

Contested Nation Building: The Challenge of Countering Insurgency in Afghanistan in 2007

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This article was originally published in the *Australian Army Journal* and is posted here with permission of the author.

*Peace will come
With tranquillity and splendour
On the wheels of fire*

--Bob Dylan, *Changing Of the Guards*

In a military sense, 2007 was the coalition's year in Afghanistan. The coalition defeated the Taliban tactically at every turn, forcing them to resort to indiscriminate attacks with explosives and suicide bombers — tactics which risk alienating the local population. The Taliban's much-vaunted 'Spring offensive' failed to materialise and they suffered substantial losses, including the death of key leaders such as Mullah Dadullah by coalition actions. They lost freedom of action in former sanctuaries such as the Upper Garesh and Chora valleys, and had Musa Qala — a town the Taliban vowed they would never surrender — seized from them as the 2007 fighting season drew to a close. While international media reports have played up the headline-grabbing "coalition's deadliest year", only one side of the ledger has been considered. The increase in coalition fatalities from 191 in 2006 to 232 in 2007¹ also points to a heightened engagement with the enemy that has produced good results. Throughout last year the Taliban saw support from sanctuaries in Pakistan erode, and a better-trained and more capable Afghan Army played a leading role in the assault on Musa Qala. By military standards 2007 was an awful year for the Taliban. Yet their resolve and influence persists, and more must be done through non-military means to achieve peace for Afghanistan.

Though the Taliban are struggling, their insurgency will not be fully defeated until governmental and bureaucratic progress matches military successes. Overwhelmingly, the people of Afghanistan do not want to return to Taliban rule or the associated international isolation and stunted progress. However, there is increasing frustration with perceived corruption and inaction by President Karzai's Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). Some Afghans argue they receive no support from their government and the reconstruction and development promised by the international community has not materialised. It is surely a test of their patience, as ongoing military operations cause damage and civilian casualties without removing the scourge of the Taliban. The challenge in

¹ Coalition military fatalities during *Operation Enduring Freedom* as estimated by Iraq Coalition Casualty Count from military sources (www.iCasualties.org/oef)

Afghanistan now is to augment military operations with civilian efforts to move the country from *rule of the gun* to the *rule of law*.

This article describes some of the challenges of ‘contested nation-building’ in Afghanistan. Contested nation-building aims to engender democratic processes and capacity, while simultaneously fighting an insurgent campaign. Both are complex tasks which becomes even more difficult when attempted in parallel. A priority for Afghanistan in 2008 should be the rapid development of the justice sector. Effective police, judges, lawyers, courts and prisons will ensure criminal consequences result from insurgent action, narcotics trading and corruption. Right now, military responses reinforce the rule of the gun and delay a shift to civil society. Postponing the development of infrastructure — particularly legal frameworks — because of perceived dangers to non-military agencies consigns military operations to a repetitious treadmill of killing and capturing insurgents then waiting for more to take their place. In military quarters it has become known as ‘mowing the grass’.

The views expressed in this article are based on my time with NATO in Afghanistan between April and November 2007. My experience as an Australian military officer in Afghanistan was unique in that I held two distinctly different roles. Initially I was the Senior Australian Commander. I witnessed the daily machinations of NATO headquarters and the diplomatic community in Kabul, while overseeing and visiting all Australian forces throughout the country. Then, for the final four months, I was attached to the NATO regional headquarters in Kandahar, with responsibility for NATO efforts to rebuild the Afghan army and the police in the troubled south. I travelled widely across the southern provinces and worked closely with Afghan Army and Police leadership, including observing their operations among the Afghan people. I gained first-hand experience across the military spectrum from the tactical to the strategic, and interacted with a wide array of Afghans government officials and villagers.

Broadly, Afghanistan’s population view the foreign military coalition, to which Australia contributes, as a force for good and an agent of progress. However, military operations will not, in themselves, rebuild Afghanistan into a stable and dependable country. Success in Afghanistan can only come from a careful integration of political, military and developmental means, in a manner that wins the support of the local people and denies the Taliban freedom and legitimacy.

