

Counterinsurgency and a Comprehensive Approach: Helmand Province, Afghanistan

Peter Dahl Thruelsen

The point of departure of this article will be the situation in Helmand Province as of summer 2008. The article will provide an exclusive focus on comprehensive approach (CA), the complex context of Helmand Province and the international setup there. Fighting an insurgency like the one in Afghanistan is not just a job for the military. Experiences from previous and present insurgencies have shown that a variety of measures including political, economic and developmental play a significant role in gaining progress and success in what can be called state-building. In Afghanistan, the term ‘comprehensive approach’ has been used to underline the need for a more cross-ministerial interagency approach when fighting the insurgency. A recent report to the US Congress views the importance of CA in the following way “*success will never be achieved through military means alone, but through a comprehensive approach that involves all elements of power: military, diplomatic, and economic. Above all, it will require a sustained effort to continue to develop the capacity of the Afghans themselves.*”¹ In this article the focus will be on local capacity building and the fact that CA by definition involves more than one player, and that one of these is often a military one.

The article will try to go in-depth regarding the current situation in Helmand Province and it will look into the current British approach to the engagement. The article is based on several field researches conducted in Helmand since 2006, with the latest in May 2008 and it is inspired by the earlier contribution to *Small Wars Journal* by Dr. Daniel Marston on “British Operation in Helmand Afghanistan”. The main argument will be that when implementing a fully integrated civil-military counterinsurgency strategy in the context of Helmand Province extensive resources must be identified and allocated in a fast pace. Together with this the rapid deployment of civilian advisors to theatre will be crucial for success in the complexities of counterinsurgency in Helmand Province. In sum, the article is meant to contribute to the constant ongoing debate on Afghanistan, by providing, to some extent, a detailed picture of the situation as of summer 2008.

Helmand

In the following the overall context for the engagement in Helmand will be outlined. This will be followed by an analysis of the current situation as of summer 2008. On the ground of the current situation an analysis of the current British approach to counter the insurgency will be conducted. However, before commencing on the main part of the article, the geography of Helmand Province is listed below.

¹ Report to Congress (2008): *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress in accordance with the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 1230, Public Law 110-181), June 2008. Pp. 8.

Helmand Province	
Province capital	Lashkar Gah
Square kilometres	Approximately 62,000
Estimated size of the population	820.000
External border	Southern Pakistan
Internal provincial borders	Kandahar, Oruzgan, Day Kondi, Ghowr, Farah and Nimruz
Districts	13 (Baghran, Dishu, Gereshk, Now Zad, Musa Quala, Lashkar Gar (province capital), Nawa-I-Barakzayi, Kajaki, Nad Ali, Garmser, Khanashin, Washir and Sangin)
The majority ethnic group	Pashtuns
Minor ethnic groups	Smaller Baluch and Hazara communities
Main crop in terms of income	Opium followed by wheat and corn

Figure 1: The Geography of Helmand Province

The Context: International Engagement

Between the autumn of 2005 and the summer of 2006, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) accelerated the preparations to take over operational command of the whole of Afghanistan. Until the summer of 2006, the southern and eastern parts of the country had been under US command; whereas the capital, western and northern areas had been under ISAF command. One of the aims of the takeover was to release US troops deployed under the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) mandate for other tasks primarily in the east, and this finalised the ISAF expansion. On 31 July 2006, command of the six southern provinces (Regional Command South) was given to ISAF and on 5 October the same year, regional command east was also transferred to ISAF command. Between the time the Taliban regime fell and the time ISAF took over the southern provinces, the US presence in the area had been limited. The US had been permanently present at Kandahar Airfield from the fall of the Taliban, but no major military or civilian presence had been established on a large scale throughout the south.² In September 2004 the US opened a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the main city of Helmand Province (Lashkar Gah), but the PRT had only a limited capacity and a few hundred soldiers.³ To facilitate ISAF's takeover of the southern provinces, US and Coalition troops conducted large-scale combat operations in the area to make way for ISAF and to decrease Taliban influence and military power throughout the area. Operation Mountain Thrust, involving some 10,000 US-led troops, gave ISAF a taste of things to come. The operation lasted for approximately two months and at the time some of the heaviest fighting involved Coalition troops, the Taliban and other anti-government forces.

