

Faithful Ally

The UK Engagement in Afghanistan

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Shot of multinational flags at
ISAF HQ in Kabul. Photo:
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Intra-alliance Analysis: Policies and Approaches of NATO Allies in Afghanistan

A CMI-PRIO study of the US, the UK, Germany and Norway

The growing difficulties facing the NATO mission in Afghanistan had by mid-decade led to increases in commitment and innovations in policy. Pressure on allies to make more robust military commitments mounted, coupled with policy innovations designed to meet the growing insurgency with more appropriate strategies and better use of resources. The 2006 Riga summit endorsement of a strategy that stressed the integration of military and civilian policy elements was an important step in this development. While the terminology and its implications differed (American policy-makers were already talking of 'counter-insurgency', while their European counterparts preferred 'comprehensive', 'integrated' or 'whole of government' approach), the Riga meeting signified a broadening as well as a deepening commitment of the alliance. In the years that followed, each NATO member and other allies struggled to adjust their policy to deal with often conflicting contexts and demands – a worsening situation on the ground, demands for alliance solidarity and awareness that NATO's prestige was on the line in Afghanistan, an increasingly critical public at home as casualties were rising, and growing concern over the economic costs of the war.

The papers in this series examine the strategies of four NATO members in this regard. Each case study first contextualizes their Afghanistan engagement in light of the broader foreign policy concerns of the country concerned, and then focuses on the development and adjustment of military strategy in relation to other components of the engagement. In this respect, special attention is given to the importance of realities on the ground in Afghanistan, organizational (NATO) interests, and domestic factors. The story is taken up to the NATO Lisbon summit meeting in November 2010, which marked the counter-point to Riga by announcing that security responsibility would be transferred to Afghan forces by the end of 2014.

What are the implications of this analysis for NATO's role in out-of-area, unconventional engagements? This question is addressed in a separate series of Policy Briefs presented as part of the project.

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Bergen and Oslo
25 October 2011

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“The answer to the fact that we are close to losing one war in Afghanistan is to fight lots more.”

1. The initial response: A faithful ally under the banner of liberal internationalism

The British government under Tony Blair was an early and major supporter of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The Royal Navy and Air Force participated in the first strikes against Afghanistan in October with Tomahawk missiles launched from British submarines striking at Al Qae3da and Taliban targets, as the Ministry of Defence points out on its website.¹ Shortly afterwards, British commandos landed at Bagram airbase and a battle group of 1700 later joined the OEF. The British also led the first ISAF contingent in Kabul, they were the first to take over one of the American PRTs that had been established to manage the expected transition from combat to stabilization – the PRT in Mazar in July 2003 – and they were among the first of Washington’s allies to again contribute a major combat unit against the insurgency by deploying a Task Force to Helmand in April 2006.

The strong support was what would have been expected by a major US ally. It also reflected the particular commitment of Tony Blair to a liberal and interventionist form of internationalism, a position that later led him to into a controversial support for - and participation in - the war in Iraq. It was a position that he defended in ethical as well as national security terms, both before the 2003 invasion and in retrospect.² His close foreign policy advisor, Richard Cooper, held similar views, although possibly more extreme and at the time more fully ideologically articulated. Cooper’s advocacy of ‘a new imperialism’ in April 2002 made quite a stir even at a time when several public intellectuals in the Anglo-American world were exploring the values of liberal imperialism.³ In the post-9/11 international system, he argued, intervention was necessary to deal with ‘failed states’, terrorism and similar threats facing the established powers; interventions that promoted human rights, cosmopolitan values, and free markets were beneficial for the target population as well. In this perspective, military force was at times a necessary tool in service of the necessary and morally legitimate objective of creating a stable and enlightened international order. Ideologically this position was a huge distance from the simple national security objectives that guided the US invasion of Afghanistan and its aftermath.

Consistent with this view, Cooper and Blair played an important role in securing agreement for a multinational force – what became ISAF – at the Bonn conference in December 2001. Working with the American envoy in Bonn James Dobbins, Cooper advocated the establishment of an international force to maintain security not only for Kabul, but also other cities and areas of the country. To Cooper and Dobbins, and many with them, such a force was necessary to ensure post-invasion stabilization and permit the development of a more democratic, stable and prosperous Afghan state. Yet it was an uphill battle. In Washington, the State Department supported the idea, although Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld vehemently opposed it, as did the US military. When it turned out that the force could only be established if Britain agreed to lead it, British military leaders became deeply sceptical as well. ‘Rumours had it that chief of the UK Defence Staff had been strongly opposed to Britain taking on the ISAF mission....Blair had only dissuaded him from resigning in protest after promising that the United Kingdom’s commitment there would be short lived,’ Dobbins later wrote.⁴ The British military had several concerns. Nearly institutionalized memories of the defeats suffered by British imperial armies in Afghanistan

¹<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FactSheets/OperationsFactsheets/OperationsInAfghanistanBackgroundBriefing.htm>

² See e.g. his memoirs: Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010).

³ Robert Cooper. *Re-Ordering the World: The Long-term Implications of September 11th* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2002).

⁴ Dobbins, *op.cit.* p. 128

during the 19th century were a cloud in the horizon, but there were more immediate issues. The mandate was unclear and elastic, and reservations by the US military weighed heavily.