Since returning, I have been struck by the Australian media’s limited coverage of Afghanistan. The insurgency there is dangerous and difficult but has been overshadowed by the conflict in Iraq. In part, this has been due to a negative image of the Iraq war, which is widely portrayed as an unjustified or ‘bad’ war. The difficulty of travelling in Afghanistan has also, obviously, limited coverage of the conflict. The Australian media’s focus may shift in 2008, but for now Australian casualties spark most interest and Afghanistan’s plight remains poorly understood. As with the ‘great games’ played in Afghanistan in previous times, events occurring there now will greatly impact upon the broader international community, and — as ever before — are layered with nuance.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a spectacular country blessed with majestic mountains, vast deserts, rich fertile belts, tough resilient tribal people, and climatic extremes from Arctic cold to baking heat. It is a land of striking contrasts. Many of the areas where Australian forces operate remain reminiscent of biblical times and belie the sophistication of local allegiances and

communications networks. Other parts of the country, such as Kabul, are modern and thriving. The Afghans themselves, who have seen little peace over recent centuries are, above all else, proud and pragmatic. It is said that, “you can’t buy an Afghan, only rent him” and one is wise to keep this in mind. They have seen foreign armies come and go since before Alexander the Great and are yet to decide if the new Afghan government, and their coalition allies will prevail — or if the Taliban will return. Despite this, those opposed to extremism are optimistic by nature and retain a robust sense of humour. These Afghans are hospitable and welcoming, and want the coalition of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, coalition military forces are conducting a dogged counter-insurgency. The campaign has been running in one form or another since 2001. The coalition is waging counter-insurgency with the most sophisticated technology and weaponry available, yet the conflict harks back to earlier military ventures such as the British-Afghan Wars of the Nineteenth Century and the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. The shadow of wars and conflicts hangs over the land and a cautionary sense of those gone before prevails. Sophisticated warfighting technology is now to the fore, but as ever in Afghanistan the landscape remains foreboding and the close combat, brutal. Defeating the insurgency on a military level is a dirty and dangerous endeavour. Foot soldiers are still the fundamental currency to separate the enemy from the population. Consequently, foreign nations — now surprised by their costly and prolonged deployments, and rising casualties rates — are debating whether to remain in Afghanistan. The country stands at a crossroad. Australia and the wider international community must come to a decision about their commitment to remain in Afghanistan.

Over recent decades Afghanistan has been a major sanctuary for international terrorism including — most notoriously — for Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Afghanistan will again foment terrorism if allowed to slide back under extremist control. The Taliban delivered an intolerant and brutally oppressive Islamic government in the 1990s. Taliban rule was particularly repressive of women and violently disposed against artists, homosexuals and, of all people, clean shavers. An alliance of US and Afghan forces ended Taliban rule in 2001. However, the Taliban regained influence (possibly due to the diversion of forces for the invasion of Iraq in 2003), and once again threatens Afghanistan’s stability.

Since 2006 the US and NATO have renewed their emphasis on defeating the Taliban and have called for international assistance. Australia’s national interests are threatened by global terrorism and served by the defence of human dignity and the strength of our alliances. Australia’s current military deployment is frustrating Taliban activities, improving the lives of Afghans, and validating international efforts.

Enduring success for Afghanistan implies a stable democracy, a healthy economy and indigenous security forces which can defy internal and external threats. These goals are achievable but are difficult ‘works in progress’ that Afghanistan simply cannot achieve without foreign assistance. To leave Afghanistan to fend for itself now would be callous and irresponsible. The spread of Islamic extremism will only be defeated by determined civilian and military effort. Success is possible in Afghanistan and crucial to a broader refutation of extremism.

The Lay of the Land

Afghanistan is operationally divided into five NATO regional commands; North, South, East, West and Central (for the capital Kabul). The effort in the North of the country is led by the

Germans. The effort in the East is led by the Italians. Both regions are relatively quiet. The East is controlled by the US and sees frequent heavy combat, particularly near the border areas with Pakistan. Region Central is Kabul, a large modern city that has experienced a wave of suicide bombings in 2007 and into 2008, which has shaken the otherwise thriving capital. The bombings have received widespread coverage, (among them the attack on the Serena Hotel housing the Australian Embassy in mid-January) and given the appearance of a deteriorating situation in the country. Such an appearance should not be taken at face value.

Region South, dominated by the Pashtun tribal belt and the iconic Pashtun city of Kandahar, is currently under overall command of a British General. The post was previously held by a Dutch General and will be held by a Canadian General in 2008. Afghanistan's southern region generally experiences the most lethal fighting. The Eastern Region generally is the next most volatile, and daylight third. Regional Command South is divided into four sub-areas, or provinces - Helmand Province led by the UK; Kandahar Province (Canadian); Zabul Province (Romanian); and Oruzgun Province² (Dutch/Australian).

The bulk of Australia's forces operate in partnership under overall Dutch command in Oruzgun province, an area long considered a sanctuary for the Taliban. It is Region South — subject to the pervasive Pashtun influence — that most requires additional troops to break the back of the insurgency. Larger NATO nations such as Germany who are not represented in the south are being encouraged, unsuccessfully in the main, to deploy combat forces there. Rightly or wrongly, a perception exists in-theatre that there are 'those in the South' and 'those who are not' (i.e. avoiding it). This debate elevates the importance of Australia's contribution in Oruzgun and, although small, we gain credibility for *being* in the south.

