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Conceptualizing the War in Afghanistan: Perceptions from the Front, 2001–2006

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ABSTRACT Analytical focus on military operations in Iraq continue to overshadow analysis of the war in Afghanistan as it enters its sixth year. It is now possible to discern several clearly-delineated periods of coalition counter-insurgency and stabilization operations. What is the nature of the war and how has it evolved? Has there been success so far in Afghanistan?

‘War in Afghanistan is very strange.’
General Kulikov

With analytical attention directed towards Iraq and now the new American construct of ‘The Long War’, it is easy to forget that there is another major counterinsurgency war in progress involving Western forces and that it is not the sole preserve of the US. Coalition operations in Afghanistan evolve dramatically from year to year and there are several overlapping problems involving insurgent, political, and criminal violence in Afghanistan.¹ Simplistic analysis conducted by those seeking to jam the insurgency in Afghanistan into a Maoist Procrustean Bed, and its response, have only confused the issue for the non-cognoscenti.² The situation is compounded by the fact that there were (and remain) two major international military coalitions operating in Afghanistan. Both work with Afghan security forces and both in action against insurgent forces at the same time. Significantly, the US also contributes forces to both organizations.

The first, Operation Enduring Freedom or OEF, is American-led and is part of a larger regional effort, while the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) started off as a UN-mandated European organization but

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then evolved into a NATO-led mission which operates solely in Afghanistan. At the very least, this violates the principle of unity of command. To make matters worse, some commentators referred to ISAF as a 'peacekeeping' mission which conversely implied that OEF was a 'warfighting' organization.³ The reality of the situation is that both organizations conduct stabilization, counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism functions, in many cases working together. They have to: the insurgency in Afghanistan adapts from year to year, and this in turn prompts constant adaptation on the part of the international community and their Afghan government partners. This study will lay out a chronological and conceptual framework for understanding the war in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2006. Coalition military operations in Afghanistan are complex, they evolve annually, and operate at many levels. Any commentator seeking to provide authoritative observations on the war in Afghanistan must be aware of these factors. This war does not fit neatly into the categorizations usually assigned by analysts or commentators.

The war in Afghanistan can be broken down into distinct periods. First, there was the removal of the Taliban regime and the hunt for Al Qaeda by OEF. This period lasted from September 2001 well into 2002. From 2002 to 2004, international efforts were designed to stabilize Afghanistan to prevent a repeat of the 1993–96 civil war, while at the same time staving off insurgent attempts to interfere with that process. The insurgent forces re-organized and re-conceptualized their campaign and by 2005 re-focused their efforts on southern Afghanistan. In 2006, the insurgents severely challenged Afghan government control of the southern provinces with a much more sophisticated and organized campaign. This conceptualization is not meant to suggest that insurgent violence was absent from 2002 to 2005. Indeed, there was a steady border campaign, low-level unrest in the south and east, and a growing urban terrorist campaign throughout that period.

2001–02: Proxy War and the Al Qaeda Hunt

The situation in Afghanistan prior to intervention in 2001 consisted of a civil war between various combinations of Afghan religious, ethnic and tribal groups combined with significant external support to the different factions. The Taliban movement, created and supported by Pakistan, controlled most of the country. Dominated by Pashtuns, the Taliban enjoyed significant support from Pakistani military and intelligence, a wide variety of jihadists, and ex-Soviet bloc mercenaries. When the Al Qaeda organization was expelled from the Sudan in 1996, it relocated to Afghanistan and developed a network of sophisticated terrorist and guerilla training camps, biological and chemical weapons

labs, and facilities for religious–ideological indoctrination. Al Qaeda also had conventional military units, engineering companies, and its own non-governmental relief organizations in addition to the terrorist training and support infrastructure.⁴

A cluster of organized armed groups resisted Taliban dominance. Generally known as the Northern Alliance by the media, but more properly as the Shura Nazar, there were a number of Afghan military leaders of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara ethnicity that had no truck with the Pashtun Taliban's radical Islamist orthodoxy. The Northern Alliance received material support from Iran, France and, ironically, Russia. It held a number of mountainous citadels in northern Afghanistan, as well as the vital Panjshir Valley north of Kabul. The action was primarily conventional in nature and even static on many fronts where the terrain precluded maneuver.

There were prototypical American proxy efforts against the Al Qaeda organization in the years prior to the intervention in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. An incoherent anti-Al Qaeda policy under the Clinton administration resulted in the deployment (and later removal) of a small CIA liaison group codenamed Jawbreaker into Afghanistan during 2000 to meet with the Northern Alliance which was at the time coordinated by famed anti-Soviet guerilla, Ahmed Shah Massoud. Contingency planning was conducted to insert American special operations forces to kill Osama bin Laden, but these plans were superseded by a plan to use Predator unmanned aerial vehicles to act as spotters for submarine-launched cruise missiles. A variety of other covert operations designed to hunt and kill Osama bin Laden were conducted without success using the Northern Alliance as a proxy force or cover for US covert activities.⁵

