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THEO FARRELL AND STUART GORDON

This article examines Britain's capabilities and resources in Helmand Province, and assesses the high-level strategy and civilian-military inter-relationships that provide the overarching framework of current operations. In doing so, Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon analyse the British counter-insurgency approach, arguing that the UK's troops have faced and overcome unique challenges in Afghanistan.

There is a growing consensus that the British are no longer any good at counter-insurgency (COIN). The irony is that just a few years ago, senior British officers felt able to lecture the Americans (much to their annoyance), often contrasting US problems in Iraq with Britain's record of successful COIN campaigns from the end of empire.¹ Now the roles appear reversed. The US Army and Marine Corps produced a new COIN manual (FM 3-24) in December 2006 that is now in use by militaries the world over.² Informing this manual are new COIN tactics and capabilities that were developed and road-tested by US battalions in Iraq in 2005–06. Around this time, the British were beginning to lose their hold over Basra. British failure in Iraq was complete when it was left to the Iraqi Army, supported by the US military, to wrestle back control of Basra city from Shia militia in March 2008.³ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that *The Economist* should note 'a new mood of self-doubt' in the British military, citing one British general as declaring that 'we have lost our way' when it comes to small wars.⁴

The failure of Iraq casts a long shadow over the British campaign in Afghanistan.⁵ Critics routinely pair the two campaigns, concluding that both demonstrate that 'we lack the troops, wealth and stomach for anything more than the briefest conflict'.⁶ Just as the lack of will, resources and strategy undercut military operations in Iraq, so

the same dysfunctional dynamic is seen at play in Afghanistan. Hence, it is argued the British are reliant on airpower 'to blunt Taliban offensives' and that, due to the lack of commitment by non-military Whitehall agencies, efforts to develop an integrated civil-military Comprehensive Approach have been 'largely still-born'.⁷

These criticisms have significant implications for the British campaign in Afghanistan at a time when the Americans are surging an additional 20,000 troops into the south. Of these, 8,000 marines from the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) will deploy into what has been, until now, British controlled Helmand province. If the critics are to be believed, then the Americans should expect little from the British. To be sure, American expectations are low.⁸ American commanders and commentators tend to lump all the Europeans together in contrasting the American war-fighting effort with the more effete European peacekeeping contribution.⁹ Such a comparison ignores the sacrifice of the British, Danes, Dutch and Canadians, who have been involved in heavy fighting in the south for almost three years.

This article offers a more balanced assessment of the British military effort in Afghanistan by looking at three key elements in the campaign: strategy, military operations, and the inter-agency 'Comprehensive Approach'. We start by recognising the scale of the challenge that has faced the British: of all the

provinces in Afghanistan, Helmand is the toughest to stabilise and secure. We then examine the evolution of all three elements above and find significant improvements in each: a flawed strategy has been corrected; the military have received more resources and become a lot better at COIN; and there has been significant progress in the development of the inter-agency approach. In short, what the Americans will find in Helmand is a British COIN machine; a little creaky perhaps, but one that is fit for purpose and getting the job done. We briefly conclude on the prospects and the key to success: namely the development of a more coherent international strategy that accommodates the challenges posed by both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Helmand – A Tough Nut to Crack

Comparisons between the British performance in Helmand and that of the US in the east have tended to ignore the different scale of challenges in each region – making meaningful comparisons difficult. Simply put, Helmand is a far tougher nut to crack.

Admittedly, some of the challenges are common to both regions, deriving from a combination of the scale of international ambition for reform and the resistance to this from elements of Pash-tun society. At the very least, the ambition is to effect a rapid 'triple transition' in the security, political and socio-economic spheres¹⁰ but in the context of the



A Royal Marine Commando on operations in Helmand province, early 2009. *Photo courtesy of NATO.*

absence of an effective 'importing elite', a vast and unforgiving terrain, a paucity of established infrastructure and a tribally fragmented population that has little experience of central government and who are xenophobic, conservative and largely predisposed to resist foreigners. Furthermore, the idea of a strong, central state is contested and lacks legitimacy, particularly in the southern part of the Pashtun belt, and development has the potential to be portrayed as a Western plot. These challenges have been compounded by significant military difficulties: an inability to deny the home base of the insurgents, an almost inexhaustible supply of foreign jihadists and a largely ineffective and corrupt Afghan state that cannot easily address grievances.¹¹

Though the challenges in Helmand are shared by the south and east of the country, they are particularly accentuated in the province. The Helmandi economy is mobilised around criminality, corruption and networks of drugs traffickers to a far greater degree than other parts of the country. The paucity of education, lack of human capacity, and acute deficit of governance, justice

and economic each provide space for exploitation by criminals, narcotics dealers and insurgents. Moreover, significant elements of the provincial leadership and institutions are so enmeshed with criminal and insurgent interests that it is difficult to draw distinctions between legal and criminal structures – a particularly challenging situation in the context of a counter-insurgency campaign where perceptions of the state's responsiveness and legitimacy are critical to the extension of its moral and political authority.

