

Afghanistan

Policing a whirlwind

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As foreign troops become more efficient, government is still the problem

Pfc

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THEY came on foot, by lorry and by helicopter to the great tents at the junction of two dry river beds at Charbaran. Bearded men whirled rapturously to the sound of a drumbeat, kicking up a cloud of fine dust over the American soldiers around them.

This *shura*, or tribal council, was the culmination of Operation Attal, designed to clear the Taliban from three districts in Paktika, a troubled province bordering Pakistan. Three months earlier Charbaran's district centre—a government office-cum-police station—had been torched by the Taliban and the area was said to be a training ground for the insurgents. Now it has been rebuilt with stout sandbagged fortifications and artillery for protection.

In a bloody year that has seen more Western soldiers killed than at any time since they toppled the Taliban in 2001, Operation Attal, which lasted three weeks, was uneventful. Hardly a shot was fired as the Taliban melted away before thousands of Afghan and American soldiers. But for the Americans success these days is measured less by the number of Taliban killed, and more by the number of Afghans who overcome their loyalty to the Taliban, or fear of them, to attend such a meeting. The Americans had been hoping for 200 guests; about 1,500 people came. It was billed as an Afghan reconciliation between local tribes and the central government. The choreography, however, was all American: American soldiers rebuilt the district centre, erected the tents, bulldozed new roads, brought the dignitaries by helicopter and even supplied a portrait of President Hamid Karzai.

One elder complained about the broken promises of development, and about the Americans surrounding them with armoured Humvees and roaring jets. He also wanted to get the tribe's confiscated weapons back. The 36-year-old governor, Akram Khapalwak, was having none of it. He demanded to know why the area's Kharoti tribe had allowed the destruction of the district centre and the theft of government vehicles. What was the point in building schools when teachers were being intimidated? He said \$1m had been given to the Kharoti for schools, clinics and water projects, but there was little to show for it. "You thieves," said the governor.

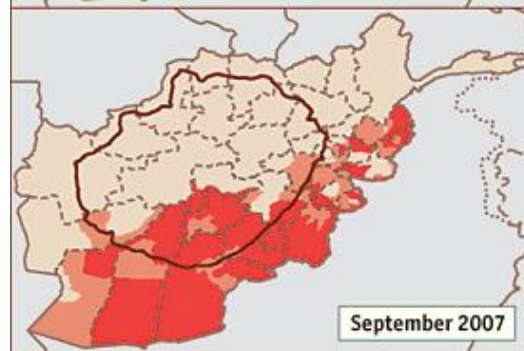
The recriminations over, lunch was served. The elders later agreed to provide 30 of their sons for the Afghan police force: a hopeful sign that the tribesmen were coming over to the government's side.

Operation Attal was remarkable for another reason. It was the first big operation planned and executed by the Afghan National Army, with more than 5,000 Afghan soldiers supported by about 400 Americans from the 1-503rd airborne infantry regiment. In the operations centre near Gardez, American officers sat in the second row, behind Afghan staff officers.

It was Afghan forces who searched homes while the Americans covered their backs. And behind the front-line troops followed lorry-loads of humanitarian supplies. The Americans delivered carpets and sound systems for the mosques; Korans, food, clothes and blankets against the onset of winter; hand-cranked radios to hear government broadcasts; doctors and veterinary surgeons. None of this is guaranteed to win support, but it helps.



Security threat (level of risk): ■ High (volatile) ■ Extreme (hostile)
 Ring road
 Source: UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan



American soldiers are still involved in a lot of shooting, particularly along the border with Pakistan. Indeed, across the country, violence has inexorably got worse. This year has seen a record number of suicide-bombings as well as a 20% increase in Taliban attacks, according to the United Nations. The insurgency has spread from the badlands along the frontier with Pakistan to much of the country's Pushtu-speaking belt, the Taliban's support base. Kabul is a regular target. Although far more American soldiers have been killed in Iraq, many more bombs fall in Afghanistan.

The Taliban can bomb, ambush and intimidate, but cannot conquer territory held by Western forces. The question is whether they can drain NATO's will to stay on. As one senior Western diplomat admits: "Failure is an option."