After 9/11, the gloves came off. The CIA's Northern Alliance Liaison Team re-initiated contact with the Northern Alliance to facilitate the introduction of American special operations forces to work with conventional forces in order to collapse the Taliban regime. At the same time, the intelligence relationship between the NALT and their Afghan counterparts was used to gather information on the Al Qaeda organization in Afghanistan and track its leadership with the objective of killing them using armed Predator UAVs and traditional airpower.⁶

American special operations forces teams, working with CIA facilitation and intelligence teams, deployed across northern Afghanistan in direct support of Northern Alliance forces. These teams had access to significant air resources which were then employed to support Northern Alliance tactical and operational moves on the northern front. Northern Alliance forces used a combination of bribery, PSYOPS, and fighting to convince the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces to surrender, fight among themselves or otherwise quit the field. At the same time, an American air campaign was conducted against more traditional air

power targets that included Taliban regime military bases and air defense systems, until the US Air Force virtually ran out of targets in the first two weeks of the war.⁷

In southern Afghanistan, American special operations forces established contact with anti-Taliban tribal elements, coalesced them, provided material support and initiated a campaign designed to put pressure on the regime from the south. In many cases, this was a 'classic' US special forces task. At the same time, American and later allied Tier I special operations forces⁸ conducted a hunt for Al Qaeda high-value leadership targets in the south using the newly-liberated areas as a base and using the new tribal allies as intelligence assets.

This squeeze play produced dramatic results: The Taliban regime collapsed much earlier than anticipated.⁹ At this point American CIA and special operations forces on the ground were trying to establish an 'Eastern Alliance' in order to block retreating regime and Al Qaeda forces. Generally, enemy forces fled south from the northern front to Kabul, then east to Pakistan or south to a number of mountainous areas. Enemy forces in the west and northwest headed to Kandahar in the south, with the intention of reaching Pakistan. Al Qaeda's leadership established itself in the Tora Bora region, escaped, and then moved east to Pakistan, while al Qaeda fighters tried to establish defended areas in mountainous regions near the Shai-i-kot valley and in other rugged locations along the border. American special operations forces and their proxies in the south consolidated control over Kandahar city, and a massive sensitive site exploitation operation commenced against abandoned Al Qaeda facilities. These operations prevented further large-scale global Al Qaeda operations.¹⁰

The increased unreliability of Afghan proxy forces operating outside their traditional tribal and ethnic areas of domination prompted the belated deployment of American, Canadian and later British light infantry to assist in the reduction of enemy defended areas in 2002. More and more coalition special operations forces, mostly from NATO countries, arrived to contribute to these operations. After a series of light infantry-SOF operations in the southern and eastern provinces conducted throughout 2002, Taliban and Al Qaeda formations and units ceased to operate at a level above platoon-sized groups. Al Qaeda lost all of its infrastructure in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda affiliates like the UMI also lost their safe haven and ability to interfere seriously with Uzbekistan and its neighbors. Military operations in Afghanistan during this period essentially forced al Qaeda to evolve its *modus operandi*: one result was the emergence of what analyst Marc Sageman calls the 'bunch of guys' model of Al Qaeda terrorist groups who conducted the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005 and planned attacks in Toronto in 2006.¹¹

2002–2003: Initial Stabilization Efforts

The problem of what to do about Afghanistan once the Taliban regime was removed concerned planners long before the collapse, but there were no easy answers. There appear to have been two overlapping schools of thought in American circles. The first was to have a ‘hands-off’ approach whereby pro-American proxies would dominate the country and ensure that Al Qaeda did not come back in. In this schema, Afghanistan would be left to its own devices with limited American support since the White House was suspicious of taking on a ‘nation-building’ role.¹² The other school of thought envisaged an American hand-over to the United Nations, who would then handle reconstruction and political development with OEF acting as a shield. This plan was rather vague. The UN, however, refused to become involved with such an exercise unless there was a non-US led military security force to protect it. At the same time, the victorious Afghan proxies were suspicious of the UN, the organization that abandoned them in the early 1990s. A compromise was reached in November 2001. The Bonn Agreement allowed for a limited non-UN, non-US force that would be used to stabilize the capital, Kabul. Initially led by the UK, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) started to deploy in spring 2002.¹³

For the most part, however, ISAF was neutered. It was small (1,500 ‘bayonets’ and 3,000 support troops) while the anti-Taliban factions boasted at least 26,000 troops equipped with the full range of conventional weapons. ISAF’s purpose was symbolic and acted as a tool to get reconstruction ‘buy in’ from the UN and non-governmental organizations. It was not a peacekeeping force: it was not neutral, it protected the emergent Afghan Interim Administration and did what it could to provide an international, non-US presence in Kabul.¹⁴

Enemy forces reverted to a relatively disorganized guerilla resistance in the southern provinces around this time. By 2003, Taliban groups were incapable of operating at even the platoon level. At the same time, there were still significant coalition operations tracking Al Qaeda and Taliban high-value leadership targets. An additional problem lay, however, in consolidating the areas that had been cleared of a Taliban presence. The Joint Regional Team (JRT) concept emerged from these requirements in OEF planning circles. Initially conceived as small intelligence collection and aid liaison cells attached to friendly Afghan governors, the idea evolved into the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept. The PRTs had more people (initially one hundred then more, as opposed to the planned JRT’s 16 people), were all-agency to include national development agencies, and were structured to coordinate the establishment of Afghan civilian government in each

province with an eye towards progressively linking provincial leaders with the emergent government in Kabul. OEF PRTs deployed throughout the country in 2003.¹⁵