Tony Blair persisted. Indeed, the Prime Minister had been so eager to send British forces to stabilize Afghanistan that he had on his own initiative dispatched a contingent of British commandos to Bagram air base, in what was planned as the first of ‘thousands of British forces’. Landing at Bagram air base just north of Kabul in mid-November, the British were met by Northern Alliance leaders who told them they were not welcome, and that ended the operation.⁵ In Bonn, the meeting agreed in the end to establish a multinational force to ‘assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and its surrounding areas,’ and a British contingent was rapidly dispatched to Kabul to form its core.⁶

The British likewise were the first to step forward when the Washington in early 2003 looked for allies to take over the PRTs which the US military had established as the main vehicle for securing contributions to the planned stabilization phase. Of the 9 PRTs established by the US in 2002-2003, 3 missions had been taken over by the allies by the end of the year: the British took responsibility for a team in Mazar-i-Sharif, the Germans did the same in Kunduz, and New Zealand in Bamyan. The following year the British also took lead responsibility for the PRT mission in Faryab (which later was taken over by the Norwegians).

These early PRT missions were cast in a soft stabilization mode. The main purpose was to establish trust, extend the authority of the central government, monitor events, create some quick impact projects and, in some cases, help to demobilize the Afghan militias. For the allies that took over from the US teams it seemed a low-cost and low-risk opportunity to demonstrate their credentials as good allies of the US and to contribute to a more peaceful Afghanistan. The north was still a relatively quiet and friendly place – indeed the kind of post-combat scene for which the PRT concept was originally designed. The British missions in Mazar and Faryab were developed accordingly as a peace support operation with a strong civilian component and a mostly non-kinetic military function. The team (100 in Mazar and 70 in Faryab) had had three pillars - military, political and development - with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the aid agency DFID leading the last two. All three pillars jointly led the team. The PRT had mobile observation teams in which the military personnel moved about without helmets and flak jackets and, in some cases, lived in small villages in the district.⁷

Known as ‘the British model’, this PRT was the embodiment of sorts of Blair’s vision of liberal internationalism. It was a listening, helping and progressive interventionist instrument with a human military face. As long as the environment was friendly and supportive, the model worked reasonably well, as happened during the short time when the British were in the north. When the British deployed to the more turbulent south, things developed in very different ways.

2. Deploying to Helmand

By mid-decade the US was urgently requesting its allies to contribute troops to deal with the growing insurgency in the southern part of Afghanistan. NATO had by then rolled out its regional command structure and was moving towards a ‘comprehensive strategy’ to deal with what

⁵ Michael R. Gordon, ‘Afghans Block British Plan for Brigade Force,’ *New York Times*, 20 November 2011.

⁶ Agreement on provisional arrangements in Afghanistan pending the re-establishment of permanent government institutions. <http://www.afhangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm>

⁷ Peter Viggo Jakobsen, *Prts in Afghanistan. Successful but Not Sufficient* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of International Studies, 2005-6), 21.

appeared as a growing insurgency. The joint declaration of the Riga meeting in November 2006 described NATO's commitment in ambitious, unambiguous and wide-ranging terms. NATO was standing with the government and people of Afghanistan 'to build a stable, democratic and prosperous society'. To this end, an integrated or comprehensive approach was necessary: 'There can be no security in Afghanistan without development, and no development without security....[ISAF] Provincial Reconstruction Teams are increasingly at the leading edge of NATO's effort supported by military forces capable of providing the security and stability needed to foster civilian activity.'⁸

It had by then become clear that NATO's mission in Afghanistan involved a range of operations from combat to peacekeeping, with the various nationally defined PRTs spread out across the spectrum. When the British deployed to Helmand in April 2006, the contingent consisted of a military Task Force prepared for combat, as well as a PRT modelled on the joint civil-military leadership that had existed in Mazar. The PRT model had been refined in 2005 through an inter-agency planning process involving the FCO, DFID and the Ministry of Defence. As soon as the Task Force landed, fighting broke out, however. Fighting escalated over the summer when US-led forces supported by newly arrived allied troops launched Operation Mountain Thrust in the southern region. Having started with airstrikes already in March, the offensive peaked in June-July. The largest offensive since the invasion, it was designed to break the backbone of the insurgents in the area, or at least weaken it sufficiently to permit a smooth transfer of the southern regional command from the US to its allies. The immediate result was heavy casualties among the insurgents and forced displacement of thousands of civilians. For the British, it meant a primary focus on the military function. Although the political and development pillar of the PRT were able to carry out some of their functions, the team as a whole worked in the shadow of the fighting, which continued to escalate and limit its civilian functions. The time in Mazar, when the PRTs military observers moved around without flak jackets and helmets and the civilian experts visited villages on their own, was definitely over.

The main puzzle regarding the Helmand deployment, then, is why the arrival of the British seemed to intensify the insurgency and, when the escalating fighting was a fact, how the British adjusted to the worsening situation in terms of both military strategy and overall policy.

2.1. Spreading out in Helmand

The British deployed into what analysts in London described as 'a vast and unforgiving terrain, [with] a paucity of established infrastructure and a tribally fragmented population that has little experience of central government and who are xenophobic, conservative and largely predisposed to resist foreigners.'⁹

The insurgency, however, was still in its infancy. Taliban leaders, some of whom were originally from Helmand, had started returning from Pakistan to reactivate their local networks, asking their supporters who had hung up their weapons after 2001 to take them down and drive out the infidels. Gradually they succeeded in mobilizing discontent, fuelled by the predations of the local leaders who had taken power after 2001, the failure of the new order to deliver on the expectations for peace and economic prosperity, and 'aggressive search operations and aerial bombings by Western Special Forces on counter-terrorism missions,' a British journalist wrote.¹⁰ Nevertheless,

⁸ www.nato.int/docu/pr/p06-150e.htm

⁹ Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon, "Coin Machine: The British Military in Afghanistan," *RUSI Journal* 154, no. 3 (2009): 19.

