³ Q Somerville (2010, November 19) *Afghan town’s despair as Nato eyes endgame*. BBC News. From <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11796617> accessed 29 January 2011

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ A King (2010) *Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British military operations in Afghanistan*. *International Affairs* 86(2), p.311

effectively in any other way. Despite an increase of the troop strength to 19,000 by early 2010, however, the tactic of concentrating troops within dispersed FOBs seems to have continued¹⁶.

Some observers have drawn a historical parallel with British campaigns in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century, equating today's FOBs with the "forts" of the colonial forces in British India's frontier.¹⁷ Then, as now, with a relatively small force covering a huge area, and a hostile attitude among the local population to the presence of foreign forces in its land, jurisdiction often extended just a few yards beyond the immediate boundaries of the garrison. In Helmand, the particular ferocity and persistence of the Taliban campaign has meant that the British forces have been constantly chasing shadows and failing to ensure continued security in the areas that they conquer. As the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, described the situation early in 2011, any gains made by the coalition forces are "tenuous and fragile and can be lost"¹⁸.

As significant a year as 2010 was, this year is likely to be crucial in the development of the Afghanistan campaign. On the military front, the thawing of snows and resumption of the insurgency in the Spring will be a telling test of whether the Taliban have been as weakened as the NATO forces are saying is the case. However, 2011 is the first year in which substantial departures of coalition forces are planned. President Obama has set July 2011 as the first period in which US forces will start to hand over to their Afghan counterparts in significant numbers. This year is also the year that Canadian, Dutch and Spanish forces will withdraw. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, has said that an initial withdrawal of British troops in 2011 was "possible", depending on situations on the ground¹⁹. Germany's parliament has also voted to start withdrawing its troops by the beginning of 2012²⁰.

The plan that underpins the withdrawals is dependent on the appropriate establishment of Afghan National Army (ANA) and National Police (ANP) forces across the country. This is part of the Security Sector Reform programme (SSR) in Afghanistan, which also includes reform of the Afghan intelligence agency (the NDS) and has represented \$30 billion in aid up to 2010²¹. Again, opinions on how effectively this process has been vary depending on the source. The official NATO view, as expressed in the White House statement of December 2010, claims that: "The Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior, with help from the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, have exceeded ANSF growth targets, implemented an extended array of programs to improve the quality and institutional capability of the ANSF, and sharply improved their training effectiveness."²² On the army front, a top US military trainer in the country noted that a number of improvements were being seen in 2010, such as an enhanced success rate in graduations from the training, an improved display of skills in the field, and a reduced attrition rate of recruits²³.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.315

¹⁷ Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, former British ambassador to Afghanistan. Speech at the Pluscarden Programme, St Antony's College, Oxford University, 27 January 2011

¹⁸ L Doucet (2011, January 18) *Afghanistan's make-or-break year ahead*. BBC News. From <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12203904> accessed 29 January 2011

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-10708063> accessed 29 January 2011

²⁰ J Dempsey (2011, January 28) *Germany plans start of troop withdrawal*. The New York Times. From <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/world/europe/29germany.html> accessed 29 January 2011

²¹ J Richards (2011, January 6) *Intelligence burden: Afghanistan grapples with security reforms*. *Jane's Intelligence Review*

²² The White House, Office of the Press Secretary (2010, December 16) *Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review*. From <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review> accessed 29 January 2011

²³ W H McMichael (2010, June 1) *Afghan army improves, but still lacks leaders*. The Army Times. From http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/06/military_afghan_army_training_060110/ accessed 29 January 2011

The same officer, however, admitted that the ANA “lacks the self-sustainment it must develop to become an independent and capable force”²⁴. While the army is considered the most capable of the emerging security forces (the others being the police, air force and intelligence agency), structural problems in Afghan society make the successful formation of a national army a difficult challenge. As Giustozzi pointed out, one of the key issues is an ethnic one, namely that the army tends to be dominated by Tajiks from the northern areas of the country. This makes them ethnically different from the Pashtuns in the south, where the heart of the insurgency is located, and means that the army lacks public legitimacy in these areas²⁵. Other problems include lack of leadership, low literacy rates among officers, and poor logistics capabilities. Problems of oversight in the civilian Defence Ministry, furthermore, notably high levels of corruption and factionalism, threaten the ability of the army to remain intact following the departure of NATO forces and any intensification of the insurgency²⁶.

The problems faced by the army, however, are not as grave as those in the Afghan National Police. Attrition rates sometimes reaching 60 percent in Helmand Province, rampant corruption, low levels of literacy and widespread drug addiction are plaguing the establishment of a reliable and effective police force in many areas²⁷. A British government memo in 2010 suggested that in Helmand Province, as many as 50 percent of recent recruits to the police had tested positive for narcotics abuse²⁸. In some ways, the problems are not surprising, as the police are often very poorly equipped, trained and paid in comparison to their Taliban adversaries, and in many cases they or their family members run the risk of gruesome punishment from the insurgents for daring to join the police at all. There is no doubt that, in this area of the strategy, reaching numerical targets for recruitment belies the very real structural concerns with building an institution to which the coalition forces can hand over security responsibility with confidence.

