

# Calibrating Ink Spots

## Filling Afghanistan's Ungoverned Spaces

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*'Ninety nine percent of counter-insurgency operations is civil affairs, or winning people's hearts and minds. Insurgents are fishes living in a pond and people are the water. If they are separated, it is easy to catch them.'*

(General Paik Sun Yup)<sup>1</sup>

*'We've got to strike the right balance. Security has to be there for the economy and government to work. But having an economy and government is essential for security.'*

(General William Wallace)<sup>2</sup>

### Glasses Half Full or Empty?

Much overall progress has been made in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, though this seldom captures the headlines.

Today the news is about the increasing incidence of attacks and casualties, predominantly in the south, and the wider use of suicide and other improvised explosive devices countrywide. These incidences are taken as representing broader trends of instability, as pixels not contributing to but indeed defining the national mosaic.

Fortunately, the reality is different. Take, for example, the baseline measurement of refugee flows out of the country. Fact: 2.5-plus million Afghans have returned over the past five years; Pakistan and Iran's camps are *not* bursting at the seams.

There are other benchmarks which offer a different picture to the one generally accepted of approaching catastrophe. Six million Afghans went to the polls in national and provincial elections in October 2005, in so doing establishing the first democratically elected legislature in over thirty years. One could hardly argue with conviction that human and especially gender rights have not improved dramatically since the Islamo-fascist Taliban era.

Significant progress has been made also in creating, virtually from scratch, a viable police force (numbering around 62,000 now) and army (about 30,000), and demobilizing more than 60,000 militia members. Despite the problems in the south of the country, opinion surveys show that a majority of Afghans no longer see security as a priority problem and that 86 per cent of them feel safe in their district.<sup>3</sup> Where they don't feel safe, in five of thirty-four provinces, there is a clear correlation between the drug-trade, tribal allegiances and levels of insecurity.

Tremendous, if insufficient, advances have also been made in education. Again, one cannot overlook the inheritance: under the Taliban, just 32 per cent of school-age children and just 3 per cent of Afghan girls were enrolled in school. The total enrollment rate for children has increased to 57 per cent today: 67 per cent for boys and 37 per cent for girls.

As for the wider region, often seen as an obstacle to Afghanistan's peace and development, it too reveals real grounds for optimism. Pakistan is widely perceived as a breeding ground for radical Islamic insurgents, but it is also a potential market of 165 million people, growing its economy at over 6



Senior British Army officer speaking with locals in Kabul, June 2006. *Photo by Greg Mills*

per cent annually for the past four years. Despite the acrimony between the leadership of Afghanistan and Pakistan, systems of security co-operation have been established at subordinate levels through the Tripartite Commission involving also the 37-nation NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the opportunities presented by the burgeoning middle-classes of China and India – together estimated to number over half a billion people – are overshadowed by gloomy analysis of the impact of porous borders on the opium trade, and the dangers presented by a radicalizing and nuclearizing Iran.

And the continued commitment of the international community, through ISAF and the London Compact<sup>5</sup>

ensuring a steady flow of development assistance, is not to be sniffed at – especially in an age when global attention spans are microscopic and politics, despite globalization, remains fundamentally, if frustratingly, local.

But of course, as much as things have improved, much remains to be done.

Progress is threatened by a number of worrying developments. Foremost among them is the deteriorating security environment, measured in terms of the number of incidents, and the increasingly aggressive modus operandi of the insurgents. Roughly 1000 people had, by June, been killed in the insurgency in 2006, with nearly half of that number dying in May, a month that witnessed the worst rioting in Kabul since the fall of the

Taliban. Also significant is the perceived failure by the government of Afghanistan (GoA) to meet the expectations of citizens and international actors alike. This relates not only to security but also to deep frustrations at the lack of faster progress in building the licit, non-drug economy and extending government services and authority. Little wonder President Hamid Karzai said in June 2006, 'It is not acceptable for us that, in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. [Even] if they are Taliban, they are sons of this land.' He added that the current stress on hunting Taliban militants did not address the root causes of the violence. 'We must engage strategically in disarming terrorism by stopping their sources of money, training, equipment and



motivation.' The causes of violence centre on the inability, real or perceived, of the government to provide essential services – governance – especially law and order to sectors of the population. This delivery failure is compounded by corruption; institutional weakness especially of the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the judicial system overall; poor security co-ordination between Afghan and ISAF/US forces; external interference; widespread poverty and high levels (81 per cent countrywide) of illiteracy; and clashes between traditional Afghan religious and cultural norms and what are seen as 'Western' values. Put differently, in the words of Mohammed Atta, mujahiddin guerrilla leader turned governor of the northern Balkh province, 'Pakistani mullahs provoke young Afghans in their madrasas. Some other people of course fight for money, while there are some approaches adopted by the government and ISAF which have alienated people.'<sup>7</sup>