The PRT situation reflected a continuity problem in the international effort in Afghanistan. Military forces have units to deal with the civilian population in areas where forces are maneuvering. Called Civil Affairs by the Americans and Civil–Military Cooperation by Canada and NATO, they are not intended to be aid agencies or to provide a venue for long-term development. In the Balkans, however, there had been coordination problems between CA and CIMIC and aid from non-governmental organizations and governmental development agencies: at what point did the hand-off take place? The non-government aid organizations, who generally view themselves as neutral, did not want to work with the PRTs in Afghanistan and saw them as ‘military’ tools. Consequently, CA and CIMIC took on more and more responsibility for the development tasks, which are vital in any counterinsurgency effort.

The PRTs, however, were there to support Afghan governance efforts and to support OEF information requirements relating to the civil and security situation throughout Afghanistan. In the south, PRTs were part and parcel of military efforts to root out what remained of the Taliban. In the north, which was comparatively secure because of the ethnic make-up of the provinces, this function had a lower priority (at least outside of Konduz).¹⁶

It is important to note that the Afghan government was embryonic in 2003. There was no bureaucracy capable of running the country. There were no central government organizations, like a ministry of the interior, chancellor of the exchequer and so on. The governors were the anti-Taliban leaders who had armies that held allegiance to them, not to a central government. They were temporarily ‘legitimized’ by the Afghan Interim Administration and with good reason. OEF was dependent on them for ongoing operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in that these commanders provided guides, linguists, protection forces for bases, and vital logistics support.¹⁷

The degree of control exercised by coalition and Afghan forces throughout the country was extremely localized. For example, OEF exerted control of its bases in Kandahar province, while its Afghan Militia Force allies had a semblance of governance in Kandahar city where power came from the barrel of a gun and rough justice. There was little or no government presence in the region. The concept of counterinsurgency operations in the south during 2003 involved the deployment of special operations forces to a network of forward operating bases. Civil Affairs units deployed into uncontrolled areas to assess the situation in between those bases. These two webs were used to cue two types of forces: Tier I special operations forces in the event

a high-value target was located; or a light infantry battalion if a significant number of Taliban were discovered.¹⁸ Increasingly, however, there were fewer and fewer high-value targets present in Afghanistan as most fled to Pakistan. Indeed, Tier II special operations forces working from the forward operating bases grabbed more high-value targets than the specialized Tier I SOF did.¹⁹

Enemy forces which included Taliban, Al Qaeda, and HIG then initiated a limited terrorist campaign which targeted ISAF in Kabul and OEF around Kandahar. Improvised explosive device attacks (IED) were used on a limited basis in both Kabul and Kandahar throughout 2003. A spectacularly lethal suicide attack against a German convoy in Kabul in 2003 indicated that Al Qaeda, its allies and their affiliates were adopting new tactics, even before the Americans entered and occupied Iraq, where we would see even more dramatic evolution of these techniques.²⁰

2003–04: Preventing Civil War

There was increasing unease in European circles over leadership of ISAF after these suicide attacks and it was difficult to get a European nation to accept leadership of the force. For a variety of national interest reasons, Canada agreed command of ISAF, but only if it were transformed into a NATO force. By mid-2003, ISAF was 'NATO-ized' and Canada took command in 2004. Canadian commanders re-assessed the stabilization and reconstruction situation during this time and came to several conclusions. First, not enough was being done to assist the Afghan Interim Administration in capacity building so it could actually govern the country. Second, there was no coherent national plan for reconstruction. The UN and the Europeans had failed to accomplish even a semblance of these critical tasks during their tenure: The Americans were busy elsewhere, now in Iraq. Third, if something was not done to create national security structures, the heavily-armed anti-Taliban factions might fight among themselves in a bid for political domination. Progress was particularly slow in building up police forces and a multi-ethnic Afghan National Army.²¹

The first two problems were initially addressed by assigning a small ISAF team to help the Afghan government plan and budget with an eye towards increasing governance capacity. The third problem became a focus of ISAF efforts for this period. Working with Canada, Japan, the US and the UN, ISAF formulated a plan to demobilize and disarm regional military forces and then canton their heavy weapons for use by the emergent ANA, at first in Kabul, but with plans to move this program throughout the country. The ANA training function was handed off to OEF control since there had been no centralized body to coordinate numerous national efforts. ISAF forces in Kabul became

increasingly involved with countering urban terrorism in conjunction with special operations forces from OEF.²²

Unfortunately, when Canada relinquished ISAF command, the follow-on staff drawn from the Eurocorps HQ led by French Lieutenant General Jean-Louis Py discarded the vital advisory and planning function. Some of these staff officers believed that ISAF should restrict itself to narrowly-defined security sector reform activities. ISAF confined itself to administering the local disarmament and cantonment plans, protecting itself from urban terrorism, and other minor operations within the environs of Kabul. The coordination of Afghan National Army planning was in some disarray. This short-sighted approach significantly delayed capacity-building efforts and is, in retrospect, a major setback.