¹⁰ Tom Coghlan, "The Taliban in Helmand. An Oral History," in *Decoding the New Taliban*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi (London: Hurst&Co, 2009), 125-6.

by the time the British arrived a relative calm prevailed. The Taliban were there, the British General David Richards who took over as ISAF commander in mid-2006 said, but they had a ‘marriage of convenience’ with the Governor and his men, as well as with the drug lords who controlled Helmand’s massive opium production.¹¹ A balance of power of sorts prevailed, with conflict over control of the poppy trade looming over the insurgency. A British journalist who visited the province just ahead of the British forces warned that the major fight would be against the drug mafias, describing a scene where ‘at night the southern desert roars with the sound of high-speed convoys – Jeeps crammed with itchy-fingered gunmen and Class A narcotics – whizzing across the hardened sand.’¹²

The arrival of the British not only changed the local balance of power. Being British, they evoked Afghan memories of British invasions during the 19th century that made them particularly attractive targets to the militants. The embittered Anglo-British history had been cited by international diplomats at the Bonn conference as an argument against having the British lead the ISAF contingent in Kabul; now British forces were deployed in the region where they had fought (and been defeated by) Afghan forces in memorable and celebrated battles of the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880. The former Taliban leader Mullah Zaeef was not the only one who thought sending British forces to the south was a strategic mistake.¹³ Other Afghan analysts thought the same. ‘The British are known as a defeated force here. Now people think the British are here to take their revenge,’ Professor Wadir Safi at Kabul University said.¹⁴ A former Taliban official who had been reconciled with the Karzai government feared it would be counter-productive. ‘Every year we celebrate Afghan independence from British... In school history books and in tales, people are told of the bravery of empty-handed Afghans against the well-equipped British army. This can harm the counter-insurgency,’ Waheed Mujda told the international press.¹⁵ But no other US ally stepped forward, and the British deployed – perhaps in a spirit of imperial hubris, as Anatol Lieven later claimed.¹⁶

The initial deployment in 2006 was light – the Task Force had 3,100 troops, of which only 700 were infantry, and the rest support and logistics. Reflecting the prevailing ambiguity about what the mission was about, the Defence Secretary sent the troops off saying he hoped no shots would be fired, although he added that the mission was ‘complex and dangerous’.¹⁷ The plan was to concentrate the forces in a triangle around the provincial capital district, Lashkar Gah, which included Helmand’s major population and administrative centre as well as some of the most fertile areas of the province. From this ‘inkspot’ of security and development, the government’s authority would spread outward on the Helmand blotting paper. The plan, produced by a joint civil-military process in London in late 2005, was explicitly modelled on the Malayan counter-insurgency campaign of the 1950s and streamlined with NATO’s evolving ‘comprehensive approach’.

The troops were deployed in April 2006. By May the fighting had started. It soon turned into the most intense fighting involving British forces since the Korean War. Reinforcements of 1,500

¹¹ Cited in James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets. The Real Story of the British Army in Afghanistan* (London: Transworld, 2008). p. 209.

¹² Declan Walsh, ‘Welcome to Helmand,’ *Guardian Weekly*, 10-16 February 2006, p. 16.

¹³ Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, ed. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuhn (London Hurst&Co., 2010).

¹⁴ ‘Hopes and fears as NATO takes command in south Afghanistan,’ *Agence France-Presse*, 27 July 2006. Available on: <http://www.e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/allDocs/8EFCCF35E298F3A1872571B8003FC5CE?OpenDocument>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Anatol Lieven, ‘Insights From the Afghan Field,’ *Review Article. Current Intelligence* 6 September 2010. <http://www.currentintelligence.net/reviews/2010/9/6/insights-from-the-afghan-field.html>

¹⁷ Cited in Fergusson, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

troops were rushed in but casualties mounted and the entire British mission came close to collapse.¹⁸ During the summer months alone, 33 British soldiers were killed and more than 100 injured. The PRTs civilian development component barely got off the ground and was ‘severely, and continually, restricted by the security situation’.¹⁹ Quick Impact Projects that were started in lieu of more ambitious development plans also stalled as local contractors were intimidated or killed. To defend themselves, British troops called in ‘astonishing amounts of airborne ordnance, alienating the locals by destroying their homes and, sometimes, accidentally killing their children,’ as Fergusson’s close account of events notes, and the violence widened.²⁰

What sparked such ferocious fighting? For a start, the British were vulnerable. The Task Force Commander had dispersed his force in small outposts, including Sangin, Musa Qala, Kajaki and Now Zad in the remote northern corner of the province, rather than concentrating them in a triangle around the provincial capital as planned.²¹ Not surprisingly in view of the outcome, this ‘platoon house strategy’ caused much controversy and a blame game. According to the Task Force Commander, he merely responded to a request from the Helmand Governor; the Governor later denied this, claiming it was truly a joint decision.²² Whichever the case, the background facts are not in dispute. Insurgents had burned a clinic built by American soldiers, who had been in the area before the British arrived, and taken over a village in the upper Baghran valley. The Governor raised the issue with the Task Force Commander as soon as he arrived: would he send his troops to retake the village?²³ A couple of weeks later British troops were on their way to Sangin in the Baghran valley to extend the authority of the central government and, soon afterwards, to other district centres in the far northern part of the province as well.

