

**International Security Monthly Briefing – June 2010**

## **AFGHAN OPTIONS**

Paul Rogers

### **Introduction**

Barely a month after the UK election, the incoming Prime Minister, David Cameron, visited British troops stationed in Helmand Province in Afghanistan. Four aspects of the visit were indicative of the situation facing British and other NATO forces there. One was that Cameron was able to offer vigorous support for the British troops, knowing that this would be popular within the UK. While the war may be controversial across large swathes of the population, public support for the troops, as distinct from the war, remains high.

This was the positive element but the other aspects were most certainly not. In the week before he was there, 26 NATO soldiers were killed and scores injured in a series of attacks. Even Mr Cameron's visit was affected by the levels of violence as his planned visit to a forward operating base was cancelled after his helicopter was already airborne following receipt of intelligence that the base would be subject to a Taliban attack. This incident supported the view that paramilitaries have extensive intelligence of forthcoming coalition operations. It followed a rocket attack on a major Jirga meeting in Afghanistan a week earlier, which was undertaken in spite of around 12,000 security forces being assembled to guard the Jirga.

The final aspect was that Mr Cameron announced that the British Army planned to double the numbers of specialist bomb disposal personnel to be deployed in Afghanistan. This was in response to sustained loss of life and serious injuries to UK troops caused by improvised explosive devices, especially in their main areas of operation in the northern part of Helmand Province.

### **A chance of progress**

Mr Cameron's visit demonstrated the significance of the ongoing war in Afghanistan for the incoming government and it is appropriate to review the current situation and assess the prospects for the coming months. This is in the context of earlier briefings in this series, especially those in March and April of the current year. The March briefing (*A Hint of Victory?*), in particular, analysed the view that was being promoted in Washington at that time, that there were clear signs of progress with the war in the Afghanistan. Attacks by armed drones in Afghanistan and especially western Pakistan were reported to be killing significant numbers of the middle-ranking leadership of the al-Qaida and Taliban movements, and the substantial increase in US troop deployments in southern Afghanistan was enabling the military leadership to start major operations that had been beyond its capabilities previously. The most important of these was Operation Moshtarak in central Helmand Province which was expected to expel Taliban forces and replace them with governance by the Karzai administration.

There was confidence that the operation would be a success and, more importantly, that it would be a prelude to a very much larger and sustained military operation that would aim to eliminate, or at least greatly diminish, Taliban influence in the city of Kandahar. The city, which is the administrative centre of the province of the same name, has long been regarded as the most important centre for the insurgency in the whole of Afghanistan. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, was based in the city as the Taliban rose to power in the 1990s, and the US military leadership believes that taking full control of Kandahar city and the surrounding districts will make it far more likely that a process of negotiations with some Taliban leaders will be possible.

The context of this is the underlying theme of the Obama administration's policy in Afghanistan – increase the force levels to 100,000+ US troops during 2010, make substantial military progress and

negotiate with a weakened enemy from a position of strength. After this, begin a progressive withdrawal during 2011 so that the end will be in sight for major military operations in Afghanistan by early 2012, just as the Presidential Election campaign gets fully under way.

By mid-June the majority of the additional US troops had arrived in Afghanistan and were expanding operations, providing an opportunity to assess progress to date, especially as Operation Moshtarak around the town of Marjah in central Helmand started in mid-February and has therefore been under way for five months.

### **The Impact of Moshtarak**

The initial impact of the securing of Marjah and the surrounding area by the end of March appeared positive, as evidence emerged of Taliban paramilitaries withdrawing. Within a few weeks, though, this proved illusory. In particular, it became clear that many of the Taliban were very much embedded in the local population, forming part of that very population. They were not just “outsiders” who had moved in to take control - even if some were from other districts, many were local people.

One way in which this was demonstrated was a report from a local police chief that Taliban elements were even getting compensation from US Marines for relatives killed or property damaged (ORG April briefing “Progress in Part”). As part of their policy of reaching out to local communities after a period of fighting, the Marines were offering monetary support to those most affected, but it was not always possible for them to distinguish Taliban supporters from others, and the police source reported numerous cases of Taliban elements gaining compensation, even to the extent of it then being used to buy munitions.

More generally, after a lull in the fighting after the US troops moved in, fire-fights with paramilitaries now occur on a daily basis, with more US troops being killed in the past month than in the first month of the campaign. What appears to have happened is that the very heavy troop concentrations employed in that first month did indeed enable the US forces to take control of the district, but many of the insurgents either went quiet within their own villages or else moved temporarily away to neighbouring districts where there was a minimal foreign presence.

Furthermore, Operation Moshtarak took place a few weeks before the start of the opium poppy harvest, a key source of income in Helmand province. There has been a pattern in previous years of a short dip in Taliban activity at this time of year as many of the young men take part in the lucrative poppy harvest, and this year has been no exception. In spite of the level of the foreign troop presence in the province, there has been relatively little impact on opium production – about 80% of the crop has been harvested. Yields have been lower but any resultant shortage tends to mean an increase in price, with little impact on net revenues. In any case, the harvest is now complete, increasing the numbers of young men engaged in combat.