Increased US involvement in Iraq during 2004 drove a plan to have NATO ISAF progressively take control of international efforts in certain parts of Afghanistan. In this schema, NATO ISAF would take over a number of PRTs in northern Afghanistan. If that worked out, then 'Stage II expansion' would see NATO take over PRTs in Western Afghanistan. The mission would remain the same: assess and assist in governance capacity building, de-fanging the AMF, and assist with the introduction of Afghan National Army units and police into these areas. Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, and New Zealand were the main players in what became known as Regional Command North. The fact that there was little or no insurgent activity in this region made it a fairly safe test-bed: the exception was Konduz where the Germans took casualties from terrorists embedded in the Pashtun population there.²³

In the Pashtun-dominated provinces along the Pakistani border, however, Al Qaeda and HIG particularly, and then increasingly the Taliban further south, mounted a border campaign. Military force, usually in the form of small raiding operations and rocket attacks, was mostly directed at OEF bases in border provinces but the campaign also involved increasingly sophisticated political tactics designed to subvert the establishment of legitimate governance in these provinces.²⁴

More and more enemy activity, usually of a political nature at first, was directed at interior provinces like Oruzgan to give the campaign depth, presumably in order to lay the groundwork for future operations. The enemy political campaign coincided with the run-ups to the 2004 elections whereby the Afghan Interim Administration would transition into a fully-elected government. Widespread intimidation was employed in an attempt to coerce the populations in these provinces and increasingly in Kabul. A combination of ISAF and OEF counter-terrorism operations in Kabul and massive ISAF and OEF security presence thwarted enemy efforts seriously to interfere with the UN-led and then certified election. Afghanistan now had a legitimate, elected government supported by the vast majority of the Afghan population.²⁵

Another extremely important series of operations in the election run-up related to the disarmament, demobilization, and cantonment programs. Afghan Militia Force leaders who wanted to be part of the political process had to relinquish control of their armed forces beforehand or be declared anti-government and therefore non-participants. In essence, these men were forced to choose between being players in the political power game within the new system, or remaining outside the system and then being dealt with using coercive force. None of the major anti-Taliban commanders took up arms against the government. The combination of the election and the co-option of the commanders represented a major victory for stabilization in Afghanistan and a significant defeat for the Taliban and its supporters, who did not even attempt to participate in the elections in a non-violent fashion.²⁶

The main security problem, however, remained: the Afghan National Army was slow to build up, and police professionalization and expansion was in an even worse state, which dictated the continued presence of OEF and ISAF. The policing 'pillar' of the international effort, held by Germany, was hampered by restrictions placed by the German government on how far the police trainers could mentor their students: German mentors were not permitted to accompany police outside of Kabul. The lack of a Bosnia-style International Police Task Force structure meant that regional police training in the provinces was uneven or even non-existent. In theory, there should have been IPTF-like police units in the provinces working with the provincial reconstruction teams to build police capacity right from the beginning.

And then there was the judiciary, the capacity-building pillar held by the Italians. The non-existent police could not turn over criminals to a non-existent judicial system. In some provinces, Sharia law continued to dominate the proceedings, while some Afghan judges training in Italy chose to stay in Italy as refugees and not return.²⁷

Another drawback was the hesitancy of NATO countries to accept responsibility for future PRT expansion, which in turn should have been the basis for police and judiciary capacity building. In most cases, NATO countries bickered over who would command 'safe' PRTs, that is, ones not directly affected by the Taliban insurgency in the south and east. In this game of musical chairs, Canada hesitated and was last to play. There were no 'safe' PRTs left: consequently, Canada committed to the Kandahar PRT in the OEF operating area, the only non-US country to commit to the reconstruction effort alongside the Americans in the 'front-line' provinces thus far. American PRTs were directed more towards supporting counterinsurgency operations with capacity building by necessity taking a second row seat.²⁸

2005–06: The Southern Campaign

By 2005, OEF in the south had moved slowly away from the reactive airmobile raiding operations that predominated in 2003. At some point in 2004, there had been a loss of momentum in the American-led effort. Some have attributed this to the deployment of the 25th Infantry Division headquarters, a divisional headquarters that had comparatively little or no coalition experience because of its isolated location in Hawaii and one that had trouble operationalizing strategy for Afghanistan. PRTs were undermanned and were not, at least in Kandahar, pushing out into the hinterland to develop information and contacts with the rural population. When the command situation was rectified, American units moved away from a single big base and the PRTs to numerous firebases and forward operating bases in the border provinces. Special operations forces changed focus: they moved to the interior provinces and worked with the new Afghan National Army units to counter the increased Taliban influence that emerged during the 2004 election campaign. Tier I special operations forces units remained on-call, but since most high-value targets were in Pakistan, direct action missions were more and more directed at medium-value targets inside Afghanistan.²⁹

Al Qaeda and HIG raiding operations on the border became more sophisticated in terms of equipment and organization, which led some coalition observers to believe that this was all training for something larger in the future. For the most part, however, enemy forces were incapable of operating in any organization larger than ten men. Anything larger was targeted and destroyed by airpower.³⁰

