

A Canter Some Dark Defile: Examining the Coalition Counter-Insurgency Strategy in Afghanistan

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A scrimmage in a Border Station—
 A canter down some dark defile—
Two thousand pounds of education
 Drops to a ten-rupee jezail—
The Crammer's boast, the Squadron's pride,
Shot like a rabbit in a ride!

These verses are from Rudyard Kipling's evocative 1886 poem 'Arithmetic on the Frontier' that was published after the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880). Kipling speaks of the asymmetry of warfare between British soldiers who were educated and dispatched to the Indian sub-continent at great expense, and the Pushtun tribesmen that inhabit the wild borderlands between Afghanistan and what is now Pakistan, who although illiterate, are nonetheless skilled in the martial arts.

Accounts of Great Game-era conflicts such as the Battle of Maiwand (1880) in Southern Afghanistan—where nearly 1,000 British and Indian Army troops were slaughtered by an overwhelming force of Afghan soldiers and *ghazis* (holy warriors)—have formed an image in the Western mind of the Pushtun as a fiercely independent actor who will defy attempts at external coercion or indeed strong central rule. A century later these perceptions were reinforced when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan's tortuous internal politics, only to quit after 10 years of dogged resistance by Western-backed Mujahideen fighters.

The present-day Taliban-dominated insurgency that has engulfed much of the south and east of Afghanistan is essentially being conducted by violent Pushtun Islamists on either side of the 2,430 km Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier.

The conflict in Afghanistan is really a tale of two insurgencies in the Pushtun tribal belt. A consortium of ideologically-allied Sunni extremist militant groups with different motivations, operate along two broad fronts. In the south, exists a hierarchical Afghan Taliban organisation under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar and the Kandahari shura that previously ruled Afghanistan.

In the east, a more complex, adaptive insurgency comprises the Pakistani Taliban and a range of other groups that have their roots in the Mujahideen-era, including the Haqqani Network and the Hizb-i-Islami: all with close ties to al-Qaeda which has an operationally subtle influence on the insurgency, acting mainly as a force multiplier. These diverse and often competing insurgent elements interact and cooperate to serve mutual tactical interests and contribute to their overall strategic goals in Afghanistan and the wider region.

As the Taliban regime fell in 2001, its senior leaders sought refuge in the Pakistan tribal-belt and lay the foundation of their shadow government. They have established regional and local leaders that reside in Afghanistan and travel in and out of their areas of operation to acquire orders, supplies, training, and some minimal force structure from the senior leadership.

Pakistan's refusal to disrupt the Afghan Taliban higher command and control in Baluchistan poses the most serious threat to the Coalition's effort in southern Afghanistan. For its part, Pakistan continues to deny the Taliban leadership are based in Baluchistan, or indeed enjoy strong tribal support in that province. The most recent denials were in response to leaked reports the United States is contemplating extending its program of covert strikes against insurgent leaders in Baluchistan.

The Taliban employ a wide range of tactics against Coalition and Afghan National Security Forces that have ranged from battalion-sized ground assaults to asymmetric warfare. They are an agile foe that changed tactics after realising the futility of engaging superior conventional military forces that are well supported by air assets. Large-scale clashes in the field in 2006-07 have given way to a combination of ambush-type attacks and the widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings, as well as information operations.

The overall Taliban strategy appears to rely less on controlling territory than expanding its influence. The Taliban are fighting a war of political attrition to outlast war-weary Coalition forces. This causes ordinary Afghans to reassess their loyalty and support to the Western-backed government in Kabul.

A recent Pentagon assessment on progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan indicated that the Taliban-dominated insurgency has increased its influence and access to the population. Moreover, the disparate insurgent groups operating within Afghanistan have increased their activities to counter progress in development, specifically targeting construction projects and infrastructure such as the 'Ring Road' linking Kabul with key provinces.