Military analysts blame ‘political considerations’ that ‘forced the British to deviate from [the original plan] and establish platoon houses’, as Daniel Marston writes, citing pressure from both the Governor of Helmand and President Karzai.²⁴ A different analysis is offered by the sociologist Anthony King. Blaming the political context ‘falsely absolves commanders in theatre from responsibility, robbing them of the agency which they have clearly exercised,’ he writes.²⁵ The Commander acted in line with the operational autonomy traditionally accorded British field commanders, in this case reinforced by the ‘lack of strategic political guidance’ that enabled the Task Force Commander to depart from the initial plan.²⁶ The organizational culture of the military and institutional incentives ‘to act’ and demonstrate a ‘can-do’ attitude did the rest. When faced with requests to show the flag and deploy his newly arrived force, the commander – and certainly some of his men on the ground – seemed eager to get an opportunity to go and fight. This was what they had trained for and were sent to do, King argues.

Both perspectives overlook the more fundamental point that ISAF’s core mandate was to extend the central government’s authority, and therefore had a huge built-in potential for conflict. It may

¹⁸ Tom Coghlan et al., “Cut Off, Outnumbered and Short of Kit: How the Army Came Close to Collapse,” *The Times*, 9 June 2010.

¹⁹ Phil Sherwood, “Reconstruction and Development in Afghanistan: A Royal Engineer Regiment’s Experiences,” *RUSI Defence Systems* October (2007): 91.

²⁰ Fergusson, *op.cit.*, p. 207.

²¹ Farrell and Gordon, *op.cit.*

²² Coghlan (2009), p. 129.

²³ Leo Docherty, *Desert of Death. A Soldier’s Journey from Iraq to Afghanistan* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2007), 68. The author was the aide-de-camp to the Helmand-based Task Force Commander. He later resigned from the army in protest against the British engagement in Afghanistan.

²⁴ Daniel Marston, “British Operations in Helmand Afghanistan,” *Small Wars Journal* (2008): 2.

²⁵ Anthony King, “Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Afghanistan,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2010): 312.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

be questioned whether the initial provocation by Taliban (burning down a clinic) justified the immediate deployment of British troops – if, in fact, they were Taliban and not drug smugglers or just a rival faction challenging the new Governor – or whether a village of some 14,000 inhabitants in the remote Baghran valley was an important strategic goal. Sangin, where the trouble started, did have some strategic properties. The district was located on the crossroads of the opium trade and close to the huge Kajaki hydroelectric dam that the international forces later made great efforts to repair and guard. Either way, if the British troops were to provide ‘security assistance’ on behalf of the central government, it did not seem odd to insert forces in disputed areas to plant the flag of the government when requested by the provincial Governor who was appointed by Kabul. ‘Political considerations’ in this sense were at the heart of the mandate.

Whether the force was adequate for the mandate is another question. As it happened, the British forces were deployed in small and isolated outposts that were quickly surrounded by well-organized, courageous fighters, apparently instructed by trainers familiar with British military tactics.²⁷ The debacle led to requests for more troops to boost the contingent, but the insurgents adapted to the reinforcement by placing greater reliance on guerrilla tactics. A larger, initial British force might well have produced a similar response, and hence failed to gain the advantage necessary to create a sufficiently secure environment for the political and development components of the deployment to function as planned.

2.2. Deposing the Governor

Another challenge buried deep in ISAF’s mandate that the British met head-on in Helmand was managing the relationship with the local power holders. Tribal politics in the area had long and complex roots, shaped by issues over land (especially after some older khan families had been weakened during the Communist period), control over opium production and trade, and patterns of alliances and hostilities formed during previous conflicts – the *jihad* against the Soviets, its chaotic aftermath, and the Taliban regime that followed.²⁸ In the northern part of the province, a sub-tribe of the Alizai, the Akhundzada clan, had developed its power base for over three decades to achieve a dominant position but lost out to the Taliban. In exile in Pakistan, the Akhundzada had aligned with Karzai and were rewarded with the governorship of the province after 2001. The Governor, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada (called SMA by the British), did not rule by the dictates of narrow clan politics alone. While securing significant power for his own clan, he distributed important offices of police and internal security across tribal lines to ensure broad cooperation. Other factions were excluded – especially a rival sub-clan that had sided with the Taliban (Abdul Wahid) – but the system established by Sher Mohammed produced overall considerable order and stability. Sher Mohammed also maintained relations with the poppy industry. This had a short-term stabilizing effect as well, but turned out to be his undoing when US forces in late 2005 raided the Governor’s compound and found a large stash of opium.

The raid created considerable embarrassment for the British. Britain was the lead nation for counter-narcotics activities in Afghanistan, according to the division of labour established by the major donors in Geneva in 2002, and one task of the contingent dispatched to Helmand was to address the province’s burgeoning opium problem. The narcotics stain on Sher Mohammed’s reputation was therefore serious. Although in some respects he was more acceptable than other high officials of the post-Taliban order who had appalling human rights records, the British asked Karzai to remove him as Governor as a condition for deploying to Helmand,. Karzai complied, but

²⁷ Fergusson (2008).

²⁸ Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, "Tribes' and Warlordism in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005," (Crisis States Research Centre LSE, 2008). CSI, "Afghanistan: Helmand's Deadly Provincial Politics - Competition and Corruption " (Courage Services Inc. Produced for the US Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, 2008).

he was more conscious than the British of the dangers of alienating a powerful local clan. To sweeten the dismissal, he appointed Sher Mohammed to the Upper House of the Parliament, and his brother Amir Muhammad Akhundzada to the position of Deputy Governor. As befitted the member of a powerful family, Sher Mohammed placed key allies and relatives in other positions in the provincial administration.²⁹

His dismissal nevertheless disturbed the balance of power he had carefully erected and opened a new round of making and unmaking alliances. In the process, the Taliban came out stronger than before, and the British certainly had fewer friends. Combined with the platoon-house strategy, it made the British dangerously exposed. Karzai later said he warned them:

