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Afghanistan needs our Air power not our ‘boots on the ground’

By

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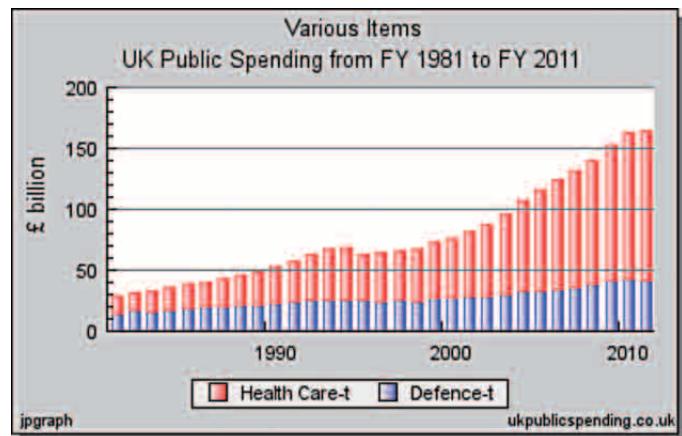
Introduction

Air power supporters spend a disproportionate amount of their time defending the independence of air forces, or explaining why air power may not have delivered success as quickly as some had believed possible. As a consequence of this unnecessarily defensive mindset, those who present air power solutions to operational challenges face a difficult audience, particularly when the options proposed promote the use of air power over other forms of arms. Most commentators tend to view the success of air power in a binary fashion: it either succeeds or fails. After Kosovo, where Milosevic's intransigence exposed the politicians' over-optimistic expectations of the effects of a short air campaign, the 'boots on the ground' mantra re-emerged; the argument that you cannot win any conflict without soldiers on the ground became prevalent, oft repeated and, to many, an intuitively obvious truth. Other arms of the Services, it seems, are afforded more time to achieve success before being adjudged unfavourably. As we approach the ninth anniversary of our involvement in Afghanistan, it is pertinent to be reminded of the words of General Sir David Richards, Chief of the General Staff: "I believe that the UK will be committed to Afghanistan in some manner — development, governance, security sector reform — for the next 30 to 40 years".¹ However, his more recent comment that "... we expect the military conflict to trail off in 2011"², suggests that he anticipates a reducing military presence in the next few years. Operation HERRICK is a Joint campaign, extensively supported by Air, and while the media coverage focuses on 'land battles' and the counter-insurgency campaign, Air is given relatively little credit. It is perhaps too easily forgotten that air power is our asymmetric advantage in Afghanistan and that, when western land forces have been withdrawn, air

power could remain to ensure that the hard-won gains are not easily lost to the insurgents. This paper aims to provide a timely reminder that we are unlikely to win this campaign by putting more NATO 'boots on the ground', and that a long-term solution will only be found by giving the Afghans the means of providing their own security. However, it is likely that this will only be achieved with the continued use of allied air power and that, while this campaign is not typical of all conflicts, the importance of gaining and maintaining control of the air, however costly, is an essential prerequisite for success. Nonetheless, before developing the argument, it would first be apposite to remind ourselves of the financial constraints that will be acting as a back-drop to any Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that will occur over the remainder of the year.

Strategic Defence and Security Review Implications

Whilst other areas of public spending have grown since 1980, such as Health Care, Defence spending has fallen as a proportion of Government spending. The pressure on the next government to reduce the large



national debt, caused predominantly by the financial crisis, is likely to result in some 'hard choices'. Though Defence is now resourced at a significantly lower level than Health, Education and Welfare, many commentators anticipate

that it will take a disproportionate share of the necessary pain.

UK Governments tend to opine that the MoD is an inefficient organisation and assume that cuts are achievable, forgetting that the 'can do' military ethos affords efficiencies unimaginable elsewhere in the public sector. While it is essential that Defence is able to support government defined policy and respond to future threats, CGS and CAS have offered alternative solutions to support future defence needs.

Competition for Defence Resources

The Defence Secretary reminded us that Afghanistan must continue to be our main effort in the period ahead.³ The joint statement from PUS and CDS 'Strategy for Defence' requires planning within Defence to be '... based on the assumption of a rolling three-year military commitment to Afghanistan, reviewed annually.⁴ In attempting to match planned activity with the resources available, there is an obvious danger that strategic requirements become subordinate to resource management, and that the Commanders Strategic Intent may not be achievable due to lack of money. Indeed, the resultant internecine tension between the services in the run up to the SDSR clearly demonstrates that remaining operationally relevant is critical to survival. Being the main force in the main effort is seen, by many, as the way to guarantee that available resources are allocated along lines of 'natural selection'. In this context, the British army has seized on the opportunity presented in Afghanistan to take centre stage.



