Afghanistan:
How much is enough?

Terry Liston

Prodded by the demands of Canada, Australia and others, NATO's recent Bucharest summit produced a firm commitment to deploy an additional French battalion to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. The French example hopefully gave the lead to others who may increase both their presence as well as the flexibility of employment of their contingents. There is a clear consensus that more troops are needed, as ISAF hikes its stated requirement to three additional brigades. It is therefore timely to identify Afghanistan's real troops-to-task requirement and the implications for Coalition military and political leaders.

Resources to fit the mission?

One approach is to have the mission determine the number of troops. The objectives in Afghanistan are multiple, ranging from retribution and counter-terrorism to the virtual re-engineering of Afghan society into an oasis of secular Western democracy and freedom. The essential military problem is that an insurgency is raging. The focus of operations is therefore not on the enemy and territory, but rather on the 'people' that have to be both 'wooed' and, above all, protected. It is a struggle 'for hearts and minds'.

US military doctrine recognises that the key to any counter-insurgency (COIN) effort is establishing security for the civilian population. General John Craddock, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander – Europe (SACEUR) has insisted that 'the key is to be able to have a continuous presence – control an area – stabilise it, then you can build – Where there is a government or ISAF presence, the Taliban are not going to prevail.' In January 2008 Lieutenant General Sir David Richards, the previous ISAF commander, said that NATO can take ground, but, lacking troops to hold it, the Taliban come back and soldiers' lives would have been lost for nothing.

How much is enough? In his 1995 study, *Force Requirements in Stability Operations*, RAND mathematician James Quinlivan influenced the new US COIN manual, FM 3-24 in this regard. This recommends using a 'troop density' ratio of security forces (including host-nation military and police) *to inhabitants* to calculate the forces needed. It notes: 'Most density recommendations fall within a range of 20 to 25 counter-insurgents for every 1000 residents – Twenty counter-insurgents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective COIN operations'.

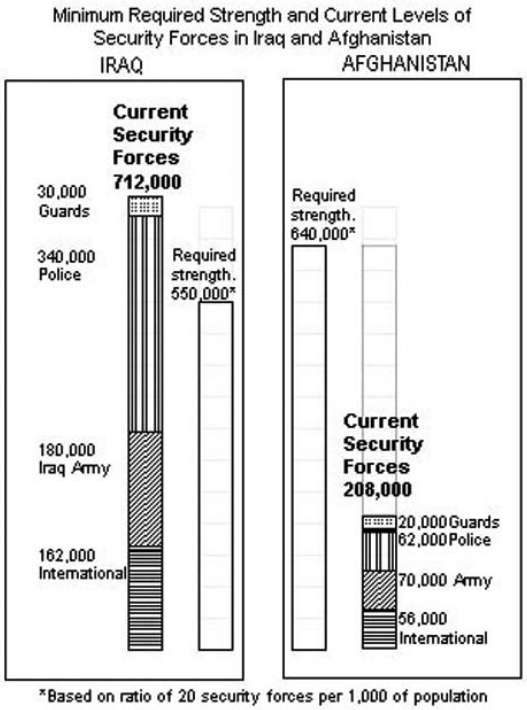
The Joint Co-ordination and Monitoring Board established by the Afghan Government and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan established a 'Task Force on Afghan National Police Target Strength' to set targets for the number of police required, based on a police-to-population ratio. This analysis identified a force requirement of 94,000 police and border guards. However, in view of the Afghan fiscal situation, the subsequent recommendation was the status quo of 62,000 or an intermediate increase to 82,000.

Therefore, to cater for the Afghan population of 32 million, the real requirement is for a minimum of 640,000 security force personnel. Even General Dan McNeil, the ISAF commander, has repeatedly conceded that he would need 'well over 400,000' for the country.

Even a most generous assessment of existing forces in Afghanistan totals only 208,250 security personnel, 32.5 per cent of the real requirement. These consist of about 56,250 international troops and 152,000 Afghan security personnel. These figures are imprecise because the strength of the US Special Forces based in Afghanistan, and operating against al Qa'eda outside ISAF command, is not publicised.

Moreover, the Afghan strengths are probably inflated and do not reflect desertions or false names on the payroll. The 152,000 total includes the Afghan National Army (ANA), at the optimistic level of 70,000 planned for March 2009, plus an Afghan National Police (ANP) strength of 62,000 and an assumed figure of 20,000 private security guards.

Were we to use more realistic assumptions, the figure would drop to 20-25 per cent of the COIN ratio requirement. In comparison, Iraq, a smaller and less populous country, exceeds the required minimum force level (even for Afghanistan), with security forces of over 700,000, of which 162,000 are international, mostly American. And this number does not even include the Sunni militias now allied to the Iraqi Government and the Americans.



