Pakistan – Afghanistan:
Breaking the Taliban Connection

Claude Rakisits

Webster University Geneva adjunct faculty, Consultant

Five years after the ouster of the Taliban, the security situation in Afghanistan is not looking good and the prospects for the future are looking equally gloomy. Insurgent and terrorist-related security incidents increased from less than 300 per month in March 2006 to over 600 by the end of September 2006, compared with an average of about 130 per month in 2005. Close to 4,000 people died in 2006, a rate four times greater than in 2005.¹ NATO officials have publicly acknowledged that they are expecting the situation to be worse this year. And, according to the head of a November 2006 UN Security Council mission to Afghanistan, Japanese Ambassador Kenzo Oshima, unless the situation is fixed quickly, it could become again a failed state.²

The Taliban and other insurgents are returning in force from hideouts in Pakistan and in south and east Afghanistan. These militants have been using very effectively a combination of traditional military engagements, hit-and-run tactics and suicide bombings. The Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah, claims to have some 12,000 men under his command. It may quite possibly be even more, as there is a ready supply of young, unemployed men willing to fight or die to expel the Western military forces and oust President Hamid Karzai’s government.

The situation in Afghanistan can still be fixed but it will require Afghanistan, Pakistan and the international community to implement some tough and difficult decisions. The solution will need to focus on a combination of security, reconstruction and governance issues in Afghanistan, on the one hand, and stopping the flow of insurgents coming streaming in from

² UN News, 24 November 2006.
neighbouring Pakistan, on the other. In this paper, I will be examining in particular the security aspects of the issue. But before I proceed to what I believe needs to be done, let us assess the situation on the ground in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

**Situation in Pakistan**

One of the fundamental reasons the Taliban and its fellow travellers have been able to make such a robust comeback since about 2003 is for the simple fact that they have a safe haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan bordering on Afghanistan. Most importantly, this tribal area is inhabited by the Pashtun, the ethnic group that straddles the border and makes up about 15% of Pakistan's population and over 42% of Afghanistan's. Roughly the size of Switzerland, FATA has always been a sort of 'no-man's land' where the authorities are not allowed in. This was the case under the British, and it remains the case today. Consequently, it was rather easy for the Pashtun-dominated Taliban to effectively establish a mini-state there following their ouster from power in Kabul in late 2001. They have principally, but not solely, regrouped in North and South Waziristan and Bajaur agencies from where they have been able to launch their attacks across the border into southern and eastern Afghanistan.

The Taliban has been joined by other like-minded terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, Pakistani Taliban, Central Asian members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Chechens, Uighurs, Chinese Muslims and Afghans loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (former Afghan Prime Minister) and Jalaluddin Haqqani (a former mujaheddin who served in the Taliban government). According to Barnett Rubin, it is this lethal mix of extremist groups cooperating in a relatively safe environment which has made Pakistan the "centre of terrorism of global reach".³

This assessment was recently echoed by the US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, who stated that Taliban attacks "were coming across the border" and that there were "al-Qaeda networks operating across the border".⁴ Moreover, John Negroponte, until recently the US National Intelligence Director, stated that the leaders of al-Qaeda had found refuge in Pakistan.⁵ This was the first time the US had categorically stated that the al-Qaeda high command was hiding in Pakistan, one of its key allies in the War on Terror. Pakistan rejected this statement.

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The physical protection which the very rugged and mountainous terrain of the tribal area provides these militant and terrorist groups is reinforced by the political support they get from Pakistani religious parties. The Jamiatulema-e-Islam (JUI), one of the more hardline parties with popular support among the Pushtun, is particularly supportive of the Taliban and its allies. JUI controls some of the more radical religious schools, the madrassas, which have and still spawn the Taliban fighters. But more importantly, the JUI is a member of the religious coalition in power in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) which borders FATA and upon which President Pervez Musharraf depends for political support in Islamabad. However, that relationship has been rocky ever since President Musharraf decided to dump the Taliban and join the War on Terror.

