

Afghanistan

Emerging Scenarios and Recent Operations in Southern Afghanistan

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Since March 2010, the Multi National Forces (MNFs) in Afghanistan have been implementing a more comprehensive strategy to counter the armed offensive groups in Afghanistan, than previously - the transformation can be seen via the transmission of additional forces, implementation of new tactics on ground and the launch of major operations in Southern Afghanistan.

The Kandahar operation's success (or failure) will be pivotal in the determination of the viability of the coalition's new strategy. The importance of the south lies not just in the fact that it is therein that the Taliban is most active and visible, but in the cruciality of Kandahar itself. It is the politico-economic node of the south and historically saw the emergence of most Afghan rulers. It was also the de facto capital of the Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001 and it was the capture of that very province that marked the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001.

However, if the attitude of the Afghan people is any indicator, the chances of success in these recent operations cannot be rated very high. Analysts who have recently visited the region indicate that the purpose of the so-called 'surge' is not something that resonates very deeply with the locals, not just of Kandahar proper, but of the surrounding districts as well. A significant percentage of them are of the opinion that much like the other military operations in the south, these particular series of operations too will end, bringing momentary relief, if any, to the villages, and sure to bring devastation and sorrow anew to them. Notwithstanding this point of view, the locals are not in favour of the coalition forces vacating the area either. From their perspective, these military forces have a more important and effective role in stabilisation and peace-building efforts, rather than in active military operations.

The reasons for this (at least perceived) failure are as varied as they are complicated. However, the two fundamental factors for the relative lack of success in the recent operations are - for one, there can be no effective 'defeat', as such, of the Taliban, unless the safe havens that they enjoy in Pakistan are rendered asunder. In the absence of such a step being carried out, the Taliban simply retreat to these havens and wait out the coalition forces' operations in a given area.

At the same time, Pakistan is able to utilise this 'down-time' on the part of the Taliban to further indoctrinate its members on the 'injustices' being carried out by coalition forces in Afghanistan, thereby ensuring that when these people do return, they attack the coalition forces with a new fervour. And second, in light of the previous operations, they have internalised even further, that face-to-face engagement with the coalition forces is untenable. Therefore, they are relying more and more on fewer foot soldiers and more IEDs, rendering the coalition's superior technology and foreboding airpower relatively impotent.

Further, coalition forces touted that this particular series of operations would be different than previous ones because they would involve the troops staying in areas they clear for a longer period of time than before. However, these efforts have proved unsuccessful in the recent as well as distant past, not least because in the absence of being able to establish full control/dominance over the area, the troops end up in garrison-like environs within the allegedly 'cleared' area.

As has been experienced in the previous few years in Afghanistan, the Taliban are fairly adept at adapting to coalition operations. So when coalition commanders announced that they would be launching operations in Kandahar, Taliban commanders knew that it was time to fade into Pakistan, or just the neighbouring provinces, and prepare for a new series of attacks. In this strategy, they allow the coalition forces to develop a false sense of victory, while lying in preparation to ambush them no sooner than they believe that they have secured a particular area. While this does not imply that the Taliban will give up all its strongholds, it does mean that they will focus more on taking back a particular area, rather than expend substantial effort in defending it in the first place.

The Surge

The Obama administration has always laid stress on the importance of more 'boots on the ground' in Afghanistan, and while Afghanistan has been described as the 'greatest military challenge' facing the United States, the fact remains that there can be no purely military solution to it. The reason that the surge is not

working as effectively as expected is that it is, for the most part, a purely military surge, without the necessary civilian component to make it worthwhile. Civil aid and resources are as essential, if not more, to defeating the insurgency, as military forces. While policy wonks stress on the importance of civilian infrastructure, both human and material, it seems as though the Obama administration's bias weighs heavier on the military side of the equation. According to analysts, the belief appears to be that while the US manages the military side of affairs, the Europeans and other NATO members can be left to deal with civilian and developmental issues. These perspectives will have to be revised if there is to be any hope of maintaining deadlines as professed in 2011 and 2014.

The Obama administration third review of US' policy in Afghanistan in December 2010 argued that its current approach was seeing effect in Afghanistan, in terms of rising numbers in the ANA and ANSF. However, there are more reasons to be skeptical than optimistic. For instance, even if the policy under practice is said to be successful, the costs are consistently prohibitive, especially for the US. There are almost 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan. In 2010 alone, almost 500 US troops lost their lives in Afghanistan, while nearly ten times that number were injured. The US involvement in Afghanistan is costing its taxpayers upwards of \$125 billion a year, not to mention the fact that it is tying up nearly all of US' foreign policy attention and intelligence assets.

While it is essential that Afghanistan not be allowed to revert to what it was earlier, i.e. a staging ground for terrorists, that goal was achieved even before force levels were increased in Afghanistan. And in the unlikely event that the Taliban are able to establish connections with Al Qaeda close enough to enable matters to revert to pre-2001 levels, counterterrorism operations comprising drones, special forces and local forces could be brought to bear, much like they are in Yemen and Somalia.