General McNeill's reaction is to put the onus on the Afghan forces. He recently stated: 'What I think we need, more than huge numbers of international forces, is effective capacity in the Afghan national army and in the Afghan national police.' Indeed, some are now suggesting that NATO could just declare 'victory' and leave when the Afghan forces are able to hold, unassisted, their national capital and other large population centres. However, even if the ANA were to grow to 200,000 men (as the Afghan Defence Minister is now suggesting) and the ANP were to approach 100,000 (as a NATO analysis suggests), total Afghan security forces would still represent less than half of the true security requirement. Unless the ANA, ANP and private security guards reach a level close to 600,000, which is twice the size of the most audacious dreams of the Afghan military leadership, their forces will be inadequate.

The impact of this lack of manpower is evident. The most recent US intelligence assessment reveals that only 30 per cent of the country is controlled by the Karzai government. Some of the rest is run by the Taliban (10 per cent), while most of the country (60 per cent) is designated as 'under the influence' of local tribes. It was indeed predictable that government and international forces, with less than one-third of the needed strength, would control less than one-third of the country.

Mission to fit the resources?

So what can we do? The first reaction of resource-poor planners is to juggle their troop lists to accomplish the assigned missions in phases, often including different areas, over an extended time-frame instead of all at once. However, in COIN operations such as in Afghanistan security forces must remain in an area in order to ensure the continued security of areas and communities they have cleared. Moreover, only three of the 24 European members of NATO, (the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark), have provided battalion-group manoeuvre units to ISAF in its volatile Regional Command South. Juggling inadequate troop lists will not accomplish the mission.

The 1100 Australian troops deployed under ISAF in southern Afghanistan, the largest by a non-NATO country, are in stark contrast to the inadequate support by Europeans of their agreed mission. It confirms the futility of a strategy that assumes the eventual provision of sufficient resources from NATO.

The mission must therefore be adjusted to fit the resources. An approach put forward by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown seeks a shift in strategy that would favour 'hard-headed realism' working 'with the grain of Afghan tradition', where local volunteers are recruited to defend homes and families modelled on traditional Afghan *arbakai*. The support of *tribal militias* has already been implemented in the US sector of eastern Afghanistan and in Iraq's Anbar province. However, the downside of reinforcing tribal militias is that these 'deals with the lesser devils' will strengthen sectarian warlords and often hinder counter-narcotics iniatives. Much effort has already gone into disarming these warlords and militias and into creating a non-sectarian national police force and army.

An even more audacious policy adjustment is suggested by those who favour restricting the mission strictly to counter-terrorism and securing the border, as it was before NATO arrived in the South, using a *light footprint* based on intelligence and Special Forces operations. However, in Iraq this approach did not secure the population from terrorist attacks and led to consistent increases in terrorist violence. Success only came with the large influx of US conventional forces, willing and able to protect the population, something that Special Forces and long-range missiles alone cannot do.

The most far-reaching policy-adjustment option is *national reconciliation,* requiring the negotiation of a political end-state with the bulk of the insurgents. 'Reconciliation' as a concept is found in virtually all international mandates for Afghanistan. Negotiations are favoured by a majority of the Afghan population, the Afghan parliament's upper house, and are supported by President Karzai. Even the Taliban are in heated internal discussion on this issue.

In Europe, the UK, among others, has voiced its belief in negotiations. In Canada, among the credible supporters is the think-tank, the Senlis Council, and Gordon Smith, former Canadian ambassador to NATO and former Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Smith argues that the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily or eliminated as a 'political entity', and certainly not with the small increase in forces currently envisaged. The Taliban's wide constituency has legitimate concerns that must be addressed, he says. The Afghan head of the Human Rights Commission in Kandahar made a telling point: 'the Taliban were a part of this country – they must be brought back for there to be peace'.

The main obstacle to such negotiations has been the United States' view that it does not negotiate with terrorists. The policy on reconciliation of Canada's government and official opposition, as well as Australia's, follows that of the US.

Finding a way forward

Afghan and Coalition security forces in Afghanistan are less than one-third of the real requirement, and it seems evident that this gap will not be reduced. Accordingly, the Karzai government, with international support, controls only one-third of the country. Although these enclaves of control can be held against insurgents, current troop levels will not permit much further expansion. Consequently the war will continue indefinitely with no resolution. This is neither a desirable nor responsible goal.

The implication is clear: military leaders must demand a coherent set of policies and resources from their governments and from the international organisations, such as the UN and NATO, that have blessed the Afghan mission. Lacking 400,000 more international and Afghan security forces, the current mission to impose drastic societal transformation on a population more than one and a half times the size of Australia's must be significantly reformulated.

Our political masters must then give missions that are *do-able* with the troops they provide. These mandates could be limited to border control and counter-terrorism, using only a *light footprint* of Special Forces and air strikes. 'Success' could simply be the creation of a nucleus of effective Afghan forces, holding the main population centres. Alternatively, governments could agree to allow tribal groups to re-establish their own governance and security, accepting as a lesser evil the rebirth of *tribal militias* and the risk of renewed sanctuaries for international Islamist terrorism. Finally, our political leaders could consider *reconciliation* and a negotiated peace with the bulk of the insurgents who are often not really Taliban in the ideological sense. Whatever strategic objective is selected, it must be coherent with the real provision of a sufficient level of security forces and, in parallel, with provision of the necessary development assistance funds. ◆

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