

## Clash of Revelations: ISAF Nations Struggle to Sell the Integrated Approach on the Home Front

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“Talk to them, they are ours.” In *Morad Khan Kalay*, in Afghanistan’s troubled southern *Zabul* province, a local *Pashtun* leader leaves no doubt about the role the Taliban should play in a future Afghanistan. However cruel the movement’s leadership has been during its reign and despite the fact that it continues to terrorize the local population, the Taliban are and will be a part of Afghanistan’s new beginning. To the ordinary Afghan, the Taliban are not that different from the old warlords and drug barons, who have become democratically elected leaders. The international military presence is slowly realizing that there can be no clear-cut military operation to fix this problem in the short run.

In fact, the tone has changed since the invasion and the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001. ISAF<sup>1</sup> commanders are keen to highlight that the Taliban should not be seen as a homogeneous movement, and that coalition troops are working hard to target selected key figures in order to eliminate their command structures. In other words: winning the peace by winning the war against the Taliban.

However, daily reality is somewhat less differentiated. In 2007, “thousands of Taliban” were killed by international troops, aided by the freshly trained Afghan army or police. NATO troops are tempted to portray these strikes as significant victories in the war on terror, and as a critical step towards Afghanistan’s stabilization and normalization. According to General McNeil, the current commander of ISAF, there has been “significant tactical progress.”<sup>2</sup> Some NATO member states have proposed using the numbers of Taliban killed as a critical measure of the Coalition’s success.

However, for those who travel to Afghanistan, it is painfully clear that the Taliban are far from being put “back in the box.” The security situation

<sup>1</sup> International Security Assistance Force.

<sup>2</sup> General McNeil (Commander of ISAF), in discussion with the author, Kabul, October 2007.

in Afghanistan is deteriorating, extremism is spreading beyond the *Pash툼* tribal belt to the major towns, the narco-economy is booming, and the population is struggling to survive without seeing tangible improvements in their daily lives. Public confidence in the government and its leaders is low, particularly at the local level, owing to corruption and weak or non-existent governance. The Taliban are filling the vacuum. According to the Senlis Council, the Taliban insurgency now controls vast swaths of unchallenged territory in rural areas, border areas, some district centers, and important road arteries. Military convoys are only able to operate in the surroundings of towns and military bases, and humanitarian aid is functionally nonexistent. Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps have sprung up in and around Kandahar since the summer of 2006, some of which are controlled by the Taliban.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of Taliban killed have not been leaders or Taliban operatives related to Al-Qaida, but so-called "third or fourth tier" Taliban.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they are local Taliban, some of which have been indoctrinated in religious schools (*madrasahs*) in neighboring Pakistan. This may become a major headache for the multinational peace operation in Afghanistan, if not today, then certainly tomorrow. NATO is breeding a new style of opposition to their presence based on revenge, which is a question of honor for many *Pash툼s*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it creates a public Afghan perception of Western indiscrimination towards Afghan citizenry. These kind of civilian casualties—be they Taliban fighters or not—merely serve to nurture a feeling well-known to the local population: external powers mingling in their affairs without genuine commitment to their needs, and even less understanding of the long violent history of the central Asian country.

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A different kind of field trip takes us some eight hours west, to the Netherlands. During a lengthy parliamentary debate, a Member of Parliament cynically remarked that a few safe inkblots were little to show for hundreds of millions of euros and Dutch soldiers' lives spent. Another pleaded with the

Government to convince him that "our boys" are not dying in vain, and that what we are doing in Uruzgan is worth it.<sup>6</sup> The Minister of Development Cooperation tried his best to argue that reconstruction—what this is all about—is progressing well, and that hospitals and schools are being built and girls are getting educated.

Some of these statements may have been of a highly rhetoric nature. However, they reflect a broader trend in countries engaging in peace or stability operations. The domestic context is the ultimate reference point for policymakers to consider sending soldiers abroad. In many countries this has long been the case. However, the speed of information to and from the area of operations has changed the dynamics between what happens on the ground and how politics can decide on troop contributions to large-scale missions. The 21st century peace operation is a multi-media spectacle, which cannot escape the need to take thorough account of what is politically feasible given the current public perception at home.

Therefore, a field visit to the capital of a troop-contributing nation may be as enlightening as a trip to Afghanistan itself. "We have dealt a blow to the Taliban in Chora, which gives us more room to do reconstruction." Similar statements are made in national newspapers, particularly where NATO coalition partners need public (and therefore taxpayers') support. "We are here to make the Taliban irrelevant, not to kill them."<sup>7</sup> Officials from contributing nations tend to portray ISAF as a reconstruction mission, mainly supporting the work of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). As fighting continues and international (as well as national) news agencies have been covering fighting scenes where possible, the reconstruction image of ISAF has come under enormous pressure. Fierce Afghan-inspired resistance to peace-loving, school-building soldiers was unexpected.

In various ISAF nations, these kinds of revelations have led to an increasingly critical public. The Chief of the Dutch Armed Forces recently lamented that casualties and fighting make it to the news easier than successful reconstruction projects, which gives the Dutch populace the wrong impression of the character of the mission.<sup>8</sup> Questions have been asked as to whether ISAF can and should deal with the Taliban, and if so, how—or is the mandate strictly aimed at reconstruction? While on paper this may be clear cut, the average taxpayer is still convinced that the "boys" are out there to rebuild what no Afghan generation can remember: peace-time government institutions that

<sup>6</sup> Hans van Baalen, Liberal Party (VVD).