Coalition conventional military operations in Region South range from section-level foot patrolling to Brigade-sized airmobile assaults against defended locations. The region sees regular use of mortars, artillery, close air-support and attack helicopters. The Canadians employ main battle tanks. These were found to be essential in defeating entrenched positions and minimising Canadian casualties during significant battles to the West of Kandahar City in late 2006. Danger to coalition troops comes predominantly from rockets; small arms up to Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs); and from suicide bombers. But it is improvised explosive devices, known as IEDs, which are the biggest killer of coalition and Afghan forces. Afghanistan is also a war of perceptions which, to a concerning extent, the Taliban appear more adept at exploiting than the coalition. I will return to this last point later.

A Coalition of the Unwilling?

In Afghanistan there are two discrete campaigns underway. The ongoing US-led *Operation Enduring Freedom* (essentially the War on Terror, or more loosely the hunt for Al Qaeda) is being carried out by around 25,000 American servicemen. In addition, the NATO-led *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF) assumed overall responsibility for operations in Afghanistan from the US in mid-2007. ISAF has approximately 40,000 troops from 37 predominantly European nations. Although Australia is not a NATO member, we provide approximately 1,000 troops and were the eighth largest contributor in 2007. Australia's commitment is noteworthy in light of increasing public criticism of NATO, particularly by the US, that *member* countries are not shouldering their share of the burden in Afghanistan — let alone their share of the combat there.

² Also commonly referred to as Uruzgun Province (the Russian spelling).

NATO has an agreed force structure for the mission in Afghanistan. The structure was revised in 2007 but widely viewed as underdone. More specifically, the structure can be criticised as retaining the building blocks of conventional warfare rather than targeting the specialist capabilities — critical to counter-insurgency — such as human intelligence, forensic exploitation, and information operations. Regardless, NATO commanders are short of combat troops and helicopters. Some forces on the agreed NATO list for Afghanistan are yet to be offered by any member countries, and some NATO nations have failed to meet even their own agreed contribution levels.

There is an awareness in Afghanistan that some NATO countries are not only avoiding the dangerous south but combat in general, leaving it to the US, UK and Canada in the main. The US is taking up much of the slack by providing NATO ongoing support from OEF helicopters (covering deficits in NATO helicopter contributions) and by deploying a further 3,200 US Marines for direct combat in 2008.

Although the US and NATO missions are complementary, other tensions exist beyond resourcing. Philosophically, the US forces are disposed to aggressively taking the fight to the Taliban at every opportunity. Other NATO contributing nations, even those engaging in close combat, are generally more circumspect in countering the Taliban. While perhaps such distinctions generalise and oversimplify the differences, the general thrust was felt recently when the US Secretary of Defense criticised the NATO approach to counter-insurgency³. The US may perceive NATO's method as soft-handed, or limited by resources, but conversely NATO nations more commonly stress a 'hearts and minds' attitude for undermining insurgency. US/NATO tensions, though subtle, are constantly at play and are exacerbated by the American forces' ability to act rapidly and unilaterally while NATO seeks consensus. In addition, all NATO and US activity must be condoned by President Karzai — yet another impediment to unified action on vexed issues such as national counter-narcotic strategies.

Opium lurks ominously behind all efforts to build a stable Afghanistan. The curse of the cash crop is a significant hurdle but is ultimately subordinate to the objective of separating the population from the Taliban. The ability to protect, influence and monitor the civilian population will ultimately determine the result in Afghanistan. Present coalition troop levels do not offer soldier-to-civilian ratios that can separate the Taliban from local communities. Optimal density recommendations range between 20 and 25 counterinsurgents for every 1000 inhabitants and while Petraeus dismisses fixed troops-to-civilian ratios, he makes the point that counter-insurgency is "manpower-intensive".⁴ In Afghanistan, with a population of around 31 million, and including all coalition and Afghan troops, the current ratio is about 5 troops per 1000 civilians. Coalition military commitments to Afghanistan can, at best, be considered 'economy of force' contributions that provide the minimum capability and coverage. Only the US, the UK and Canada (and possibly the Netherlands) are meeting the challenge with a good proportion of their combat assets.