Until the appointment of Governor Mangal in 2008, the province was administered by an ineffective and obstructive governor, Asadullah Waffa. Waffa resisted Kabul's reforms, had limited understanding of, or interest in, Afghan Government budgetary processes and suppressed the directors of line ministries (who in turn possessed little or no ability to draw funding from Kabul or manage public service or capital investment programmes). In contrast, the east benefited from more active gubernatorial leadership and national line ministries. Furthermore, the political engagement between the eastern population and provincial authorities was more vigor-

ous as several of the eastern governors actively reached out to the more marginal communities and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) played a more active political role, despite its limited capacity.

The situation in the east enjoyed other advantages. In several areas, Ghazni for example, the population was generally wealthier and better educated than Helmandis, whilst the province had a sizeable pro-government pocket of Hazaras creating a large area of permissiveness. Domestically generated economic growth (as opposed to externally generated reconstruction) in the east appeared to provide communities with a stake in the licit economy and reason to co-operate with the Afghan government. The eastern insurgency itself was also more fragmented (split between as many as fourteen groups including the Taliban, 'foreign fighter' groups loosely linked to Al-Qa'ida and the Sarajuddin Haqanni network) and enjoyed less popular legitimacy. In contrast, the Helmandi population was more sincerely supportive of the Taliban ideology and its tribal networks were more fragmented and penetrated to a

far greater degree by narcotics interests and corruption. The east's traditional community structures (tribal elders, *shuras* and other community groups) were in significantly better shape and more able to resist Taliban pressure and assert their own interests. Furthermore, throughout much of 2007 and some of 2008, the Pakistani Army's offensives in the Tribal areas diverted many of the fighters who would otherwise have engaged US forces in the east of Afghanistan. None of these advantages existed in Helmand.

British Strategy – Creating a Road Map for Success

The evolution of the UK strategy in Helmand has proceeded in two principal stages. The first was a period (from 2006 until late 2007) of adjusting an initial 'peacekeeping strategy' to the realities of Helmand. The second, beginning in early 2008, consolidated activity around the 'Helmand Road Map'.

The UK deployed troops into the south of Afghanistan in support of the plan to extend NATO's footprint from the north. In October 2005, the Cabinet Office commissioned the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU) to lead inter-departmental planning for a strategic framework encompassing both civilian and military activity in Helmand – resulting in the UK Joint Plan for Helmand. Claiming consistency with the Afghanistan Compact, the Interim Afghan National Development Strategy, the Government of Afghanistan's National Drug Control Strategy, the UK Strategic Plan for Afghanistan, NATO's ISAF strategy and the emerging Afghan Development Zone concept, it also provided a vehicle to improve the coherence of the Department for International Development (DfID), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Afghan Drugs Inter-departmental Unit (ADIDU) and Ministry of Defence (MoD) planning. It was also one of the first occasions in which three very different departments of state were able to establish an inter-departmental compact – arguably providing a greater range of strategic options and a means for developing synergies.

The UK plan, echoing the Malayan 'ink spot' strategy, focused on Lashkar

Gar, Helmand's provincial capital. It envisaged British and Afghan troops providing a framework of security sufficient for development work to slowly transform the political, social and economic fabric of the town and generate 'effects' that would spill over beyond the town itself. The transformation was to be funded with some £6 million of UK money allocated to small-scale, quick impact projects in 2006/2007 and DfID providing an additional £30 million through a multi-year rural livelihoods programme. The DfID money was to be channelled through the Afghan Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development.