Before [the British came] we were fully in charge of Helmand....They came and said 'your governor is no good.' I said, 'all right, do we have a replacement for this governor? Do you have enough forces? Both the American and British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing and I made the mistake of listening to them. And when they came in, the Taleban came.'³⁰

While Karzai in 2008 had reasons to say 'I told you so', there is no reason to doubt that this consummate player of tribal politics saw the risks at the time. A British journalist, Tom Coghlan, who followed Helmand politics closely, came to a similar conclusion: 'While the control of the province by the former Jihadi leaders appears to have been often divisive and their control far from comprehensive, their abrupt removal in the absence of significant government or foreign forces to fill the void seems to have been a still larger error of judgment.'³¹

The deeper reasons for this error of judgment might lie in the interventionist zeal that marked the Blair government. Yet it was a risky move. When the decision to sack the Governor was made in late 2005, the British did not have a mission on the ground in Helmand and had little knowledge of local politics. The Task Force and the PRT that first arrived had no Pashto speakers, and only one fluent Dari speaker seconded from the Foreign Office. The British 'did not know friend from enemy,' a woman parliamentarian from the province later said.³² Much later British generals acknowledged the importance of understanding the nature of tribal politics and its relationship to the insurgency. Understanding why various groups made life difficult for British battle groups, General Nick Carter noted in 2010, 'will define a different strategy in terms of ...how you will defeat the problem, than if you simply labelled them as Taliban.'³³

Knowledge might have prevented errors of judgment but did not remove the basic dilemma posed by ISAF's mandate. The Akhundzada Governor was an ally of Karzai, and as such certainly an extension of the authority of the central government. But he was a poor instrument for implementing liberal internationalism, whether in its Blairite form or as generally expressed in the provisions of the Bonn Agreement. For this task the international forces needed counterparts in what Bertrand Badie has called 'importing elites' – local leaders committed to the reformist

²⁹ Kim Sengupta, "Sacked for 'Corruption and Drug-Dealing', but Warlord Seeks Return to Power in Helmand," *The Independent*, 9 October 2007.

³⁰ Cited in 'Helmand Ex-Governor Joins Karzai Blame Game,' *IWPR*, 3 March 2008.

³¹ Coghlan (2009), p. 128.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Nick Carter, "Briefing from Kandahar by Commander of Nato's Regional Command (South), Major General Nick Carter, 7 January 2010," (UK Ministry of Defense Afghanistan Briefing, 2010).

agenda.³⁴ Lacking such counterparts, the British brought in outsiders to perform the task, yet these were invariably weak, dependent on British support, and so unable to function effectively as an 'importing elite'. The result was a threefold power structure: the formal but weak new government appointee, the informal power structure controlled by the deposed, but still present, former Governor, and, when the insurgents flexed their muscles, a Taliban shadow governor on the provincial and district level.

The new Governor, Mohammed Daoud, fitted the bill nicely in terms of formal qualifications. He spoke impeccable English, had previously worked with the UN as a development expert and had an engineering degree. As a technocrat from outside Helmand, he had no local tribal ties. But that was also his weakness as a powerbroker. 'He has no personal militia, no private source of income, and no tribal links with village elders', a British source conceded.³⁵ His only coercive power derived from the newly arrived British Task Force, which he consequently requested should be placed throughout the province to extend the government's authority. Daoud lasted less than a year as Governor. His successor, Assadullah Wafa, was considered obstructionist and ineffective by the British and was replaced after two years. The next Governor, Mammed Gulab Mangal, was still in the post by mid-2011.

3. Path dependence: Escalation and deepening commitment

The circumstance of the initial deployment created a 'path dependence' of escalating involvement and deepening commitment. The immediate British reaction to the attacks on their exposed forces was to send more, on the grounds that 'the main reason why this [platoon house] strategy almost went so badly wrong was... a lack of manpower.'³⁶ The deployment steadily increased, from the initial 3,100 in 2006 to 6,500 the following year, and close to 10,000 in early 2010.³⁷ The military repeatedly asked for more troops to increase security and carry out their mission more effectively. The Task Force Commander in 2008 called for a doubling of his forces; the call came as the Taliban switched to new methods, particularly extensive use of IEDs, which caused high British casualties. Institutional interests were involved as well. A former British Ambassador to Afghanistan told the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons that the war in Afghanistan had given the army reasons to claim resources 'on an unprecedented scale' and to shield it from budget cuts. The head of the army was reported to be afraid that he would lose the battle group returning from Iraq in a future Defence Review unless it was deployed to Afghanistan. A supply-side strategy, said Ambassador Cowper-Coles.³⁸ Adding more troops to address the growing insurgency was also in line with the prevailing attitudes in NATO's leadership and the policy of the United States, as discussed above.

3.1. Negotiate to withdraw? Musa Qala

On the ground, the dynamic of deployment reinforced the logic of staying the course rather than pulling back. The dispersed British force was vulnerable, but withdrawal even as a tactical

³⁴ Bertrand Badie, *The Imported State: The Westernization of the Political Order, Mestizo Spaces* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³⁵ Jeremy Page, "It's Called Peace Support at Home. The Troops Here Know It Is a War," *The Sunday Times* 5 August 2006.

³⁶ Marston, *op.cit.*, p. 2 (html version).

³⁷ Farrell and Gordon, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

³⁸ Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Army Strategy in Helmand under fire from former top diplomat,' *The Guardian*, 13 January 2011. By this time Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles had resigned from the Foreign Office and publicly criticized the US actions in Afghanistan.

adjustment could be interpreted as a defeat. The first – and by early 2011 the only – attempt to negotiate withdrawal from a precarious outpost had ended badly, setting a negative precedent.