Last year was the costliest of the eight year conflict for the Coalition, with 295 soldiers killed. IED attacks increased dramatically in 2008, and are now a preferred insurgent tactic. Direct fire incidents also increased by 40 per cent, indirect fire by 27 per cent, and somewhat disturbingly for anyone here who has occasion to fly to Afghanistan, surface-to-air fire increased by 67 per cent. Insurgents also carried out a series of high profile attacks including firing on a military parade attended by President Karzai, the mass breakout of Taliban prisoners from Kandahar's Sarposa Gaol, the Indian Embassy bombing, and, more recently, coordinated assaults on government buildings in Kabul.

The increase in insurgent initiated violence in Afghanistan relates directly to a failure of governance, the availability of a safe-haven in Western Pakistan, and an increased security force presence in insurgent-controlled areas that has led to more contacts with the enemy. Without a strong government in Kabul, buttressed by effective Afghan National Security Forces to deliver public goods of security and justice, conditions will continue to be favourable to insurgents.

More than seven years have lapsed since American Special Forces and CIA operatives backed by massive airpower, embarked on a rapid campaign with the Northern Alliance to destroy al-Qaeda and drive the Taliban from power. As it stands, the conflict in Afghanistan has reached a stalemate. We must ask how we reached this impasse?

It is worthwhile examining the various counter-insurgency (COIN) approaches adopted by the Coalition to fight this constantly evolving insurgency.

A COIN campaign includes all military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency. COIN involves diminishing the capacity of insurgent organisations to undertake operations and enabling the host government to provide for its own security, public services and economic growth. COIN is successful when the civil populace consents to the legitimacy of the established government and ceases to actively or passively support the insurgents.

General Tommy Franks, head of US Central Command (CENTCOM), advocated a light footprint approach after the Taliban and al-Qaeda had been driven out in 2001. With the Taliban seemingly shattered as a fighting force, US attention soon turned to regime change in Iraq. Roughly one division of US forces was retained in Afghanistan to pursue fugitives from Operation Enduring Freedom. A smaller number of personnel from the UN Security Council-mandated 'coalition of the willing' known as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), appeared sufficient to provide security for the Afghan Interim Authority that was established following the December 2001 Bonn Agreement.

Mindful of the experience of earlier interventions, the United States had no desire to become involved in state-building in Afghanistan. Early counter-insurgency approaches were enemy-centric; summarised as 'find, fix, destroy'. The main vehicle by which operations were conducted was the combat reconnaissance patrol. Operations were designed to find insurgents, and once contact was made, Coalition forces applied pressure and pursued the enemy to ensure its destruction, calling on aerial and indirect fire support to influence tactical engagements. However, the extensive and, at times, injudicious use of fire support has over time led to a considerable loss of life among non-combatants.

The 'light footprint' approach substituted manpower for firepower, and with it came a loss of support for the Afghan government and Coalition forces among a revenge-oriented people, who have little tolerance for 'collateral damage'. Furthermore, these *ad hoc* tactical approaches failed to protect the population from a creeping insurgency. Added to this was a failure to integrate warfighting with political and economic assistance.

Afghanistan had already become something of a sideshow in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which diverted military resources. In Australia, the Howard Government had drawn down the Australian Special Forces contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom to one officer attached to the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). By then the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) had assumed command of the multi-national ISAF mission as the United States became increasingly bogged down in Iraq.

ISAF pursued an 'ink-spot' COIN strategy in Afghanistan, which attempts to subdue a large hostile territory with a relatively small military force. The process begins by dispersing a number of small safe areas—Afghan Development Zones—across each province where reconstruction projects, development work and capacity building can be undertaken in a secure environment. Once established, ISAF units can then push outwards, extending their control and making each safe area larger until they are all linked together.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are a primary means of implementing the ink-spot strategy. The PRT concept emerged from a need to extend the authority of the Afghan national government into the provinces. A PRT is basically an Army civil affairs unit that combines engineers with force protection elements. The aim is to civilianise PRTs by embedding personnel from other government agencies. This process is of course complicated by ongoing insurgent violence.

