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Astri Suhrke

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A Contradictory Mission? NATO from Stabilization to Combat in Afghanistan

ASTRI SUHRKE

Between 2001 and 2007, the United States and NATO gradually abandoned the commitment to a light military footprint in Afghanistan, initially adopted to avoid making the same mistakes as the Soviet Union. A heavy footprint, it was feared, would enable the militants to mobilize resistance in the name of Islam and Afghan nationalism. As it turned out, the militants mobilized effectively to meet the growing foreign military presence. More combat troops have given NATO some tactical victories, but the limitations and counterproductive effects of the military approach to defeat the militants tend to undermine NATO's broader stabilization function in Afghanistan, thus pointing to a fundamental contradiction in the mission. Strengthening NATO's combat role is likely to sharpen this contradiction and increase the related probability of a strategic failure.

When the Afghan Transitional Authority was installed in Kabul at the end of 2001, the international military presence was deliberately light, in no small measure due to fears in Washington and in the UN system of repeating the Soviet mistakes of the 1980s. The UN-authorized 'international security assistance force' (ISAF) had around 4,500 soldiers in Kabul with a mandate to support the government. In the south-eastern border provinces towards Pakistan, a smaller number of US-led forces were hunting for Osama bin Laden and his associates. Six years later, this military presence had been transformed. The international forces had grown to almost 50 000, mostly under a common NATO command, and the United States was asking for still more. ISAF had expanded beyond the capital and was present in all regions of the country. In the southern provinces, ISAF troops were launching combat operations, while US forces concentrated on the eastern provinces. Elsewhere in the country, NATO troops were increasingly engaged in offensive operations as well. Despite initial warnings in New York and Washington against a large Western military presence in Afghanistan, the footprint was getting heavier in terms of both numbers and functions. Yet no one in NATO claimed more than a few tactical victories over an enemy that seemed to expand just as rapidly as the NATO and Afghan government forces did.

How did this change from light to heavy footprint come about? What dynamic brought NATO from a stabilization mission into full combat and silenced the warnings not to repeat the Soviet mistakes? And why did it prove so difficult to defeat or even subdue an enemy who appeared to recover from successive tactical defeats? To some, the problem was simply insufficient forces. NATO had to commit itself more strongly to defeat the insurgency, as the Bush administration in particular called for. To others, the problem lay in the limitations of the

military approach. Under the circumstances, it seemed that the build-up of US, and later NATO, forces itself was a factor driving the insurgency.

The Afghan Model and Its Limitations

The US-led intervention, Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) of October 2001, had been premised on a very light presence by ground forces. The advance party in late 2001 consisted of Special Operations Forces and around 1,000 marines. More conventional forces were added in early 2002 to mop up remnants of al-Qaida and the Taliban but Gen. Tommy Franks, head of the Central Command, was very clear: 'We don't want to repeat the Soviets' mistakes.'¹ For the Afghan theatre overall, Franks envisaged a quite modest force of around 10,000 American soldiers. The result was 'the Afghan model' of intervention.

The model was based on air power, US Special Operations Forces and indigenous troops. This proved a 'powerful and robust combination' in removing Taliban from power, as US experts noted.² The model proved much less effective in hunting down al-Qaida and Taliban members who had escaped towards the mountainous border region with Pakistan. One reason was poor organization among the Afghans. For security reasons, American advisers did not inform the Afghans in advance of the operation, giving them little time to prepare. One local commander said he was informed only a few hours before the offensive started: 'My father told me, "just go", so I . . . took 700 soldiers. We got there, but I don't know for what. We had no food or anything.' More important were motivational factors. Having routed the Taliban from Kabul and provincial strongholds, Afghan commanders were inclined to consider the war as over. They had little interest in pursuing a few Taliban leaders or even 'the Arabs', as foreign fighters were called. In the eastern Nangarhar province, local commanders were reluctant to leave their newly liberated home territories, preferring 'to stake out their own turf', as one American military adviser reported. In terms of the local calculus of power, this was more important than joining the Americans to chase Islamic militants. Another American adviser recalled that he had to 'sit down and negotiate with General Hazrat Ali [leader of the Afghan militias] and convince him to stay in the fight'. The willingness of the Afghans to pursue al-Qaida, in short, was 'built on U.S. diplomacy and cash, not internal motivation'.³ Despite heavy cash handouts, however, Afghans fought poorly and some even sought cash from the other side to help militants escape to Pakistan.

Overall, the campaign to cut off and destroy the retreating militants failed. The result was a certain devaluation of the Afghan model and greater reliance on US forces in the continuing anti-terrorist operations in the border area and to counter the resurgent militants.

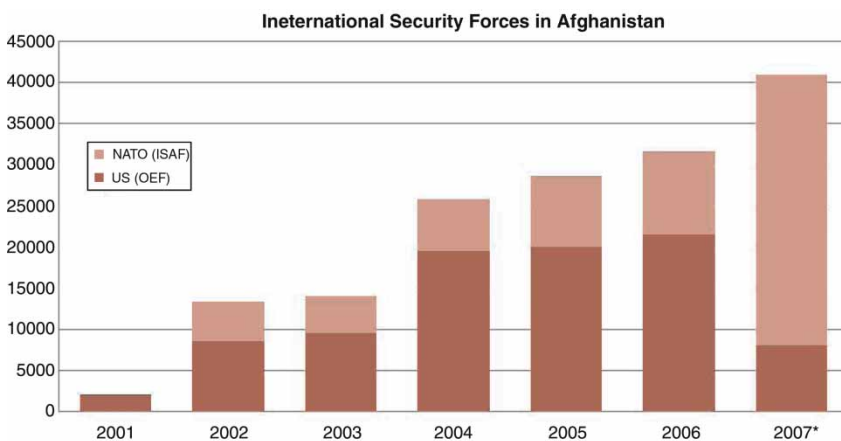
Force Expansion

Despite initial assessment that the Taliban was a spent force,⁴ US troops kept up the pressure on militants in a series of offensives designed to eliminate the

al-Qaida and the Taliban leadership, presumed to be hiding in the border region. Operation *Mountain Viper*, launched in August 2003, was the largest coalition offensive since the invasion, involving ground and air forces. It was immediately followed by Operation *Avalanche* with about 2,000 US and other coalition forces involved. *Mountain Storm* was launched in early 2004, and from March to July, US-led commando teams kept up the pressure with search-and-destroy missions in seven provinces stretching from Kunar in the northeast to Kandahar in the south-east. Often inserted by helicopter in remote areas, the teams raided villages and engaged suspected militants with the help of close air support. When *Mountain Storm* finished, *Lightning Freedom* lasted three months and likewise focused on the border areas.