However, the Pakistan army’s all-powerful and quasi-autonomous Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), who had supported the Taliban in the 1990s was not so keen to abandon its erstwhile Pushtun ally. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that by then, 5 years after the Taliban had taken over in Kabul, the Pakistan military no longer had that much leverage over their former ally. Still, the question, however, is not if but how much support does the ISI still provide the Taliban, despite Musharraf’s radical policy shift. No one seems to really know or be able to agree on that. But, even Musharraf has acknowledged that some former ISI officers are probably still providing assistance.6

Worryingly, Afghan officials have reportedly uncovered recently signs of large-scale indoctrination and preparation of suicide bombers in the tribal areas, and the Pakistani Minister of the Interior, Aftab Khan Sherpao, for the first time publicly acknowledged that training of suicide bombers was occurring in the tribal areas.7

Nevertheless, the Pakistan government has sent 80,000 troops into the tribal areas – a first in Pakistan’s history - and has lost some 1,000 troops in the process of hunting down the Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists. But while it has been more successful and more willing to go after the non-Pushtun-dominated al-Qaeda, the Pakistan government has effectively acknowledged its inability – some would even say unwillingness - to make a serious dent in the Taliban’s cross-border activities by cutting a deal with the local leaders and mullahs in two tribal agencies. The implausible deals in South Waziristan (April 2004 and Feb 2005) and North Waziristan (Sept 2006) called on the tribesmen to expel the foreign militants and end cross-border attacks into Afghanistan.

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return the army would stop major operations in those agencies and pull most of its soldiers back to military camps in NWFP.

The deals have been a failure. Since then there have been more attacks across into Afghanistan. In the 60 days before the September agreement, according to American intelligence officials, there were 40 cross-border attacks in the eastern Khost and Paktika provinces, but in the two months after the deal these had increased to 140. The major flaw with the deal is that it assumed the tribes controlled the areas when the Taliban and other insurgents are increasingly in control of the area. Moreover, there were no enforcement provisions.

And while al-Qaeda has been pursued more rigorously, with several high ranking al-Qaeda members having been captured in Pakistan, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammad and Abu Faraj Al Libbi, they are still very well entrenched in the tribal areas. The latest big operation against al-Qaeda was an attack against a madrassa in Bajaur tribal agency in November 2006 which killed some 80 suspected al-Qaeda terrorists, including the madrassa’s leading cleric, Liaquat Hussain, reportedly a deputy to al-Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri. This attack, however, caused a major domestic backlash in NWFP. Some say it may have been the reason for a subsequent major attack against an army camp in NWFP in which more Pakistani soldiers died than in any other previous attacks by militants. Let me now turn to the situation in Afghanistan.

**Situation in Afghanistan**

The Taliban is effectively calling the shots in the countryside in the four southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul and Uruzgan. And although they do not hold territory, at the same time they are making it unsafe for the Afghan government and Coalition forces to operate in those areas and for reconstruction to proceed as planned. The return of the Taliban, which began to regroup in earnest in 2003, has been made easier by conditions on the ground.

There have been many positive developments in Afghanistan, including the holding of the presidential and legislative elections in 2004 and 2005, as well as in the reconstruction of the country, particularly in the construction of roads (about 1,500 km built) and in the provision of education (5 million children

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have been sent back to school). However, much of the goodwill this has generated has been negated by a high level of corruption in the bureaucracy, particularly in the Ministry of the Interior and the judiciary, the presence of former warlords in government and Parliament, poor governance, incompetence and the lack of transparency and consultation in the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{11} All this has bred resentment, lack of trust, hostility and dissatisfaction with the Karzai government and thus has made it a fertile ground for the Taliban to return to. Accordingly, in the worse case, the locals join the Taliban ranks or, at best, acquiesce in their return. Already the people in the south are turning to the Taliban’s parallel system of schools and courts it has progressively established since making its comeback.