Non-kinetic energy

The mistakes of the past six years of fighting in Afghanistan—principally the Americans' decision to have only a "light footprint" and the costly diversion into Iraq—have changed the mindset of American military commanders. They now regard "kinetic" actions (ie, fighting) as a distraction, a preliminary

“shaping” operation at best. “The decisive operation is non-kinetic,” says Colonel Martin Schweitzer, commander of Task Force Fury, responsible for six south-eastern provinces. His focus is training Afghan forces, building roads, schools and clinics and, above all, getting the government to “start addressing the needs of the people”.

He has schooled himself in the ways of Pushtunwali, the Pushtun tribal code of honour, and has its main tenets on his wall. Next door to his office, a group of anthropologists and sociologists known as the “human-terrain team” provides him with valuable intelligence, not on the enemy but on the society in which they mingle. Colonel Schweitzer says what he needs is not more troops but more “non-uniformed instruments of power: diplomatic, information and economic”, especially agronomists and water engineers.

The colonel reckons that of the 92 districts in his area, the number rejecting the Taliban has grown from 19 to 58 in less than a year. The change is palpable around his own headquarters at Forward Operating Base Salerno, outside the city of Khost. Until last year it used to be attacked so often that soldiers called it “Rocket City”. No longer. Rockets are now a rarity, wild potshots fired from Pakistan. Khost's progress against the tide of violence is heartening, especially since it lies across the frontier from North Waziristan, the main haven for the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

The Americans say the success is all due to the governor, Arsalala Jamal. “He is phenomenal. The governor is the centrepiece. We take directives from him,” says Lieutenant-Colonel Scott Custer (descended from George Armstrong Custer, the cavalry officer who lost the battle of Little Bighorn) of the 2-321st Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, in charge of Khost. The name of his strategy says it all: “Protect the Quarterback” (a reference to the vital playmaker in American football who needs shielding by his team). It involves creating concentric circles of security around Khost of Afghan police and army, with the Americans on the outer ring.

With better security, and with the funds provided by the American army, Governor Jamal is able to show progress. “The whole game is about confidence-building,” he says. “I will never change the minds of the bad guys, and the good guys will stay with me. Better security builds the confidence of people in the middle.”

The Taliban hate him as much as the Americans love him. Suicide-bombers have tried to kill him at least four times since he was appointed as governor last year. One of his would-be killers was a 14-year-old boy from Pakistan who was captured and pardoned.

Judging from American intelligence intercepts, the Taliban seem rattled. “There is a big problem now,” one Talib is heard to say. “Half [of the people] are with us and the other half are against us.” Another wrestles with self-doubt: “I hope God directs me in the right path. I am not sure if I should do this against my own Afghans. There is no point in fighting. Who is the enemy here? We don't have an enemy.”

Senior British officers, who until recently regarded themselves as experts in counter-insurgency, marvel at the speed with which the American army is learning imperial policing. “It is a case of the son surpassing the father,” says one British officer. Similar changes are taking place in the British-controlled province of Helmand. Afghan troops have been at the fore of a joint operation with British and American forces that retook Musa Qala, the only sizeable town controlled by the Taliban, on December 11th.

The operation, which involved the defection of one Taliban commander, will cheer the British after a year of intense but inconclusive fighting. Yet the army now finds itself pretty much back to where it was in 2006: parcelled out across Helmand's districts, with exposed supply lines. The British may have more soldiers, and their outpost may be better protected. But the question is whether Afghan forces are able to hold the ground on their own. One important objective in Helmand has been to reopen the road leading to the Kajaki hydroelectric plant to bring up a new turbine and increase the electricity supply, but that is still a distant prospect.



Custer and his quarterback

Pfc

In the neighbouring province of Kandahar, Canadian forces have also struggled time and again to recapture the same ground. Fighting the Taliban, they quip, is the military equivalent of "mowing the lawn". In contrast with the American sector farther east, where troops are fighting right up to the border with Pakistan, the British and Canadians do not have enough forces to secure their section of the frontier, and have abandoned a large swathe of the south to the Taliban.

This year has seen a mini-surge of Western forces, notably from America, Britain, Poland and Denmark. Germany and the Netherlands have decided to stay in Afghanistan, averting a NATO split. There have been successes too, notably the killing of scores of insurgent commanders. According to the UN, this has forced the Taliban to appoint Pakistanis to replace some of them. But the Taliban have an inexhaustible supply of recruits, and a haven in Pakistan in which to organise. They are reinforced by foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda, including Chechens, Uzbeks and Turks, who are highly motivated and surprisingly well equipped. As the Taliban have been pressed in one area, they have moved to cause mayhem elsewhere.