A small number of Afghan militias participated in the offensive, sufficient to cause warnings in Kabul that empowering local 'warlords' was undercutting the state-building strategy of the UN and main donors. Yet the offensive revealed additional limitations of the 'Afghan model'. During *Mountain Storm*, Taliban elements had infiltrated some of the Afghan militias and fired on the Americans.⁵ The experience reinforced the inclination of the US military to rely more on their own forces for anti-terrorist operations, and the string of major offensives was accompanied by a steady increase in US troop deployment. During 2004 alone, US troops in Afghanistan more than doubled, from about 8,000 to just under 20,000 (Figure 1). The increase was sizable, not least in view of the parallel demands of the Iraq theatre. It significantly outstripped Gen. Franks' original plan, yet occurred without great fanfare or announcement of policy change.

FIGURE 1
INTERNATIONAL FORCE LEVELS



*10,000 US-OEF troops transferred to NATO command on 5 Oct 2006

Source: HSRP; NATO; Stimson Center

Note: The lightly coloured column in 2007 includes 10,000 US troops placed under NATO command. Source: Human Security Report Project, *Afghanistan Conflict Monitor*, accessed at <http://hsrp.typepad.com/afghanistan/ISAF-troops.jpg>

The force expansion seems *not* to have been a case of muddled gradualism or 'disjointed incrementalism' (in Ezekiel Dror's colourful term for a process whereby small changes add up to an unanticipated, unplanned policy).⁶ This may well have been the case for some US allies, as Janice Stein and Eugene Lang argue for Canada,⁷ but the expansion of US forces appears to have been a deliberate strategy in response to two developments – the security situation in Afghanistan and the political dynamics arising from presidential elections in both Afghanistan and the United States in 2004.

For the United States, the most important aspect of the security situation was that Osama bin Laden was still at large. Pursuing the al-Qaida leadership remained its primary objective. Even as the Iraq invasion in March 2003 crowded out most other issues, finding Osama remained an overarching concern, if not an obsession, in Washington. As the invasion of Iraq became a long and gruelling war rather than a quick 'mission accomplished', the whereabouts of the al-Qaida leadership became even more important. Critics of the Bush administration, particularly Democrats, argued that the invasion of Iraq was a distraction from the principal front in the 'war on terror' – the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. These concerns were driving the wave of counter-terrorist operations in the border area and pushing up the demand for US troops.

In Afghanistan, moreover, the security situation started to deteriorate in the second half of 2003. Political violence increased, dramatically so according to reports of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Clustered in the east and south-east, the attacks were mostly against visible but 'soft targets' associated with the foreign presence – against foreign offices and personnel in white vehicles, non-governmental organization (NGO) offices and personnel, including Afghans working for foreign NGOs, and kidnapping of foreigners working on the Kabul–Kandahar road.⁸ A bomb went off in Kabul that blew out half the windows in the Intercontinental Hotel. Many incidents took place in Kandahar and the troubled Ghazni province, halfway between Kabul and Kandahar. The UN started marking most of the southeast as a no-go zone for its personnel. International NGOs, which normally have a higher security threshold than the UN, were restricting their activities as well. The head of the UN mission, Lakhdar Brahimi, warned that unless the security situation improved, the UN might have to abandon its efforts to stabilize the country.

Compared to later developments, the upsurge in violence during the autumn of 2003 seems relatively mild. It was still safe, for instance, for foreigners to travel by road from Kabul to Kandahar in unmarked cars and without armed escort – an unthinkable journey only a few years later when the militants were on the outskirts of Kabul. In 2003, moreover, the suicide attacks had not yet started. And while many of the accumulating incidents had a political character, it was not always clear what motives and agents were behind the attacks. Afghanistan's tortured history had left a reservoir of grievances and desire for justice or revenge. The growing public violence provided a context for settling new scores of private nature as well.⁹ Attacks directed against foreign targets were commonly assumed to be the work of militants even though the causes were unclear.

In November 2003, for instance, the foreign community was deeply shocked by the assassination of a young Frenchwoman who worked for UNHCR in Ghazni. The Taliban did not claim responsibility, and closer examination suggested it was a case of private vendetta. Nevertheless, Ghazni had been a Taliban stronghold, and the militants were widely assumed to be behind the killing; the incident contributed to UN statistics that showed a deteriorating security situation.¹⁰

In many cases, the Taliban *did* take responsibility, thereby inflating their image as a powerful striking force. They kidnapped a foreign engineer to bargain for the release of Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government. Taliban-signed leaflets were distributed to the foreign press calling for a boycott of the presidential elections scheduled for next year. Other leaflets announced a jihad against US troops and warned Afghans not to work with foreigners or the government. Taliban spokesmen claimed their forces controlled large parts of the southern province of Zabul. In November 2003, US intelligence agencies revised their earlier estimates. Far from being decimated, the militants had regrouped and were infiltrating the southern provinces, showing a boldness not seen since they had been driven from power.¹¹ Analysts started to talk of a threefold structure of militants: al-Qaida, the Taliban, and the followers of the old *mujahedin* leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The analysis suggested an effective reconstitution of a movement that only a couple of years earlier had been in disarray.

US force expansion and the string of offensive operations that started in late 2003 were partly driven by this revised security assessment. If the military pressure on the militants were to be kept up – and the hunt for Osama bin Laden to continue – there seemed few alternatives. The ‘Afghan model’ had shown its limitations. The new Afghan National Army was still in the process of being formed. International forces that had participated in the original OEF coalition had by this time been either reduced or withdrawn, and NATO members were still reluctant to send ISAF contingents into combat. On the Pakistan side of the border, the government of President Pervez Musharraf was a reluctant partner in the ‘war on terror’, and resisted US demands to mount military offensives in the traditionally autonomous border areas where the militants enjoyed *de facto* sanctuary. He did send several thousand government troops into North Waziristan as Pakistan’s contribution to Operation *Mountain Storm* in March 2004, but the offensive ended in an agreement with tribal elders to deal with foreign fighters. In Washington, it was seen as a lacklustre performance.

The American military build-up in 2003–04 was also driven by a political calculus. The year 2004 was an election year and the Bush administration needed to demonstrate progress in the two wars in which it was engaged. In Iraq, things were going badly. Although Afghanistan was also becoming problematic, it seemed a comparatively easier place to produce a visible measure of success. The Taliban had raised their head but were still so weak that they were primarily hitting soft targets. The political transition agreed to in Bonn was proceeding on schedule. The US intervention continued to command broad international as well as domestic support – Afghanistan was still ‘the good war’.