Such structural problems run deep in the Afghan establishment. Accusations of corruption in the political class have dogged the administration of the president, Ahmed Karzai, in particular. 2010 was the year in which the Wikileaks saga reached new heights, with publication of secret US diplomatic cables concerning the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of the latter, one of the most damaging revelations was the story of corruption of an “overwhelming scale” in the Karzai government, which was seriously hampering efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of the Afghan public in the country’s reconstruction²⁹. One astonishing report described how the 2009 Afghan vice-president, Ahmed Zia Massoud (younger brother of the former Afghan warlord, Ahmed Shah Massoud) was stopped and questioned entering Dubai with \$52 million in cash in a suitcase³⁰. The case was just one example of “pervasive wealth extraction” by members of the Karzai government³¹.

Karzai has also faced problems establishing legitimacy through the electoral process, which is considered a central plank of the ISAF reconstruction of Afghanistan. The parliamentary

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ A Giustozzi (2002) *The Problems of Creating a New Afghan Army – and the critical dangers of failure*. International Industrial Information Ltd, p.15

²⁶ International Crisis Group (2010, May 10) *A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting the Afghan National Army*. Asia Report No.190, p.26

²⁷ B Brady (2010, March 28) *Drugs and Desertion: How the UK really rates Afghan police*. The Independent. From <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/drugs-and-desertion-how-the-uk-really-rates-afghan-police-1929508.html> accessed 29 January 2011

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/02/wikileaks-afghanistan-cor_n_791321.html accessed 29 January 2011

³⁰ J Steel and J Boone (2010, December 2) *Wikileaks: Afghan vice-president ‘landed in Dubai with \$52 million in cash’*. The Guardian. From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/02/wikileaks-elite-afghans-millions-cash> accessed 29 January 2011

³¹ Ibid

elections of September 2010 were the latest episode in which electoral irregularities were noted. The Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) announced that it had “serious concerns about the quality of the election” after polls closed³². The election of President Karzai himself for a second term in 2009 was a messy affair, in which an initial victory was delayed following the rejection of nearly a third of his votes for fraud by a UN-backed electoral monitoring committee³³. A second round run-off was cancelled after his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew from the contest. Despite his incumbency as president, the legitimacy of Karzai is questioned by many in Afghanistan, and this casts a serious pall over his position as ISAF’s key partner in the reconstruction process.

If the military gains are shaky and the Afghan security institutions not yet developed, what are the prospects for the immediate future? Many are calling for a much more serious consideration of a negotiated solution to the conflict involving all political stakeholders, including the Taliban. This has been one of the areas of disagreement between the various allies involved in the campaign. In 2009, evidence was surfacing of the British government giving serious consideration to bringing the Taliban’s central leadership, the “Quetta shura”, into some form of political process negotiating the end of the conflict and departure of NATO forces³⁴. This was to run alongside attempts to encourage elements of the Taliban’s forces to lay down their arms. The Afghanistan analyst, Gilles Dorronsoro, is one of many other observers suggesting that a change of strategy in this direction is needed. He suggests that “in the coming months, the American-led coalition needs to declare a ceasefire and begin talking to the Taliban. While negotiations could be an extremely long and fraught process, the sooner they begin the more likely they are to achieve results”³⁵.

This will not be an easy process. Pitfalls include the difficult role that Pakistan should and could play in such negotiations, and the likelihood that they will want to make sure they have a stake in the shape of the future Afghan administration. NATO’s initial explorations of opening up real channels with the Taliban have not necessarily gone very well. In late 2010, a supposed high-ranking Taliban official that British intelligence had developed as a conduit to the organisation turned out to be a confidence trickster, leading to considerable embarrassment³⁶.

The US has traditionally not been at all keen to consider negotiations with the Taliban. The aim of the troop surge through 2010 was to get the coalition forces into a position of strength, and the Taliban in a position of weakness, before the idea of negotiations was floated. They also followed the official UN line that serious concerns over the protection of human rights (and particularly women’s rights) made it virtually impossible to consider a political role for the Taliban in a future Afghanistan. As the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said at the NATO summit in Lisbon at the end of 2010, “civil, political and human rights are not political luxuries that that can be traded for stability or ‘saved for later’”³⁷. Now, there are signs that

³² J Boone (2010, September 19) *Afghanistan election: fraud could delay result for months, observers warn*. The Guardian. From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/19/afghanistan-election-fraud-delay-result> accessed 29 January 2011

³³ CNN World (2010, November 2) *Karzai declared elected president of Afghanistan*. From http://articles.cnn.com/2009-11-02/world/afghanistan.election.runoff_1_azizullah-lodin-abdullah-abdullah-president-hamid-karzai?_s=PM:WORLD accessed 29 January 2011

³⁴ G Corera (2009, November 13) *UK ‘backs Taliban reintegration’*. BBC News. From http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8357972.stm accessed 29 January 2011

³⁵ G Dorronsoro (2010, September 9) *Worsening Outlook in Afghanistan*. Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

³⁶ J Boone (2010, November 28) *Taliban imposter warnings ignored by Afghan leaders, says former spy chief*. The Guardian. From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/28/afghanistan-leaders-security-karzai> accessed 29 January 2011

³⁷ United Nations, Secretary-General (2010, November 22) *Secretary-General, at NATO Summit on Afghanistan, stresses flexibility in moving ahead with transition, saying ‘we must be guided by realities, not schedules’*. Paper SG/SM/13265 AFG/364

the US administration is starting to think more seriously about the possibility of discussions and the channels that might be used³⁸.