With the ISAF takeover of the southern provinces, the UK committed itself to take the lead in Helmand Province. Alongside the UK were Denmark and Estonia. The UK took over the US PRT in Lashkar Gah and a number of other bases in the province. One of these was Forward Operation Base (FOB) Price on the outskirts of the town of Gereshk, where the main Danish military contribution is currently located. The first British deployment of troops in Helmand consisted of an

² Maloney, Sean M. (2008): *A violent impediment: the evolution of insurgent operations in Kandahar province 2003-07*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 19:2, 201-220, Routledge, United Kingdom. Pp. 207.

³ Jakobsen, Peter Viggo (2005): 'PRTs in Afghanistan: Successful but not Sufficient', *DIIS Report 6*, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark. Pp. 13.

air assault brigade and a civilian and military element of the PRT. The brigade or Task Force Helmand and the PRT were organised as two separate pillars, with Task Force Helmand as the main and senior party. The two pillars coordinated and consolidated their overall tasks through the Helmand Executive Group (HEG)⁴, but the military pillar led the efforts. The UK approach to the task in the early days of the takeover was characterised by a strong kinetic focus and a campaign with an extensive involvement of Afghan politicians regarding how and where to commence operations.⁵

By the spring of 2007, the UK's knowledge of the ethnic, tribal, cultural and other characteristics of the province began to interact with the campaign plan, and a more counterinsurgency-focused campaign plan was introduced. The non-kinetic effects gained a larger role, and the kinetic operations began to focus on smaller and more populated areas – Afghan Development Zones – that could be held by the international forces, rather than on maintaining a presence throughout the whole province.⁶ In the autumn of 2007, the UK began fact finding for reviewed, longer-term and civilian-led plan for the province. A new reviewed plan called 'The Helmand Road Map' was developed and was approved by the British in the spring of 2008.⁷ Among other things, the PRT was upgraded to include a 'two-star level' senior civilian representative placed above the 'one-star level' military commander of Task Force Helmand.⁸ All operations now needed to have a specific long-term objective in support of the civilian and political development goals – the process now became civilian and political led.

The Context: Current Situation

The situation in Helmand Province in the summer of 2008 is characterised by uncertainty. Although progress has been made and a number of small- to large-scale reconstruction programmes have been implemented, the local population is still waiting to see which is the stronger and more determined party – the insurgents or the counterinsurgents.⁹ At the moment large-scale military operations are ongoing in the province; corruption and opium production are flourishing;¹⁰ local militias are still armed; and the legitimacy of the central and local administration is low. However, at the provincial level the recent appointment of Governor Gulab Mangal has shown a positive progress.¹¹ Local governance at this level is improving and is now showing positive nascent signs of increased

⁴ The Helmand Executive Group is no longer operative. When operational both province officials, the PRT and Task Force Helmand were present in the group.

⁵ The at that time unclear command and control structures and the interests of Helmand province governor, a number of districts governors and president Karzai resulted in what became known as the 'platoon house strategy' where small contingents of international soldiers were spread thin in government district compounds throughout the province (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080617/halltext/80617h0001.htm>). The 'strategy' did not favour some of the basic principles of using military force.

⁶ Thruelsen, Peter Dahl (2007): 'NATO in Afghanistan – What lessons are we learning and are we willing to adjust?', in *DIIS Report 2007: 14*, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark. Pp. 11-13.

⁷ Approved by Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), Department for International Development (DFID) and Ministry of Defence (MOD). The UK government made the final approval.

⁸ Interviews conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with a civilian PRT representative and phone interview conducted on 28 August 2008 with Lars Jensen Senior Danish Representative at the British PRT in Helmand.