Musa Qala had been one of the districts chosen for British deployment soon after the Task Force arrived in April 2006. Fighting had earlier flared in Musa Qala district between Akhundzada's men and a rival faction belonging to Abdul Wahid, who had controlled the area under the Taliban but had retreated after 2001 to a neighbouring district. When Sher Mohammed was ousted, the Taliban sensed the opportunity of a comeback. They were reportedly welcomed by the population in the district centre, who resented the abusive practices of Sher Mohammed's police force, but the district authorities requested the British to send troops to restore the authority of the government.

The British arrived in May 2006 with a small unit later supported by Danish ISAF troops. The Taliban kept up the pressure, however, surrounding the district centre and making resupply difficult.³⁹ The garrison was repeatedly on the point of running out of water, food and ammunition. Several attempts to break the siege over the summer failed. An additional complication arose when the garrison suspected the local police chief of collaborating with the Taliban. The British-Danish leadership of the garrison dismissed the police chief and a new police force was brought in from the outside. As outsiders they did not have direct ties to the local conflict, which was a plus, but as non-Pashtuns dispatched into the Pashtun heartland by the central government's Ministry of Interior they were part of a much larger conflict. It was the same scene recreated four years later in Marjah, the nearby cluster of villages targeted by General McChrystal to receive a 'government in a box'.

The difficulties of holding Musa Qala had by September led the Task Force Commander and author of the platoon-house strategy, Brigadier Ed Butler, to favour unilateral withdrawal. In London, the army chiefs deferred to his judgment in line with the autonomy traditionally accorded the field commander. In Kabul, however, the British ISAF commander, General David Richards, was sceptical. A unilateral withdrawal could be a political and propaganda success for the Taliban and appear to the Afghans as another Maiwand, the disastrous defeat of the British in the second Anglo-Afghan war in neighbouring Kandahar. With only a handful of British survivors (along with the regimental dog, Bobby), that 1880 defeat (though Britain eventually won the war) carried great political-emotive significance among both Afghans and Britons. In Britain, the battle was memorialized in a poem by Kipling, and in Afghan folklore it was remembered as the scene where the young woman Malalai urged her Pashtun menfolk to resist the invaders.

In Musa Qala the impasse was solved by a proposal from the elders for a cease-fire and withdrawal of both Taliban and Western forces.⁴⁰ The town had suffered severe damage from the fighting, including allied air strikes that had destroyed the local mosque. The elders now proposed that the district centre (the town of Musa Qala) should be demilitarized and ruled by the *shura* of elders, who would oversee development assistance and fly the Afghan government flag. Negotiated in cooperation with Governor Daoud and British officers, the 14-point agreement enabled the British to leave the town without being attacked. In December 2006 they piled into gaily decorated Afghan trucks and were driven out of town while the Taliban quietly looked on.

For a short while, the Musa Qala agreement appeared as a model for local conflict management and a way to deal with the insurgency. Yet three months later, in January 2007, a US air strike

³⁹ Patrick Bishop, *3 Para* (London: Harper Collins, 2007).

⁴⁰ Background paper on Musa Qala, written by Aziz Hakimi for Astri Suhrke and et al., *Conciliatory Approaches to the Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2009).

targeted a Taliban commander who entered the town in an apparent violation of the cease-fire agreement. Although it is unclear whether the commander was inside or outside the town boundaries, the attack occurred the day after the American General Dan McNeil took over as ISAF commander from General Richards, and McNeil let it be known to Western reporters that he did not favour making deals with the Taliban.⁴¹ The air strike triggered a chain of events that wrecked the agreement. Forces loyal to the commander who had been killed entered the town in clear violation of the agreement. This was followed by more US air strikes, including one that killed a major Taliban leader. Taliban forces then stormed the town, executed some of the elders who had signed the agreement, hoisted the Taliban flag and established Taliban rule. Their regime in turn lasted only a few months. A force of some 4,000 US, British and Afghan forces, supported by heavy air and artillery power, retook the town in December 2007. A new district Governor was installed, this time an ally of Sher Mohammed and a former Talib who had repented.

To the British, the costs and the eventual futility of the Musa Qala solution left a bitter aftertaste. A well-known Pakistani journalist who visited Musa Qala in December 2006, well into the cease-fire period, reported that the 'first thing one notices in the village of Deh Zor in the Musa Qala district is bits of British army equipment hanging from trees.'⁴² Possibly, as the locals claimed, these were the remains of a convoy of British troops that had been sent to Musa Qala earlier to break the siege, but had been ambushed and hanged by Taliban fighters. Casualties on all sides were high. For both opponents and supporters – and there were Afghans and internationals on both sides of this issue – Musa Qala became emblematic of the difficulties of negotiating a local peace agreement. Above all it demonstrated that to endure, such agreements required firm support from the top of the NATO command as well as local restraint.

After Musa Qala, the British did not attempt similar initiatives. Staying the course now appeared the only alternative, only with stronger commitment and with a more comprehensive approach.

4. A more comprehensive approach

Soon after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, Prime Minister Tony Blair had formulated the British objectives in Afghanistan as defeating international terrorism, providing humanitarian assistance, and helping the Afghan people to create 'a better, more peaceful future, free from repression and dictatorship'.⁴³ Six years later, the Cabinet had redefined the list, which had now grown to six items: (i) reduce the insurgency on both sides of the Durand line, (ii) ensure that core Al Qaeda does not return to Afghanistan, (iii) ensure that Afghanistan remains a legitimate state, becomes more effective and able to handle its own security, and increase the pace of economic development, (iv) contain and reduce the drug trade, (v) provide long term sustainable support for the Afghan Compact goals [adopted at the London conference in 2006] on governance, rule of law, human rights and social/economic development, and (vi) keep allies engaged. For bureaucratic purposes, these objectives were translated into 'nine interdependent strands' according to function (security, politics & reconciliation, governance & rule of law, economic development & reconstruction, counter-narcotics), geographical areas (Helmand, regional engagement, international engagement) and, to keep it all together, 'strategic communication' to generate

⁴¹ The transfer of command was on 1 February 2007.