However, the initial plan contained serious weaknesses. Planning developed in a virtual information vacuum compounded by Karzai's removal of the Helmandi Governor, Sher Mohammed Akhundzadha (or 'SMA'), an individual who would otherwise have been expected to have been a major interlocutor and source of information.¹² The information vacuum was compounded by Whitehall's focus on Iraq and the resultant diversion of critical assets, reducing further the access to local actors and the information that was necessary to develop more detailed implementation planning. Furthermore, the plan did not provide a clear cross-governmental blueprint for a COIN campaign, or an effective means of reconciling the COIN strategy with the counter-narcotics approach, nor did it adequately reflect the military distortions introduced by the US led Kajaki Dam project. As with most of the international community, the UK's national planning also reflected many of the assumptions of the post-Bonn period; envisaging a largely top-down, technocratic and 'apolitical' approach to state-building and neglecting the sub-national state-building agenda. However, the post-Bonn process implied a logic of co-operation between donors and Afghan leaders which presumed a shared understanding of, and commitment to, reversing state failure and managing reconstruction in the interests of all. Many Afghan elites, however, did not share that diagnosis of state failure and the state-building objectives; seeking instead to maximise the potential benefits accruing to them from the political, financial and military

resources that flowed from Kabul.

The UK plan was derailed almost from the outset. By mid-June 2006 the removal of SMA had created a power vacuum and elements of the Taliban and the narcotics barons harnessed what amounted to a popular uprising against the remnants of SMA's regime in northern Helmand. Governor Daoud (SMA's replacement) and President Karzai placed considerable pressure on the UK to re-establish control – making British commanders painfully aware of Karzai's view that he could lose the presidency if the northern districts of Helmand were to fall. Despite having little more than a battle group (initially around 500 infantry), the UK deployed units into the beleaguered towns of Sangin, Now Zad and Musa Qaleh, beginning what became known as the 'platoon house' strategy.

The deployment met unexpectedly fierce resistance from the Taliban, who massed conventional forces to drive out the British. The British clung on grimly, withstanding siege and near constant attack until in October 2006 the task force commander, Brigadier Ed Butler, negotiated a controversial arrangement with local tribal leaders. In exchange for guarantees that the Taliban would be prevented from retaking the town of Musa Qaleh, the British withdrew. Predictably, the Taliban retook the town in February 2007.

However, the British military presence in Musa Qaleh had been untenable almost from the outset. With insufficient troops to deter Taliban attacks, British weakness encouraged both direct Taliban assaults and increased the British reliance on defensive airstrikes. Not only was the resulting collateral damage deeply unpopular with the civilian population, the Taliban also portrayed the British presence as supporting an unpopular leader, SMA. The strategy had other deleterious side effects. The serious deterioration in security during the summer of 2006 contributed to a difficult debate in Whitehall over whether the UK was 'on' plan. Assessments of the security situation grew increasingly pessimistic and the focus on the fighting in the north of Helmand combined with the growth in the Taliban's use of asymmetric tactics to affect both DfID and

the FCO's willingness to send staff – both because of the inherent security threat and the sense that the environment was not conducive to development work. This further slowed the build up of civilian capacity in the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and reduced the military's capacity to translate tactical military success into more enduring results.

Regaining the Momentum

While in theory the British approach was more 'comprehensive' than that of the Americans, at least in terms of harnessing foreign, defence and development ministries to a common plan, the first two years were characterised by considerable difficulties in making the model work. The original UK plan envisaged a 'top-down' and largely 'apolitical' state-building strategy that failed to adequately take into account Helmand's dangerous volatility, the nature of Afghan political society, and the paucity of implementing partners willing to operate in such an insecure environment; and it seriously underplayed the mechanisms and resources necessary to focus and integrate the relevant civilian lines of operation within a COIN plan. This resulted in nearly eighteen months of strategic drift in which much of the UK's overall effort dissipated and the assumptions underpinning the original UK plan increasingly broke down.

2007 saw a significant increase in British forces in Afghanistan. British commanders began to focus on more effectively developing the capabilities and techniques for COIN, and on aligning military and development activities. Supporting this more focused and capable military effort was the development of a detailed operational level plan. This emerged in the autumn of 2007, when 52 Brigade's deployment coincided with the arrival of a team from the then PCRU; the new brigade and PCRU team agreed to jointly produce the 'Helmand Road Map'. The Road Map was fashioned around elements of 52 Brigade's Operational Design and Operational Plan. Hence it reflected what the military wanted to achieve and the scale of UK resources, but it also built on the lessons learned by the British PRT in the preceding two

years. This bottom-up initiative coincided with a change of prime minister in the UK and a renewed emphasis by Whitehall on Afghanistan – creating space for a policy refresh. It also coincided with the arrival of a charismatic and influential ambassador, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, who shepherded the plan through the pitfalls of Whitehall.