One of the problems is that the Taliban have not outwardly shown any interest in negotiating, as they consider the political and military momentum to be with them. In June 2010, Afghanistan and Pakistan commenced a series of talks called the Abu Dhabi Process, aimed at developing a political solution to the crisis. The report of the first meeting noted that “Taliban leaders have so far rejected reconciliation or attached unacceptable conditions to it”³⁹. They also noted that no consensus yet exists on the goals and parameters for reconciliation of the Taliban in the political process, and that previous moves in this area have been overshadowed by opportunistic political objectives by both the Karzai administration and by the Pakistani authorities⁴⁰. Clearly, a process of political negotiations is going to be very delicate and complicated for all concerned, but it is probably time for the process to be given much more serious consideration. The longer the conflict goes on, the longer most will accept that unending military confrontation can never be the endstate for Afghanistan, and that the Afghan people have to be in charge of their own affairs.

Sadly, the difficulties that Afghanistan faces now are not new. There is an argument that the nation-state has been fundamentally flawed and riven with dispute since the 1960s, when communism was introduced as a model for the Afghan people. Since that time, Afghan society has been a tangled knot of disagreement and schism, encompassing many dimensions. The questions have swirled around communism versus democracy; Islam versus secularism; Tajik versus Pashtun; elected government official versus tribal chief, and many other factors.

As an editorial in *Le Monde* discussed in January, the conundrum is encapsulated in the phrase “democratic state”, where this is applied to Afghanistan⁴¹. The country obtained independence as a state in 1921 under Amanullah Khan, but the political basis of that state has never been clear or agreed upon. Communism failed largely because it came up against cultural and religious barriers, but Islam has so far only brought further conflict and failed to unite different ethnic factions. As for democracy, that has never been present and arguably still is not, despite the attempts to establish an electoral process in the country. Is part of the problem the fact that the Western democratic model that ISAF is attempting to establish in Afghanistan is fundamentally at odds with the existing landscape of tribal chiefs, ethnic leaders and mullahs? Perhaps the plan is far too ambitious to work in a state as fractured and complex as Afghanistan.

For a host of reasons, 2011 is likely to represent a very significant year for Afghanistan – probably the most significant since the latest conflict commenced in late 2001. Despite a troop surge, the NATO forces have found that the insurgency remains stubbornly persistent. The political and military leaderships in the West are increasingly coming to see that one of the main reasons for this is the “AfPak” factor, namely that the Taliban are able to use safe havens on the Pakistani side of the border. Despite billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan, and the extensive use of missile attacks on al-Qaida targets from unmanned “drone” aircraft, the strategy in the Pakistani tribal areas is demonstrably not working. 2011 will be the year that these factors will lead to a shift in policy, as the first deadlines for NATO troop withdrawals

³⁸ L Doucet (2011, January 18) *Afghanistan's make-or-break year ahead*. BBC News. From <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12203904> accessed 29 January 2011

³⁹ East-West Institute (2010) *Seeking Solutions for Afghanistan: A report on the Abu Dhabi Process*. New York, East-West Institute, p.4

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Le Monde (2011, January 14) *Où en sommes-nous en Afghanistan?* From http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/01/14/ou-en-sommes-nous-en-afghanistan_1465293_3232.html accessed 30 January 2011

arrive and the policy of handing over security to the the state of Afghanistan becomes a reality.

Political opinion in the West will increasingly mean that this transition will need to stay on track. While many analysts will say that the solution for Afghanistan would ideally take decades to build, Western governments are not a position to sell unending military conflict and loss to their electorates. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan itself, serious human security issues are overshadowing any talk of progress and development. Legacies of the latest war include worsening health and security indices in many parts of the country, a shattered economy, and the meteoric rise of the narco-business. A future Afghan state will have to address these issues if it is to survive, but the current state of the Karzai government and its institutions does not yet inspire confidence that these goals can be achieved in the medium term.

A growing body of opinion is starting to see that this has to be the time to make progress on a political solution to the crisis, which involves all players in the Afghan arena, including the Taliban. The Paris Peace Accords which ended the Vietnam war in 1973 took five years of negotiations to achieve their goal. Interestingly, they commenced after a military surge by the US which achieved success on the battlefield (the Tet Offensive of January 1968). Historical parallels are always uncomfortable when looking at Afghanistan, but this may be the year in which a new phase of the strategy involving political negotiations with all parties will have to commence, if an end to the conflict is ever to be achieved.

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