<sup>7</sup> Colonel Hans Griensven, quoted in *New York Times*, 12 April 2007.

<sup>8</sup> General Dick Berlijn, quoted in *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 January 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Senlis Council, *Recommendations to the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan*, 1 December 2007, 1.

<sup>4</sup> General McNeil responding to a question during a meeting in Kabul, October 2007.

<sup>5</sup> This is confirmed by findings of the 'Centre for Peace Studies' in Kabul that investigated why people join the Taliban. In addition to compulsion and economic gain, it appears that local 'men of fighting age' join the Taliban to take revenge against the international community. Killing Taliban in great numbers may therefore be counter-productive. <http://www.cps.nl>

more integrated strategy to assist Afghanistan in what is one of the most challenging state-building exercises of modern history. According to the Special Representative of the United Nations in Afghanistan, progress at this key moment depends on the international community and the Government of Afghanistan better coordinating their efforts to defeat the insurgency, promote good governance and provide tangible improvement to the lives of Afghans.<sup>10</sup> This requires a radical shift in thinking and a comprehensive strategic plan for Afghanistan that includes military and non-military actors in a common quest for peace.

How far can a multinational military alliance go in terms of fostering an integrated approach? There have been various attempts, particularly by NATO and military actors, to work in a more integrated manner.<sup>11</sup> However, good intentions notwithstanding, this has not resulted in a more comprehensive approach. The main challenge is that civilian actors appear less thrilled about a comprehensive approach which they tend to view as a military pre-occupation rather than something that is crucial to their efforts in (post-) conflict environments. Some non-governmental organizations see military operations as an impediment to their work and refuse, for example, to work in areas of southern Afghanistan where NATO are deployed.<sup>12</sup> Others are apprehensive about perceived attempts by the military to make development efforts subservient to a counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>13</sup> They reject the notion that NATO is there to help the military "get the job done."

If NATO's ambition is to be a global security player, Afghanistan is its chance to get it right. Six years after toppling the Taliban regime, the situation in Afghanistan is at a tipping point. Either the country stabilizes or it again falls prey to Islamic extremism. Afghanistan has the potential to create more, rather than less, understanding between the various disciplines and actors involved in international stability and peace operations. However, it needs a well-maintained balance between operational realities on the ground and public perception at home. This new battlefield is set to become more

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, *Report to the UN Security Council, S/2007/152*, September 2007.

<sup>11</sup> For example, PRIs, originally a poor-man's concept, are now heralded by some as the new model of a comprehensive approach to post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, W. van de Put, "No Safety without Rehabilitation," HealthNet TPO, <http://www.healthnet.org>.

<sup>13</sup> Assertions that there is little difference between counterinsurgency and a comprehensive approach, as the former is not only "a blunt military effort that focuses solely on killing high value targets," raise concerns in the NGO community. Amb. E. Edelman, *A Comprehensive Approach to Modern Insurgency: Afghanistan and Beyond*, 27 March 2007.

ensure human security for the Afghan population. A combination of necessary might, with urgently needed humanitarian and diplomatic efforts over a long period of time is not the easiest to sell in a parliamentary democracy.

Whether one cares to look at the ISAF operation from an Afghan or a troop-contributing national perspective, it is not the military situation that causes concern to most analysts. Militarily, ISAF is superior to the Taliban. However, even if NATO were to gain ground on the Taliban, it is the lack of national security capacity, the fragile social fabric of a war-torn country, and the absence of local governance structures, that pose a threat to normalcy. According to the Deputy Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Asif Rahimi, the Taliban are filling a gap in the South created by a weak government rather than by a strong insurgency. Polls among the Afghan population in the tribal southern belt have revealed that absence and poor quality of government institutions (i.e. corruption) was their prime security concern; the Taliban ranked either second or third.

The question is whether there is enough political commitment to put the necessary resources into diplomatic and economic efforts, in order to create real stability and tangible peace dividends for the population. There is a lively debate about how different non-military actors can, should, and must be strengthened in order to get Afghanistan's state-building effort under way. While different in many aspects, everyone seems to agree that the Afghan government must be in the driver's seat. First, this entails putting serious effort into reaching out to the entire Afghan citizenry and making clear that you are here to stay. Second, it takes the courage and determination to open dialogue with the Taliban. A genuine commitment to an inclusive political process is the key to stability in Afghanistan. Negotiating with the Taliban is not the prerogative of the international community; it is up to the Afghan authorities to talk to the Taliban, as the intricacies of tribal relations are too complex and the stakes too high. The international community could, though, discreetly encourage the process and play a role in facilitating such a dialogue. Coalition troops have a critical role to play in strengthening the authority of the Government of Afghanistan in this process.<sup>9</sup> Encouraging negotiations with the Taliban should be part of a comprehensive approach and an exit strategy of foreign troops.

To achieve stability in Afghanistan—not to speak of development or democracy—military and non-military efforts must be combined into a

<sup>9</sup> See also C. Meindersma, 'Four-Point plan to win the peace in Afghanistan' in *Europe's*

complicated to deal with as integrated mission concepts mature. The adagium of von Clausewitz that one can win the battle, but without the support of the population, one will lose the war, is as much applicable to the population of the country where the intervention takes place as to the population of the home country. The Taliban realize and exploit this fact.

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