The lack of friendly forces permits selective (and usually temporary) decisive action, and makes comprehensive control of population centres difficult. Constructive and enduring control of the population is impeded by the coalition's and Afghan Army's habitation of 'super-bases'. The base mentality results in the population being visited rather than permeated

³ "Gates says NATO force unable to fight guerrillas; The U.S. Defense chief asserts that troops in southern Afghanistan lack proper training", *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 2008

⁴ Field Manual FM3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, Ch. 1-13., 15 Dec 2006.

by coalition and government forces, thereby ceding the night to the Taliban. The Taliban dominates communities by consent or by coercion wherever permitted to — whether overtly or subversively. Not only will additional coalition troops be necessary in the short-term to defeat the Taliban. It will be essential for coalition and Afghan forces to live in closer proximity to contested communities.

Even with the troops NATO has, the nature of coalition warfare makes getting the most from them difficult. Allies have broadly different national caveats and restrictions that range from ‘all green’ to ‘all red’ by certain measures. Some nations have liberal and aggressive Rules of Engagement (e.g. the US); while others are very limited in the range of tasks they will undertake and the areas in which they will operate. These caveats, along with complex political and cultural requirements, shape the operating environment and daily actions of everyone from senior NATO commanders to soldiers in the field. For example, President Karzai has expressly forbidden certain coalition actions, while others require his personal approval.

NATO has also issued detailed requirements for the use of offensive weapons in built-up areas to limit civilian casualties. Planning therefore requires an understanding of what certain partners will and won’t do - or can and can’t do; and what the approval levels and lead times are. An understanding of how these constraints will impact on soldiers engaged with an aggressive and elusive enemy — often hidden among the civilian population — is also important. For soldiers, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the political and cultural imperatives shaping tactical guidance from on high. To them, detailed and qualified directions appear to be restricting their ability to bring all means to bear against a lethal and ruthless enemy.

The Taliban

So who precisely are the Taliban? Like many things in Afghanistan the answer is not straightforward. At the highest levels they are ideologically driven by an extreme view of Islam but whether they have a coherent ‘grand strategy’ is uncertain. At the tactical level their capabilities and motivations are mixed. Hardcore ‘Tier 1’ Taliban fighters are in the minority. Many of these are not Afghans but foreigners — hired guns, very capable but not popular with the xenophobic local population. The next rung, ‘Tier 2’ are predominantly local men who fight seasonally and turn their hand to the lucrative poppy trade at harvest time. These villagers may be genuinely driven by a desire to drive infidels from Afghanistan but this is not always certain. The lowest quality Taliban fighters, ‘Tier 3’, may be poorly trained enthusiasts, compelled by tribal deals, or coerced to fight. Nonetheless the Taliban are well armed, capable and skilful in the use of cunning, deadly tactics.

Most significantly, the Taliban understand the importance of controlling the population. To this end the Taliban wield violence and information adeptly, and are politically aware and active. They also utilise emerging technology both in their bomb-making and their communications networks, which keep them well informed of coalition activity. However, the Taliban were damaged in 2006 and 2007, and their increased use of IEDs and suicide bombings can be interpreted as a desperate measure.

Culturally, bombings and suicide tactics do not sit well with Afghans. Such actions are difficult to justify within the rules of Islam and exponents earn little honour. Attempts by Taliban-affiliated militias to ‘join’ to the Government ranks, and by senior Taliban leaders to

enter legitimate political processes such as 'peace jirgas (Afghan councils)' are an indication that the Taliban are losing faith in their ability to seize power by force. Among coalition forces these moves are a cause for some optimism. The broader question of whether the Taliban should be engaged in dialogue and reintegrated as yet finds no consensus. It is likely to be a topic of debate in 2008 among coalition nations, and inside the Afghan government.

While the Taliban currently operate at the military and political levels, they cannot offer development or progress, and they are hamstrung by this weakness. In fact, they inherently represent the opposite — a point that is not lost on the general population and one which should be exploited. Curiously, Afghans hold mixed feelings for the Soviet times. Afghans feared and despised Soviet massed artillery but greatly admired, and continue to benefit from, their infrastructure development. They have no such illusions about what the Taliban did for Afghanistan. It is worth noting that the flagship Australian contribution to Afghanistan, the Reconstruction Task Force, is specifically designed to deliver development in non-permissive regions of Afghanistan. The Afghans appreciate this work but unfortunately the RTF is a unique capability in-theatre, and the south is not seeing widespread development as yet in contested areas.

Conversely, the Taliban may be brutal and retrograde but among the Afghan villagers they do not carry the same stigma of endemic corruption as that of the current Afghan government. From a villager's viewpoint, the Taliban may not represent a cohesive grand collective at all, merely a loose group of well-funded extremists who are simply 'not the government'. It is rare for communities to actively support the Taliban without vested interests or coercion but some locals passively support them because there is no other way to voice political opposition. That the distaste for the government is strong enough to make the Taliban tolerable in some areas is a serious impediment. For a comprehensive solution to be found, the Karzai Government must respond justly and positively in the eyes of its local communities.