⁹ Interviews conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 15 May 2008 with Mayor Said Dur Ali Shah and the at that time Gereshk District Chief Haji Manaf and a survey conducted by Danish CIMIC among key elders in Gereshk in May 2008.

¹⁰ From 2007 to 2008 the opium cultivation remained almost constant in Helmand Province. Thereby, the province remains the number one opium producer in Afghanistan responsible of 2/3 of the total production. UNODC (2008): *Afghan Opium Survey 2008*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

¹¹ Governor Gulab Mangal was appointed governor of Helmand Province in March 2008.

influence at district level. On 26 August 2008, Governor Mangal conducted a visit to Gereshk and met with a large group of local community leaders. The significance of this was the inclusion of local district leaders and the fact that it was only the second visit to Gereshk by a provincial governor in 30 years. Other encouraging governance signs in the province are the newly established presence of defence lawyers – something that did not exist during recent regimes – and the focused pursuit at both provincial and district level to improve and strengthen the education sector.¹²

Helmand Province is currently the biggest opium producer in Afghanistan, with more than 80% of the farming families in the province involved in opium cultivation and 35% of the farmers' annual cash income coming from opium – indicating a strong dependence in the province on the opium economy. The opium production in the province is not a new problem and it can be traced all the way back to the period before the Soviet invasion in December 1979. From 2002 to 2008, production more than tripled in the province, and in 2008 approximately 103,500 hectares of Afghanistan's 157,000 hectares of opium production were located in Helmand. This high level of opium production in the province has a variety of implications and challenges for the economy, the local power structures and governance. It also has a strong influence on and connection to the insurgency.¹³ The cultivation of opium therefore has a quite negative and complicating effect regarding the positive development of the area. Farmers routinely bribe the police to avoid crop eradication, middlemen and insurgents collect taxes to safeguard the fields and earn large amounts of money on trafficking, and it is estimated that government and provincial officials are involved in as much as 70% of all opium trafficking in the country.¹⁴ It should be said that Governor Mangal has been very outspoken with regard to poppy cultivation and production and the influence of drug barons within the local power structures. Afghan national security forces have apprehended some local criminals and seized more than a ton of opium over the last few months. Most of this progress is a direct result of the appointment of Governor Mangal who also has a positive record in other Afghan provinces. The governor is currently working on strengthening his counter narcotics plan in close co-operation with the PRT and Task Force Helmand.

In the central part of Helmand the opium cultivation in the 'green zone' north of Gereshk city is controlled by a major drug lord called Haji Khan Mohammed, who lives on a large estate on the road between FOB Price and Gereshk. Haji Khan Mohammed reputedly owns a large part of the arable land in Helmand where the opium is cultivated, and he is believed to be connected with high-level Helmand Taliban commanders and other illegal armed groups in the province. He is also known to be involved in a family blood feud with the family of Abdul Raziq, the Deputy Chief of Police of Gereshk, which frequently results in gunfights between the two sides. On 13 April 2008 the struggle escalated with an attack on a police check point followed by an ambush on the rescue convoy going to reinforce the check point. Four police officers were killed and five wounded. The attack and subsequent ambush are believed to have been planned by Haji Khan Mohammed with the purpose of killing deputy police commander Abdul Raziq, who was leading the rescue patrol.

¹² Phone interview conducted on 28 August 2008 with Lars Jensen Senior Danish Representative at the British PRT in Helmand.

¹³ UNODC (2008): *Afghan Opium Survey 2008*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC (2008): *Afghanistan – Opium Winter Rapid Assessment Survey*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and UNODC (2007): *Afghan Opium Survey 2007*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

¹⁴ US Department of State (2007): *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, United States Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and Government Accountability Office (2008): *Afghanistan Security*, Report to Congressional Committees, GAO-08-661, United States.