⁴² Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Rough Justice and Blooming Poppies," *Asia Times Online*, 7 December 2007. The reporter was later killed in Pakistan. His body with marks of torture was found on 31 May 2011. US officials reportedly had intelligence that implicated the Pakistan intelligence agency ISI in Shahzad's kidnapping and murder.

⁴³ Blair's statement to the Foreign Affairs Committee House of Commons on 4 October 2001, cited in House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Security: Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Eight Report, sess. 2008-09 para. 215. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmfaff/302/30209.htm#a44>

'public support for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan'. Reviewing this list in July 2009, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House noted a distinct 'mission creep'.⁴⁴

The expanded list reflected in part the growth of the international project itself, which conferred roles and responsibilities on the UK as one of its major sponsors. Internationally assisted national development strategies and plans for Afghanistan (ANDS) were part of an increasingly fine-masked net of goals and principles for the country's development that also entailed obligations on donors. Other donors and agencies involved in Afghanistan adopted similar policy agendas. But goal expansion also reflected lack of progress in the initial core mission of defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The House Foreign Affairs Committee approvingly cited the admonition of Paddy Ashdown, the former international High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina and who had been considered as a UN special envoy to Afghanistan: the government's 'answer to the fact that we are close to losing one war in Afghanistan is to fight lots more: a war against the Taliban; a war against drugs; a war against want; a war against Afghanistan's old traditional ways.'⁴⁵

To members of Parliament, this form of goal expansion made for confusion, lack of priorities and an impossible mission. In a classic counter-insurgency perspective, however, it made a great deal of sense. Since defeating the enemy means winning over the people, several wars had to be fought simultaneously. This had been the premise of the Joint UK Plan that framed the deployment to Helmand in April 2006. That strategy did not work, nor did tactical innovations that followed the abandonment of the platoon house strategy – fighting the Taliban was like 'mowing the grass', a British commander said.⁴⁶ To compensate, an even more comprehensive strategy was embraced.

The Helmand Road Map developed in 2007 was a more elaborate version of the 2005 plan and had a bottom-up approach. The two-year plan prioritized five geographical and district centres that the British still controlled (Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, Sangin, Garmser and Musa Qala) to launch a 'politically-led counterinsurgency campaign' structured around the nine interdependent strands.⁴⁷ The planners envisaged six to eight civilian advisers per strand per district, which meant that some forty specialists were required. The job-description was certainly demanding. According to one of the co-authors of the plan, the 'stabilisation and political advisors' would be deployed into forward areas, 'working with district authorities and local communities to build their trust in government and to sponsor the growth of community based structures with which formal government could link'.⁴⁸

By this time, the structure of the PRT had changed slightly with the formation of the Stabilisation Unit, a child of the interdepartmental agency established jointly by the FCO, the Ministry of Defence and DFID in 2007 to develop and apply an 'integrated approach in fragile and conflict affected states'.⁴⁹ In Helmand, the Stabilization Unit represented about half of the civilian experts in the PRT (around 30 in 2009). Their task was to promote local governance, the rule of law, 'stabilising outlying districts and countering the narcotics industry'.⁵⁰ The Stabilization Unit itself worked closely with the military, both in Helmand where members placed out in the districts

⁴⁴ Foreign Affairs Committee (2008-09), para. 221- 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 222.

⁴⁶ Theo Farrell, "Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand, 2006-2009," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 4 (2010).

⁴⁷ Peter Dahl Thruelsen, 'Counterinsurgency and a Comprehensive Approach: Helmand Province, Afghanistan,' *Small Wars Journal* (2008), p.7. <http://smallwarsjournal.com>

⁴⁸ Farrell and Gordon, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/about-us.html>

⁵⁰ <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/about-us/where-we-work/afghanistan.html>

coordinated closely with the military battle groups, and in the UK, where field exercises were held with the military twice a year to ‘develop common understanding of key issues’, facilitate planning and improve the effectiveness of joint operations.⁵¹ The PRT as a whole was led by a civilian (FCO), but the close cooperation with the military had watered down what previously had made the British-led PRTs the most civilian among the NATO missions of this kind in Afghanistan. About half of the team consisted of military personnel. Like all NATO PRTs, the team was multinational, with representation and strong funding from the United States, as well as representation from smaller countries in regional command southwest (Denmark and Estland).

The Helmand PRT found itself in an increasingly difficult situation. The worsening situation had led to task expansion in the civilian area of a kind that required very considerable trust, mobility, language skills and cultural knowledge – all of which were in short supply. Experts on Helmand were far and few between. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the parliament was told that even by mid-2009 there were no Pashto speakers among the Foreign Office and DFID staff in all of Afghanistan, and only two Pashto speakers in the army. At the same time, the worsening security situation limited the mobility of the civilians outside the base and increased their dependence – and thus also their proximity to – the military. By mid-2008, an independent analyst characterized the situation in the province as a whole as ‘characterised by uncertainty. Although progress has been made and a number of small- to large-scale reconstruction programmes have been implemented, the local population is still waiting to see which is the stronger and more determined party – the insurgents or the counterinsurgents.’⁵² In London, the government recognized the uncertainty by scaling back its plans. The Helmand Road Map of 2007 was followed in 2009 by a new plan, more modestly and simply called the Helmand Plan and covering only one year.