But, of course, the Taliban has also been very effective in systematically destroying what has been reconstructed. Particularly appalling has been its targeting of the educational infrastructure, destroying school buildings, killing teachers and forcing schools to be closed. According to President Karzai, 182 schools were burnt in the south of the country in 2006 alone. And in Zabul province 148 out of a total of 188 schools remained closed during 2006, while in Ghazni province over 50,000 students could not attend classes due to similar closures. But, perversely, having made the educational system unworkable in most of the south, the Taliban is now reportedly earmarking $1 million to set up their own schools in the south.\textsuperscript{12}

Afghanistan is a very poor country. It ranks 173 of the 178 countries included on the World Bank’s Human Development Index - the poorest outside sub-Saharan Africa. That is why it is so vital that economic aid be distributed efficiently and effectively and that reconstruction proceeds apace. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be happening. So while the international community has given some $10 billion in aid for reconstruction, because of bureaucratic bottlenecks the Afghan government has been unable to absorb such large amounts. So, for example, Kabulis apparently have less electricity today than five years ago.\textsuperscript{13} Not a single new dam, power station or major water has been built.\textsuperscript{14} And to make things worse, there is housing and land pressure for almost 5 million refugees who have returned in the last 4 years.

Moreover, there has generally been poor consultation between, on the one hand, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and

\textsuperscript{12} Khan, M Ilyas, “Taliban to build Afghan school”, BBC News, 23 Jan 2007.
other Coalition forces, and, on the other hand, the local population and those managing the reconstruction projects. This is despite the presence of 25 ISAF-run Provincial Reconstruction Teams whose role includes developing a relationship with local authorities to facilitate the reconstruction effort. This has meant that a lack of coordination between those providing security and those involved in the reconstruction of the country has led to the abandonment of many planned projects.

The Taliban's return has also been facilitated by tapping into the narcotics trade and entering into an alliance with drug smugglers. Like other insurgents, local warlords and corrupt officials, the Taliban thus obtains funds from the poppy smuggling network with which it buys its military equipment material, pays the suicide bombers and bribes officials. Afghanistan is the source of 92% of all opiates in the world. Poppy cultivation is also a symptom of the problem. Farmers have turned to that cultivation because not enough development funds have been put into alternative crops. And as it will soon be the planting season again, we can expect to see another bumper poppy crop later this year. Needless to say, the enormous amount of money to be made from these crops compounds the existing corruption among Afghan law enforcement officials.

In the meantime the 34,000-strong NATO-led ISAF and Coalition forces, 12,000 US troops and 24,000-strong Afghan army are playing a catch up game. Following the easy defeat of the Taliban in November 2001, the US and its allies left only a very small force in Afghanistan, about 4,500 military personnel deployed around Kabul - a light footprint, indeed. It is only in 2003 that ISAF came under NATO control and expanded its area of operation outside Kabul. By then the Taliban and its allies had already begun re-infiltrating into the country from Pakistan. And while the number of troops has increased, there are significantly too few for the large area they need to cover. Comparing it to the situation in Iraq, the Coalition forces alone there have 147,000 troops versus only 46,000 in Afghanistan - a country 30% bigger than Iraq. Moreover, not only are too many NATO troops located in the north (about 10,000) where there is less need for them, but their respective governments have placed too many restrictions on where they are allowed to go. The Washington has been putting pressure on Germany, France, Italy and Spain to lift those restrictions and allow their troops to be deployed to the south.
NATO commanders and officials have been astounded by the ferocity of the Taliban’s attacks, with some offensives not seen since the Korean War.\textsuperscript{15} Even “Operation Medusa” in September 2006, in which 6,000 ISAF and US troops fought alongside the Afghan army and during which over 1000 Taliban fighters were reportedly killed, have not dealt a decisive blow to the Taliban’s overall capability. According to senior officials, NATO is beating the Taliban tactically but not strategically.\textsuperscript{16} So what started as a peacekeeping operation has now turned into a full-scale combat operation. Last year close to 200 coalition troops were killed in action, over 500 since 2001. Casualties among the Afghan government forces and civilians ran into thousands. And they expect much more of the same once springs comes back. Of particular concern to NATO commanders is that Taliban attacks continued at high level this winter, a time when fighting normally diminishes and fighters regroup.\textsuperscript{17}