At the same time, it is fair to say that the US Marines have worked closely with other agencies and the Afghan government to consolidate the gains made in the initial military operation. Some markets and schools have re-opened, clinics have been built and there has been some evidence of greater governmental administration. Even so, this has been substantially undermined by the increase in Taliban activity in May and early June, an increase exacerbated by the widespread use of intimidation and violence against those seen as collaborating with US forces. Although it is very early to be drawing longer-term conclusions, there is a view now held by some key US military analysts that the pervasive insecurity is making it difficult, if not impossible, to consolidate the early military gains into a stable security environment that allows for wider progress. This is not a good result, given that Operation Moshtarak was seen as the start of a much wider process of curtailing the Taliban movement in Afghanistan.

### Consequences for Kandahar

The US military leadership in Afghanistan made it clear some three months ago that the latter part of 2010 would see the largest military operation since the end of 2001, as US and other coalition forces embarked on the process of taking control of Kandahar. This, though, was to be a very different operation to that undertaken around Marjah. For a start, it would involve sustained security operations over several months rather than an intensive short-term thrust to take control followed by consolidation.

Furthermore, US troops would rarely be involved in the centre of the city because of the risk of increasing the opposition. Instead, US forces would control the periphery thereby limiting paramilitary access, and would also engage in Special Forces operations – “night raids” – against suspected insurgents in their houses and compounds in and near the city. Major operations and an enduring military presence in the city itself would be largely undertaken by Afghan forces. Over a number of months it would be expected that Taliban influence in Kandahar would go into irreversible decline. Given the importance of the city for the Taliban, this would affect their standing across the country as a whole, making negotiations with some of the leaders more feasible. In a very real sense, success in Kandahar in the second half of 2010 would ensure that President Obama’s overall Afghan policy in the context of the 2012 Presidential Election was on track.

This was the situation three months ago, but the problems that have arisen in and around Marjah are already having an impact on the planned Kandahar operation, the main result being an expectation that the operation will be far slower than expected, quite possibly going through into 2011. Moreover, the Taliban have themselves adapted to the substantial increase in foreign forces by developing particular tactics as they prepare to counter the Kandahar operation.

### Taliban Tactics

The main changes in the Taliban operations relate to the more extensive use of IEDs, more concentrated opposition to the dispersed forward operating bases around Kandahar City, and much more intensive use of intimidation of actual or potential collaborators.

The increased use of IEDs and direct attacks on ISAF units are greatly aided by seasonal factors. In many of the fertile valleys in Kandahar Province, the summer months are marked by the lush growth of grape vines, fruit trees, vegetables and marijuana. For more than three months, these provide good cover for insurgents, especially as they have detailed knowledge of the terrain in which they are operating. It is easier to set up roadside and path-side bombs, to ambush patrols and even to use rocket propelled grenades, mortars and small arms against forward operating bases. By these means the Taliban divert US resources away from the main task of securing the periphery of Kandahar City.

Beyond this comes the extensive use of intimidation and assassination, which has increased hugely in recent weeks. One of the worst examples, early in June, was a bomb attack on a wedding near Kandahar where many of the party had links with anti-Taliban militias. Fifty people were killed and 87 were injured. Other attacks have been directed at police and security patrols, as well as senior officials such as the Deputy Mayor of Kandahar, Hajji Azizmullah Yarmal, who was killed two months ago.

There has also recently been a significant change in the nature of the attacks, with increased numbers directed against relatively low-level officials such as agricultural officers, relatives of politicians or Afghans employed by international aid groups. The reasoning behind this is two-fold. One is that most of the more senior officials are well-protected by bodyguards, whereas more junior officials are not, and therefore present easier targets for murder. The other is that attacking people lower down the scale of influence has a deterrent effect, persuading other people against even providing any kind of help to the authorities, even at times of very limited employment opportunities.

## Prospects

The official NATO line is that there may be substantial problems but that Afghanistan is more or less on track for a steady move towards stability over the next two years, leading to a progressive troop withdrawal. Many other assessments point to a very different picture of a coalition that is increasingly mired in an intractable insurgency. Much of what will happen will revolve around the experience in and around Kandahar, and the former US commander in the region, General Stanley McChrystal, made it clear that the operation may not be over by the end of the year, even though the bottom line for the Obama administration is to see evidence of substantial progress by then.

Since such progress now seems unlikely, the administration will have to decide early next year to begin a withdrawal from Afghanistan, even if that leaves Taliban elements with the prospect of a considerable role in governance. This is an outcome that would be well received in Islamabad, if not in New Delhi, and it would be of real concern in Washington, even if domestic realities forced acceptance of the unacceptable.

In all of this, though, one other factor is likely to intervene. This is the recent report of the discovery of very large mineral reserves in many part of Afghanistan. It was already noted for copper reserves, with China developing the Aynak mine in Logar Province, but other reserves include iron, cobalt, gold and lithium, the latter being a critically important metal because of its role in batteries. The reserves are reported to be worth many hundreds of billions of dollars and while development would be spread over decades, they make the country strategically important and likely to be of great interest to the United States as much as China. News of these reserves was released from the Pentagon and may reflect the need of the US military to prop up domestic support for the war.

This certainly presents the Obama administration with a singular dilemma. If it does plan to start a substantial military withdrawal next year, whatever the state of the war, it may be criticised for giving up on a country that may be of huge significance in the coming decades, just as rivalry with the new industrial giant of China comes to the fore. It is an unexpected and difficult situation facing a President who is still struggling to escape from the toxic legacy of the Bush administration. It is currently made worse by the sacking of General McChrystal, but that will be largely forgotten in a few weeks, whereas the wider predicament will still be with us in months if not years to come.

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Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His International Security Monthly Briefings are available from the ORG website at [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk), where visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.

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