The purpose of the attack could be related to Haji Khan Mohammed's ambition to become Chief of Police in Gereshk, and to his attempt to enrol his own fighters in the local police.¹⁵

Local militias also flourish in Helmand. Two of the important militia commanders with regard to the international engagement in Helmand are Haji Kaduz, who controls the road from Gereshk to Lashkar Gah, and Mullah Daoud, who commands Afghan Security Group (ASG), which guards the outer perimeter of FOB Price.¹⁶ The two militia commanders are brothers. The Deputy Chief of Police of Gereshk, Abdul Raziq, was a former member of the ASG before he became Deputy Chief of Police. So the ASG have participated in the struggle on the side of Abdul Raziq against the drug lord Haji Khan Mohammed. These local and quite complicated power structures fully illustrate that the main problem in the area is not isolated to the Taliban insurgency, but also the local power struggle and the fight to keep Afghanistan from becoming a narco-state.

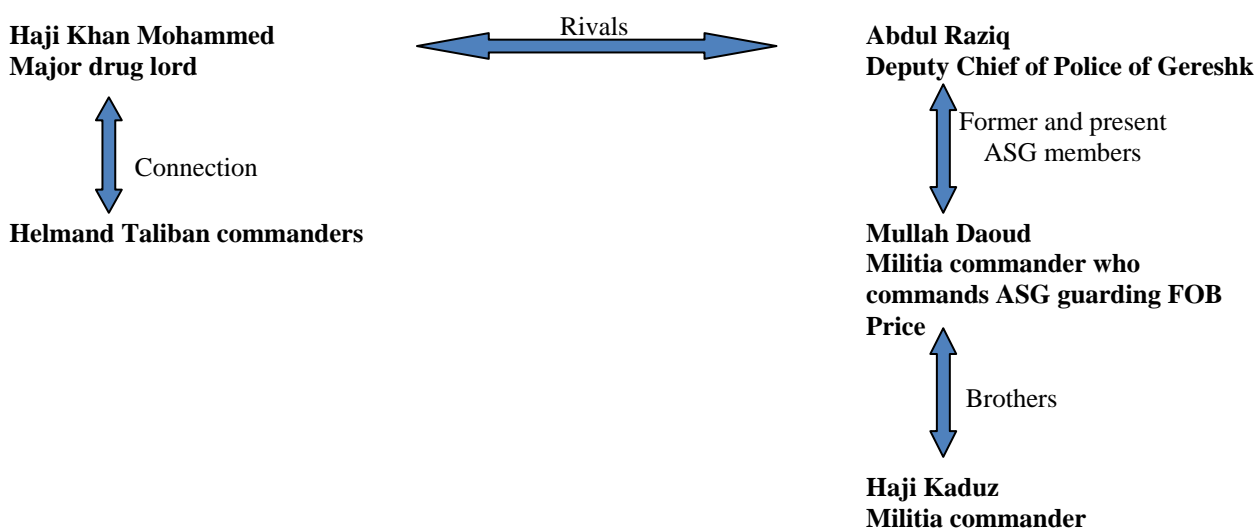


Figure 2: Politics and Power Structures in Gereshk

On the official government level, the local provincial authorities are as described above undergoing a fast development supported by the international commitment; but there still seems to be a long way to go, and intensive international involvement will be needed before confidence and trust in the local authorities have been established. Public services in the province are underdeveloped because of a history of neglect, and the technocratic competences of the authorities are scarce. The presence of line ministries in Helmand Province is primarily focused on Lashkar Gah, and there is little evidence of ministerial presence allocated through the province capital to the major cities such as Gereshk.¹⁷ Governor Mangal however, seems to be on the right track with the focused education programmes and his outreach program attempting to show the general population in Helmand that he is there to serve and support them.¹⁸ On the security side the Afghan army and police are present

¹⁵ Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 12 and 16 May 2008 with DABG intelligence unit (S2).

¹⁶ Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 12 and 16 May 2008 with DABG intelligence unit (S2). Also, the authors visited Mullah Daoud in Gereshk on 16 May 2008.

¹⁷ The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development is present in Gereshk.