The Western effort is fragmented. Even close military allies such as Britain and America have had rows about tactics. There are two separate but overlapping commands, NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and America's Combined Joint Task Force 82. Most training is conducted by another American command. However, co-ordination has improved with the appointment of an American, General Dan McNeill, to head ISAF. The old distinction between "stabilisation", done by NATO, and "counter-terrorism", done by America, is blurring.

On the ground, though, each contingent is fighting its own separate war and promoting its separate vision of reconstruction. The fact that most countries rotate their units every six months or so makes continuity difficult. Americans currently serve 15-month tours, a consequence of the acute overstretch of the American army, but it means that commanders have time to learn and adapt.

The state of state-building

The problem in Afghanistan is not so much the resurgence of the Taliban, but the weakness of the Afghan government. The economy has grown briskly in recent years, but this has only moved Afghanistan from being crushingly poor to extremely poor. Six million children are now in school, but 2m still get no education.

Mr Karzai's government is dependent on foreign aid for about half of its budget. Much of the government is ineffective and often corrupt. One Western diplomat reckons there are just 200 competent people in the whole of the Afghan bureaucracy. The administration of provinces and districts, often the only contact between villagers and the government, is even more rickety. Provincial governors symbolise the state, but policies and budgets are controlled by ministries in Kabul.

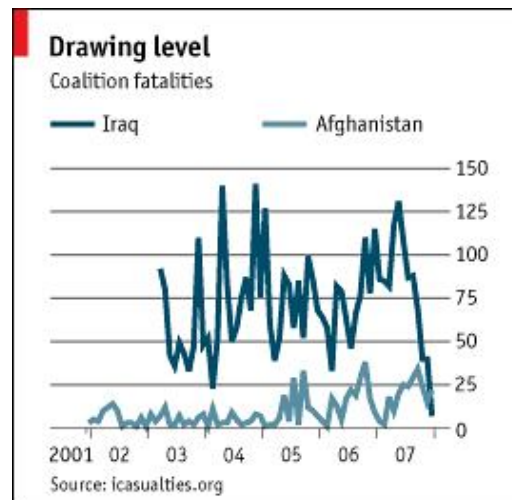
The political balance in Kabul has become more uncertain. The Afghan government is essentially a fusion of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance of warlords, dominated by ethnic Tajiks, with a Pushtun head in the form of Mr Karzai. Not only have many of the Pushtun tribes risen up against the government, but members of the Northern Alliance have now formed a political opposition movement with royalists and ex-communists.

Whether by design or by chance, the UN does not fill the vacuum in governance. Donors are at odds too. Britain gives most of its aid directly to the Afghan government, but America, by far the biggest donor, worries about corruption and prefers to entrust its aid projects to private American contractors.

Much of the development work falls by default to army officers, working through civil-military groups known as "provincial reconstruction teams" (PRTs). Development charities such as Oxfam in Britain complain this runs against good practice in aid work; it focuses on short-term fixes rather than long-term development, results in vastly different levels of spending (the American PRTs are richer than the others) and blurs the line between soldiering and traditional aid work. There are many

stories of armies building schools without teachers, and clinics without medicines. Yet imperfect as the PRT system may be, military commanders say they have little choice but to rely on them. Traditional aid workers will not, or cannot, venture into the more dangerous areas of the country.

Arguably the biggest danger to the future of Afghanistan comes not from the external Taliban enemy but from two interconnected internal ones: corruption and opium. The police are too often regarded as predators rather than protectors. The appointment of police chiefs, particularly in posts along lucrative drugs-smuggling routes, is rife with corruption. The government and donors are attempting, with mixed success, to clean up the force by weeding out tarnished or unqualified officers, and raising police salaries to match those of the army. And once again, foreign soldiers are stepping in. For instance, America's 1-503rd infantry regiment has used a former senior FBI investigator to arrest an Afghan commander in Paktika accused of funding the Taliban.