The counter-insurgency campaign had produced few results. The British controlled a few district centres, but these appeared as the classic garrison towns that General Richards had observed in 2006: ‘[W]ith British troops surrounded by the Taliban the moment they arrived in towns, the ink would not flow.’⁵³ In the northern area, the British sphere had shrunk altogether. In Musa Qala and Sangin the Americans had taken the lead after President Obama sent fresh American troops to the south. Even work on the prestige project of the Kajaki Dam had come to a standstill. In 2008 the British had taken the lead in the huge 2008 operation to haul a giant turbine up the Helmand River valley to the dam, the site of the hydroelectric power station serving Helmand and Kandahar. Some 2,000 British troops and an equal number of Afghan forces had protected the convoy. Yet work on installing it was put on hold owing to security conditions in the valley. With anti-government elements controlling the road and the countryside, all supplies had to be helicoptered in. The dam itself was protected by British Marines.

There were other measures of the fragility of the mission. On several occasions British soldiers were attacked by members of the Afghan police and the Afghan National Army, their ostensible allies and vital partners. In November 2009, an Afghan policeman in a team working with British soldiers turned and shot five of his mentors at a training base southwest of Lashkar Gah. In July the following year, an ANA soldier pointed his RPG towards the compound of his British colleagues just northeast of Lashkar Gah, killing three and wounding several. The incidents cut to the heart of the mission, further undermining the trust and cooperation which were essential if

⁵¹ <http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/about-us.html>

⁵² Thruelsen, *op.cit.* web-version.

⁵³ Cited in Foreign Affairs Committee (2008-09), para. 231.

the British were to work with Afghan forces to extend the authority of the central state and permit the British military to exit from its 21st century campaign in Afghanistan.

The pre-election military offensive produced an equally striking metric of defeat. In order to improve security before the presidential elections in 2009, the British had launched Operation Panther's Claw in an area around the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. It was the largest operation since the British arrival in the province three years earlier. More than 3,000 British, Danish, Estonian and Afghan forces supported by close air support were deployed to create a secure environment for an estimated 80,000 voters. After two months of fighting, in which some 2-300 insurgents and five coalition soldiers were killed, and large numbers of the local population fled their homes, the area was deemed safe for voting. As it turned out, the area was only safe enough for one polling station to open, where early returns showed around 150 votes were cast.⁵⁴

5. Conclusions

British policy towards Afghanistan after 2001 was marked by the ideological framework of liberal internationalism. National security objectives related to confronting international terrorism were informed by a broader understanding of the importance of a normative international order. In this order, a more just, prosperous, democratic and friendly Afghanistan had an obvious place. The greater balance at the outset between military, social and political objectives in British policy towards Afghanistan made the government a pioneer within NATO in developing a 'comprehensive' approach. Its institutional expression on the ground was the PRT developed for Helmand. The team had an overall balance between the military and civilian components (about half civilians, and civilian leadership), and the new Stabilization Unit within it was structurally integrated in its inter-agency ownership (FCO, DFID and MoD). As applied in Helmand, however, the approach was severely limited by the growing violence in the province. No sooner was the military Task Force deployed in April 2006 than the fighting broke out, and from then on the war escalated steadily. Adverse security considerations made the civilian component heavily dependent on the military and limited its freedom of movement. The results in terms of improved governance and development were modest. The days from Mazar when the first British PRT moved around freely and the military observers patrolled without flak jackets and helmets were definitely gone.

The deteriorating security situation was part of a larger strategic picture over which the British had little control, but the British strategy in Helmand was controversial on both accounts. Spreading out the forces made them vulnerable and invited attack, yet it was certainly in line with the expanded ISAF mandate to extend the authority of the central government throughout the country. Firing the Governor upset the local balance of power, further complicated the local conflict pattern, and earned the British a few more enemies. To deal with the deteriorating situation within the framework of NATO's 'comprehensive approach', the British ramped up their response. More troops were added and a more ambitious civilian development plan was rolled out. As Paddy Ashdown put it, the government's 'answer to the fact that we are close to losing one war in Afghanistan is to fight lots more: a war against the Taliban; a war against drugs; a war against want; a war against Afghanistan's old traditional ways.'⁵⁵ By the end of the decade, however, the strategy of adding 'more wars' had yielded inconclusive results.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey A. Dressler, 'Securing Helmand. Understanding and Responding to the Enemy' (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2009), pp. 34-8.

⁵⁵ Cited in House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committees Committee (2008-09), para. 222.

Faithful Ally

The UK Engagement in Afghanistan

The British government under Tony Blair was an early and major supporter of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The Royal Navy and Air Force participated in the first strikes against Afghanistan in October 2001 with Tomahawk missiles launched from British submarines striking at Al Qaeda and Taliban targets, as the Ministry of Defence points out on its website. Shortly afterwards, British commandos landed at Bagram airbase and a battle group of 1700 later joined the OEF. The British also led the first ISAF contingent in Kabul, they were the first to take over one of the

American PRTs that had been established to manage the expected transition from combat to stabilization – the PRT in Mazar in July 2003 – and they were among the first of Washington’s allies to again contribute a major combat unit against the insurgency by deploying a Task Force to Helmand in April 2006.

This paper is part of a series that examines the strategies of four NATO members in Afghanistan: The US, the UK, Germany and Norway. Each case study first contextualises their Afghanistan engagement in light of the broader foreign policy concerns of the country concerned, and then focuses on the development and adjustment of military strategy in relation to other components of the engagement. In this respect, special attention is given to the importance of realities on the ground in Afghanistan, organisational (NATO) interests, and domestic factors.