Although suicide bomb attacks directed against ISAF and OEF forces were not new in Afghanistan, enemy forces initiated a suicide bombing campaign in Kandahar province during 2005. This campaign attracted a significant amount of media attention, as it was designed to do. The purpose of the campaign was to get the international audience to compare the international effort in Afghanistan to the apparently failing American effort in Iraq, and then exploit this to get Western populations to pressure their governments to cease and desist in Afghanistan. The proximity of the suicide campaign in Kandahar to the July 2005 London bombings, which in turn drew inspiration from the Madrid attacks, was not coincidental. As we will recall, the Madrid attacks influenced Spain's withdrawal from military operations in Iraq. This lesson was not lost on the opposing forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The deadlock on the capacity-building front was broken, finally, in late 2005 when the Afghan government accepted the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the central basis for reconstruction and security efforts. The ANDS was an Afghan government document

Conceptualizing the War in Afghanistan 37

that was produced with an Afghan staff mentored by a Canadian military group called Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan. The ANDS was patterned on the Multi-Year Road Map used to coordinate NATO SFOR and the international community efforts in Bosnia.³¹ There were, however, significant alterations to deal with the unique aspects of the situation in Afghanistan. Initiated in 2003–04 by the Canadian ISAF leadership and then derailed by the Eurocorps staff, the ANDS gave the international community a strategy, after four years of uncoordinated efforts. The ANDS had ‘buy-in’ from ISAF, OEF,³² and the UN.

Most importantly, the ANDS had buy-in from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, organizations reluctant to invest in Afghanistan unless there was a clear plan. Only then could the necessary monies flow to fuel the reconstruction effort. It is in this way that ‘tactical’ considerations in the war in Afghanistan have ‘strategic’ implications: no stability and no plan equals no money and no reconstruction. The level of stability established by ISAF and OEF over the preceeding years was high enough at this point to secure the resources needed for the first phases of reconstruction.³³

It remains possible that the autumn 2005 suicide campaign was also designed to deter the IMF and World Bank from investing in the reconstruction effort, with obvious benefits to the Taliban. If that is the case, the commitment of substantial forces to the south in preparation for the OEF to ISAF transition in 2006 had some effect at muffling this attempt.

For the most part, there was comparatively little insurgent activity in Afghanistan outside of the border provinces in the south and east, and in Kabul. Media attention directed at the suicide campaign in the south, however, made it appear to the outside world as though Afghanistan had collapsed into complete anarchy. This in turn had a deterrent effect on NATO countries asked to contribute to ISAF in its expansion into southern Afghanistan, or Regional Command South. OEF could not hand over to ISAF if there were no ISAF forces to hand over to Canada, which had already accepted PRT lead in Kandahar province, committed to lead a multinational brigade under OEF and then transition the region to ISAF command. The UK agreed to turn over its ‘safe’ PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and join the multinational brigade, while the Dutch decided to accept the lead of the PRT in Oruzgan and then deploy forces to secure the province. No other nation would commit combat troops, so the multinational ‘ABCD’ (American-Britain-Canadian-Dutch) brigade more properly known as Combined Task Force AEGIS, was established in early 2006 working under command of the American divisional headquarters responsible OEF forces in RC East and RC South. The Canadian-led Task Force AEGIS was the facilitating organization for the British and Dutch deployment.³⁴

The pattern of enemy activity in the south throughout 2006 indicates further evolution in methodology and objectives. As we will recall, OEF did not exert control over RC South: it had selective control in certain areas and was pushing PRT and special operations patrols into uncontrolled areas to assess them. Some provinces, like Nimroz, had remained terra incognita since 2001, for example. Enemy forces had been using Pakistan as a base area in every sense: logistics, money, weapons, recruitment, and training. Pakistani forces had sporadically cooperated with OEF in 2001–02 and again in 2004, but in the main the Pakistani effort was focused on Waziristan, from where it is believed Al Qaeda and HIG operate. Balochistan, which has been in the throes of insurgency for decades, is problematic for the Pakistani government. The Taliban organization is based in Quetta and has Al Qaeda and HIG advisors attached to it.³⁵

The suicide campaign in Kandahar was undertaken for international effect, but it also reflected the Taliban's impotence in RC South. Whenever the Taliban deployed fighters in groups of larger than ten, they were usually interdicted and pounded with airpower. Throughout 2005, however, individuals and small groups infiltrated Afghanistan along several remote trade routes to create facilitation cells. This 'magic carpet' was laid from Pakistan to Afghan districts on the border to certain areas inside Kandahar, Helmand, and Oruzgan provinces. Weapons traveled separately from the personnel: these mostly came in through the Spinboldak highway concealed in trucks.³⁶

A number of districts were selected by the Taliban to act as fortified areas, using terrain which would slow down coalition forces. Weapons and personnel were to converge and marry up in these areas in preparation for future operations. The fortified areas in effect sat astride each of the four highways leading out of Kandahar City, with the obvious objectives of being able to cut off the city and launch attacks into it.