Encouragingly, in 2007 there were many examples of villagers courageously standing up to the Taliban. Such actions will inspire others, particularly as the presence of the coalition and Afghan forces spreads.

Contested Nation Building

Clearly, defeating an insurgency and establishing democracy make awkward bedfellows. Peace in Afghanistan is attainable but is no certain proposition. Enduring peace will only come with the continued resolve of the international community. Sadly, this demands the further expenditure of 'blood and treasure' for some time yet. But blood and treasure alone will not be enough. Peace also requires the full integration of military, political and developmental means which are equally important to variable degrees. Aligning the military, political and developmental efforts of the host and contributing nations is the real challenge to success in Afghanistan as it moves from 'rule of the gun' to 'the rule of law'.

Contested-nation building in its contemporary form requires a coalition military to defeat an enemy while building the capacity of the indigenous military. It must also remain responsive to the needs and directions of a fledgling national government which may require nurturing and mentoring by military personnel. The dual requirement of nurturing and operating is the lot of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Military officers are spread throughout the Afghan government and the security forces. In some ways this leaves the military in an unenviable position of responsibility without authority. While the military has dominant, but

not complete, control of 'hard power', it has little authority over 'soft power'. Conversely, the fledgling government has incomplete control of 'soft power' and a tendency to manipulate military operations when feeling pressured. This conundrum compounds the difficulty of cohesively integrating soft and hard power, even before competing coalition interests and vested national aims come into play. And overshadowing all efforts is an enemy who seeks to undermine, destabilise and destroy. For success in this environment, agreed aims and enduring resolve are vital to safeguard against the type of 'policy on the go' that nearly always dilutes military and political benefits.

In Afghanistan, contested nation-building may be viewed as three dimensional chess. At a national level a democratic government is being established in an Islamic society with neither democratic traditions nor sound judicial processes. At the community level, tribes, warlords, insurgents, drug lords, corrupt officials, and pernicious international influences compete for the hearts and minds of the masses in rudimentary conditions but with modern communications. Meanwhile, counter-insurgency forces with differing approaches and means create localised conditions that do not necessarily accord with a national strategy.

Modern Counter-insurgency

By traditional readings of military history this Afghan campaign has three key points of difference to earlier counter-insurgencies. The first is that the coalition military does not have overall power to set national priorities, impose laws, or exercise pervasive powers of search as might have been the case in Malaya or Algeria. The second is that the nature of the NATO coalition sees contributing nations providing very different force mixes, with different operating philosophies, and with uncertain tenures. Resulting military operations can be a daily dance of compromise and reassurance. Not an insurmountable challenge but a significant one the British did not face in Northern Ireland nor, in any real sense, the US-dominated coalition in Vietnam. The third difference is the requirement to establish a democratic government before the insurgency is defeated. This sets a weak platform for robust and unequivocal action against those defying the new government or operating outside the law.

The contested nature of national authority invites a reflexive, rather than steady, approach to policy. Such an approach is susceptible to the vagaries of shifting domestic and international events. The Taliban are well tuned to this weakness and take tactical and strategic advantages handed to them at every opportunity. At times they have purposefully targeted the troops of nations engaged in public debate about the withdrawal of their military contributions. In previous eras, military counter-insurgencies have more commonly been conducted in support of established (although not necessarily popular) national or colonial governments. In more successful models, the military have been responsible for exercising full executive authority until power can be transferred to a civilian government. The modern reality is that coalition military operations must strive for success in spite of the command and control arrangements and limitations necessarily imposed on them.

A justice system is a central tenet of society and essential to resolving modern conflict. Military operations, development and the delivery of justice must be intertwined even in areas considered dangerous or non-permissive. Increasingly, the coalition must support activities that criminalise insurgent behaviour. Reinforcement of the rule of law is paramount. A judicial authority and effective policing are essential to de-legitimising enemy actions and criminalising insurgent violence. Therefore, the development of an effective police force and

the establishment of a justice sector should be the highest priorities for Afghanistan right now. No insurgency can be defeated without effective policing and the criminalisation of insurgent behaviour.

Non-military organisations must be prepared to work closely with the military in areas still contested by insurgents to bring development and justice. It is the soft-power of reliable civil administration that will bring societal change to Afghanistan.