Stretching the argument to the effect that a stable Afghanistan is important to maintaining at least a status quo in Pakistan is disingenuous. Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban is ultimately detrimental to Pakistan itself and leaves that country open to further radicalism and destabilisation. There is no reason for the international community to be worried about Pakistan any more than it worries about itself.

The Pakistan Army and COIN

On any given day, significant numbers of people cross over the Durand Line from Afghanistan to Pakistan and on the surface, Pakistan's ability to stem the flow

of insurgents seems to be very limited. On the ground, policing and securing such terrain would require the kind of resources that even many advanced countries would struggle to provide, notwithstanding the greater cooperation necessary between the Afghan and Pakistani governments for any policing to be successful. Although there are fairly regular discussions now between Pakistan and Afghanistan on these issues, and there is said to be greater cooperation between the armed forces of both these countries, it remains to be seen if this 'cooperation' translates into progress on the ground.

While there is considerable disenchantment within the international community vis-a-vis Pakistan's approach to tackling the safe havens and insurgency in its western border regions, it is true that for now, the willingness on the part of the government to confront groups occupying those areas is higher than it was before. While it has undertaken an intensive counterinsurgency campaign in the area over the past two years, sustaining a considerable number of casualties in the process, the progress has not matched the rhetoric - for one, it has not targeted the Afghan Taliban, nor its former proxies, including but not limited to the Haqqani and Hekmatyar groups. According to Dr Sajjan Gohel of the Asia-Pacific Foundation, "the Pakistani military spent an enormous amount of time and effort in the 90s to support and assist the Afghan Taliban, giving them strategic depth in Afghanistan...They are not going to give up something they invested so much time in just because the West is getting angry."

President Zardari has claimed that it has failed to tackle certain groups as its limited counter-insurgency capabilities prevent it from conducting operations in the northwest of the country. Indeed, it is worth noting that the Pakistani Army has only recently been re-configured for counter-insurgency. In the past, its sole function had been oriented towards conventional conflict in response to a perceived existential threat from India. At the same time, it is also worth noting that since 2001, Pakistan has been in receipt of over \$12 billion in overt military aid from the US alone, which has allowed it to use its own domestic defence budget to purchase big-ticket military items which have absolutely nothing to do with COIN. Therefore, most analysts are of the view that the failure to tackle the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan is largely that of lack of will, than of capabilities.

Impact of Special Forces

While the involvement of special forces in Afghanistan has never been publicly denied, 2010 marked the first time that concrete figures about their deployments were revealed. In the summer of 2010, they conducted hundreds

of operations in an effort to breakdown the Taliban's resistance, thin out its leadership and decimate its insidious network of IED planters. This 'offensive' which began in 2009, led to 365 mid-to-high ranking insurgent commanders having been killed, just in the summer of 2010, in addition to the capture of several hundreds of people, including Taliban foot soldiers. As per ISAF reports, between May and December 2010, approximately 7,100 special forces CT operations were conducted, in which more than 600 insurgent leaders were either killed or captured, and over 2,000 enemy fighters killed, in addition to over 4,000 captured. These numbers are said to stand apart from Taliban and allied fighters killed during conventional COIN ops or during Taliban assaults on coalition and/or Afghan bases.

On the surface, these figures lend a far more positive image of the US' policy in Afghanistan than the metrics from its conventional COIN operations. However, there is very little empirical data to support the veracity of these figures, not to mention no considerable decline in the Taliban's intensity of operations, attacks or defences, in light of such figures. In addition, the increasingly public involvement of these special forces could complicate cooperation with the Afghan government and the people, since the elimination of top-level commanders runs counter to the stated Afghan policy of reconciliation, reintegration and rehabilitation.

What lies ahead

The current strategy, therefore, does not much inspire confidence amongst the Afghan people that the coalition forces have much of an idea about the insurgents, the culture of the region, or for that that matter, the vagaries of the terrain in which they are deployed. And the patience of the Afghan people, in this regard, runs thinner every day. This does not, however, imply that the coalition forces should leave. The belief that if the coalition forces leave, the Taliban will stop fighting and the violence will end, is as mistaken as it is dangerous. The Taliban will overrun every bit of land that they can, not because they have supreme capabilities to do so, but because the Afghan government is currently not strong enough to resist them without the support of the coalition forces.

What the coalition forces need to do is figure out better ways of working with the Afghan people, even if it means that their tactics do not match up with what the higher-ups have in mind in Kabul or in Washington. A better and more informed understanding of the particularities of Afghan tribal society is integral to this. For instance, this would imply an understanding on the part of the coalition forces that when they arrest or detain a potential Taliban, that individual is also a family

member with ties running deep in that particular society. While this does not mean that such detentions should not take place, it does mean that tribal elders must be more involved in the investigative and judicial process. By taking these measures, they will not only inspire more trust amongst the people, they will also be re-empowering them for functions they will have to continue to maintain in the future.