'We have lost our way' when it comes to small wars

The Road Map set out a broad range of security, counter-narcotics, development and governance objectives, reflecting existing UK, NATO and Government of Afghanistan policy frameworks and resulting in a more detailed plan than the original 'UK Joint Plan for Helmand'. However, the latter's legacy was clear, with the Road Map combining the former's 'top-down' state-building approach with significant efforts to stimulate local governance structures and enhancements to their capacity to draw down national programmes and the work of line ministries. It envisaged stabilisation and political advisers being deployed into the Forward Operating Bases and working with district authorities and local communities to build their trust in government and to sponsor the growth of community based structures with which formal government could link. The underlying intent was to channel political dialogue, largely defined in terms of the voicing of community aspirations and grievances, through political channels maintained by the provincial authorities. This meant focusing the UK security effort on supporting the disruption and containment of the military threat posed by the Taliban and creating a space for collaboration between the Afghan authorities and the key populations of Helmand. The dialogue was to be led by the Afghan Provincial Authorities and underwritten by their timely delivery of critical but basic public services – principally security, health, education and some rural infrastructure work. This would be augmented by the UK's support to key ministries in order to create a government that was increas-

ingly responsive and able to deliver visibly against key expectations in the major population centres. Delivery of the Road Map depended on a better resourced and more effective British military and civil-military effort. Fortunately here too, there have been significant improvements.

More Resources, Less Fighting

The British military campaign in Helmand has evolved from one centred on hard military power and directed at destroying the Taliban, to one focused on generating 'soft effects' and securing the civilian population. Here too we see two phases in the Helmand campaign: an initial phase from May 2006 to September 2007 where the main effort involved major combat operations against the Taliban, followed by a second phase since October 2007 where the main effort has involved stabilisation operations to secure and develop urban centres.

The military campaign started badly. Under-strength and slow to arrive (taking three months to deploy the full task force of just over 3,000), 16 Brigade lacked the necessary momentum. The force was promptly augmented by another 1,500 troops in response to the ferocity of Taliban resistance. It should be noted that the British military was not alone in underestimating the Taliban response. The Danes rushed special forces into theatre to support the battle group they had embedded in the British task force, and the neighbouring Canadians promptly reinforced their task force with Leopard 1C2 main battle tanks. As noted, under immense pressure from Karzai and Whitehall to support Governor Daoud, the British adopted a platoon house strategy which, though causing considerable attrition to Taliban forces, made little strategic progress. Much to the fury of the US head of Regional Command (South), Major General Ben Freakley, practically the entire British task force was stuck defending towns from Taliban attack, and hence the British were unable to contribute forces to support the RC (South) scheme of manoeuvre.¹³

Evolving the Concept of Operations

In October 2006, 3 Commando Brigade

took over from 16 Brigade with a very different concept of operations (CONOPS). The Marines were determined not to be 'fixed' by enemy action but rather to go on the offensive. To this end, 3 Commando created a number of Mobile Operations Groups (MOGs) – 250 strong flying columns in forty vehicles (a mix of Vikings and Land Rovers) – tasked with seeking out and engaging the Taliban. The idea was to disrupt and defeat the Taliban but they proved too wily to be drawn by the MOGs into prepared kill zones. Instead the MOGs had to 'advance to ambush' to engage the Taliban on their own terms.¹⁴ Moreover, as the brigade's main effort was concentrated on military defeat of the enemy, little progress was made on stabilisation and development.

Greater military resources were committed to the British campaign with the deployment of 12 Mechanised Brigade in April 2007. In addition to having more troops, 12 Mechanised was far better equipped than its predecessors: it deployed with Warrior infantry fighting vehicles and the new Mastiff armoured vehicles, as well as two GMLRS (Guided Multiple Rocket Launch System) batteries. With 12 Brigade, there was also a return to the original UK plan. Indeed, whereas Brigadier Butler felt cut out from the drafting of the Joint Helmand Plan which he had been given to implement, the commander of 12 Brigade, Brigadier John Lorimer, had been on the PJHQ team that helped draft it. Hence 12 Brigade's CONOPS followed the 'ink-spot strategy' of the original plan – namely to secure the Green Zone,¹⁵ focusing on the triangle formed by the towns of Lashkar Gah, Gereshk, and Sangin. However, 12 Brigade ended up pursuing an attrition campaign against the Taliban. It sought to secure the countryside between these towns through a series of 'clearance operations'. These involved many pitched battles which the Taliban lost to an ever-rising body count. However, territory was not held afterwards, and so the Taliban were able to return once the British had departed. The lack of real progress led a frustrated Brigadier Lorimer to reflect that it felt rather like 'mowing the lawn'.¹⁶