The upcoming presidential election in Afghanistan was an opportunity to validate both the intervention and its aftermath. Admittedly, little progress had been made towards the original objective of crushing al-Qaida and its Taliban hosts, but more achievements could be shown if the mission were recast towards the state-building and peacebuilding agendas that much of the international community embraced. In terms of the policy discourse, it was hardly a radical shift. The international donor community was affirming the link between development and security by presenting state building in 'fragile states' as a defence against international terrorism.¹² The literature on 'post-conflict' stabilization stressed early attention to security followed by other democratizing and nation-building measures.¹³ To mark the new departure in policy, the Bush administration dispatched Zalmay Khalilzad as ambassador to Kabul in autumn 2003. Given a broad 'nation-building' brief and an additional US\$1.2 billion in aid money, Khalilzad initiated a period of activist diplomacy to promote nation-building and rapid reconstruction, and to ensure the election of Hamid Karzai.

The change towards a greater emphasis on democratization and post-war development was accompanied by an increase in troops. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard B. Myers, made the point with exemplary clarity when he dispatched another 2,000 marines to Afghanistan in March 2004. This was an election year, he said, and '[w]e want to make sure that the event goes well.'¹⁴ The election did indeed go well. For the most part, the Afghan factions contested the elections peacefully, the militants lacked the capacity to obstruct on a national scale and Karzai was elected by a huge margin. In the short run, the infusion of additional troops from both the United States and ISAF-contributing countries helped establish conditions for the orderly conduct of elections. They also reinforced Karzai's image as the candidate of the West and hence the only realistic leader for continued international support of reconstruction and stabilization. In a slightly broader perspective, however, the increase of combat troops did not create more security, as the Bush administration assumed, but rather the contrary. The insurgency became measurably stronger in 2005, after the first major build-up of US combat troops, and at least partly as a result of its counterproductive effects.

The Militants Fight Back

In retrospect, 2005 appears as a watershed in the development of the insurgency. The insurgents fought back more strongly than before and with new techniques. Suicide attacks – unknown in Afghanistan in 2003 – first occurred in 2004 with three attacks, but thereafter increased sharply with 17 incidents in 2005, and then seemed to become the 'weapon of choice' with 123 attacks in 2006 and 137 in 2007.¹⁵ Incidents involving an improvised explosive device (IED) increased by 142 per cent from 2004 to 2005.¹⁶ By 2005, the militants were no longer primarily hitting 'soft targets'. US and NATO casualties more than doubled from 2004 to 2005 (from 58 to 130).¹⁷ With an estimated 1,400 casualties among Afghans, 2005 was the deadliest year so far in the post-Taliban period.¹⁸

What caused the upsurge of militant violence in 2005? The insurgency was fuelled by underlying conditions as well as coincidental triggering factors. First, there was a continuation of leadership. Key Taliban leaders and their international supporters had not been eliminated by the American invasion, although their network of local support had been shattered.

The 'Taliban regime' that developed after 1994 had been a network of local alliances attached to the core leadership drawn from southern Pashtun tribes. The network had expanded as Taliban militias scored successive military victories, especially but not only in Pashtun areas, and at its peak extended to some 90 per cent of the country. When the invasion toppled the regime, many local commanders and their followers simply went back to their villages. Some commanders immediately changed side, such as Mullah Naqib in Kandahar, an *ex-mujahedin* leader in Kandahar who had negotiated a peaceful transfer of the city to the Taliban in 1994, and seven years later made another nearly seamless transition to Karzai's side.¹⁹ Other commanders later joined the government under its reconciliation programme, extended in 2003 to non-belligerent and 'moderate' Taliban (some successfully running for parliament in 2005).²⁰ Others bided their time for an opportunity to regain power and status, and some went back and forth between the government and the Taliban, including Mullah Abdul Salaam, whose record of fluid alignments eventually landed him a government position in the embattled Musa Qala district in Helmand.

The leadership had few options. Being excluded from the power-sharing negotiations in Bonn – which they may or may not have entertained – they had the choice of surrendering or resisting. Many remained defiant. That included Mullah Omar and his lieutenants, like the Dadullah brothers, as well as old-time *mujahedin* leaders, notably Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who had strong solidarity networks of their own and now allied, or re-allied, with the Taliban to fight the new government installed in Kabul. Fragmented, hunted and uncertain how to regroup, they initially lay low.

The US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 dramatically changed the picture and revitalized the militant struggle. Afghanistan became a second front in an increasingly globalized conflict between US-led forces and militant Islam. Radical groups in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East started to pledge support for the struggle in Afghanistan. For the Taliban leaders, it meant new opportunities for support and training and an ideological validation of their struggle against the forces that had deposed them. The international context of a larger *jihad* gradually transformed the movement, enabling it to incorporate new techniques of struggle, organization and propagandizing, while maintaining a measure of resource autonomy through the production and trade of opium. Observers started to talk of the 'Neo-Taliban'.²¹

The militants' de facto sanctuary in Pakistan was a third factor that shaped the insurgency. The sanctuary function was long established in the border area. In modern times, it dates back to the 1920s when Nadir Shah mobilized support in the north-west of then British India for his march on Kabul. During the war against the Afghan communists and Soviet forces, the sanctuary became highly developed and institutionalized, operating with the official blessing of the host

government and its major allies. This time, however, the sanctuary for the anti-American resistance was unofficial, and the Pakistan government tried to establish conditions of plausible deniability. The fall of the Taliban had placed Islamabad in an extremely difficult position. Subject to contradictory demands, Musharraf sought to strike a balance that permitted a de facto sanctuary in the tribal areas and gave the militants some freedom of movement in the provincial capitals of Quetta and Peshawar – but subject to government crackdown. As violence within Afghanistan increased, however, so did tension over the role of the sanctuary. The Karzai government and its principal international supporters, above all the United States, tended to blame Pakistan for every violent incident and anti-government demonstration. Yet, as a constant, the sanctuary cannot explain the upswing in militant violence from 2005 and onwards.

The most immediate reason for the escalating violence was the build-up of US forces and string of combat operations in the border region in 2003–04. The United States had just doubled its force levels, sent commando teams up and down the eastern border, searched houses, killed suspected Taliban and al-Qaida fighters, and bombed their village hideouts (or suspected hideouts) with inevitable collateral damage among civilians. Against the background of the radicalizing influence of the Iraq war, and with a near-by sanctuary for the militants, the build-up became in itself a driver of the insurgency. It gave the militants more targets to attack and more grievances to exploit.

The 'American Model'

The counterproductive effects of the US build-up were related to the limitations of what can be called the 'American model' of warfare in Afghanistan. Its distinguishing feature was reliance on conventional troops with close air support. While the 'Afghan model' suffered from lack of organization and motivation, the American model was disadvantaged for technological and cultural reasons. These limitations applied to other Western combat forces as well, which were later inserted in the south and operated within a similar framework.