The Australian Way

Development is considered by many as something separate from military operations. On the contrary one should complement the other. A common criticism from Afghans across the south is that, “you have done much to defeat the Taliban but we see no development to support employment and commerce”. This is not an altogether accurate criticism but it should not be ignored. Much of the developmental aid in Afghanistan is presently channelled through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (or PRTs) which use local labour to undertake construction. The difficulty with this approach is that large amounts of international money (money being easier to provide than troops) is being poured into an economy that does not have the skilled labour force to deliver anywhere near the number of funded projects. The resulting impression is of many promises but little progress.

The Australian contingent is making a very meaningful and valued contribution to the campaign on a number of levels. All of our soldiers are performing strongly, be they Special Forces; conventional combat troops; engineers leading construction and development; or specialist support troops. Our forces are well trained, well led, cunning, brave and disciplined. They are maintaining the traditions of those Australians that have gone before, and have earned the respect of our coalition partners and our foes. Australian military equipment is among, if not the best in theatre, and is consistently saving Australian lives. Our nation has much to be proud of and our allies would like to see more of our troops in Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan is now a test of NATO resolve and commitment — which NATO must deliver on.

The greatest feature of our flagship contribution, the Australian Reconstruction Task Force (RTF) — a combination of engineers, mounted infantry and other enablers — is that it can deliver development in remote and hazardous areas. The RTF's integral close protection troops allow engineers to employ soft power in areas that only hard power would dare to tread. Ours is a unique contribution to Afghanistan. Australia's ability to deliver development in non-permissive areas is valued by the locals and acknowledged as well-considered and meaningful assistance. The RTF has also established a highly popular and successful Trade Training School which provides local men carpentry skills that are immediately sought by the burgeoning Afghan construction industry. The Trade Training School is another distinctive contribution by Australia that is highly popular with the locals. These two facets of the RTF's operations are a guide to how development and the benefits of central government can be delivered in strongly contested areas.

The RTF is delivering immediate tangible development in the face of the Taliban and increasing the skills of the local population in ways that create capacity and avoid welfare dependency. Additional military contributions of this type would be useful to complement combat operations until the general environment becomes more permissive. Other agencies could progressively join the RTF to spread other skills, be they developmental, policing or

administrative, to round out development in a more holistic and balanced way. The RTF may be a hybrid but counter-insurgency requires extraordinary measures that shift shape as the conflict inevitably will. Too many of the contributions to Afghanistan fit either a conventional war model or a misplaced permissive nation building model.

The Afghan Way

The Afghan Government must, of course, ultimately take responsibility for the outcome of the current conflict. However, the international community, including contributing nations and their participating military forces, have an investment in the outcome that implies more than merely 'all due care'. Participating nations can expect to share the blame with the Karzai Government if the Taliban retake the country. Building Afghan national institutions is, therefore, a priority. The Army and the Police are the most obvious security sector institutions that will progressively take over from NATO.

The Afghan Army and the Police are each building to around 80,000. The Army are well on the way in terms of numbers and effectiveness. They have a strong military culture, a depth of experience, and are renowned as a brave force that goes forward under fire. The Army is recruited and employed nationally, and is proudly resistant (but of course not immune) to tribal influences. The Army has benefited from a large injection of international (predominantly US) resources, and a comprehensive military mentoring scheme. They still need to work on their planning ability and logistics but, in the main, they are respected and trustworthy.

The Afghan police present a different story. They have not enjoyed the same degree of attention or resources to date. Their development largely descended into a debate on the nature of policing and an emphasis on quality over quantity despite a pressing urgency for law enforcement. They are now probably three years behind the Army. Insurgents are more likely to face military consequences rather than the systematic criminal prosecution they deserve as perpetrators of illegal violence. Much evidence that might have been helpful to the restoration of normalcy has been squandered. And the use of policing methods including searching, detaining and questioning should have been more widely applied as part of a coherent counter-insurgency effort. The balance must now shift toward police-led, military-supported operations which are more appropriate for defeating an insurgency.

Unfortunately, the Police are widely regarded as corrupt and symptomatic of much that is wrong with the Karzai government. In fact, they have been poorly selected, poorly trained and are only lightly equipped and armed in a country where heavy weapons are in no short supply. In the field the police are isolated and infrequently paid. They present a soft target for the Taliban and are ostracised by their Army counterparts who will only reluctantly be demeaned by working with them. In reality, the Afghan police are bearing the brunt of the war and taking casualties at rates up to 20 times higher than the Army. From this point it is likely the Police have hit rock bottom and their capabilities should now only improve. One positive indication was the delivery of the long-awaited Police pay and rank review in 2007 where Police pay achieved parity with the Army for the first time. Pay reform bolstered recruiting and prestige and has set a better base for the expansion of a capable and trustworthy police force.