The military campaign changed direction with 52 Brigade in October

2007. Borrowing from FM 3-24, the brigade's CONOPS was 'clear, hold, build'. In contrast, 12 Brigade had done little holding and no building. Moreover, 52 Brigade's Operational Design conceptualised the campaign centre of gravity in terms of the local population instead of the enemy's will and ability to fight. Indeed, for the new task force commander, Brigadier Andrew Mackay, the Taliban body count was a 'corrupt measure of success'.¹⁷ Accordingly, 52 Brigade's campaign focused on influence operations to win the consent of the population and developed new capabilities for influence operations, including company level Non-kinetic Effects Teams, and a new methodology, the Tactical Conflict Assessment Framework (TCAF), to target non-kinetic activities and measure their effectiveness.

This population-centric strategy continued under 16 Brigade on its second tour in Helmand from April to October 2008. This time under the command of Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, the brigade's CONOPS was to 'go deep not broad'. Hence the British Task Force focused on protecting urban centres, and on developing the Afghan government's influence and authority in those areas that realistically could be secured and held. In terms of the enemy, the focus was on undermining Taliban influence rather than fighting their forces. Like their predecessor, 16 Brigade strove to achieve an appropriate mix of kinetic and non-kinetic activities which was coordinated by a civil-military Joint Targeting Board. 16 Brigade did not continue with TCAF, but it did develop its own capabilities for soft effects – such as Radio Hewad. TCAF has since been readopted by the British and is currently in use by 19 Brigade in Helmand. It has also been adopted by the US military and will be used by the 2nd MEB when they deploy into theatre.

What we see over the period 2006–09 then are major improvements in the planning and conduct of the British COIN campaign in Helmand. It is tempting to find a very simple dynamic at play: that the British re-learn old tricks. Indeed, the historical record supports this. Almost all of Britain's past COIN campaigns started poorly – excessive force, poor

intelligence, no influence operations – and came good only when the British re-learned and applied the principles of COIN. But we would suggest a more complex interaction of factors.

For a start, the British were able to focus more on stabilisation and development activities from early 2008 because the Taliban lost the will and ability to continue major combat operations in Helmand. In 2006–07, Taliban forces suffered considerable attrition in heavy fighting with 16, 3 and 12 Brigades. British Defence Intelligence puts the number of Taliban dead in the thousands (though some British commanders have expressed doubts at such high figures). It is clear, however, that since early 2008 the Taliban have switched from conventional to asymmetric tactics as their primary mode of warfare. Most casualties in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are now caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Not only are the Taliban slower to engage in formation assaults on ISAF forces, when they do attack in numbers it is clear that there has been a decline in Taliban combat field craft: the inference being that experienced fighters lost in 2006–07 are being replaced by novices.

Of all the provinces in Afghanistan, Helmand is the toughest to stabilise and secure

Just as Taliban capabilities had retarded by early 2008, so Afghan National Army (ANA) capabilities were improving. The ANA grew from around 50,000 in 2007 to almost 80,000 in 2008.¹⁸ Moreover, the ANA increased its capability to conduct battalion-level operations; 30 per cent of ANA battalions could do so with the support of international forces by December 2006, rising to 44 per cent by December 2007 and 62 per cent by December 2008.¹⁹ The situation in Helmand reflected this national trend especially in terms of the capabilities of ANA battalions. Accordingly, the British task forces have been increasingly able to integrate the ANA into their campaign. This is

critical to building ANA confidence and capabilities to take over the security role and enabling the eventual withdrawal of ISAF. Thus we see a progression from using ANA to backfill areas secured by the British to – from late 2007 on – the partnering of ANA battalions with British battle groups and the ANA being given their own independent area of operations within Helmand.²⁰

Better Kit, Better Support

Another important factor is that the campaign received more support and resources, especially as the British government shifted its strategic focus on Iraq to Afghanistan. Hence British troop numbers more than doubled between late 2006 and late 2007, peaking in 2008 at just over 8,500 (see Table 1). Equally significant has been the better equipping of task forces from 12 Brigade onwards. Much of this additional kit has been acquired as an Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR). The British soldier has also received around twenty enhancements (new rifle sights, body armour, night-goggles, etc). One key new capability, the Mastiff, was originally acquired for Iraq within five months under the UOR scheme; some of these units were redirected to Afghanistan. Delivery of a larger purchase for Afghanistan is taking longer due to a complex refitting of the vehicle to meet campaign-specific specifications combined with limitations on industry's ability to meet demand. In October the defence secretary announced a £500 million 'Protected Mobility Package' providing an additional 500 armoured tactical patrol and support vehicles for operations in Afghanistan.

