
A war of money as well as bullets

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The Americans are learning the tricks of the Great Game quicker than the British, who invented it. But a weak and corrupt Afghan government is hobbling them.

THE Taliban came at dawn, catching the policemen by surprise while they were at prayer. Fifty of them attacked from three sides, using AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars. Closing in for the final assault to cries of "Allahu Akbar!", they called on the policemen to surrender.

That, until recently, is just what the Afghan police would have done. But this time the young police chief, Daryakhan, decided to hold out behind his new American-built fortifications, shouting back: "This is my country. You are the agents of Pakistan." In the subsequent fighting the police lost an observation tower, but Daryakhan had a better asset up his sleeve. He called for help with a satellite telephone, and in minutes American Apache helicopters clattered overhead to break the Taliban attack. Several insurgents were later tracked by drones and killed.

This action on April 25th at Charbaran in Paktika province, at the crossroads of infiltration routes from Pakistan, is a footnote in the seventh year of the war in Afghanistan. It was not mentioned in NATO or American reports. Even if it had been, it would quickly have been eclipsed by the uproar in Kabul two days later, when insurgents opened fire on a military parade attended by President Hamid Karzai, as well as by Afghan and foreign dignitaries. At least three people were killed.

But events at Charbaran were important in one respect: in a counter-insurgency strategy that is summed up by the catchphrase "clear-hold-build", Afghan security forces, backed up by American power, are showing that they can hold areas cleared by the Americans. In a war that has often gone from bad to worse, this is good news for NATO.

A record number of Western soldiers—232—died in Afghanistan last year, and 2008 is unlikely to be better. Some 8,000 Afghans were killed in 2007, more than 1,500 of them civilians, according to United Nations estimates. Much of the Pushtun belt in the south and east, where the insurgency is most intense, is deemed too dangerous for humanitarian workers. NATO says the Taliban's increasing resort to suicide-bombs is a sign that they are weakening. Equally, it could be a sign that the insurgents are getting cleverer.

General Dan McNeill, the American commander of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), notes that his mission is seriously "under-resourced". Yet he suggests that the Afghan army and police will become strong enough by 2011 to take the lead in most areas, allowing NATO to start reducing its forces and to take more of an advisory and support role—providing, for example, embedded advisers who can organise air support and medical evacuations.

The Afghan army is the most respected institution in the country. Western trainers say that, in contrast with Iraqi forces, Afghan soldiers have little fear of closing with the enemy; if anything, the problem is holding them back so that Western aircraft can have a clear shot at insurgents. Thanks to a beefed-up training programme, paid for largely by America, the Afghan army has grown to more than 50,000 troops; it has started conducting large-scale operations alone and is building up an air force. By 2010 it is due to expand to 80,000 men. The often corrupt Afghan police are being retrained en masse.

Nobody thinks these forces, even at full strength, will be anywhere near large enough. Afghanistan, though bigger than Iraq geographically and with a roughly comparable population, has less than a third as many security forces employed, whether Western or indigenous. Still, Afghan forces are due to take charge of the capital, Kabul, in the coming months. In Nangarhar province, the gateway to Pakistan, where al-Qaeda had several camps in Taliban times, the Afghan army and police are doing most of the security work in Jalalabad and other main towns, while American forces try to secure the borders.

The Afghans will have their work cut out. A suicide-bomb killed 18 people in the district of Khogiani, near Jalalabad, on April 30th. Ten days later, villagers in the district of Shinwar blocked the road and threw stones at police in protest at the alleged killing of three civilians by American forces. Afghan police opened fire, reportedly killing one man and injuring others.

That said, American commanders feel Nangarhar is ripe for investment in roads, airports and electricity generation. Their confidence contrasts sharply with the pleas for help from the embattled Canadians in Kandahar and the defensiveness of the British in Helmand. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the pacification of Jalalabad is the sight of American Humvees waiting patiently at traffic lights.

Green fields, and purple

Detailed data on security are hard to come by in Afghanistan. Even the UN declines formally to release its “accessibility map”, which these days depicts a country in two halves: a relatively quiet north and west and a restive south and east where, with few exceptions, the risk to humanitarian workers is deemed to be either “high” or “extreme”.

Few dispute that the American-controlled east of the country is faring better than the south, where other NATO allies are in charge. Although America accounts for more than half the foreign forces in Afghanistan (divided roughly evenly between ISAF and its own counter-terrorist mission, Operation Enduring Freedom), it has suffered fewer deaths than its allies this year.