The 26 PRTs in Afghanistan operate according to the national caveats and rules of engagement of each ISAF member running them. This has led to an uncoordinated approach to security and development. Many PRTs are too light to have a marked socio-economic impact within their assigned provinces. Furthermore, the emphasis is on rapid stabilisation rather than long-term sustainable development.

As ISAF began its phased expansion across the whole of Afghanistan, the insurgents set about consolidating their position in the Pakistan tribal belt. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan precipitated an influx of Islamist militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that would result in the Talibanisation of the territory, and a systemic insurgency in Pakistan.

The failure of Islamabad's efforts to mitigate the insurgent presence in the FATA has allowed the Taliban to expand their influence into Afghanistan and within Pakistan. The militancy was encouraged by a flawed policy of accommodation, which has not prevented insurgents from staging attacks in Afghanistan. The most recent incarnation of this policy is in the Malakand District of the Northwest Frontier Province taking in the Swat Valley, where the government has acceded to Pakistani Taliban demands for the imposition of Sharia law after a bloody anti-state campaign.

By 2007, the international community became concerned at the deepening conflict on both sides of the border, but in particular was troubled by the lack of progress of the armed state-building mission in Afghanistan. The strategy appeared to lack coherence, and it was questionable whether otherwise capable NATO alliance members were really committed to the mission.

The growing unease over the ISAF mission was addressed by the April 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, which elevated Afghanistan to the alliance's key priority. The Summit produced a medium-term integrated military and civilian plan for Afghanistan known as the ISAF Strategic Vision.

NATO also welcomed the appointment of Norwegian Ambassador Kai Eide, as the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA, who is responsible for coordinating the combined efforts of the international community.

While these developments were encouraging, they hardly represented a turning point—especially in troop numbers. There was little progress in fulfilling ISAF's priority shortfalls delineated in the ISAF Combined Joint Statement of Requirements, which includes additional maneuver forces, rotary wing aircraft, and surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, two extra PRTs, and more mentoring and training elements.

Nor did particular NATO members lift national caveats that continue to limit ISAF's operational flexibility; over half the international Coalition partners have some form of caveat on the geographic or functional deployment of their forces in-theatre. However, one must ask whether we can expect countries like Germany, Italy and Spain that signed on for a stabilisation mission, to fight a protracted COIN campaign for which they have little experience.

The Bucharest Summit did, however, introduce a Comprehensive COIN approach. This current COIN strategy is often referred to as 'clear, hold, build'. The bad news is that the four Lines of Operation that constitute Comprehensive COIN are either under-performing or failing.

Security

The current COIN approach is foundering because security cannot be established or maintained; not the least because there are too few security force personnel (US military doctrine calls for 20 counter-insurgents for 1,000 head of population, which translates to over 600,000 in Afghanistan). Thus, the full military, governance and economic spectrum of the COIN strategy cannot be implemented and the insurgents retain their hold on the population. Clearly more effort must be channeled into providing security, before all other lines of operation can proceed.

Governance

The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is one of the weakest governments in the world—this is a significant problem in implementing Comprehensive COIN. It is hampered by pervasive corruption and a lack of sufficient leadership and human capital. Transparency International ranked Afghanistan 176th of 180 countries in its 2008 Corruption Perception Index.

Reconstruction and Development

Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world—nearly half the population lives below the poverty line as defined by the Afghan government. Afghanistan is dependent on Overseas Development Assistance. The government will cover less than 20 per cent of its recurrent expenditure through domestic revenue in FY2008-09. Slow progress is being made in health, education, transport, energy and communications, however, the Taliban continue to impede development activity.

Counter-Narcotics

Overall progress in counter-narcotics is inadequate due to the difficult security, economic, and governance conditions in Afghanistan. Narcotics-related activities fuel the insurgency and threaten the legitimacy of the Afghan government through corruption of public officials. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, 93 per cent of the world's illicit opium originates in Afghanistan.