## ***Meeting high public expectations and simultaneously transforming a drug-warlord political-economy stoked by religious sentiment is a difficult task***

Complicating matters further is the current mismatch between ambitious local programmes, mostly assiduously crafted, and the capacity and money of both the government and the military, local and international. The latter has until now been hindered by the chronic problem of turnover and continuity: for example, every six to nine months another ISAF mission has been born, so the learning process has had to start largely afresh, with each element having to adjust to new national operating styles and doctrinal guidelines – and, of course, getting to

know the country and its personalities and develop a working level of trust all over again.

Meeting high public expectations and simultaneously transforming a drug-warlord political-economy stoked by religious sentiment is a difficult task, one that inevitably results in disappointment, setback and unacceptably high levels of violence. And violence begets violence. Indeed, the more the allied government, coalition and ISAF troops press Taliban and other insurgents, the greater the social upheaval. 'For every Taliban killed', goes the saying, 'ten more are created'. And to recall Brigadier Richard Clutterbuck, 'The first reaction to guerrilla war must be to protect and control the population'.<sup>8</sup>

While the military resolve of the coalition cannot diminish, the need for a new approach to extend governance and government services and benefits for the population has been recognized. The importance of filling the ungoverned spaces exploited by the Taliban and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan has been seized on and energetically promoted by ISAF's current<sup>9</sup> commander, British Lieutenant General David Richards. His aim is to fill these spaces by establishing carefully selected governance zones – or 'ink spots' – of relative security and prosperity where the efforts of the security sectors, donors and the government of Afghanistan will be closely integrated through President Karzai's recently-formed Policy Action Group (PAG). The PAG can best be described as a 'development war cabinet', expediting development assistance to security hot-spots by improving intra-government and inter-agency co-ordination.<sup>10</sup> The goal is to improve the level and focus of spending within the Afghan government, which remains severely constrained by a lack of internal capacity. In 2005, the average ratio of expenditure-to-budget in Afghanistan's twenty-five ministries was around 30 per cent, the best 78 per cent.

If the ANDS provides the overall strategic framework for Afghanistan's development and the London Compact

is the delivery mechanism, the PAG offers the means to identify and implement priorities consistent both with the overall needs of the ANDS and the security situation. The Afghan Development Zones (ADZs) will offer a tactical focus. Local needs will be fed through the Provincial Development Plans (PDPs) and by District and Provincial Development Committees; ISAF and the coalition's twenty-three provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) dotted around Afghanistan will be an important conduit for development spending and provider of security assistance, one nib through which the ink will flow. The development of this approach – and its component directorates of intelligence, information, security and reconstruction – is recognition that the Afghanistan mission has transfigured from a peace-support operation into a traditional counter-insurgency operation involving robust military action in the velvet glove of winning 'hearts and minds' through political process and reconstruction and development. As such, past counter-insurgency experiences are once more under study.

The remainder of this article does not dwell on past failure or even current difficulties. Rather it focuses on what can be – and is being – done to make things go better. In doing so, it places the ink spot strategy advanced by General Richards within an historical context and evaluates the role of the PRTs and other bodies in this approach; and assesses where and how resources might best be focused for maximum effect.

## **Relevant History**

The 'ink spot' – or 'oil stain' – strategy, employed successfully by the British in Malaya fifty years ago, has been given more recent prominence by the former army officer and American academic Andrew Krepinevich. Krepinevich, a Vietnam veteran, has popularly espoused what he terms an 'oil stain strategy' whereby rather than focus on hunting down the enemy in Iraq as in Afghanistan, the coalition forces should concentrate on securing



The US PRT in Gardez, roughly 100km south of Kabul, is to fall under ISAF command by September 2006. *Photo by Terence McNamee*

specific towns and improving local services including schools, medical centres, sewerage, water, roads, and electricity, so much so that no one would want to support the insurgents. In time, the argument goes, success will spread slowly outwards as if from an expanding oil stain or ink spot, as happened in Malaya.<sup>11</sup>

Krepinevich's argument has its origins in the enduring principles of counter-insurgency warfare: of the need to deny the enemy the support they need from within the population; to win the support of that population by increasing opportunity and offering them security; and by making a protracted commitment in terms of both time and materiel. It also requires accepting a high degree of political and military risk by recognizing that not all areas will be secured and, second, that a greater troop presence will result in greater exposure to risk and casualties.