In addition, the coalition forces need to focus more on peace-building and peace-keeping, than on active military operations. Metrics cannot be the complete answer every time. It would be more worthwhile for coalition troops to build the capacities of local communities and the ANSF for a considerably longer period of time, rather than moving on to another area after only installing a superficial degree of stability. In a similar vein, more focus must be devoted to the ANA and the ANSF, rather than to local militias, which, while may deliver more immediate results, are ultimately detrimental to community needs.

But most importantly, it is the Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan which merit strong addressable. It is imperative that the coalition forces work with the Afghan government and regional powers to assure Pakistan that a strong and independent Afghanistan will not be a source of threat to Pakistan, either directly or indirectly.

In summary, what the US-NATO coalition needs to convey to the Taliban and to the Afghan people at large is that while there may be talk of deadlines floating around, every now and then, they do not intend to leave any time soon.

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Notes

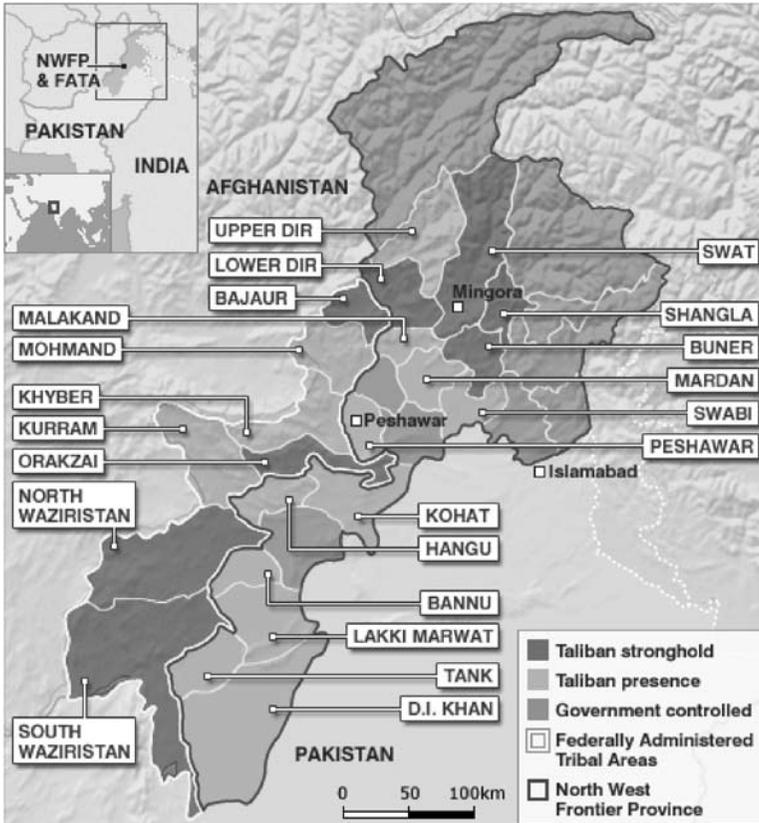
1. Data as of 15 February 2011. Source: Afghanistan Conflict Monitor; icasualties.org.
2. Data as of January 2010. Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – Quarterly Report to the US Congress 2010.
3. Data as of December 2010. Source: Pajhwok Afghan News Agency.
4. Data as of January 2011. Source: Press reports from Reuters, Pajhwok Afghan News Agency.
5. Data as of January 2010. Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – Quarterly Report to the US Congress 2010.
6. Data as of January 2011. Source: Press reports from Reuters, Pajhwok Afghan News Agency.
7. Data as of January 2011. Source: Press reports from Reuters, Pajhwok Afghan News Agency.
8. Data as of March 2010. Source: Pajhwok Afghan News Agency.
9. Data as of January 2011. Source: Afghanistan Interior Ministry; icasualties.org.
10. Data as of 18 February 2011. Source: Press reports from Bloomberg News Agency.

SCHOLAR WARRIOR

11. Data compiled from UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan – 2009 Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict
12. Data compiled from UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan – 2010 Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict
13. Data as of January 2011. Source: Press reports from Reuters, Pajhwok Afghan News Agency and Congressional Research Service Reports.

**AFGHANISTAN – CASUALTIES
[2009 ONWARDS]**

	2009	2010	2011
Multi-National Forces ¹	510	708	44
Afghan National Army	292 ²	806 ³	3 ⁴
Afghan National Police	639 ⁵	1250 ⁶	7 ⁷
Taliban	4610 ⁸	5225 ⁹	30 ¹⁰
Civilians	2412 ¹¹	2777 ¹²	74 ¹³



Source: BBC News