By their presence and type of warfare, US forces created a measure of fear and antagonism that resonated beyond the inner circle of militants and fuelled recruitment to their cause. US soldiers were considered infidels in a countryside that was mostly tribal in social structure, culturally conservative, and closed to the uninvited. The Americans behaved on all accounts like an occupation force. They moved at will in any place their operational plans required and searched villages without asking permission or informing the local authorities. Tribal elders in vain sent delegations to Kabul to protest that foreign forces did not consult them before entering their villages. On the national level, the US forces likewise did not consult and were not accountable to Afghan authorities; there was not even a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Afghanistan as is customary between sovereign states. US forces detained suspected terrorists of Afghan and other nationalities at various bases on Afghan soil, particularly Bagram. The practice led in some cases to deaths in custody and injurious cases of mistaken identity, as detailed in a critical 2005 report by the UN.²²

American officials recognized the limitations of the model. Gen. David Barno, who arrived in October 2003 to command the US-led coalition forces, was scathing in his criticism. Lacking an updated counter-insurgency doctrine (after the Vietnam War, the US Army did not publish a new one until 2007), the first contingents of US forces had followed what Barno called an ‘enemy-centric raid strategy’. Acting on intelligence tips, conventional units would encircle a village and systematically search for weapons and suspects. The results were predictable. “‘Tossing’ whole villages in a cordon-and-search operation based on an intelligence tip, regardless of its accuracy, could quickly alienate a neutral or even friendly populace,’ Barno warned.²³ He promoted instead a ‘people-centric’ counter-insurgency based on respect and tolerance. The principles were crystallized in a 15-point list of do’s and don’t’s for the troops. The points are as revealing in what they forbid as in their hints of situational constraints on good intentions. For instance, US soldiers were not to search Afghan national government property without prior approval from the US command structure, and not to search Afghan government officials without another government official present. In local searches, police or government officials should be forewarned ‘unless there is a compelling and time sensitive reason’. In most cases, of course, prior warning would invalidate the search. Similarly, soldiers should, ‘when possible’, ask villagers to unlock doors rather than forcing entry, and should not cuff or bind hands of suspects ‘unless necessary for security’. When detainees proved to be innocent and were released, troops should pay reconstruction money to their villages.²⁴

American troops operated with close air support, which raised a set of separate and enormously sensitive issues. The potentially disastrous effects of air power in anti-terrorist operations were demonstrated soon after the invasion with the infamous bombing of a wedding party in Uruzgan in July 2002. The incident became the subject of both a UN and a US inquiry, which showed that American pilots over a traditional Taliban-friendly territory had mistaken celebratory gunfire for an attack. About 50 persons were killed, and survivors were taken away by US soldiers for questioning.

Recognizing the political costs, Gen. Barno disallowed air strikes based on technical intelligence, limiting the use of air power to situations of close combat and when called in by troops on the ground, even if this meant some tactical sacrifice. A large margin for error nevertheless remained in a conflict where militants merged with civilians, political alignments were fluid, and the ‘the fog of war’ closed in to create mistakes and misunderstanding.

Repeated incidents of ‘collateral damage’ were later to become a national issue, but even the early dramatic cases, such as the Uruzgan wedding party, had an impact that played into the hands of the militants and fuelled the insurgency. Ordinary villagers became aware of the costs of the international presence. In the central province of Logar – an area that had not experienced recent fighting – villagers told a team of foreigners in late 2004 that ‘the Americans bomb the wrong kind of people and imprison innocent people’.²⁵ A poll commissioned by a US television company in December 2005 found the anger reflected in attitudes towards American forces: one-third of the respondents said attacks *on*

American forces were justified. In subgroups of 'socially conservative' respondents among those who declared themselves to be 'dissatisfied with the benefits of peace', the figure rose to 60 per cent.²⁶ In so far as most of rural Afghanistan would be considered socially conservative and dissatisfied with what peace had brought in terms of economic and physical security, the polls indicated that foreign combat troops had an uncertain welcome already early in the war. At the same time, the polls found that a majority felt international forces were necessary to maintain 'peace and security' in the country. The two responses are not necessarily contradictory. Well-informed Afghans might distinguish between US combat forces, and the international forces deployed under ISAF, who patrolled in the capital and were closely associated with the consolidation of peace after Bonn. Alternatively, the polls simply showed a hostile minority and a friendly majority to foreign forces in general, regardless of their mandate and command structure.

To mobilize among disaffected Afghans, the militants appealed to Islam and Afghan nationalism – just as they had done during the war against the Soviets. As happened during the Cold War, the foreign presence in Afghanistan was enmeshed in a broader international conflict that validated and intensified the local struggle – this time between the West and militant Islam. The invasion of Iraq, and the detention and mistreatment of Muslims at Guantánamo (where several Afghans were held), made it easy for the militants to present the US 'war on terror' as a new crusade. Their propaganda pressed the American connection. When the Taliban started burning local schools and killing teachers in 2004, the typical message they left was: 'Why are you working for Bush and Karzai?' or 'We warn you to stop going to school, as it is a centre made by Americans.'²⁷ The strategic and ideological emphasis on a *jihad* against the foreign 'occupiers' came into sharper focus as the conflict escalated. Before long, the militants were re-designing the NATO emblem on their websites from a four-pointed star into the cross of the crusaders.

Escalation

American military planners had expected that Taliban and al-Qaida would resort to guerrilla tactics once their large formations had been destroyed, and hoped that allied troops would help stabilize the situation. The deteriorating situation in Iraq made the Bush administration shift to a more radical strategy: NATO would take over main responsibility for Afghanistan in order to free up US troops for Iraq. The result was a gradual expansion of ISAF in terms of both geography and function. The change was so gradual, and so wrapped in an extraordinarily complex command structure, that the qualitative transformation of the mission was obscured.

In 2004, ISAF had started to deploy small civil-military teams in relatively calm areas of the northern and western region of Afghanistan. The purpose was to stabilize them by demonstrating 'presence' on behalf of the central government and contributing to reconstruction. The name, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), conveyed their civilian orientation. The teams were an extension of ISAF's

deployment in Kabul; most commentators and government officials referred to them as a stabilization force. The media often called both the PRTs and the ISAF force in Kabul 'peacekeepers' in order to distinguish them from the mainly combat forces of the US in the south. Deployment of PRTs to the north and west of the capital had taken place within the framework of the formal expansion of NATO's command to areas outside Kabul – respectively, stage 1 (to the north), and 2 (to the west).

In mid-2005, NATO announced plans for stage 3 of the expansion, which would be to the south. US officials discussed force contributions with several allies, and by year's end the line-up seemed clear. The UK would send 3,400 troops to the south, Canada was considering around 1,000, The Netherlands a few more, and Denmark and Estonia smaller numbers. The troops would be under NATO's newly established Regional Command South and gradually take over from the US-commanded OEF mission, which would shift eastward. Yet, organizationally speaking, the new deployments were part of NATO's 'security assistance' mission – that is, ISAF – which until then had functioned as a low-risk stabilization operation with a strong civic component. Unsurprisingly, even well-informed observers wondered what the southern mission entailed. Would it be just a robust form of PRT deployment, a reconstruction mission in a difficult security environment? What was the relationship to the American OEF? Was NATO going into full combat in Afghanistan?