Out of necessity, in 2008, the Police will undergo a dramatic makeover. Afghan Police will be bolstered by similar levels of resourcing and mentoring to those the Army has experienced,

and those failing to reach training and ethical standards will be dismissed. Coalition police mentoring teams will be the main agent of change and should now be the priority for international effort. Appropriate priority of effort on mentoring the Afghan Police can bring them a long way quickly and should be paralleled by investment in the judiciary and prison systems, without which policing becomes almost pointless. The majority of police mentoring will be conducted by military personnel for the foreseeable future which is not ideal.

Progress *is* being made in the justice sector but all too slowly. The bulk of police mentoring will be conducted by military forces until international police can be convinced to deploy into dangerous areas in sufficient numbers. Similarly, other agencies are not yet well engaged in the rest of the judicial sector. Soldiers are not the ideal trainers of police, nor are they well suited to running prisons or mentoring accountants and bureaucrats. Here, other government agencies must progressively become involved in Afghanistan. Justice sector reform cannot wait until the insurgency is defeated; it must happen concurrently with military operations in contested areas. Other agencies must rely on the military for protection while they deliver expertise as a necessary part of contested nation-building. Ongoing debates in foreign parliaments about troop levels are missing the point when the pressing need is actually for developmental and administrative assistance. The insurgency will only lose traction when progress and sound governance take hold.

Moving Beyond Mowing the Grass

Afghanistan has some experience of central hierarchical governance but it has always been balanced by the reality of staunchly tribal and collective *local* authority and justice. Considerable effort is being made to attribute coalition successes and related development to the central government to boost its credibility and that of democracy as a whole. For the Afghan people the most overt symbols of central government are the provincial governors, the Afghan Army and the Afghan Police. Regrettably, the average person's experience of central government is wholly unsatisfactory. Afghans regularly face corruption such as the extortion of money by police at checkpoints or by petty bureaucrats during administrative dealings. The drug lords have a strong culture of impunity. The population can't help but feel bitter and helpless when their governor, their judges and their police chief are complicit. A sense of justice and trust in a central authority, will not take root where police, courts and prisons are ineffective. Corruption also permits the Taliban to deliver 'justice' locally and to build legitimacy with the population.

There are some signs that corruption is being tackled, albeit slowly and selectively. For example, the poorly performing Governor and Police Chief of Oruzgun province were replaced by better quality candidates in late 2007. But not enough is being done to rein in the widespread government corruption and cronyism that, in the worst cases, is turning people to the Taliban. Unfortunately, President Karzai is widely regarded as having squandered his opportunity by not taking hard decisions, by succumbing to tribalism, and by failing to stamp out corruption.

The coalition and the international community need to take a strong stand against corruption within the Afghan government. Pragmatism is not an appropriate response to government corruption in the medium- to long-term as the Afghan people have limited patience. The Karzai government is becoming increasingly despised which in time may rub off on the now popular coalition.

For the military, supporting the national will of a host government can be frustrating when the strategy is not clear. Within the coalition some may feel they are fighting with ‘one arm tied’ or being drawn into political manoeuvrings that undermine their own legitimacy. Conversely, the government of a contested state walks a tightrope of maintaining power bases and popular support, particularly when unrestrained coalition military force can cause cultural offence (such as the searching of private houses) or collateral damage (typically by the use of artillery or airpower). In the current mix of power and politics in Afghanistan soldiers must be prepared to face this awkward reality. The military remain central to building the conditions for progress and development but operations must be conducted with carefully chosen objectives that are integrated with political and social aims — and are flexible enough to withstand shifts in national and international sentiment.

Information Warfare

Though counter-insurgency has ever been complex, the wielding of ‘soft and hard’ power⁵ is now analysed under a microscope. It should be no surprise that the degree of legal and media scrutiny of soldiers far from home is a significant factor for both civilians and soldiers seeking to defeat the insurgents. Media scrutiny is not equally applied to our adversaries in a factual sense nor from a moral dimension. Nonetheless the media is now part of the operational landscape and must be duly considered in a modern counter-insurgency. The Taliban know this well and are beating the coalition in the information war.

The Taliban efficiently exploit themes and messages which undermine the government or the coalition - whether by word of mouth, by night letters, or openly through local and international media. Truthfulness and accuracy are fundamental to the coalition’s information strategies and great care and time is taken to ensure factual reporting. Getting the coalition message out can take days, if it is released at all. The Taliban — understanding the primacy of timely (albeit inaccurate) messages — will deliver information into the public domain within hours of an event. The coalition and the Afghan government must develop procedures to seize the information initiative and quickly counter Taliban propaganda. Speed is of the essence in the domain of information warfare as the first release often creates the lasting perception.