The Chief of the General Staff explained⁵ that he sought a changed methodology for defence

procurement; one that acknowledges the new strategic and economic environment, with less emphasis on 'hugely expensive equipment', such as air power capabilities that have been traditionally necessary to defend our national interests.

His argument has been that Defence has still not come to terms with the Post Cold War reality and that we should react to the communications revolution that presents the greatest threat to the future. Indeed, he argued that by '...reducing investment in higher-end war-fighting capability, suddenly one can buy an impressive amount of kit...' and that '...one can buy a lot of UAVs or Tucano aircraft for the cost of a few JSF and heavy tanks.' He reiterated the need for mass, although he acknowledged that it would be expensive too: '...[o]perating among, understanding and effectively influencing people requires mass - numbers - whether this is 'boots on the ground', riverine and high speed littoral warships, or UAVs, transport aircraft and helicopters.'



In contrast the Chief of the Air Staff has argued that Afghan model may not fit future scenarios and that Combat ISTAR could satisfy the needs of the current conflict, whilst allowing flexibility to switch to other, more complex, scenarios against technically and militarily proficient adversaries.⁶ With Afghanistan the main effort and UK forces' effort shifting 'increasingly from combat to enabling Afghan forces to take responsibility for security'⁷ what different activities, if any, from the methodology adopted since the entry of the British Army into Helmand in 2004, should be accelerated to

deliver campaign success?

The Population may be the Prize ... but

In his operational design for counterinsurgency in Helmand Brigadier Andrew Mackay explained that there were active minorities supporting both the government and the insurgents.⁸ He noted that '...to be successful we must influence the uncommitted middle who make up the majority and which contains passive supports of both sides.'⁹ How do we do this effectively? One essential element is that we are able to understand how to influence the local population.

Despite a huge intelligence organisation inside and outside Afghanistan, "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan,"¹⁰ notes that intelligence-gathering systems are '...ignorant of local economics and landowners, hazy about who the power brokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the levels of co-operation among villagers, and disengaged from the people in the best position to find answers.' From a planning perspective failure to understand our adversaries in Afghanistan affects our ability to attack the insurgents' centre of gravity. Whilst many consider the strategic centre of gravity to be ISAF's ability to affect the will of the Afghan people in order that they lend their support to the Afghan government, it is uncertain whether our intelligence communities have been asking the right questions or have answers to the questions that should have been asked.



Nad 'Ali 'super-shura'
28 April 2010

The majority of the Afghan population appear



to be undecided whether to support their government or the insurgents; however, it is likely that while ISAF forces are regarded as 'foreigners', the insurgents are generally considered to be 'of the people'. Despite the increasing number of Western ground forces, a Pentagon report to Congress, released in April assessed that the population '... sympathizes with or supports the Afghan government...' in only 24% of the key parts of Afghanistan.¹¹ Our strategy of putting more western 'boots on the ground' is therefore only likely to be counter-productive, especially in the longer term.

Furthermore, whilst ISAF forces are bound by the laws of armed conflict, the insurgents thrive by ignoring them, and this often appears to give them a comparative advantage. The insurgents are adept at articulating falsehoods, for instance that ISAF air power indiscriminately kills civilians, while the insurgents largely escape censure despite encouraging suicide bombers to kill coalition forces, even if civilians are nearby. While only 20% of civilian casualties are attributable to air power incidents, the perception is that the majority are caused by air-related collateral damage and that Air is a 'blunt instrument of power'.¹² COM ISAF General McChrystal's tactical ROE directive aims to reduce civilian causalities in order to help gain the support of the population, but there is little doubt that incidents, such as the death of 27 civilian casualties in late February, continue to create tension between ISAF and the Afghan government and its population.¹³ However, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) statistics show that 67% of civilian casualties were the result of insurgent action. While this is in breach of a 'code of conduct' issued by supreme leader

Mullah Omar, in July 2009, which instructed Taliban fighters to win over the civilian population and avoid civilian casualties, the message that civilian deaths are primarily the fault of the foreigners is one that Afghan society appears ready to accept. The enemy are waging a successful information operations campaign that focuses on the collateral damage caused by Air, and which highlights the indigenous dislike of foreign culture, foreign ethics and foreign religion; this approach makes long-term support for the insurgent cause credible to large elements of the Afghan population. It also makes it difficult for western forces to be successful in bringing the Afghan people 'over to our side'. However, this attempt to undermine the use of air power only indicates the fear and regard with which it is held by the insurgents; they know that the air represents our asymmetric advantage and that it is in their best interests to undermine its use at any turn.