The Taliban’s guerrilla tactics and increasing number of suicide bombings have been extremely effective, including one outside a US base ten days ago in which 20 Afghan civilians were killed. Suicide bombings have been particularly lethal given that it is a relatively recent terrorist technique in Afghanistan. It is suspected that it has been passed on to the Taliban from its al-Qaeda partners who have returned from Iraq where it is used frequently and very effectively.\textsuperscript{18} Suicide attacks in Afghanistan have gone from 23 in 2005 to 115 in 2006, an increase of 400\%.\textsuperscript{19} These have been aimed at government officials and buildings and any one else considered ‘collaborators’ of the Kabul government.

And there is a ready pool of young, disaffected, unemployed youth ready to join either from the 1 million-strong refugee camps in Pakistan or from Afghanistan itself to become suicide bombers or fighters. Reportedly these suicide bombers are promised that $1,400 will be given to their family after they have completed their suicide mission.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15} Leithead, Alastair, “Can change in Afghan tactics bring peace?”, \textit{BBC News}, 17 October 2006.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview, Kabul-based Western diplomat, January 2007.


\textsuperscript{19} Ruble, David, “Iran’s influence spreading to Afghanistan”, \textit{International Herald Tribune}, 23 December 2006.

\textsuperscript{20} Gall, Carlotta, “Afghans and NATO routinely find Pakistani link to bombs”, \textit{International Herald Tribune}, 14 November 2006.
And so with the very effective Taliban attacks and their ability to absorb hard hits, the lack of security has become a real issue, making it even more difficult to proceed with the reconstruction of the country. Unfortunately, security is even an issue now in the cities and on the roads, making NGOs’ work difficult. For example, Médecins sans Frontières pulled out in 2004 because of the security situation. This is why in Musa Qala, Helmand province, where there had been a lot of fighting, a deal was struck between the tribal elders and the Governor in which the local police militia would provide security, ensure the Taliban did not come back and in return the British troops would leave the town. The deal is still holding after 3 months and there is peace in Musa Qala. But there are mixed feelings about this deal and whether it is a proof that ISAF forces simply cannot secure the south.

**So what needs to be done?**

If the reconstruction of the country is to proceed unimpeded, security must be restored in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. Unless this is achieved, or at least substantially restored, Afghanistan will continue to bleed and not be able to fully fight the Taliban. For this to be achieved, it will be essential to equally focus on the implementation of a number of measures in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In both cases, the active involvement of the international community will be vital and indispensable. Let me first turn to Pakistan.

**Pakistan: the source of much of the problem**

The safe havens in Pakistan’s tribal areas from where the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operate from must be shut down for four reasons.

First, it is utterly unacceptable for NATO and other Coalition members to continue to lose men and equipment fighting the Taliban and others who come pouring in from neighbouring Pakistan which is meant to be a staunch ally in the War on Terror. While acknowledging the inherent difficulties in hunting down these militants in the tribal area’s very rugged terrain, the continuous flow of these fighters must be stopped or at least seriously stemmed. And, according to a recently captured Taliban spokesman, the Taliban leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, is hiding in Quetta, Baluchistan, under the protection of the ISI. Whether this is true or not, it does yet again suggest that Pakistan could be doing more against the Taliban. In an unusually blunt statement, the UN Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Representative, Chris Alexander, recently said that greater action had to be taken in Pakistan against the Taliban insurgency.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) *UN News*, “UN calls on Afghanistan, Pakistan to end war of words and cooperate in fighting Taliban”, 8 Jan 2007.
Second, it is a historical fact that very few insurgencies that have had a safe haven across the border have been defeated.