The bigger source of money for the Taliban is illicit poppy cultivation. Afghanistan produces 92% of the world's opium-related drugs. This year's record crop came overwhelmingly from Helmand, as well as other embattled regions. The drugs trade makes up about one-third of Afghanistan's GDP. ISAF commanders, who had avoided involvement in counter-narcotics, now acknowledge that insurgents and drugs-smugglers operate symbiotically and must be tackled together.

Here too, views are split. The American ambassador to Kabul, William Wood, is an enthusiastic supporter of aerial herbicide spraying to eradicate the crop. The British, in charge of overseeing the fight against opium, worry that this will turn the farmers against the Western forces. So far there has been a messy compromise: limited manual eradication that has been beset by corruption. It is not just the Taliban who benefit from opium; members of the government, even close relatives of Mr Karzai, are routinely accused of being drugs lords. In the long run, the answer lies in stability and rural development. In the short term, few actions would make the government more popular than the prosecution of some big bosses of the opium trade.

The West's best weapon

Like the Greeks, the British and the Soviets before them, America and its allies are discovering the old adage that Afghanistan is easy to invade, but difficult to control. Can they defy history? Perhaps, but only if they accept that a military victory is not possible and that they will have to stay for a long time.

Western countries still enjoy an important asset: the support of ordinary Afghans who have no desire to return to the harshness of Taliban rule or to the civil wars of the past. Recent polls (see chart) show that Afghans are much more strongly in favour of foreign forces than Iraqis. However, growing insecurity and civilian casualties in air raids are eroding the West's position, especially in the south.

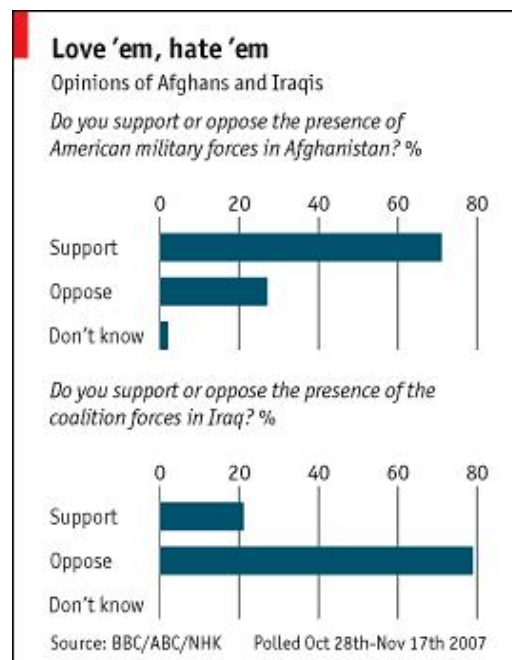
Western opinion is just as important. Gordon Brown, Britain's prime minister, was right to announce on December 12th his plan for "Afghanisation" of the military campaign, gradually focusing more on mentoring and training Afghan forces and economic development. He said an effort would be made both locally to recruit armed village guards and encourage Taliban to give up their weapons, and regionally to improve co-operation.

Given the shortage of Western troops, Afghanistan's best hope lies in expanding and improving its own forces. Afghan soldiers

are respected both as symbols of the nation and as tough fighters; but the Afghan army, which will grow to 70,000 next year, needs to be greatly increased. For years it will need to be partnered with Western units able to provide close air support, transport and medical evacuations. It makes sense to give ISAF more of an Afghan complexion, with plans to appoint an Afghan general to help co-ordinate operations. The Afghan police will need even more money and training. Once again it is America that has taken on the main burden of training the police, while Europe's effort has been half-hearted.

Above all the Afghan government—particularly in the provinces and districts—needs to be made more effective. Mr Karzai complains that he gets too much contradictory advice from the 40-odd allies in ISAF. The appointment of a strong international civil co-ordinator to energise the reconstruction effort, and even to give political direction for the military campaign, is long overdue.

Paddy Ashdown, the British politician and former soldier who served as the international overseer of Bosnia, is the leading candidate to become the new UN chief. He should also be “double-hatted” as the NATO civilian representative (and perhaps also as the European envoy). Some worry that such a “super-envoy” would either undermine the authority of Mr Karzai, or be ineffective because of American predominance. There are risks in a foreigner meddling in Afghanistan's intricate tribal power game. But the bigger risk is to leave Afghanistan violently adrift.



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