¹⁸ Phone interview conducted on 28 August 2008 with Lars Jensen Senior Danish Representative at the British PRT in Helmand.

in most areas. ANA 5 Corps covering southern Afghanistan currently has 8,500 soldiers on hand with a brigade stationed in Helmand, and the ANP is present in all the districts of the province. Whereas the credibility of the ANA in the province is high, the credibility of the ANP is comparatively low. According to an official US government report, none of the Afghan police units are fully capable of performing their role in the country.¹⁹ During interviews conducted in Gereshk it was mentioned that the two main challenges to security in Gereshk were intimidation by the Taliban and by the police.²⁰

The context described above illustrates the current challenges that the international involvement and the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) have to counter if success is to be achieved in Helmand. The counterinsurgency and CA strategy to counter these challenges must address the security challenges, the local power structures and the local political reality, as well as encouraging the development of a legitimate national government. If this is to be done a variety of activities need to be carried out in a timely and sequencing manner within a comprehensive framework including military, political, economic and civilian instruments.

The International Setup and Approach in Helmand

The British assumed control of the Helmand PRT in May 2006. The PRT, which is considered well funded and which is one of the most 'civilian' PRTs in Afghanistan with some 50 civilians, carrying out reconstruction, recovery and development activities in the province.²¹ The engagement in Helmand is organised with the PRT on one side and a military task force (Task Force Helmand – TFH) on the other. The PRT is run by a civilian chief with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), Department for International Development (DFID) and Stabilisation Unit (SU)²² all included within the organisation.²³ Task Force Helmand is led by the military and consists of some 7,900 British troops along with Danish and Estonian troops.²⁴ The task force is responsible for facilitating reconstruction and extending the authority of the Afghan government. The task force works in close coordination with the PRT and Afghan security institutions.

¹⁹ Government Accountability Office (2008): *Afghanistan Security*, Report to Congressional Committees, GAO-08-661, United States. Pp. 22, 31-33.

²⁰ Interviews conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 15 May 2008 with Mayor Said Dur Ali Shah and the at that time Gereshk District Chief Haji Manaf and a survey conducted by Danish CIMIC among key elders in Gereshk in May 2008.

²¹ <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/fco-in-action/uk-in-afghanistan/afghanistan-reconstruction/helmand/uk-prt> and interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with civilian and military PRT representatives.

²² It has been decided that the Stabilisation Unit will provide all civilian UK personnel apart from the political staff for the PRT.

²³ Other institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are also present within the PRT. Helmand Province is one of the largest recipients of USAID donor money in the world. Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with the regional chief of USAID in southern Afghanistan.

²⁴ <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/fco-in-action/uk-in-afghanistan/afghanistan-reconstruction/helmand/task-force-helmand>