Third, these safe-havens have also become a training ground for terrorists going overseas. For example, some of the terrorists involved in the London bombing of 7 July 2005 and the subsequent attempted London bombing of 21 July 2005 had trained in Pakistan.22

Fourth, the existence of this Taliban mini-state in the tribal areas is bad news for Pakistan in the long-term. It has led to the creeping Talibanization of neighbouring NWFP, despite attempts by Islamabad to stop this. But more worrisome for Pakistan’s long-term internal stability is that it has encouraged pro-Taliban Pakistani militants to flex their muscles. For example, their attack of an army base outside the tribal area in NWFP in November 2006 came as a deep shock to the Pakistani military. Similarly, in the last week there have been three suicide attacks in NWFP, Peshawar and Islamabad killing 23 people. And while no one has claimed responsibility, the police suspects the bombings were by militants based in Waziristan.23 These are worrying developments for Pakistan.24

And while we are all cognisant of the fact that it cost Musharraf valuable political capital to join the War on Terror and that his political room for manoeuvre is limited, particularly given his dependency on the pro-Taliban religious parties for his own political survival, the Pakistan government must nevertheless do more to rein in the Taliban.

First of all, Pakistan’s decision to build a fence and lay landmines along the border adjacent to the tribal area, as recently announced by Islamabad, is not the way to go.29 Apart from the fact that to build such a fence in rugged terrain would be a massive, costly and lengthy operation to undertake, it would simply not work. No one supports the idea either, including the US. The Afghan government is opposed to it, arguing that it would separate tribes and clans that straddle the border, and the UN opposes it because the laying of mines would cause unnecessary injuries to Afghans who have already suffered enough the scourge of landmines. Finally, the Taliban insurgents would simply go around it on their way to Afghanistan.

President Musharraf must put real pressure on the religious party to stop their active support of the Taliban. And part of that pressure would include

25 “Pakistan to reinforce border with Afghanistan”, International Herald Tribune, 26 December 2006.
closing down the more radical madrassas associated with the pro-Taliban religious parties which churn out real and potential recruits for the Taliban and other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. Given the already strained relationship between the religious parties and the government, Musharraf would not have much to lose and it would demonstrate to the West that he was serious about clamping down on the Taliban.

The ISI must be reined in. And while the NATO/ISAF commander in Afghanistan, Gen David Richards, has said that Pakistan was not supporting the Taliban, it is very difficult to believe that the Taliban would be able to move with such great ease between Pakistan and Afghanistan without some degree of ISI support – even if only tacit. Most NATO field commanders would agree with that assessment. According to intelligence collected during Western military offensives in mid-2006, the ISI was continuing to provide active support to the Taliban leadership in Quetta, Baluchistan. Certainly, there is a sense that Pakistan could be doing more “to disrupt the senior levels of Taliban command and control”. However, having said that, bringing the ISI under greater central control is easier said than done. The ISI is a deeply divided intelligence organisation, it is very secretive even within the Pakistan armed forces, and it is a law unto itself in many cases. Moreover, the many personal and institutional ISI - Taliban links built over many years are difficult to break. Nevertheless, Musharraf must be seen to be doing more to enforce a cessation of ISI support for the Taliban. Simply put, if a military man at the helm of the country cannot do it, no one can.

The US could make the disbursement of the $1 billion in aid it gives Pakistan conditional to Islamabad making serious headway in hunting down the Taliban and interdicting their movement across the border. The US could also provide additional development funds for roads, education, social services and hospitals for the tribal areas which have simply not been integrated into Pakistan. It is this neglect which has helped the rise of the militants in the Tribal areas. There are limits, however, as to how hard the US can push without making Musharraf look like simply following Washington’s orders and thus weakening his position at home.

26 “Pakistan not supporting Taliban, says NATO Commander”, Daily Times, 10 October 2006.
28 Ibid., p. 72.
Afghanistan: the target

According to the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), which was established following the January-February 2006 London Conference and which has Afghan, regional and international representatives, "the overall pace of economic development of Afghanistan has been much slower and more geographically limited than had been hoped." The report acknowledges that an unfavourable security environment has been an important factor. It also states that the slow pace of development and reform is contributing to popular disaffection and ineffective implementation of the counter-narcotic strategy which in turn hampers the fight against insecurity and insurgency.