The public discussion in the countries concerned reflected uncertainty about the nature of the mission. In Britain, military sources described the forthcoming mission in the southern Helmand province as not primarily focused on combat: 'We are not talking war fighting. But there is potential for armed conflict in some areas,' a military source told *The Guardian* in November 2005.²⁸ The House of Commons Defence Committee defined the mission as 'building stability and security... and checking the narcotics trade'. The committee pointedly distinguished between this mission and the counter-terrorism mission of the US-led OEF.²⁹ In The Netherlands, where the decision to commit troops sparked a major public debate, 'the mission's legitimacy was grounded in reconstruction,' a Dutch analyst observed. The government nevertheless made it 'crystal-clear that combating opposing military forces could and would not be avoided'.³⁰ In Canada, likewise, the debate over whether to commit forces to the south was originally framed in terms of contributing a PRT, similar to the other ISAF teams operating in the north and the west. Combat seemed an unlikely prospect even to highly placed government officials.³¹

Yet the structure of the forces being readied made it clear that stage 3 was a very different mission. This was why France, Germany, Spain, Italy and several other NATO countries had refused the US request. Countries that *did* contribute sent strong combat units with a small PRT attached. The British sent the 16 Air Assault Brigade, a combat unit that included an airborne infantry battle group and Apache attack helicopters. Of the 3,400 British deployed, only about 100 were in the PRT. The Dutch contribution consisted of a combat unit of about 1,600, and a PRT of about 50. The Australians sent a PRT to the zone assigned to the Dutch; its presence was premised on the continued deployment of Dutch

combat forces. The Canadians started with a PRT in Kandahar and later added some 1,200 soldiers from a combat brigade. As the troops started deploying in 2006, they represented a significant addition to the US combat capacity in the south. The reinforcement meant some additional powerful combat teams, with their own lift and attack helicopters and F-16 ground attack aircraft, an American military official noted with satisfaction.³²

NATO was now at war in Afghanistan – in large part driven by US force requirements for Iraq. Nevertheless, it was a strategy of choice, not necessity. Most NATO members chose not to send combat troops to the south and maintained restrictions on existing units deployed elsewhere to ensure they would stay out of the prime war zone. The others complied for several reasons. For some (the UK and Canada), the relationship with the United States was important. In The Netherlands, NATO's Secretary-General (who was Dutch) was an indefatigable advocate of engagement. There were ideological concerns related to Afghanistan's place in the struggle against global terrorism, and a sense of obligation to help reconstruct a long-suffering society. Using military force to establish the preconditions for economic reconstruction in contested areas was in line with evolving UN and NATO doctrines of peacebuilding. That contributing governments chose to downplay the fact that they were going to war was understandable. After the Iraq invasion, a combat mission initiated and requested by the United States was domestically sensitive, the rationale for combat in the Afghan theatre was not as compelling as it had been in the aftermath of 9/11 when NATO fully supported the US invasion, and there was a significant risk of casualties.

Not unexpectedly, another round of escalation followed. The Taliban prepared for a spring offensive to receive the NATO forces. To pre-empt them and prepare the ground for the NATO command, American forces launched *Mountain Thrust*, the largest offensive since the invasion in 2001. It started already in March 2006 with air strikes and peaked with sustained ground assaults in June–July, involving some 10,000 troops from the United States and NATO allies, and a contingent from the Afghan National Army. While concentrated in the southeast, the operation covered a wide swathe of territory that stretched towards Nuristan in the northeast. It was followed by a smaller Canadian-led operation (*Medusa*) in the Kandahar area, and intermittent British campaigns in Helmand.

The militants rose to the challenge with improved organization, tactics and weaponry. The Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah – the one-legged, ex-*mujahedin* who had escaped from Kunduz in 2001 and vigorously fought the foreign forces until the British succeeded in killing him in 2007 – boasted of having 12,000 fighters in 20 districts in the south ready to take on NATO. Assessing the situation, a retired US general gave them high marks. There are now 'thousands of heavily armed Taliban ... [who are] aggressive and smart in their tactics,' he reported from a field mission in May. The militants operated in battalion-sized units, and had 'excellent weapons, new IED technology, commercial communications gear and new field equipment'. They appeared to have received 'excellent tactical, camouflage and marksmanship training', and had

secure base areas in Pakistan.³³ The arrival of the British seemed in particular to ‘energize’ the Taliban, as Defence Secretary Des Browne put it.³⁴ The British were, after all, the traditional adversary, and some of the most celebrated battles of the Anglo-Afghan wars had been fought in the south. The advance party of the British troops that landed in the southern Helmand province in June was met with such bold attacks that the commanding officer requested immediate reinforcements.

The escalation produced mixed results. NATO forces scored some tactical victories, particularly by forcing the militants from their stronghold in the Panjwai district in Kandahar. The Taliban suffered major losses, counted in many hundreds if not more, partly as a result of their decision to confront NATO in relatively large formations rather than inflicting classic guerrilla pinpricks. Yet the militants seemingly had the capacity to absorb great losses and enjoyed a ready supply of new recruits. As the head of the UN mission, Tom Koenigs, saw it, the Taliban were a ‘grassroots movement’ with a reservoir of fighters that was ‘practically limitless’.³⁵ The militants also showed some flexibility in tactics, increasingly using ‘asymmetrical warfare’ as the mounting suicide attacks in 2006 and 2007 demonstrated. And despite being pummelled by NATO forces, they made their presence felt in successively larger areas, including the western and northern provinces, and by 2007 they were on the outskirts of Kabul. NATO, for its part, also paid a price for entering into combat. Allied casualties tripled from 2005 to 2006 to a total of 93 (excluding US losses). In view of the low political threshold for absorbing casualties, it was a significant cost.

The escalating conflict in 2006 also inflicted a heavy toll on Afghan civilians. In the provinces with the heaviest fighting – Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan – some 20,000 families (probably over 100,000 persons) had been displaced, according to international monitors.³⁶ Others were caught in the crossfire. Many were felled by the suicide bombers who targeted the newly arrived NATO forces. In August alone, suicide attacks in Kandahar and Helmand killed over 40 Afghan bystanders and injured many more. The better-protected ISAF forces escaped injury. Afghans were also exposed from the other side. Human rights organizations documented 230 cases of civilian deaths from artillery fire or air raids conducted by US and NATO forces.³⁷

The heavy Afghan casualties were fast becoming a national issue, and President Karzai repeatedly criticized the conduct of the war. As the level of violence increased, he seemed to question the legitimacy of the war itself. Commenting on an offensive that was successful from NATO’s perspective, Karzai protested: ‘It is not acceptable that in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. In the past three to four weeks, 500 to 600 Afghans were killed. *Even if they are Taliban, they are sons of this land*’ [italics added].³⁸

Another Round in NATO

The NATO summit in Riga in December 2006 was held amid reports of a looming strategic failure in Afghanistan. The Anglo-American response was to ask for more forces. Another 2,500 troops were required, according to NATO’s

SACEUR, Gen. James Jones. Given the uneven distribution of the combat burden within the alliance, the spotlight turned on the majority of NATO members who had sent troops only to relatively safe areas – Kabul, the north and the west – and had attached ‘national caveats’ on their use. The issue was deeply divisive. In the end, only the French and the Germans agreed to some modification of their caveats.