There has also been better support to brigades preparing for deployment. Whereas 16 and 3 Brigades were given poorly modified versions of the training package designed for Iraq, from 12 Brigade on, the Operational Training and Advisory Group had produced a bespoke (and favourably received) package for Afghanistan. Better training has undoubtedly contributed to the learning process, as will the new collective debrief methodology introduced by the Land Warfare Centre in 2008. The Afghanistan campaign is also finally being supported by new doctrine: the army published its updated COIN field manual in April 2009, and the new British joint doctrine on stabilisation operations (JDP 3-40) is due out shortly.

This is not to say that the British military campaign in Helmand is perfect. British commanders show a keen awareness of the damage, especially to local confidence and support, caused by air strikes. Yet the British task force has not managed to reduce the number of air strikes – which remained at 500–540 air strikes for each brigade between April 2007 and March 2009 – despite the introduction of GMLRS. Indeed, equally striking is that demand for GMLRS has increased over this period. However, greater use of GMLRS is still an improvement as other options would likely have been higher yield and air dropped. A second problem is the shortage of helicopters, which is a major complaint in successive post-operations reports by campaign commanders. The nature of the evolving threat on the ground, coupled with the challenging terrain, means that helicopter flying hours will always be at a premium. Since 2006,

improvements (admittedly much needed from the early days) have delivered a 30 per cent increase in flying hours. Furthermore, using UOR procurement, technical improvements have been made to several aircraft, which lacked optimal performance 'hot and high'. The situation will further improve following the withdrawal of British forces from Basra, when seven Merlin helicopters are to be moved from Iraq to Afghanistan.

Finally, the British campaign has lacked continuity of command with a new Helmand Task Force commander arriving every six months. This, as much as lessons learned, has resulted in each task force pursuing a different campaign design from its predecessor. It has actually given a degree of agility to the British campaign, and enabled it to adapt to a dynamic strategic environment (for example, Taliban attrition and growing ANA capability). Nonetheless, more continuity of command would be desirable and proposals are now under consideration in the MoD to achieve this (including longer tours for key staff positions). In sum, there can be no doubt that the military side of the campaign has improved substantially since 2006.

The Comprehensive Approach

The third (if more modest) improvement is in linking cross-government efforts in what the MoD labels the 'comprehensive approach' – essentially an offshoot of the 'joined up government'²² agenda introduced by Tony Blair in 1997. In practice both concepts have meant co-ordinating the work of a disparate flotilla of agencies, departments, units and professions, and overcoming contradictory departmental imperatives. The UK experience of operationalising this in Helmand is testimony to the difficulties involved in developing even a common sense of 'mission' that is able to bind the activities of the departments. Nevertheless, the MoD has been particularly enthusiastic about 'comprehensive' working – reflecting changes in the department's understanding of the complex origins of 'conflict', its experience of operations in the Balkans and subsequently the War on Terror, and ultimately debates relating to the transformation of the military itself (particu-

Table 1: British troop numbers in Afghanistan²¹

Task force Brigade	Date	Size
16 Air Assault Brigade	April – Oct 2006	3,150 (4,500)
3 Commando Brigade	Oct 2006 – April 2007	5,200
12 Mechanised Brigade	April – Oct 2007	6,500
52 Brigade	Oct 2007 – April 2008	7,750
16 Air Assault Brigade	April – Oct 2008	8,530
3 Commando Brigade	Oct 2008 – April 2009	8,300

larly the emergence of the Effects Based Approach to Operations).

Poverty Reduction versus National Interest

While the MoD's appetite for comprehensive working had reached a high point by 2006, there were marked differences between the departments, particularly DfID and the FCO. Neither had career incentives for working in what the MoD termed 'expeditionary environments', but in the case of DfID the issues ran much deeper, reflecting a department configured around a 'poverty reduction' rather than a traditional 'national interest' agenda. DfID's focus on poverty reduction in support of the UN's Millennium Development Goals were enshrined in legislation (the 2002 International Development Act (IDA)) and militated against the type of co-operation presumed by many within the MoD. Development best practice also warned against seeking to use money as a 'weapon system' – highlighting the potential to undermine peace and the beneficiary state, to create perverse incentives, and to reinforce the war economy. Whilst there was good evidence to support the DfID position, the assumptions made by some within the MoD were voiced more powerfully, and in the context of wars in which UK servicemen were losing their lives, DfID found it difficult to make their arguments stick.