Late last year senior US military officers such as Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conceded that the strategy in Afghanistan is not working, nor does it address the cross-border nature of the insurgency. In its final months the Bush Administration commissioned three reviews into the contested state-building enterprise in Afghanistan. Upon assuming office President Barack Obama ordered a fourth overarching review of the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, chaired by Bruce Riedel—a think tanker formerly of the CIA and National Security Council.

A failing strategy and rising levels of violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan had caused the insurgency to become a leading foreign policy issue in the US Presidential campaign. President Obama has invested considerable political capital in Afghanistan. He has given Afghanistan a higher priority with more forces as US troops are incrementally withdrawn from Iraq. The reduction of US personnel to a force of up to 50,000 in 2010, and the gradual transfer of responsibility for security in Iraq to local forces, is due to the apparent success of the so-called 'surge' strategy in containing violence.

The basic surge strategy in Iraq was two pronged: the projection of military force into every corner of a population centre, and the simultaneous build-up of local security forces to maintain security when American forces have inevitably drawn down. The first prong was enabled by the surge during 2007, the second by the 2006 'Anbar awakening', which signaled the civilian population's disgust with jihadist insurgents and brought forth thousands of new local security for recruits throughout 2007.

Architect of the Iraq surge, General David Petraeus', brilliance as a military commander lay in determining the precise time to effect the surge. The deployment of an additional 30,000 combat personnel stabilised the politico-military situation and brought Iraq back from the brink of state failure. As a result, sectarian groups re-evaluated their allegiances, after realising the Americans were not about to commence a unilateral withdrawal from Iraq.

A lively public debate between US soldier scholars such as John Nagl and Gian Gentile attempts to divine the nature of the Petraeus doctrine. Suffice it to say that Petraeus understood and then adapted to the war he was in. This dialectic parallels arguments in military circles concerning the future of the US Army, whether it lies in COIN or conventional warfare. The key document of the revival of classic COIN doctrine is US Army Field Manual FM 3-24. The manual draws heavily from doctrine developed by COIN theorists and practitioners such as David Galula (*Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*) and Robert Thomson (*Defeating Communist Insurgency*) in the post-war era in response to nationalist and communist insurrections.

At last month's Munich Security Conference General Petraeus, now head of CENTCOM, foreshadowed a population-centric approach to Afghanistan likely to be unveiled at next month's NATO summit in France and Germany. This troop-intensive COIN strategy, that draws on lessons from Iraq, will call for more boots-on-the-ground—Coalition soldiers and Afghan National Security Forces—to provide security to the civilian population who are the centre of gravity in this conflict.

Needless to say, any new strategy must also address Afghanistan's manifold political, economic and social challenges, while simultaneously pursuing a regional solution to the insurgency that is sustained by safe havens in Pakistan. The Obama administration appears to favour a diplomatic approach to dealing with Afghanistan's difficult regional *milieu*, perhaps entertaining a 'grand bargain' with Afghanistan's neighbours.

One of the Obama administration's earliest diplomatic initiatives was to appoint veteran diplomat, Richard Holbrooke, as Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan in recognition of the hyphenated nature of those states.

The Afghan Taliban continue to be regarded by elements of the Pakistani military establishment as a natural ally to counter growing Indian influence in Afghanistan, and to prevent Pushtun irredentism that threatens Pakistan's national cohesion. Pakistan nurtured the Afghan Taliban as proxy fighters in the 1990s, and they still represent its best means of retaining influence in Afghanistan.

Islamabad views Afghanistan through the prism of its adversarial relations with India. It is apprehensive at the close relations between New Delhi and the Karzai government and fears encirclement, pointing to a proliferation of Indian consulates in Afghanistan. India is accused of using these facilities to assist separatist groups in Baluchistan.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan insurgency thus requires a regional solution which gives Islamabad a reason to back down from its objective of achieving 'strategic depth' *vis-à-vis India* by intervening in Afghanistan and Indian-administered Kashmir.