Ongoing military operations alienate and disrupt local populations. Civilian casualties were a major political contention for the Karzai government in 2007 and the Taliban deliberately exploited the government’s predicament by drawing fighting into civilian areas — often holding hostages to ensure civilian casualties were caused by coalition forces. The Taliban target coalition building projects, and troops belonging to those nations that are debating their force commitments. The Taliban make every effort to attack schools and forums for women. They also circulate misinformation, blaming the coalition for civilian deaths they themselves caused, or falsely accusing the coalition of desecrating the Koran for example.

Insurgency is about achieving support and legitimacy, even if by fear and lies. An alternative Taliban government, with an alternative constitution, challenges the legitimacy of the Karzai government. The enemy understand it is the perception that counts and it is the initial perception that will most persistently sway the local villager to actively support, passively tolerate, or turn a blind to the Taliban.

⁵ Also referred to as kinetic and non-kinetic, where kinetic implies using weapons and non-kinetic using less aggressive means such as trading and sanctions.

In 2008 the government of Afghanistan and the coalition will need to do much better at the timely dissemination of messages and themes that refute Taliban lies and challenge their legitimacy. It will be necessary to delegate responsibility for media releases to lower levels — accepting risk for greater benefits. More can also be done to undermine the insurgents, such as the service of mullahs to broadcast theological repudiations of violence in the name of Islam. The real story of Afghanistan is not being told in the Western media. Last year was tremendously successful for the coalition and crowned by the capture of the Musa Qala citadel in late November. Much of the Western media fallaciously already has Afghanistan lost. In 2008, inter-agency ‘information warfare’ must swing the advantage back to the government of Afghanistan.

Where to From Here?

Despite their parlous state, the Taliban watch the very public debate in the West which downplays operational progress and questions the reasoning behind continuing commitments to Afghanistan. No doubt the enemy take great heart from the wavering resolve of the ‘infidel nations’ and steel themselves to hold on for one more year. The aphorism, “we have all the watches but the Taliban have all the time” rings true in this respect. The Taliban must not be let off the hook by simply waiting us out. NATO’s resolve must transcend its member nations’ domestic politics to be effective in the long-term. The aims of denying extremists sanctuaries, defending human rights, and preserving human dignity demand success. Once resolved to stay the course, the solution will be in the aligning of soft and hard power in an enduring way.

Conflicts of recent decades have unearthed forgotten truths about the importance of dominating terrain and populations with people — not platforms. You cannot influence Afghans without looking them in the eye. Nor can you convince Afghans that their long-term security and prosperity is best served by a government propped up by foreign forces if military contributions are annually reviewed, and life-enhancing development is not forthcoming. War and counter-insurgency remain a Clausewitzian battle of will between opponents — political will, public will and military will. The keys to success in Afghanistan are resolve, integrated strategies and enduring commitments that balance combat and development.

Australia, NATO and the broader international community of free-minded nations must think in terms of decades, not annual fighting seasons, to bed in a lasting solution. Military solutions on “wheels of fire” will not be enough in themselves. Planning for contested nation-building in 2008 and beyond requires clever thinking to ensure all the pieces of the puzzle — military, civilian, cultural — are interlocked in ways that win over the Afghan people and isolate and marginalise the Taliban.

Afghanistan can find peace, a peace with serenity and splendour. They have the majestic countryside and stoic people to do just that. The Afghans are progressively taking responsibility for their own future but for now this dangerous and uncertain transition from ‘rule of the gun’ to the ‘rule of law’ requires sustained foreign assistance. Help not only from soldiers but from politicians, police, judges, bureaucrats and administrators.

Military operations are delivering military objectives in Afghanistan. In the case of the RTF, military efforts are delivering progress and building trust with the local population — in but one small area of Afghanistan. When military forces remain in an area the Taliban must leave.

Soon after the military depart, the Taliban return, even if the poorly performing Afghan police remain. When the Taliban suffer heavy casualties, they shift focus to bombings until they can regenerate. Strong and capable local police, soldiers to protect them if necessary, and a court system to ensure there are consequences for all criminal behaviour is what will bring the rule of law to small communities. It is the rule of law that will ensure military operations are not merely mowing the grass in Afghanistan.

Colonel John Frewen is a career infantryman who has served in 1 RAR, 2 RAR and the School of Infantry. In 2003, as CO 2 RAR, he led the initial regional military intervention force to re-establish law and order in the Solomon Islands. Other operational service includes Rwanda and, in 2007, Afghanistan. In 2006 he was the Military Assistant to the Chief of Army. He has been posted with the armies of New Zealand and the United States and holds a Masters of Defence Studies from UNSW. Colonel Frewen is currently the Director Military Strategic Commitments in the Australian Defence Headquarters.

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