The appointment of a new US Secretary of Defense in December 2006 did not alleviate the pressure. Robert Gates initially focused on Iraq, but by the end of 2007 he presented an ‘integrated strategy’ for Afghanistan to forge the various elements of the international presence – reconstruction, development, counter-narcotics and security aspects – into a common counter-insurgency framework with clear objectives, timelines and benchmarks.³⁹ Coordination would be the principal tool for mobilizing and monitoring allied contributions. Military force was an integral part of the plan, and governments that already had sent forces to the embattled south joined to lobby for a stronger NATO effort. The Canadian government was most outspoken, threatening to withdraw its combat forces unless other NATO members contributed more.

Gates’ list of ‘vital requirements’ for the Afghan theatre signalled a considerable increase: three additional infantry battalions, 20 helicopters and 3,500 military trainers. The willingness of Europeans to contribute was a test of commitment to the alliance, and there was simply ‘no substitute for boots on the ground,’ Gates made clear.⁴⁰ ‘I am not ready to let NATO off the hook in Afghanistan at this point,’ he told the House Armed Services Committee in December 2007.⁴¹ The Europeans were dragging their feet, however, and the Bush administration decided in the meantime to deploy an additional 3,200 marines, arguing it would leverage additional allied contributions. In early 2008, NATO was engaged in a new round of infighting over the issue that demonstrated the divisive nature of the Afghanistan mission.

As in previous years, the proponents of a force build-up could point to some tactical victories. In part, these reflected the more confrontational strategy adopted by the new NATO commander, US Gen. Daniel McNeil. Yet neither this strategy nor additional ‘boots on the ground’ seemed to improve the security situation according to indicators used by both the UN and the US Central Command.⁴² Figures released in the second half of 2007 showed that insurgent and terrorist violence was up at least 20 per cent compared to 2006, with a monthly average of 525 incidents. The militants, moreover, continued to adjust to the challenges of NATO’s superior firepower by relying more heavily on ‘asymmetrical warfare’. The number of incidents involving IEDs was rising (a monthly average of 152 in the first nine months of 2007), as were suicide attacks (monthly average of 11). The UN mission estimated that about 1,000 civilians had died as a result of the conflict during the first nine months of the year; other estimates were much higher.

At the village level, NATO forces seemed to cause as much death and damage as the Taliban. In a poll sponsored by Western news media in November 2007, 24 per cent of the Afghans interviewed said that civilians in their area had been killed or seriously hurt by Western forces within the last year. By comparison, 27 per

cent said the Taliban had caused similar injury.⁴³ In the southern provinces, the same poll found that nearly two-thirds of the respondents rated the United States negatively, and only 45 per cent supported the presence of NATO forces in their area.⁴⁴ In Washington, an end-of-the year assessment by the National Security Council concluded that several tactical victories notwithstanding, the West might still lose the war. Although US intelligence officials detected a growing number of foreigners in the Taliban ranks, disaffected Afghans remained a primary source of new recruits. 'I would think that from [the Taliban] standpoint, things are looking decent,' one of them told a *Washington Post* reporter.⁴⁵ NGOs working in Afghanistan were more categorical: 'A few years from now, 2007 will likely be looked back upon as the year in which the Taliban seriously rejoined the fight and the hopes of a rapid end to conflict were finally set aside by all but the most optimistic.'⁴⁶

The Rationale

The rationale for the Western military presence in Afghanistan had by this time evolved from the relatively simple premise of the original intervention; that is, to eliminate al-Qaida terrorists and the Taliban regime that had sheltered them. New objectives and investments were added that needed protection. A post-9/11 version of the 'domino theory' developed that made Afghanistan into a critical battlefield in a global war on terror. Within Afghanistan, the Bonn process had set the framework for an ambitious development agenda of economic reconstruction, state building and democratic governance that made it a test case for international assistance to post-conflict peacebuilding.

A very different rationale involved the credibility and future of the transatlantic alliance itself. NATO had taken on a complex mission in Afghanistan. The original mandate was vaguely defined as 'security assistance' to help the government extend its authority and stabilize the country. An ambiguous standard, its ultimate test was probably the prevention of renewed civil war focused on the capital, as had happened in the mid-1990s. By dispatching combat troops and expanding its command to the embattled southern region, NATO had taken on the additional task of defeating the Taliban. This raised the stakes considerably. It was the first ground combat mission of the alliance since its establishment in 1949, and it was an entirely different military threat than the purpose for which it was established.

NATO had weathered the initial transition from the Cold War to a new international security environment after 1989. The alliance had enlarged its membership and embraced a 'New Strategic Concept' for the 1990s that included peacekeeping and 'stabilization operations'. The concept was tried out in the Balkans in the mid-1990s. NATO's air war against the former Yugoslavia over Kosovo in 1999 expanded the repertoire of response. Both engagements were considered operationally successful under the circumstances. The Afghanistan mission was a test of a larger order, namely the credibility and relevance of the alliance to 'project stability', in the words of Secretary Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, in a world of unconventional security threats from terrorism, collapsing and

failing states, civil wars, and the proliferation of nuclear and biological weapons.⁴⁷ The credibility argument was much used by governments that had already sent troops to the south and wanted others to commit themselves as well. Failure to commit troops 'puts the Afghan mission – and with it, the credibility of NATO – at real risk,' Gates declared.⁴⁸ UK and Canadian officials frequently affirmed that NATO's credibility was 'on the line' in Afghanistan.

Having taken on a combat role and publicly declared it to be the ultimate test of the alliance's credibility and relevance, NATO members gave the argument a self-fulfilling character. If NATO now failed to 'defeat an enemy driving around in pick-up trucks, armed with rockets and small arms,' as a British commentator put it, the prestige and hence power of the world's most powerful military alliance would erode.⁴⁹ To avoid this, NATO invested ever more of its military resources and prestige in Afghanistan to protect itself.

The rationale rested on another factor not directly related to Afghanistan, namely the war in Iraq. For several NATO members, contributing militarily in Afghanistan was a way to avoid participating in the much more controversial war in Iraq. Critics in the United States of the war in Iraq could also demonstrate their national security credentials in 'the war on terror' by supporting a build-up in Afghanistan. The argument had surfaced during the 2004 elections and was subsequently validated by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group. The group recommended modifying policy towards Iraq but strengthening the commitment to Afghanistan.