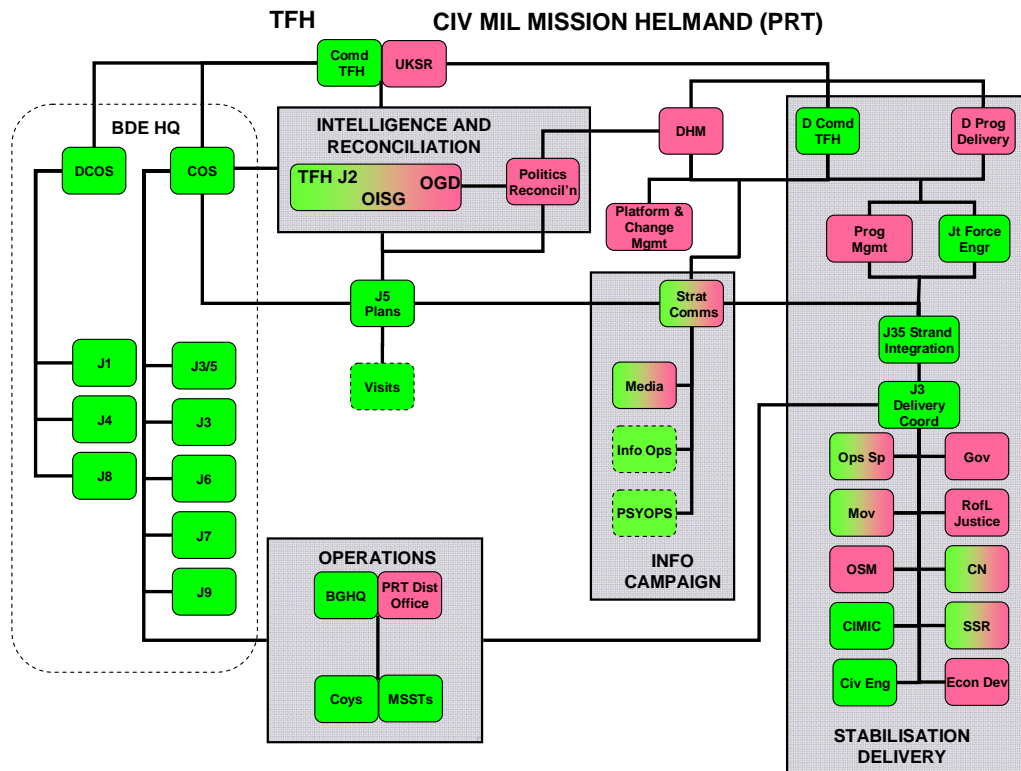


Figure 3: Organisational Structure of the British Led PRT and Task Force in Helmand

The British involvement in Helmand is being implemented on the basis of a strategic plan that presents an operational guide for both the PRT and Task Force Helmand. The strategy – the Helmand Road Map – is a two-year plan which is to be evaluated annually. It replaces previous British plans, and in contrast to these it focuses on the concentration and prioritisation of all resources. Accordingly, all civil and military activities to be carried out in Helmand will concentrate on and prioritise five main geographical areas or district centres, and will be controlled by the concept of a politically-led counterinsurgency campaign. This approach implies that the focus is on gaining the consent and support of the population towards the host government and not solely on winning territory or fighting the Taliban and other illegal armed groups. As a result, in principle all the military campaigns focus on the civilian effects to be achieved.²⁵ The Road Map emphasises the need for a political and intelligence led approach and introduces the term ‘good enough approach’ – thereby incorporating the reality of the immense challenges in the province.²⁶ The Road Map places a civilian in charge of the joint efforts in Helmand, giving the PRT a civilian face.

The actual merger of the counterinsurgency campaign theme and CA that the Road Map constitutes is in practice a close integration of both civil and military elements working together cross different planning cells. Integration of especially CJ3 'current operations', CJ5 'plans' and CJ9 'Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC)' together with a close co-operation between the civilian and the military leader on a daily basis is pivotal for positive implementation and effects. The overall work process when identifying, preparing and implementing initiatives in the province can be illustrated through eight steps of action:

²⁵ Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with civilian and military PRT representatives and a representative of the Stabilisation Unit.

²⁶ Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with a representative of the Stabilisation Unit.

- Step 1: Identification of a civilian led priority of desired effects.
- Step 2: Joint (civilian and military) identification of possible actions with the aim of reaching the desired effects.
- Step 3: Joint (civilian and military) efforts in preparing the involvement of all elements within the different actions.
- Step 4: Individual civilian and military analysis of available resources. Individual civilian and military approval of resources.
- Step 5: Joint (civilian and military) development of a resource plan including interaction between the resources.
- Step 6: Joint (civilian and military) integration of resources, preparation and plans at tactical level including Public Affairs and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS).²⁷
- Step 7: Execution. Conduct operations including both civilian and military resources. Normally with military lead supported by civilian stabilisation initiatives. Including constant Public Affairs and PSYOPS.
- Step 8: Consolidate the desired effects. Normally with civil lead supported by military security initiatives. Including constant Public Affairs and PSYOPS.