OEF operations, however, detected the build-up in some areas and conducted a series of operations to disrupt enemy forces before they could coalesce, particularly in Kandahar and Oruzgan provinces. In most cases, the enemy dispersed when confronted, but throughout 2006 they kept coming back into these fortified areas and challenging OEF forces (and now ISAF forces) for control of them with operations that were nearly conventional in nature. OEF and ISAF responded with conventional operations using mechanized infantry and artillery.³⁷ This in turn prompted Western commentators simplistically to compare operations in Afghanistan with US operations in Vietnam³⁸ and criticize the supposed lack of resources deployed for reconstruction and aid.³⁹ A dramatic suicide attack that assassinated a Canadian ambassadorial-level diplomat working with the PRT in Kandahar

significantly interfered with aid and reconstruction operations earlier in 2006, but to suggest that all activity stopped and only conventional warfare was underway was a gross exaggeration, leading to further confusion in Western media circles and electorates.

Enemy forces have not refrained from conducting suicide attacks in and around Kandahar City, nor have they abandoned political warfare in the rural areas of RC South which involves targeting schools, teachers, doctors and clinics. Practically every enemy action has a relationship to both the situation on the ground and the international media and political arena. Enemy forces are adept at information operations and the willingness of Western media to assist in this effort needs further exploration.

The battle for the south is as psychological as it is material: it is for the uncommitted portions of the population in RC South. As the past has demonstrated in Afghanistan, this uncommitted component will side with those who are perceived to be winning the fight: this is a reflection of Pashtun culture. Backing off on military operations and refocusing on aid and development will not succeed: the two components must work together.

This is a good point to discuss the narcotics issue as it cuts across all phases of the war in Afghanistan, but has particular relevance to the southern campaign. The schizophrenic approach to counter-narcotics by the international community in Afghanistan has had negative effects on the Afghan government's ability to stabilize the south and had particularly negative effects on the counterinsurgency campaign. Propelled by the UK, who accepted the counter-narcotics pillar leadership, and supported by the US State Department (but not Department of Defense, or the CIA), advocates insisted that ISAF and OEF be involved in supporting paramilitary operations against opium producers in Afghanistan. Both military organizations resisted involvement, but State Department-funded Afghan forces supported by ISAF forces operating under national command conducted counternarcotics operations anyway.⁴⁰

Narcotics producers, particularly those in Helmand province, are well-organized and armed: they also have the support of the population, who profit from opium harvesting. It was no surprise that they fought back. In some cases, they have formed alliances with enemy forces. The Taliban then uses the State Department- and UK-led counternarcotics effort as a recruitment tool, insisting to the population that this outside interference will destroy their livelihoods, which it does. This state of affairs led to severe problems in 2006. British forces, deploying into Helmand province, encountered fierce resistance which prompted a significant diversion of Canadian and American military forces from Zabol and Kandahar provinces to rescue the situation. Indeed, the

Taliban seized two districts in the south of the province and declared a liberated zone which was eventually crushed by Canadian and American OEF forces, but not before some Western media outlets declared that the war in Afghanistan was being lost.⁴¹

The spill-over effects of this reportage have deterred most NATO countries from sending additional combat forces to ISAF in Afghanistan, leaving the ABCD countries, who are already stretched thin globally (and now the Poles who recently joined ISAF) to counter the Taliban in the south. The enemy is succeeding on the international psychological plane while coalition forces are succeeding in the tactical and local military, aid and reconstruction fronts. Napoleon's dictum that the moral is to the physical as three is to one applies here. Afghanistan has to be understood as an Al Qaeda front in the larger war against the 'Crusader-Zionists', not just as a local or regional problem. A defeat, or even the perception of defeat of Western forces in Afghanistan will present Al Qaeda with a propaganda coup of massive proportions and it will be used in the movement's drive for more jihadists and adherents throughout the Muslim world.

On a positive note, international recognition that Pakistan's lack of control of Balochistan fuels the insurgency in southern Afghanistan is finally part of the public debate. Concealed out of concern for ongoing Pakistani cooperation in hunting down Al Qaeda cells and the remnants of AQ Khan's 'atomic Wal-mart', incremental steps have now been taken which at least indicate a willingness on the part of President Musharraf to disrupt the flow of resources into Afghanistan. We will see. NATO members can legitimately question the international effort if it seeks to limit its scrutiny to Afghanistan and not the region, especially when their soldiers are getting killed.

The public debate over how the campaign in the south should be approached reached its peak in the summer of 2006. Some initially applauded the hand-over from OEF to ISAF, asserting that the American-led OEF operations, was too 'militarily oriented' and believed that ISAF would bring a 'softer' approach to the situation with greater emphasis in developmental aid.⁴² The reality is, as both OEF and ISAF commanders knew, that the only things that were really going to change were flags at the headquarters and certain rules of engagement. To shift away from combat operations at the point where the Taliban were deploying larger units (company-sized) equipped with heavy weapons and using more guerilla-oriented tactics and less reliance on suicide terrorism would have been a grave error.

This misunderstanding that exists in the public debate regarding the 'correct' balance between development and military force should be addressed more forcibly by those who study counterinsurgency. Indeed,

the simplistic analogies between Afghanistan and Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam, Afghanistan and Colombia continue to populate any non-specialist discourse. This plays into the hands of the enemy's information operations campaign.