Afghanistan's other neighbours including the Central Asian Republics, Iran, Russia and China, together with the Gulf States, must also be drawn into the process. All of these countries have legitimate interests in Afghanistan and are affected by war diffusion which threatens their internal stability. The whole region is also overlain by narcotics trafficking routes that emanate outwards from Afghanistan leading to enormous problems of criminality and drug addiction.

The United States has extended an olive branch to Iran, most recently via the medium of YouTube. The operational rationale for this gesture is to reduce Islamabad's leverage over the Coalition that is dependent on Pakistani airspace and overland supply routes from Karachi, which, in any case, are exposed to Taliban attacks. The Iranian Red Sea port of Chabahar in Sistan-Baluchistan is well situated to resupply RC South. The Iranian option offers a real alternative to tenuous Central Asian supply routes.

Obama and his regional combatant commander, Petraeus, have also indicated a willingness to talk to so-called 'reconcilable insurgents'. These are political opponents (including violent actors) who represent a genuine Pushtun constituency that was excluded from the post-Taliban dispensation. This process will involve de-conflating the Taliban with al-Qaeda, and moving away from the homogenizing rhetoric of the War on Terror, in order to split pragmatists from hardliners.

Right now, however, insurgents think they are in the ascendency and have little incentive to talk to Karzai or the Americans. Military action is necessary to exert pressure on insurgents to arrive at a political settlement. Why else would you deploy an additional Marine Expeditionary Brigade and an Army Stryker formation?

Last month Mr Obama announced that 17,000 US military personnel originally earmarked for Iraq, are to be sent to Afghanistan to help stabilise the deteriorating security environment. This deployment should not be thought of as a surge, but instead it fills a capability gap in Taliban heartland areas in Regional Command South where resources are not sufficiently concentrated to implement an effective COIN strategy.

What does all this mean for Australian forces located in southern Afghanistan?

The Australian Defence Force has a range of force elements deployed to Kandahar and Oruzgan, with some personnel located in Helmand and Kabul.

The mainstay of Australia's contribution is the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force, which supports the Netherlands Task Force Uruzgan. An Australian Special Operations Task Group provides deep outer ring security for protected reconstruction and security sector reform activity, by maintaining pressure on the Taliban to disrupt their coordination and plans. This is done by deliberately targeting the insurgent command and control and IED facilitators.

Oruzgan Province is a complex and challenging operating environment—one that will become more hostile in the coming year, when Afghanistan will undergo successive presidential, provincial council and parliamentary elections. A successful counter-insurgency strategy requires a national government in Afghanistan that is a viable alternative to Taliban's brand of radical Islamist agenda. Holding credible democratic elections is a central element in bolstering the Afghan Government's legitimacy. A stronger ADF presence is required to secure Oruzgan from insurgents who will do everything they can to frustrate the electoral process, whether through direct and indirect attacks, or simply voter intimidation.

Increased pressure on insurgents from the deployment of additional US combat brigades to Afghanistan will have a knock-on effect in Oruzgan. The conservative Pushtun-dominated province's remote valleys have in the past afforded the Taliban an internal safe haven from Coalition operations in Helmand and Kandahar to the South.

Many senior Taliban leaders have familial and tribal ties to Oruzgan. It is Mullah Mohammed Omar's native province, where he fled after his regime was routed in 2001. Besides offering sanctuary, this province provides capital to the Taliban through the narcotics trade. And, according to last week's *Economist*, Oruzgan is also retained as an insurgent training ground within Afghanistan.

The very real operational requirements generated by the new COIN strategy will alter the troop-to-task ratio. The Australian Government may require, in addition to forces already in-theatre, an infantry-heavy battlegroup with protected mobility and integral fire support to carry out a demanding range of offensive, defensive, protective and training and mentoring tasks.

However, with an increased commitment comes greater risk. The Rudd government needs to better articulate Australia's national interests in Afghanistan in the face of declining public opposition for more Australian troops as the recent News Poll figures indicate (65% against, 28% for, 7% uncommitted), and to prepare the country for news of more casualties to come.