Limitations of the Military Response

There was a parallel recognition in NATO that a purely military response to the insurgency was insufficient. The British had started to explore possibilities of negotiation and ceasefires with local Taliban leaders soon after they arrived in Helmand, and maintained a dialogue despite criticism from US officials and Karzai. Negotiations led to a ceasefire in the Musa Qala district, but the agreement on co-existence and partial UK force withdrawal collapsed in 2007. The UK pursued the talks in secret, never publicly presenting a rationale for negotiations.

Evolving NATO doctrines likewise stressed the importance of the 'hearts-and-minds' component of counter-insurgency warfare. By the time of the Riga summit in November 2006, NATO members acknowledged the insufficiency of the military approach; greater investment in socio-economic development and good governance were urgently required. The point was argued in particular by NATO members such as Germany, Spain and Norway that were reluctant to engage in the southern region and wished to strengthen the rationale for alternative contributions. Yet none of them publicly articulated the more radical proposition that was emerging from the experience so far: the military approach had inherent limitations that could not be overcome by more troops or modified tactics. A heavier military footprint simply reinforced these limitations and sharpened their counterproductive effects.

This proposition has had several elements. First, the combat part of NATO's mission could actually undermine its stabilization mandate, and by extension international efforts to support reconstruction, provide humanitarian relief, and promote the authority of the central government. Reconstruction money did not seem to mollify villagers who had been bombed and invaded. The increasingly negative public attitudes towards NATO forces in the south testified to the tension between the attempt simultaneously to wage war and build peace, as did numerous anecdotal reports. Accounts of the assault on the Sangin district of Helmand in June 2007 illustrate the point. The assault was part of a larger operation – described as the largest air assault in the region since the Soviet occupation in the 1980s – and included 5,500 ISAF soldiers, 1,000 US paratroopers and an equal number of Afghan troops. Afterwards, one of the elders, Haji Mohammed Yaqub, said he believed the valley was now quiet enough for reconstruction to begin. But, he added, it was probably too late for the NATO force to be welcomed by most residents: 'They have destroyed people's houses and their lives,' he said, 'so, what do they expect?'⁵⁰

A subset of the same problem was allied use of air power. Air power played an important role in both counter-insurgency and force protection operations. By providing close support for combat, reconnaissance and resupply, air power had enabled US and NATO forces to engage in forward combat operations.⁵¹ Air power was NATO's comparative advantage, and it saved the lives of their soldiers and remained an important weapon in the fight against the insurgents. As the conflict escalated and NATO increased its presence, so did air strikes. From 2006 to 2007, these increased by over 50 per cent, from 1,770 to 2,740 sorties.⁵² The figure for 2007 was over twice the number of air strikes in Iraq in that year. Yet the political costs of 'collateral damage' among Afghans arguably did more than anything else to undermine the legitimacy of NATO's presence. And moral legitimacy is critical to win over an insurgency, as military manuals recognize. 'Lose moral legitimacy, lose the war' reads a caption in the US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual issued in 2007.⁵³

A second constraint on NATO's military effectiveness and a possible source of counterproductive effects was the limited knowledge of local affairs. The importance of local knowledge in counter-insurgency operations is one of the most established doctrines in the literature, and was a main reason for the only successful Western war of this kind, that in Malaya.⁵⁴ The British had accumulated and institutionalized knowledge of Malaya during almost two centuries as a trading and colonial power on the peninsula. By contrast, none of the governments contributing troops to Afghanistan had much experience in, or knowledge about, the country. The level of relevant language skills was low, as was military intelligence capacity; most officers served on a six-month or one-year rotating basis. Governments with combat troops in the south were conscious of the constraint and tried to build up political intelligence in a broader sense. By 2007, the British and the Dutch, for instance, commissioned NGOs to map tribal structures, local history and individual profiles in the provinces where they operated. The Dutch advertised for Pashtu-speaking consultants with area skills. The US military attached 'human terrain teams' of anthropologists and other social scientists to their

combat mission. The first batch of anthropologists arrived in late 2007, along with 6,000 American troops that were rotated into the eastern border region.⁵⁵ The use of anthropologists and other social scientists caused a deep split in the scholarly community, but its impact on the ground was unclear.⁵⁶ Arguably, sustained, systematic incorporation of local knowledge could perhaps reduce the margin for error and the tendency for the foreign forces to be manipulated by rival Afghan factions for their own ends.

The complex and fluid nature of Afghan politics increased the risk that troops unfamiliar with the language and local conditions would be manipulated. The danger was illustrated in an early incident that achieved the status of a classic failure similar to the attack on the Uruzgan wedding party. On 20 December 2001, US planes attacked a convoy of Pashtun elders who were travelling from the eastern border area of Khost to attend Karzai's inauguration in Kabul. The US military maintained they had information that Taliban and al-Qaida were in the group; more likely, they supported Karzai but were rivals of a local, powerful warlord, Pacha Khan Zadran. Pacha Khan was working closely with US forces but also was trying to extend his local domain, and was locked in a deep conflict with Karzai at the central level. Having US forces eliminate his local rivals while simultaneously embarrassing Karzai suited his interests perfectly (although he strongly denied culpability).

As an early warning of the dangers of local manipulation, the incident had little effect. NATO forces seemed as vulnerable in this respect as the US forces had been, and the list of incidents mounted. In the western province of Herat, for instance, US and NATO forces in April 2007 attacked a village in Shindand, killing 136 persons. The village was predominantly Pashtun in a Tajik-majority province, had earlier supported the Taliban, and had reportedly welcomed the Taliban back. But the village also had an unrelated conflict with the Tajik-dominated provincial power structure, and this had evidently triggered the attack. 'People settle their own tribal feuds by feeding wrong information to NATO,' the district administrator explained. As the villagers in Shindand counted their dead – claiming most were civilians – it was reported that the attack had produced a 'surge of support for the insurgency'.⁵⁷

A third constraint on the military effectiveness of US and NATO forces stemmed from the contradictions built into its counter-insurgency strategy of 'clear, hold and build'. The strategy was to clear Taliban from a territory and then secure it for reconstruction and governance reform. The problem, according to many military analysts, was that NATO did not have sufficient forces to hold what they cleared. The Panjwai district in Kandahar was a case in point. The Canadian success in September 2006 in driving Taliban from a stronghold in Panjwai had been celebrated as a major NATO victory. A year later the Taliban were back. More NATO troops might solve this immediate problem, but it would create a more fundamental one. A NATO force large enough to hold what had been cleared would appear as an occupying power. The more territory NATO succeeded in clearing and holding, the closer the alliance would come to be swallowed in the 'Soviet trap'. This realization had guided the initial military planning for a 'light footprint', and the warning was repeated by

military experts as the insurgency revived. 'Embed and partner, don't occupy,' a noted analyst in Washington, Anthony Cordesman, emphasized in late 2007. 'Only national forces can "win" and "hold" on a lasting basis.'⁵⁸