The influence of Vietnam on a particular generation of media commentators and editors leads us to the problems of 'body-count'. The concurrent debate over American casualties in Iraq was also reflected in British and Canadian media outlets, who reported absolutely every single casualty inflicted by the Taliban on coalition forces,⁴³ but could not find a comparative means of reporting aid and construction developments short of amounts of money spent, or an equivalent methodology to report enemy dead. Quantitative methodologies are simpler to understand for the non-cognoscenti: we lost X, they lost Y, they lost more, so we are winning. The difficulties of applying this paradigm in Afghanistan are obvious. Fragmentation of enemy personnel by modern weapons makes body count difficult.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is easier for the media to count coalition casualties. Moreover, success in the southern campaign should be measured by what the enemy does *not* control: the population and the districts. If he does not control the population, he cannot succeed in controlling southern Afghanistan. The Taliban does have a semblance of a parallel government, but is it not extensive yet. It should be targeted before it can evolve and grow.

All the Taliban can do at this point is generate carnage and, in most cases, this amounts to more dead civilians than coalition soldiers. The terrorist paradigms of the 1970s do not apply in this area either. In theory, the deaths of civilians should be a tool used by the insurgents to undermine the trust between the state and the people, to demonstrate the limits of state power to protect the population, and enhance the power of the insurgents. In Afghanistan, the level of violence between 1979 and 1996 far exceeded the levels employed now. In effect, the population is used to it. They already know the limits of state protection. The audience, therefore, consists of the West's populations, with the political theatre of Afghanistan coming second. Indeed, almost all suicide attacks in the south from 2003 to 2006 have been against coalition forces and not against mass groupings of civilians. Compare this to Iraq.

The Prospects

The reality is that political violence does not permeate Afghanistan: it permeates *parts* of Afghanistan. So far, enemy forces do not control significant territory in the country as a whole. They do not have the allegiance of the majority of Afghans. The allegiance of some Afghans hangs in the balance. Enemy forces have challenged the Afghan

government and its international supporters in parts of the south. Will this translate to expanded influence throughout Afghanistan? Probably not. The Taliban are of Pashtun ethnicity, or about 38 per cent of the population. It is unlikely that the Taliban as a mass movement could gain the allegiance of Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. The Taliban and its Al Qaeda and HIG supporters could, however, take control of significant portions of southern Afghanistan if left unchecked. The ultimate result of such a situation would be the creation of a Pashtunistan statelet which Al Qaeda and affiliates could use as a secure base area once again. It would destroy and discredit Western efforts to back a legitimate, progressive Afghan government. It would nullify the positive psychological benefits gained in the wake of 9/11 when the initial intervention was the first clearcut victory over the Al Qaeda movement. In short, failure in the southern campaign in Afghanistan at this point would be disastrous in the Long War.

NOTES

1. The author has traveled to Afghanistan annually since early 2003 to observe coalition military operations and international capacity-building efforts. This article draws on this body of personal experience, numerous in-camera interviews, and myriad briefings received over this four-year period, in addition to the growing secondary source literature.
2. Specifically, the Canadian debate included criticism of the deployment of armored vehicles, implying that if NATO was fighting a near-conventional war, then the insurgency had 'progressed' from terrorism, to guerilla warfare, to near-conventional warfare and, therefore, NATO and the government of Afghanistan were 'losing'. See minutes of the House of Commons, Standing Committee on National Defence, testimony 20 Sept. 2006 at <http://cmte.parl.gc.ca/cmte/CommitteePublication.aspx?SourceId=170637>.
3. This included the vaunted BBC. See BBC Newsround, 'Peacekeeping', at http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/find_out/guides/world/peacekeeping/newsid_1721000/1721491.stm. In Canada, media commentators continued to refer to ISAF as a peacekeeping operation until confronted in the summer of 2006 with the fact that ISAF was conducting the same types of operations as OEF. See Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 11 Aug. 2003, 'NATO Takes over Security Force in Kabul', at http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2003/08/11/afghan_nato030811.html; CBC 27 Jan. 2004, 'Canadian Peacekeeping Mission Comes Under Fire at Home', at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/afghanistan/peacekeeping.html>; CBC 3 Aug. 2005, 'Canadian Troops in Kandahar: A New Commitment to War', http://www.cbc.ca/news/viewpoint/vp_ahmad/20050803.html; and CBC 25 Oct. 2006, '38 Insurgents Killed' <http://www.cbc.ca/cp/world/061025/w102532.html>. The American media generally seem not to labor under the confusion between peacekeeping, stabilization, and counterinsurgency as much as the British and Canadian media.
4. The 9/11 Commission Report: The Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004) pp.62–67.
5. See Gary Berntsen and Ralph Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005) Chapters 2–5; *The 9/11 Commission Report* Chapters 4–6.
6. See Berntsen and Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker* and Gray Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2005), Parts 4, 5 and 6.
7. On US Special Forces operations, see Robin Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden: On the Ground with Special Forces in Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2003). For the air campaign, see Chris Finn 'The Employment of Airpower in Afghanistan and Beyond', *Air Power Review*, Vol.5 No.4, Winter 2002 pp.1–15; Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Air War Lessons in*

Conceptualizing the War in Afghanistan 43

Afghanistan: Change and Continuity (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002). Readers should note that there has been substantial debunking of the Moore book by Robert Young Pelton in *Licensed to Kill: Hired Guns in the War on Terror* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006) pp.241–45 and this should be read before using *Hunt for Bin Laden* as a source. That said, the general dispositions of US Special Forces in Afghanistan during this period are accurately portrayed in the book.