And while the JCMB recognises that insecurity cannot be overcome by military means alone, the implementation of many programs is extremely difficult in conditions of acute insecurity. This is compounded by limited capacity of government institutions at all levels, which are often seen as corrupt or absent in many parts of the south and southeast, creating a gap that the Taliban and the like are filling. Accordingly, the JCMB has set itself many ambitious benchmarks to try to address these issues of accountability, corruption, limited government capacity and the growing narcotics sector. And while the above issues are interdependent, I will however only address those directly related to security matters.

In July 2006 the Karzai government created the Policy Action Group (PAG) which comprises all key international military and diplomatic players as well as Afghan ministers and heads of ministries. PAG is the first real attempt to coordinate all security, developmental and reconstruction issues among all international, national and provincial players. This is promising and hopefully it will assist in delivering outcomes more effectively.

One of the issues the JCMB has stressed the PAG must focus on is the creation of the Afghan Development Zones (ADZs). These zones would be areas where security and governance have improved because of better integrated coordination between all actors and which would thus create conditions for sustained development. This approach has been criticized by some because it is argued that it will breed resentment among the people outside the zones.

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29 The JCMB consists of 7 representatives from the Afghan government and 21 representatives of the international community.

30 "Implementation of the Afghanistan Compact", Bi-Annual JCMB Report, November 2006, p.1

31 Ibid.,

32 Ibid., p.5.

However, this strategy – similar to ‘ink-spots’ in counter-insurgency - may be the best approach initially before tackling bigger areas such as a whole province.

The strengthening of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) has also correctly been identified by the JCMB as priority areas. The building up of the army has actually been one of the few success stories. Nevertheless, there are still fewer ANA than international forces, only 34,000 men out of a projected 70,000 have been trained. And many of the battalions are only at 60% strength. While it has dropped off in recent months, the level of absenteeism and desertion is still relatively high among Afghan army personnel. No one knows when the ANA will be able to conduct operations on its own. Still, the training of the ANA is on the right track.

The building up and training of the police force, however, has been another story. As opposed to the army, which consists of completely new recruits, the ANP mainly consists of previous police personnel as well as a large number of the 60,000 experienced fighters demobilized from militias. So the police are often little more than private militias, considered by most as a source of insecurity than protection. For example, the position of district police chief is ‘sold’ to the highest bidder because of the vast sums of money the police chief can make from his involvement in the narcotics trade. This must cease at once if the people are to have confidence in the Kabul government.

Needing equally as urgent attention as the police is the reform of the Ministry of the Interior. The JCMB has admitted that this will require some difficult decisions by the Afghan government with the creation of an effective civil administration, transparent senior appointments and the implementation of anti-corruption measures. It will be vital that the Karzai government makes some substantial headway in combating corruption in the legal system. Already the Afghan people are turning to the Taliban’s parallel court system to seek justice. Unless Afghanistan is governed by the rule of law, the government will have no claim to legitimacy and it will simply be another party in the present conflict.

Finally, the Afghan government should seriously consider talking to the Taliban – at least the moderates; for however repugnant it may seem to even think this, there may well be value in considering doing so. On 29 January

34 Ibid., p.16.
35 Interview, Kabul-based Western diplomat, January 2007.
2007 President Karzai said again that he would be willing to talk to the Taliban. And with the right pre-conditions, the aim could be to eventually bring them into the formal power structure in Kabul. After all, there are many precedents – historical and contemporary - for talking to some very unsavoury opponents.

Of course strict pre-conditions would have to be met before talks could even be considered. These would have to include: the cessation of all military and terrorist activity by the Taliban; its public, permanent and complete break with al-Qaeda; and its open support for the poppy eradication program. Breaking with al-Qaeda would be made easier if the Taliban knew that they would eventually be given a stake in running Afghanistan.