DfID's capacity to articulate the risks of the MoD approach was further undermined by a sense among some military officers that the organisation preferred to work *around* conflict rather than *on* it. In 2002 it had largely disengaged from planning for the invasion of Iraq, reflecting a widespread opposition to the conflict within DfID and stemming from the attitudes of the secretary of state, Clare Short, but also reflecting the culture of large parts of the department as a whole. DfID's creation and rapid expansion in 1997 had led to heavy recruitment from the NGO sector – a community that was unlikely to favour the type of robust interventionism evident in Iraq. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of DfID's budget since 1997 placed considerable pressure on the organisation in

terms of ensuring effective programme management. The rather elegant solution, and one which again reflected best practice amongst donor states, was to pour money through multilateral partners and national state structures, building beneficiary state capacity in more sustainable ways than the direct delivery of public services by donors. However, elements of the military laboured under the assumption that development workers carried out rather than funded or supported capacity building strategies. Meanwhile DfID staff argued, and with considerable justification, that since 2004 they had invested in the PCRU (renamed the 'Stabilisation Unit' in 2007) to deliver the type of conflict stabilisation work that middle ranking officers within the MoD expected. This became an unnecessary source of tension from 2006.

The idea of a strong, central state is contested and lacks legitimacy

The FCO also struggled with operationalising 'joined up' approaches in theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Configured around delivering what could be termed 'strategic diplomacy', it found it difficult to find appropriately experienced staff as well as structures and strategies that could deliver the type of local level diplomatic engagement necessitated by the tribal politics of both conflicts.

Smoothering the Path of Civilian–Military Integration

There were also significant differences over precisely what the civilian role should be, particularly in relation to the setting and supporting of operational priorities in Helmand. Middle-ranking military complained vocally that DfID's activities were too long-term and distant to have sufficient visibility or impact in Helmand, while more senior military frequently conceptualised the civilian role in terms of delivering a form of development based 'backfill', designed to enable and improve military operations. In such a model the military defined the operational priorities and objectives, and civilians were expected to provide a

form of reconstruction 'follow on force'. The civilian ministries chafed against this approach, arguing that this could not be further from the intention of the military's own model of a politically-led COIN campaign. DfID staff also questioned a strategy that simplistically linked the construction of Afghan infrastructure by international donors (and military) to the consolidation of an Afghan state. The largely kinetic character of the British COIN campaign in 2006–07 also gave DfID and FCO reason to question the military's understanding of, and commitment to, broader stabilisation and development operations. The UK civilians in theatre did gradually develop a capacity for 'political leadership' at the operational level, although until 2008 the pace of change was hamstrung by difficulties in getting high quality civil servants to Helmand, and a reluctance to deploy them in the military forward operating bases.

Against this most unpromising background of clashing institutional cultures and imperatives, there has been remarkable progress in the level of civilian effort and civil-military integration in Helmand. PRT civilian staff numbers have grown from around twenty-five in 2007 to eighty in 2009. Moreover, in late 2008, the task force headquarters and the PRT were merged into a combined Civil-Military Mission in Helmand (CMMH) which is led by an FCO civilian 'two-star'. Also by 2008, the PRT had stabilisation advisers deployed in four forward operating bases across Helmand (Gereshk, Musa Qaleh, Garmsir and Sangin) and the military had established 'Military Stabilisation Support Teams' in the key districts to significantly extend the reach and capability of the 'civil effect' – which is now limited by the 'reformability' of Afghan society rather than the number of deployed British civilians.

Prospects and Challenges

There is some scope to be optimistic for the near future. The UK military has made significant advances in terms of enhancing its capabilities and approach to COIN, and of working with civilian partners to stabilise and develop Helmand. Moreover, the new Obama strategy (unveiled on 27 March 2009) promises increased numbers of US troops and civilian advisers.

ers, more development cash, reinvigorated regional diplomacy and a more sophisticated strategy towards Pakistan. There are other significant changes: the piecemeal policies for pursuing insurgents into Pakistan appear to have given way to a more coherent and expansive programme for actively stabilising the Pakistani state, whilst there is a renewed emphasis on speeding the deployment of capable Afghan security forces, extending the legitimacy of the Afghan state and facilitating grass roots employment generation, rather than mass infrastructure 'reconstruction'. There also appears to be more focus, conditionality and coherence in the assistance promised both to Afghanistan and Pakistan and greater levels of support to an Afghan led programme of political outreach to

'reconcilable' Pashtuns.