The differences between the east and the south are most apparent from the military helicopters that skim the treetops at breakneck speed. This year the fields in Nangarhar and Kunar are green with wheat. Helmand and Kandahar, though, show the pink and purple patchwork of illegal opium poppies. Insecure areas provide the most fertile ground for poppies, and southern Afghanistan is the most insecure. The opium and heroin trade, in turn, finances the insurgency and corrupts the government.

Since Europeans cannot or will not commit more troops against the Taliban, the war effort in the south shows signs of being re-Americanised. Last year saw a mini-surge, with an extra American brigade deployed to Afghanistan when five more were sent to Iraq. This year an additional marine expeditionary unit—a 2,400-strong force with more air power than the whole 7,500-strong British task-force—has been deployed to the south for seven months to disrupt arms- and drugs-smuggling routes in Taliban strongholds.

There is talk of sending two more American brigades, about 7,000 soldiers, and of placing the southern region under permanent American command. This might improve things. At present, each national command has different priorities and allied units are rotated every six months, compared with 15 for the Americans (to be reduced to 12 months later this year). General McNeill, who took over as ISAF commander in February last year, says he is “on my fourth commander in the north, the second in the east, the third in the capital, the third in the south and the third in the west.” The military effort, he says, needs more consistency.

All this is wounding to allies, particularly to the British army with its proud military heritage. It has deployed by far the largest contingent after America and has lost 96 soldiers. It was the British who first played the Great Game in the Hindu Kush to keep Russian influence at bay; Winston Churchill fought on the frontiers of British India against Afghan tribesmen. “To the ferocity of the Zulu”, Churchill wrote of the Pushtuns in 1898, “are added the craft of the Redskin and the marksmanship of the Boer.” Little has changed.

There are underlying reasons why the south is more troublesome than the east: its tribal structures are weaker, making it harder for elders to make deals stick; it is more remote from Kabul and the main trade routes; the population is less educated and more xenophobic; and it is the ideological heartland of the Taliban. That said, a growing number of British officers grudgingly recognise that America is learning the lessons of irregular warfare, drawn mainly from British colonial experience, better than the modern British army.

After much trial and error, the allies more or less agree on the tenets of counter-insurgency. The objective is not so much to kill the enemy as to protect the population and extend the authority of the Afghan government; development, dialogue, amnesties and reconciliation are important tools for weakening the insurgents. Such ideas are as old as the Afghan hills. One senior British officer quotes the ninth-century Muslim scholar, Ibn Qutayba:

There can be no government without an army
No army without money
No money without prosperity
And no prosperity without justice and good administration.

How to turn such theories into practice? The Americans, say the British, have the advantage of time and resources: they have been in the east ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, whereas the British only got to Helmand in 2006. More important, the Americans have more forces at their disposal. They have been able to deploy right up to the border with Pakistan, whereas the British and Canadians are more thinly spread and have surrendered the southern frontier, and much of the countryside as well, to the insurgents.

America's slush fund

Probably the most striking difference between the Americans and the British is in their use of money. Britain channels most of its economic aid through the government in Kabul in the hope of building up the bureaucracy there, whereas America finances private contractors to carry out big projects, such as road construction and power stations.

For American commanders, “money is bullets.” They have at their disposal a slush fund, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, known as the Commander's Emergency Response Programme (CERP). This can be used for any number of schemes—from roads to clinics and schools—that help win local support. CERP is used to build “cultural centres” (ie,

mosques) and distribute Korans to show that the foreigners respect Islam; it finances radio stations that counter insurgent propaganda; it pays for food aid, blankets and visits by doctors and vets. In short, it brings a government presence and some economic development to parts of Afghanistan where aid workers fear to venture.

In Kunar province, one of the most turbulent in the American sector, valleys that last year proved deadly to American forces are being pacified. Troops will clear an area of insurgents and seek to stabilise it by bringing in a new road in consultation with village elders, who are expected to do their bit to keep bad elements out. Sometimes a new school will be set up in a hostile village as the precursor to the arrival of American and Afghan government forces.

Roads are especially favoured, because they allow remote villages to sell their produce and enable Afghan forces to move quickly to trouble spots. The recent opening of a new road linking the Pech valley to the provincial capital, Asadabad, resulted in a quadrupling of live births in the town's hospital as villagers were able to get medical help. The Americans unashamedly outbid the insurgents: if the rebels pay \$5 a day for a fighter, the Americans will offer \$5.50 a day for road labourers. "Where the road ends the insurgents begin," says one American officer.

"CERP is a nuclear weapon; it is the asymmetrical weapon of choice," says Colonel Mark Johnstone, deputy commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, based in Jalalabad. "I really pity other nations that don't have it." Indeed, British military commanders watch the Americans with envy. Their civilian bosses, however, believe that soldiers cannot be trusted with money; instant projects are not sustainable, they say, and the aim must be to create long-term development and build up the capacity of Afghans to run their own affairs.