The NATO and coalition countries would make it very clear from the outset of the talks that they were not about to cut and run but would be staying to assist with the reconstruction of the country even if and when the Taliban eventually joined the government. It would also be a guarantee to the Afghan people that the Taliban not renge on any of its agreed undertakings before coming back to Kabul.

But most importantly, holding such talks could mean the beginning of the end of the Taliban-al-Qaeda alliance. And this would be a major military blow to Bin Laden. It would weaken Al-Qaeda’s strategic support base in Pakistan’s tribal belt and severely complicate Bin Laden’s ability to evade capture.

The international community: the indispensable actor

If the international community is genuinely committed to assisting Afghanistan with its security and its reconstruction, it will need to bring in many more troops to be able to implement an effective counter-insurgency strategy. The rule of thumb is that to be able to make any serious headway in combating insurgents, it is necessary to have between 4 to 10 military personnel, sometimes even up to 20, per 1000 civilians. While the last official census was in 1979, it is estimated that the population of Afghanistan is about 31 million, with about 85% of it living in the rural areas, ie about 27 million. Given that the insurgency activity is in about 1/3 of the country, in the rural areas of the south and east of the country, we can roughly estimate that about 9 million Afghans are affected by the insurgency. On that basis, between 36,000 and 90,000, and possibly up to 180,000 military personnel would be...

40 Some sources claim that the Taliban is ready to drop its maximalist demands and guarantee not to allow al-Qaeda to re-establish bases in Afghanistan. See Rubin, Op. Cit., p. 73.
required to defeat the Taliban and other insurgents.\textsuperscript{41}

And, as noted earlier, while there are now about 46,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, ISAF's deployed troop numbers in the south are actually only about 36,000.\textsuperscript{42} And the 24,000-strong ANA is of mixed quality at best. So while there appears to be the minimum required troops to deal with the insurgency, not all military personnel are combat troops and there is little coordination between the ISAF forces and the separate US-led operations.

So the international community must seriously consider sending more combat troops before the expected Taliban spring offensive. It is the lack of substantial 'boots on the ground' that makes it difficult to 'clear and hold' liberated territory from the insurgents. Accordingly, implementing a more flexible deployment policy among the NATO contributing countries would effectively increase troop numbers without having to actually send more in theatre.

However, it is not all bad news. NATO member countries are fully aware that this Afghanistan enterprise – the first ground operation outside Europe - is not only an important test for the military alliance but that it must do something now to stop the Taliban from gaining any further ground.

Encouragingly, at the NATO Foreign Ministers' informal discussions in Brussels on 26 January 2007 the US promised an additional $10.6 billion in new funds for Afghanistan, $8.6 billion of which would go for training and equipping Afghan security forces.\textsuperscript{43} And while that is only slightly more than the $8 billion the US spends in the War in Iraq \textit{per month}, it nevertheless represents a significant increase in US commitment to Afghanistan; as it has only spent $14 billion in assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. And importantly, the Democrats support President Bush on this.

In addition to that, the US announced last week that 3,500 soldiers from the New York-based 10\textsuperscript{th} Mountain Division already in Afghanistan would have their tour extended by four months. Also, Poland is expected to send about 1,200 soldiers in February and reportedly the UK is considering sending 600 more troops. NATO commander, British General David Richards, announced last week that another combat brigade would be arriving soon. However, it was not clear which countries would be contributing and whether the above expected Polish and British troop contributions were part of this additional

\textsuperscript{41} In comparison, NATO sent 40,000 troops to Kosovo for a population of 2 million.

\textsuperscript{42} They come from the US, Canada, UK, Netherlands, Estonia, Turkey, Romania and Denmark.

brigade. The Italian government has also announced that it would keep its 1,800-strong contingent in Afghanistan despite pressure from parties on the left for them to be pulled out. It has, however, rejected NATO pressure to send additional troops. Apart from these expected deployments, the other European members of NATO made no commitments at the recent NATO meeting, thus leaving NATO forces still about 15% short of what NATO and American commanders say is needed to fight the Taliban.

