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Afghanistan

A victory, but little to cheer

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Afghanistan's bleak north-south divide

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THE confrontation probably marked the end the current fighting season. As some 5,000 NATO and Afghan soldiers last week massed around Musa Qala, a town in southern Afghanistan's troubled Helmand province, its Taliban defenders held on for four days before their resistance melted. The local fighters then slipped away into nearby hills, making the unconvincing claim that their retreat was out of concern for the safety of the civilian population.

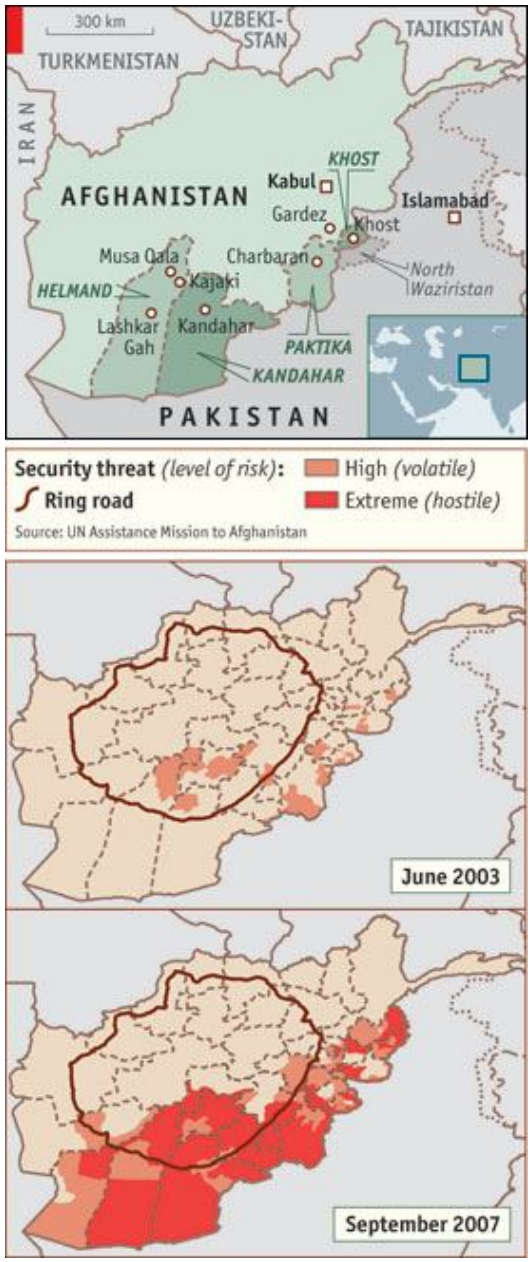
The recapture of a town that was previously controlled by Western troops is welcome, but it represents a limited triumph for the outsiders as winter freezes much of the country quiet. The year has seen neither the Taliban nor outside troops gain telling advantage. NATO has won all the battles and has managed to preserve the support of most Afghans: if opinion polls can be believed Afghans still support an international military presence in their country (one published by the BBC this month suggested that 71% of Afghans want American forces to stay). Yet overall levels of Taliban violence continue to rise across southern and eastern Afghanistan. Worse, they have spread significantly into the border areas of Pakistan.

Across southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban effort is focused, the upward trend of violence coincides with continuing weakness and problems of legitimacy for the government. In practice this means the uneven development of Afghanistan's own security forces, startlingly high levels of narcotics production and corruption (the latter fuelled by the drugs industry), and a general malaise in the legitimate economy in the region.

Elsewhere matters are more complex. In the north, and in some provinces along the eastern border patrolled by the Americans, security has improved. The northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif is enjoying an economic boom. The warlords who once dominated the north are now somewhat diminished figures, and many have turned away from brute force to profit instead from business or politics (albeit of a

dubious hue). And in the north opium cultivation is also down, although many farmers have simply planted cannabis instead of poppy.

But the rough division between north and south looks more stark now. The south continues to move steadily in the wrong direction. Instability has spread to a number of previously benign provinces. Some countries, especially European ones that have contributed to NATO's forces, are unenthusiastic about the shooting war they find themselves involved in. After a summer of repeatedly retaking the same two districts of Kandahar province, the Canadian commander, Brigadier-General Guy Laroche, commented: "Everything we have done in that regard is not a waste of time, but close to it".



There are signs, too, that as the insurgency meshes itself tightly with the drugs trade, a sizeable proportion of the population may feel it has a vested interest in prolonged insecurity which allows narcotics production to flourish.

The winter is at least a moment to pause and reflect on strategy for next year. At Musa Qala, NATO and Afghan forces easily defeated the Taliban but as diplomats in Kabul, the capital, concede, a far greater challenge is then defending against reinfiltration. Securing territory means getting the support of local

people. In Helmand, for example, this requires teams of anthropologists and political officers to deal with a mosaic of tribal interest groups, an approach used by American forces elsewhere in the country. That means a greater emphasis on reconciliation and negotiation with local Taliban leaders, as well as training Afghan forces so they are able to take the lead in military operations.

Politically the challenges are no easier. The Afghan public, particularly in the south, is gloomy about the future. Dismay over corruption and wrangling between different ethnic groups suggest that Afghan leaders, such as President Hamid Karzai, will need substantial support from outsiders for a long time yet. America is backing the idea of sending a “super envoy” to co-ordinate international efforts in Afghanistan. But the government remains unable even to reach out across areas of the south. Where it cannot reach there may need to be more controversial “tribal solutions”, such as village militias to provide local security and efforts to empower tribal elders and local systems of justice.