The alienating influence of a large foreign troop presence was recognized at one level in NATO and among Western experts, but there was a reluctance to draw the parallel with the Soviet period much further. There are of course differences. The Soviets had around 120,000 troops in the country at one point and practised a scorched earth policy with large-scale bombing. The early Marxist regimes denied the legitimacy of Islam as a source of law and government authority. In the present situation, foreign forces are fewer and the post-Taliban government recognizes Afghanistan as an Islamic Republic, as does the new constitution. This makes it doctrinally more difficult to justify a *jihad* against the government and the foreign military presence. Yet the militants have circumvented the doctrinal obstacles, and done so emphasizing both religion and nationalism in their propaganda. It is striking that Western analysts and officials who readily recognize the importance of Islam and Afghan nationalism in the *jihad* against the Soviets now downgrade ideology as a determinant of the present insurgency beyond its hard-core leadership. The most common interpretation rests instead on a contract theory of social harmony. Since the government and its international supporters have failed to deliver good governance and post-war reconstruction, recruitment to the militant cause is fuelled by a huge pool of unmet expectations and anger over misrule, poverty and injustice. Resources from the illegal opium economy enable the Taliban to pay their soldiers well, hence adding a mercenary aspect. Fighting the insurgency therefore requires renewed and massive efforts towards reconstruction, rule of law and good governance.⁵⁹

The social contract perspective has underpinned the entire international reconstruction effort. It may have some validity. There are insufficient empirical data on the recruitment pattern to the militants to establish a definite conclusion. But, *prima facie*, it seems incredible that Islam and Afghan nationalism, which are so evidently important in the social and political life of the country, and which have been critical in shaping collective action in times of previous national crisis, now should have almost disappeared as a cause of the growing insurgency. Clearly, the leadership and the most militant recruits are operating in a framework defined by the opposition to the foreign forces and 'Westernization' and legitimized by religion and nationalism. The Taliban's principal and in theory non-negotiable policy goals are (a) withdrawal of foreign forces, and (b) introduction of sharia law. Their tactic in 2006 and 2007 was increasingly to kidnap foreigners to demand foreign troop withdrawals (as well as the release of Taliban cadre from government prisons). Conservative and traditionalist clergy form the core of the revived resistance according to one study.⁶⁰ Among those most committed to violence, ideological motivations seem paramount. A remarkable study initiated by the UN on the suicide assailants showed that grievances associated with honour and pride, nation, and religion, were central motivating factors. Most of the attackers were young, uneducated, often drawn from *madrassa* across the border in Pakistan, and mostly inept (which is why many survived to be interviewed). Their grievances included 'a sense of occupation, anger

over civilian casualties, and affronts to their national, family and personal senses of honour and dignity that are perpetrated in the conduct of counter-insurgency operations. Some attackers are also motivated by religious rewards and duties.⁶¹ For these cadres of asymmetric warfare, more NATO troops required to hold cleared territory would represent additional provocation.

The alternative to more NATO troops, of course, is to rely more heavily on Afghan forces. Plans for rebuilding the Afghan National Army have indeed been accelerated, but there are limits to how rapidly an institution of this kind can be developed. Intermittent proposals to enlist Afghan militia or community defence forces are subject to the limitations of reliability, accountability and effectiveness that the 'Afghan model' has revealed. Until or unless Afghan forces can take over, therefore, there seems no escape from the predicament facing NATO combat forces in Afghanistan: they are either too light to make a tactical difference, or too heavy to ensure strategic success.

A fourth limitation on the military approach relates to the sanctuary in Pakistan. As long as the militants can operate from Pakistan, and possibly receive support from Iran as well, NATO and US forces are unlikely to defeat the insurgency decisively. To eliminate the sanctuary militarily, however, means a widening of the war with attendant risks, even if the Pakistan government were to cooperate in such a venture. The alternative is to try to neutralize the sanctuary by political means by driving a wedge between the Taliban and their supporters on the Pakistan side. This option entails serious negotiations and an adjustment of policy goals.

Conclusions

Between 2001 and 2007, the United States and NATO gradually abandoned their initial commitment to a light military footprint in response to multiple pressures and interests, although without presenting a convincing rationale for why the West would be more successful than the Soviet Union had been. As the limitations and counterproductive effects of the military approach became more evident, so did divisions within the alliance over how to prioritize among combat and stabilization strategies. A minority, led by the United States, advocated more combat forces to defeat the insurgency. Most continental European NATO members were sceptical of the North American conviction that more troops for war would solve the problem, as German commentators argued when the Bush administration pressed the German government in early 2008.⁶² The experience so far suggests an even more radical conclusion – a fundamental contradiction between the stabilization and combat function in NATO's mission. It is not simply that economic and governance matters require more attention, a point on which NATO now is agreed. Rather, in so far as the Western combat role tends to undermine rather than support stabilization, an effective strategy requires a reduction of offensive operations. Recognition of this fundamental contradiction of the mission does not provide ready answers for a solution to NATO's multiple dilemmas in Afghanistan, but at least it opens the door to a critical search for alternatives.

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 51. See House of Commons (see n.29 above), p.19 and testimony to the Committee from British-American Security Information Council, accessed at www.basicint.org/about.htm.
 52. Cordesman (see n.26 above), p.36.
 53. *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p.252. The caption refers to a discussion of the use of torture but has more general validity.
 54. The point is emphasized by West Point instructor Lt.-Col. A. Nagl in his comparative analysis: *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
 55. David Rhode, 'Army Enlists Anthropology in War Zones', *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 2007.
 56. In November 2007, the American Anthropological Association issued a reminder of its guidelines regarding 'do no harm', accountability and transparency, but did not recommend non-

- engagement for individual members. The issue stirred painful memories of the use of social scientists by the US military and intelligence agencies in Latin American and Vietnam; accessed at www.aaanet.org/PM_112807.htm.
57. Sayeed Saleem Shahzad, 'Into the Lion's Den', *Asia Times Online*, 9 June 2007, accessed at www.atimes.com/atimes/south_asia/if09df01.html.
 58. Cordesman (see n.26 above), pp.5,18.
 59. See, e.g., Barnett R. Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 2007; Seth Jones, 'Averting Failure in Afghanistan', *Survival*, Vol.48, No.1, 2006; William Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, London: Hurst, 2006; Ahmed Rahid, 'Afghanistan: On the Brink', *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 2006.
 60. Giustozzi (see n.22 above).
 61. UNAMA (see n.15 above), p.6.
 62. Mariam Lau and Martin Luz, 'Mehr Soldaten am Hindukusch gibt es nicht' ['No More Soldiers for the Hindukush'], *Die Welt*, 1 Feb. 2008.