At best CERP provides "artificial resuscitation" rather than real treatment; at worst, as when schools are built without teachers to staff them, the Americans end up constructing what one British official called "the world's most expensive camel sheds". The Americans reply that CERP projects are increasingly directed by provincial and district governors, in line with plans drawn up by ministries in Kabul. Colonel Johnstone argues that "for every bad CERP project there are ten good ones."

American commanders now consider the "human terrain" of tribal allegiances to be just as important as valleys and mountains. The Taliban and their allies have learnt to superimpose their insurgency on tribal rivalries and grievances. In Helmand last year a newly arrived British marine major, Tony Chattin, said he felt like "a man in a dark room feeling my way". He thought British soldiers "will never understand the hidden agendas and history of every tribe, sub-tribe and compound."

At least some American officers seem determined to prove it can be done. The briefing room of one brigade headquarters has a poster summarising the tribal code of honour known as pushtunwali which, in Churchill's view, "is so strange and inconsistent, that it is incomprehensible to a logical mind." In Naray, at the eastern end of Kunar, Lieutenant-Colonel Christopher Kolenda, commander of 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, can list who fought whom, in his particular corner, from Victorian times to the Soviet invasion. The underlying problem, he says, is the atomisation of society: tribal elders have lost control of their young men. America's aim is not just physical reconstruction but a social transformation to restore the elders' authority.

Another human factor is at play, too. The Americans are more deeply committed to winning in Afghanistan—militarily, economically and in terms of mental effort—than any of their allies. They have rewritten their counter-insurgency doctrine, and incorporated all manner of civilian functions—anthropologists, political scientists and agricultural experts—into their ranks. By serving the longest tours, Americans learn faster. Their soldiers may yet end up paying the cost in terms of mental health. But for the moment America sees itself at war, while Britain is still engaged in an optional operation.

The enemy within

The most serious problem in Afghanistan, however, will not be solved by new military tactics or command structures. It is the weakness of the Afghan government. Corruption is rampant, from the lowly airport security guard demanding bribes from foreign travellers to government officials who occupy gaudy houses known as "narcotechture". Afghanistan produces more than 90% of the world's opium and a growing share of its cannabis. If Mr Karzai were not a client of the West, his country might well be classified as a narco-state.

The political mood in Kabul is darkening, and Mr Karzai's popularity is declining even among some of his own officials. A year ago many Afghans regarded Mr Karzai as likeable but weak; these days, he is seen in a more sinister light. Many want him to step down, although it is hard to see a credible alternative. Some complain about his reluctance to confront warlords. Others express disgruntlement over the president's half-brother, Ahmed Wali, the chief power-broker in Kandahar province and, according to widespread rumours denied by the government, a big name in the drugs trade. Much of the former Northern Alliance, the coalition of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras that helped install Mr Karzai in power, is now openly in opposition. With elections looming next year Mr Karzai is less likely than ever to challenge powerful vested interests.

Instead, he seems to be courting religious support. Some members of parliament are pushing for laws banning women

from going outdoors without a male relative. The government has ordered private television stations to remove popular Indian soap operas on the ground that they are immoral. But Jahed Mohseni, the entrepreneurial Australian-educated director of the Moby group, which owns successful stations such as Tolo TV, says the serials are very "conservative". He sees a process of "re-Talibanisation", and growing curbs on freedom of speech. Sandbags have recently been placed on the roof of his station. The outside world, Mr Mohseni says, has to interfere more forcefully. Others in Afghanistan, even senior figures such as the education minister, Haneef Atmar, want foreign countries to name and shame corrupt officials.

That is easier said than done. Western diplomats worry that intervening in Afghan politics would make Mr Karzai look like a puppet, or provoke a nationalist backlash. Some Afghans retort that Mr Karzai is already seen as a stooge, and that Western silence over his misdeeds risks looking like acquiescence. Despite his utter dependence on the West economically and militarily, Mr Karzai is jealous of his "sovereignty". He blocked the appointment of a British politician, Paddy Ashdown, as the new UN envoy for fear that he would be too meddling. And a call last month by the Canadian foreign minister for the removal of the governor of Kandahar, Asadullah Khalid, only strengthened the governor's position.

Allied soldiers will continue to fight, build roads and host meetings with tribal elders in the hope of isolating the insurgents. But in the longer term, unless the Kabul government can be made to work more effectively, their efforts and sacrifices may be in vain. As Ibn Qutayba put it a millennium ago, there can be no lasting government without "justice and good administration". Even American money and power will struggle to achieve that.

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