The civilian chief of the PRT keeps the process en-route. According to the process described the initial priorities will usually be identified by the PRT, but in reality the priorities often originate from the daily interaction between the top civilian and military leaders. This may lead to immediate adjustments to the delivery of civilian effect and security, without resorting to a formal planning process. However, there will be cases in highly non-permissive environments where the security line of operation is so dominant that there will be little or no involvement of civilian actors in the planning and delivery process.²⁸

To lead the implementation of the Road Map, eight strands are in focus, combining the military counterinsurgency approach with the civilian contribution. Seven of the eight strands will lead the next two years of development of five chosen districts in the province, and will work to direct the military involvement. The districts are Lashkar Gar, Gereshk, Sangin, Garmser and Musa Qala. The strands are:

- Politics and reconciliation
- Governance
- Rule of Law (justice, police and prisons)
- Security (military)
- Economic development and reconstruction
- Counternarcotics
- Communications
- Regional engagement (engagement with regional players. Not included in the district development programme)

²⁷ Public Affairs relates primarily to international media and secondary to local and regional media. PSYOPS relates to the local population in the mission area. For more see “Military Committee 457 NATO Military Policy on Public Affairs” and “Military Committee 402/1 NATO Military Policy on Psychological Operations”.

²⁸ Email correspondence on 04 September 2008 with high-level civilian representatives of the PRT.

The implementation of the Road Map constitutes a major challenge to the current organisation within the province, and especially with regard to the tasks and function of the civilian advisors. Each strand will ideally require a specialist or at least advisors with great knowledge of the complexity of the area. This build-up of civilian expertise is on-going, but will take some time, and it will be crucial for successful implementation. During interviews with representatives from Task Force Helmand and the PRT, it was stated that as many as six to eight civilian advisors in each 'Road Map district' will be needed.²⁹ The countries currently present in Helmand has agreed on a division of labour, where each country will have to deliver experts within the sectors for which they have the responsibility for the coordination of foreign aid. I.e. Denmark has taken lead on the education sector and is currently looking into taking lead on a second sector. Today the British led PRT is staffing four stabilisation advisors to the five chosen district centres. With Gereshk as one of the primary focus areas in the Road Map, referred to as the most promising town in the province, the importance of a stronger integrated civil-military organisation within the framework of CA seems to be vast.³⁰

Conclusion

At the overall level, it is important to mention that CA cannot be implemented as a single model applied to all conflict scenarios. When implementing CA as the desired approach in the context of counterinsurgency in Helmand Province, CA is about combining military, political and developmental actors to create stability and especially to capacity build local authorities to perform governance tasks in the area, thereby supporting the overall strategic goal in Afghanistan. Today only few local NGOs and constructors³¹ are present and capable of working in the province, which is a situation that is not expected to change markedly in the near future.³² This fact illustrates the urgent need for a focused approach to build local capacity to fill this vacuum – a key element of CA. The capacity must be developed by international civilian resources working alongside military actors. So, the main aim in developing an integrated approach between counterinsurgency and CA is to foster a development that will create a national and indeed local host nation administrative capacity, capable of providing security and basic needs and services in a manner which is perceived as legitimate by the local population. By deploying sufficient civilian resources and by supporting these with military means, the essential contested 'political space' can be filled during the limited time available.

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²⁹ Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with civilian and military PRT representatives.

³⁰ Interview conducted in Afghanistan in Gereshk on 17 May 2008 with a representative of the Stabilisation Unit.

³¹ The Danish Battle Group in Helmand announced a 'constructor's day' in Gereshk, where local constructors could register for work. During the day only six very small local constructors came to register.

³² Interviews conducted in Afghanistan in Kabul on 9 May 2008 with the Director and the Chief of Policy and Advocacy of DACAAR. During the interview it was emphasised that the lack of security throughout the province made an international NGO present impossible within a reasonable future. Also, a list received from the British led PRT in Helmand showing 29 registered local NGOs present in the province. Of these NGOs however, only about two-thirds were implementing projects. In Gereshk in Helmand Province approximately two NGOs – one local and one international – are implementing minor projects.

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