The argument of demonstrating our intention to win 'hearts and minds' is often put forward in an attempt to justify our western 'boots on the ground'; however, it is arguable that any positive benefit is fleeting. Moreover, Anthony King suggests that in an effort to seize the initiative the British Army's decision to operate from dispersed operating bases, driven by the resources available, has stymied the requisite concentration of force necessary to achieve lasting dominance and security from within, from which influence and, ultimately, support for the Afghan government institutions could be garnered.¹⁴ Indeed, he suggests that '...[s]uccessive commanders have not identified what is most vital to the long-term success of

the campaign but have been driven into high-intensity forms of military activity by a professional need to do something decisive during their tours.' He also noted that '...[c]ommanders had to be seen to be doing something appropriately military, even if their actions have not contributed to – or have even jeopardized – long-term goals.' Patrolling does not necessarily *clear* ground for a sufficiently long period of time to have lasting effects; it is tautological that not staying does not *hold* the ground - and without being able to clear and hold ground it is very difficult to *build* trust, institutions or influence the population in a manner that leads them to support the Afghan government. Little wonder General Richards thinks it will take a long time before the necessary security is delivered to enable support for Afghan government institutions to grow.

The Way Forward in Afghanistan – Expediting the ANA option

The UK believes a whole government approach is required in order to leverage support from the population towards the Afghan government and away from the insurgents; this is the agreed single vision articulated throughout the UK Information Strategy. It stated that '...[t]he narrative needs to be carefully crafted to strengthen intervening forces' legitimacy and build the authority of the indigenous government. Such a narrative must resonate with the local population – using their words and imagery to tap into deep cultural undercurrents – and provide a counter to insurgent propaganda in the battle for the support of the people.'¹⁵ However, it does not necessarily follow that western forces have to be the ones to deliver that narrative. General Karl Eikenberry recognised air power had what he called an 'asymmetric advantage' over the insurgents, so that '...no matter where they choose to fight, coalition forces can bring to bear overwhelming firepower in a matter of minutes.'¹⁶ Therefore, given that air power is our comparative advantage and 'not being of the people' is our comparative disadvantage, could the removal of the vast majority of non-Afghan land forces and the retention or, if necessary the expansion of, air power enable the Afghan government to concentrate host-

nation ground forces in targeted areas to dominate the environment and provide the security necessary to influence the population?

Allowing the Afghan National Army (ANA) to take over the burden of protection and security chimes with the long-term government strategy and the current ISAF Mission to '...support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces.'¹⁷ However, it is accepted that correctly judging when the ANA will be *ready* is fundamentally important. If the ANA is too weak the insurgents could defeat it on the ground, have further negative influence on the population, and eventually destabilize the Afghan government. The latest iteration of the ANA was formed after the fall of the Taliban in December 2002. It has already grown to a force of over 108,000 and aims to grow to at least 171,000; in terms of numbers it is already as big as the British Army now and will soon be larger. Though some question the desertion, corruption and fighting ability of the ANA, its training has been delivered by thousands of American, British and NATO soldiers and it has a significantly better reputation than the Afghan National Police. The real question, perhaps, is at what stage will the ANA be a sufficiently coherent force to be capable of countering a determined insurgency? If the analysis suggests it will never be ready, there is little point continuing to support an Afghan government that is unlikely to survive without open-ended support from foreign military land and air forces. Western democracies cannot guarantee foreign military support for Afghanistan in perpetuity. The Chief of the Air Staff recently commented that'...the [British] populace... may now be convinced that military operations are prohibitively expensive in every sense: politically, financially and in human terms. The press and public reaction to the casualties suffered during Operation Panther's Claw in July and August this year, and the media focus on Wooton Bassett, and the continuing actual and potential impact of coroners' inquests all illustrate the point amply.'¹⁸

In the face of an insurgent campaign that seeks to maximise our forces casualties the concept of 'courageous restraint'¹⁹ is something the public may find increasingly difficult to accept.