A positive development, however, has been the inauguration of the Joint Intelligence Operation Center at ISAF Headquarters in Kabul last week. This centre will be staffed by officers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and NATO and its aim will be to increase the coordination of their counter-insurgency efforts. This centre could be used towards the deployment of tri-lateral Special Forces patrols along the Afghan-Pakistan border. The trilateral military-to-military Tripartite Commission had already announced in August 2006 that there would be coordinated patrols. It should be noted that US-Pakistan intelligence sharing and coordinated border operations already exists. And while they often antagonise local tribes, they are sometimes quite effective, as demonstrated by a recent attack which killed a large number of Taliban fighters in Barmal, Paktika province in January 2007. Tri-lateral patrols would however be more effective in hunting down the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Were Pakistan to agree to such patrols, it would assist in dispelling doubts the international community might have about Islamabad's commitment to fighting the Taliban.

Finally, the international community could urge the Afghan government to formally agree on making the Durand Line the international border between the two countries. In return the Afghan government could be guaranteed that this would not affect the existing movement of people and goods over the border. Importantly, this would put to rest once and for all any suspicions Pakistan has about Afghanistan supporting a greater Pushtunistan which would encompass parts of western Pakistan. Certainly, it would assist in improving bilateral relations. While this may be difficult for President Karzai to 'sell' to the Afghan Pushtun, particularly given the number of non-Pushtun in his government, the international community should be able to assist this process with, for example, guarantees of financial assistance for the development of the border area.

Conclusion

This is a battle that can still be won but there is little time to waste. The Taliban and other insurgents must be rolled back before they hold more Afghan territory. Already, they have made about a third of the country ungovernable, stalling the reconstruction effort in the south and east of Afghanistan. And we can expect a resolute Taliban to again initiate vigorous attacks in spring, having had a chance to regroup during winter. NATO commanders expect tough battles ahead.

Afghanistan is a turning point battleground: were the West to lose this battle and the Taliban were able to recapture power in Kabul - as opposed to moderate Taliban being included in a government of national unity - this would be a major military and more importantly psychological victory for al-Qaeda and international terrorists. And it would be particularly so given how things are panning out in Iraq. My major concern is that, given that there is already a reluctance by NATO troop contributing countries to redeploy their forces to the south, there will be little political will among Coalition forces to send more troops in significant numbers to fight the real battle in the south and east of the country.

The negative blowback effect on Pakistan of a Taliban victory could be immeasurable. It would encourage and invigorate the pro-Taliban Pakistani militants in the tribal areas to further Talibanise into neighbouring NWFP. But, importantly, even though rogue elements of the Pakistani military may have helped the Taliban, a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul – probably harbouring al-Qaeda - would not necessarily be friendly to Islamabad. On the contrary, it would not be sympathetic to a Pakistan government officially an ally in the War on Terror. Accordingly, it is in Pakistan's national interest and President Musharraf's personal interest to vigorously and unswervingly hunt down the Taliban leaders and permanently shut down their network in Pakistan.

The Afghan people do not particularly want the Taliban back; it is simply that the Kabul government has not delivered on its promises, making the Taliban an attractive alternative by default. It need not be like that: improved security, better governance and enhanced coordination and consultation with the locals in the disbursement of international assistance and in the reconstruction of the country would help convince the Afghans that it is in their long-term interest to stop the Taliban from coming back to power. Perhaps the international community and Afghanistan should consider bringing in a super 'head' – someone with impeccable international credentials – to work very closely with President Karzai and his government in coordinating all the different activities.
The history of the foreigners being defeated in Afghanistan need not be repeated either but the international community will need to show much more determination and commitment to break that tradition. It must stay the course, even if it takes years. Afghanistan is a country with great potential — there are large gas and mineral deposits, for example — and the international community can still prevent it from once again becoming a failed state, governed by backward-looking Islamic extremists harbouring al-Qaeda terrorists.