The arrival of many thousands of US Marines in Helmand in June 2009 will make a big difference to the ISAF campaign in the province. But there remain the perennial challenges to progress: ISAF's lack of 'unity of effort' and the smothering impact of Afghan national politics, the narcotics industry, corruption and the dysfunctionality of the state itself. The Obama strategy is also far from being a panacea. Whilst we recognise that a substantial element of the US troop surge is deployed to train Afghan forces – 'leveraging' Afghan capacity – and that garrisoning large numbers of foreign troops has the potential to aggravate Pashtun xenophobia, we wonder whether the increased US troop numbers are enough given the

challenges of stabilising Afghanistan. The Obama strategy reflects perhaps more Vice President Joe Biden's efforts to develop a *counter-terrorism* mission, than the more expansive and resource heavy *counter-insurgency* approach. While Obama himself has endorsed the idea of 'counter-insurgency' as the concept at the heart of his new strategy, the military resource levels are perhaps closer to those necessary for a far more limited counter-terrorism strategy. ■

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NOTES

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- 3 Warren Chin, 'Why Did It All Go Wrong? Reassessing British Counterinsurgency in Iraq,' *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Winter 2008), pp. 119–135.
- 4 'Britain's Armed Forces: Losing Their Way', *The Economist*, 29 January 2009, <http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13022177>, accessed 29 May 2009.
- 5 The British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, recently noted 'that our national and military reputation and credibility, unfairly or not, has been called into question at several levels in the eyes of our most important ally as a result of some aspects of the Iraq campaign'; General Sir Richard Dannatt, 'A Perspective on the Nature of Future Conflict', CGS Speech to Chatham House, London, 15 May 2009.
- 6 Michael Portillo, 'Britain has Lost the Stomach for a Fight', *The Sunday Times*, 21 December 2008.
- 7 David Betz and Anthony Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', *Orbis* (Spring 2009), p. 326, p. 329.
- 8 See comments by General Dan McNeill (Rtd) and Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl (Rtd) in *Dispatches – Afghanistan: Mission Impossible?*, Channel 4, 6 April 2009.
- 9 See for example: Joseph J Collins, 'Transition Strategy: Regaining the Initiative in Afghanistan: Faltered but not Fallen', *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 January 2009, <<http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/01/3846067>>, accessed 29 May 2009.
- 10 James K Boyce, 'Unpacking Aid', *Development and Change* (Vol. 33, No. 2, 2002), pp. 239–246.
- 11 Gilbert Greenal, Evidence to the House of Commons Sub Committee, Ev. 92, para. 3.6.2.
- 12 SMA was removed by President Karzai under pressure from the UK. He was heavily immersed in the Helmand drugs trade and was alleged to have been involved in serious human rights abuses.
- 13 James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets* (Bantham Press, 2008), pp. 164–165.
- 14 Ewen Southby-Tailyour, *3 Commando Brigade, Helmand, Afghanistan* (London: Ebury Press, 2008), pp. 77–78.
- 15 The Green Zone is the agricultural area that runs along the Helmand River, on which lie the main towns in Helmand.
- 16 Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite: The Explosive True Story of an Afghan Desert Siege* (Viking, 2009), pp. 61–65.
- 17 Commander British Forces, Operation Herrick 7, 'Counterinsurgency in Helmand, Task Force Operational Design', TFH/COMD/DO7, 1 January 2008, p. 2.
- 18 Jason H Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post 9/11 Afghanistan*, Brookings Institution, 19 May 2009, p. 12, Figure 1.15, <<http://www.brookings.edu/foreign-policy/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf>>, accessed 29 May 2009.
- 19 ISAF Metrics Brief, 2007-2008, UNCLASS // REL USA ISAF NATO, Slide 8.
- 20 By mid 2007, there were five ANA battalions deployed in Helmand.
- 21 Data from ISAF Troops Placemat archive, <<http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.html>>, accessed 29 May 2009.
- 22 The term was first used by Tony Blair when he launched the Social Exclusion Unit in 1997.