Given this dynamic, the ANA must be made ready as soon as possible to take ownership of its countries internal security and relieve any democratic pressure for western withdrawal.

If we are to help the Afghans build Afghan institutions supported by the Afghan people, we should promote the use of an increasing number of Afghan soldiers on the ground, and do so as quickly as possible. With the ANA acting as the Afghan face of the Afghan government, without the assistance of large foreign forces on the ground, the population would have a clearer choice between the Afghan government and the insurgents – the 'foreign' dynamic would be removed. However, by continuing to support the Afghan forces with air power, provided by ISAF, the Afghan government would maintain an asymmetric advantage over the insurgents. It has been possible to successfully train Afghan helicopter pilots, and therefore should be equally possible to effectively train Afghan forward air controllers and the teams necessary to run the operations centres necessary to coordinate joint fires. Ultimately, the Afghans would have a significant degree of responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of positive identification and collateral damage decisions before weapons were dropped from the air. It would perhaps be no bad thing for the Afghan authorities to 'own the bomb', and the population would be given a clearer choice between government and insurgent, albeit one where the government had a clear advantage over the insurgent.

The very facelessness of air power, allied to the obvious option to rely on Afghan Forward Air Controllers, under Afghan ROE, working from an Afghan Theatre Operations Centre would mean that the vast majority of civilian casualties, caused by the involvement of air power, would be directly attributable to the Afghan targeting processes. Coalition casualties would fall significantly as the burden of managing the security of Afghanistan transitioned to Afghan control, as would the logistics requirements necessary to support the ISAF footprint. The insurgents would still be bound by Mullah Omar's 'code of conduct' to avoid civilian casualties and it could become comparatively harder for them to persuade people to throw away their lives in direct

conflict against the Afghan government or an IED campaign against targets that were overwhelmingly Afghan Muslims.

Success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked with the credibility and viability of the ANA, and their ability to protect and deliver the support of the Afghan people for the Afghan government. Training and equipping Afghan Forward Air Controllers and Theatre Operations Centres would be a good start. If we are able to accelerate the process of training ANA forces to engage in all 'ground-based' activities, it could only lead to a reduction in the level of direct responsibility for western forces, and the passing of risks that are currently held by ISAF to the Afghan Government and its people. By removing the obvious western 'face' on the conflict, we could offer a greater chance of achieving success. British Army losses could reduce significantly, and air power would provide the means of ensuring that the ANA maintained an asymmetric advantage in the struggle to retain control of Afghan territory. The danger is that parochial Service interest, during this time of the SDSR process, will paint a false picture about the needs of this conflict, and will unfairly bias our ability to equip and prepare for more diverse and complex types of warfare in the future.

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Notes

¹ Interview with the Times, 8 Aug 2009.

² Interview with the Daily Telegraph, 26 Feb 2010.

³ Defence Secretary Priorities and Objectives, 4 Sep 2009.

⁴ DIB 2009/43.

⁵ Future Conflict and Its Prevention: People and the Information Age, IISS 18 January 2010: General Sir David Richards KCB CBE DSO ADC Gen.

⁶ 'Dominant Air power in the Information Age', The Comparative Advantage of Air and Space Power in Future Conflict <http://www.iiss.org/recent-key-addresses/air-chief-marshal-sir-stephen-dalton/>

⁷ Strategy for Defence - a joint statement from PUS and CDS: DIB 2009/43, 28 Oct 09

⁸ OC 52 Bde in HERRICK 7, now retired.

⁹ Counterinsurgency in Helmand, Task Force Operational Design, dated 1 January 2008.

¹⁰ Major General Michael T. Flynn, Captain Matt Pottinger, Paul D. Batchelor, 4 January 2010.

¹¹ Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan", Pentagon report to Congress, 29 April 2010.

¹² FA&SOC (2009), p.v.

¹³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8527627.stm

¹⁴ Understanding the Helmand campaign: British military operations in Afghanistan, International Affairs, Vol 86, Number 2, March 2010.

¹⁵ Doctrine Note 09/02.

¹⁶ Commander Combined Forces Command, Afghanistan, 2007.

¹⁷ Defence Internal Brief, 21 Apr 2010 Serial 2010DIB30.

¹⁸ ACM Dalton, Chief of the Air Staff, RUSI Lord Trenchard Memorial Lecture 2009.

¹⁹ TFH/Comd/ 0.1.9, dated 17 Apr 2010.

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