8. American and coalition special operations forces are generally differentiated by Tier I, Tier II and Tier III units. Tier I units are specialized direct action units designed for high-value target seizure or destruction; Tier II units conduct special reconnaissance and train and lead indigenous forces, while Tier III tend to be light infantry raiding units that operate at the battalion level. In practice, there is some overlap in the missions and in many cases a Tier I unit may be embedded in a Tier II or Tier III unit for concealment, deception or protective purposes.
9. Sean M. Maloney, *Enduring the Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2005) pp.50–51.
10. Berntsen and Pezzullo, *Jawbreaker* pp.196, 294–95.
11. See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004).
12. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2002) pp.233, 237, 241.
13. Sean M. Maloney, 'ISAF: Origins of a Stabilization Force', *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol.4, No.2, Summer 2003 pp.3–11.
14. Ibid.
15. Combined Forces Command Afghanistan Briefing to the author, Kabul, 2004.
16. Konduz Provincial Reconstruction Team briefing to the author, Konduz, Dec. 2004.
17. Author's observations while observing Task Force Devil operations in Kandahar Province, spring 2003.
18. Maloney, *Enduring the Freedom* pp.219–23.
19. Anonymous, *Hunting Al Qaeda: A Take-No-Prisoners Account of Terror, Adventure, and Disillusionment* (St Paul: Zenith Books, 2005) p.211.
20. Many assume that there has been 'migration' of tactics from Iraq to Afghanistan. The situation is more complex: techniques used in Iraq were borrowed from those used in Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan, modified, and then those techniques were re-adapted for use in Afghanistan later on.
21. Interview with LtCol Ian Hope, Kandahar, June 2006.
22. ISAF HQ briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2004.
23. ISAF PRT briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2004.
24. Combined Forces Command Afghanistan briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2004.
25. Task Force Athena briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2004.
26. Interview with Canadian Ambassador Chris Alexander, Kabul, Dec. 2004.
27. Discussion with the police training team at the Kandahar PRT, Dec. 2005.
28. Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team briefing to the author, Kandahar, Dec. 2005.
29. In-camera discussions with personnel from Combined Task Force Bayonet, Dec. 2005.
30. Combined Forces Command Afghanistan briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2004 and Dec. 2005.
31. Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2005; Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan briefing to the author, July 2006.
32. Technically, Combined Forces Command Afghanistan, which is the primary American headquarters commanding OEF operations in Afghanistan.
33. Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan briefing to the author, Kabul, Dec. 2005; Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan briefing to the author, July 2006.
34. CTF AEGIS operations brief to the author, June 2006.
35. For details on Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan, see Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir* (New York: The Free Press, 2006), Chapters 23, 24 and 25.
36. Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team briefing to the author, Kandahar, Dec. 2005.
37. The author observed these operations while they were in progress.
38. For example, see Mark Nichol, 'War in Afghanistan: Britain's Vietnam', *The Times of London* 1 Oct. 2006; 'Afghanistan will be a "third Vietnam" for US: Hekmatyar', *Daily Times of Pakistan* 31 Oct. 2006 http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006%5C10%5C31%5Cstory_31-10-2006_pg7_26; items like Bernard

44 S.M. Maloney

Weiner's 'The Vietnam-Afghanistan Mirror' also proliferate on the internet: see <http://www.commondreams.org/views01/1109-07.htm>

39. Senlis Council, 'Canada in Afghanistan: No Peace to Keep', http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/013_publication; CTV 5 Nov. 2006 'Pace of Afghan Recovery Painfully Slow', http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20061105/afghan_reconstruction_061105/20061105/
40. This is based on an in-camera discussion with personnel involved in supporting the Afghan Eradication Force, a US State Department-funded force that took significant casualties in Helmand province in Spring 2006.
41. The author was present for these events at the brigade-level while they were underway in June–July 2006. Media commentary, for example, claimed the war in Afghanistan was being lost. See 'Losing Afghanistan: The Rise of Jihadism', 2 Oct. 2006, Newsweek <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14975282/site/newsweek/>; Barnett Rubin, 'Still Ours to Lose: Afghanistan on the Brink', 21 Sept. 2006 http://www.cfr.org/publication/11486/still_ours_to_lose.html; 'Backsliding in Afghanistan', 30 Oct. 2006, *LA Times* <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/editorials/la-ed-afghan30oct30,0,245233.story?coll=la-news-comment-editorials>.
42. This view was prevalent within NGO circles and among some UN staff in Kabul throughout 2005–06. See also 31 July 2006 *The Times Online*, 'NATO Takes over Mission to Crush Taliban Insurgency', <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-2293400,00.html>
43. There are far too many sources to list here to demonstrate this fact, but any search of the BBC, CBC, or CTV websites will show that every casualty-producing incident receives detailed coverage. There is no equivalent coverage, in magnitude or scope, of aid and construction activities. Those activities are not 'exciting' and therefore do not warrant a similar level of media attention.
44. This is based on the author's personal experience during the Battle of Pashmul in July 2006.