For Britain, the historical template is the experience of fighting the communist insurgency in Malaya in the 1950s. Doubtless valuable lessons were also learned from its execrable reign in Mesopotamia three decades earlier, where the British were

responsible for shepherding a fledgling and, as it turned out, fragile Iraqi nation to statehood. Their premature pullout in 1932 led to deeper insecurity, the rise of a brutal dictatorship and a general collapse of all British-built institutions. Earlier still, the British experience in fighting the Boers in South Africa institutionalized the practice of denying guerrilla forces succour by moving farming communities into concentration camps. The metrics of success of those times would not withstand public opinion today, however, in the same way that the US experience in Vietnam, which focused on killing insurgents at the expense of winning hearts and minds ultimately lost it support on both the local Vietnamese and international fronts.

At a tactical level, there are important parallels – yet also differences – between the Afghan PRT concept and the experience both of the British in Malaya and the American forces in Vietnam, which are useful to identify at the outset.

The US programme in Vietnam took two forms: first, a Rural Community Development

Programme, which started in 1959, using direct force and incentives to move peasants into large communities. By 1960, there were twenty-three so-called 'Agrovilles', each consisting of many thousands of people.

### ***Afghanistan PRTs differ from the Malay and Vietnam experience in terms of their methods and scale***

In 1961, with help from Sir Robert Thompson (who was instrumental in the Malaya programme of forced collectivization of Chinese squatters into New Villages), the 'Agroville Plan', was reformed into what was to become the Strategic Hamlet Programme, involving smaller communities (less than a thousand residents) erected on both existing and newly developed settlements. By July 1963, over 8.5 million people had been settled in 7,205 hamlets. But the scale of this was problematic, since many could not be properly funded or

equipped, and became prey to both violence waged and alternatives offered by the North. Other initiatives including the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) programme of US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam and the Marine Corps' Combined Assistance Platoon programme, met with limited success, but ultimately went the same way as the strategic hamlets.<sup>12</sup> In essence, the Vietnam model failed because it tried to protect communities by uprooting entire villages, in the process alienating them. Unlike Malaya, where the British were able to successfully isolate the majority of the population from the insurgents who came from 'a small and relatively unpopular' socially-and ethnically-distinct minority of the population, the Viet Cong enjoyed legitimacy among the relatively ethnically homogeneous South Vietnamese allied with strong external support.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to the general impression that the Vietnam War was lost not because of battlefield tactics but because of political failure, the use of population control was untenable where the insurgents and their supporters together comprised a majority among the population, and it was impossible and self-defeating to separate them.

The Afghanistan PRTs differ from the Malay and Vietnam experience in terms of their methods and scale, however. They do not involve enforced collectivization. They are also much smaller in terms of resources, and they cover a vast and largely unoccupied, impenetrable and inhospitable area. The twenty-three PRTs cover an area of 650,000 km<sup>2</sup>, just smaller than the state of Texas, in which many communities lack roads, electricity, water and other basic services. Indeed, their small size and vast operating space has arguably made a virtue out of necessity: the PRTs could never be a force of occupation, but rather had to secure their areas through the traditional three lines of counter-insurgency operations – security (to hold the ring), governance (to create accountability, services and a sense

of responsibility to the population), and development (to change the social conditions that give rise to the insurgency).

The key lessons drawn from the (ultimately) successful strategy in Malaya were the need to: separate the insurgent from the population; act always within the rule of law – and establish the rule of law if necessary; base operations on sound intelligence; strive never to alienate the local population; devise means to strengthen the local economy; fill the security and bureaucratic vacuum with technical expertise, resources and, if necessary, the military; and, critically, set a timeframe, both for the political process and the parallel withdrawal of troops. These lessons were painfully relearned in the Algerian and Vietnam campaigns. Elsewhere, the British experience in Northern Ireland has highlighted the need for intelligence-driven operations in an urban setting, but again providing the temporary security space to manufacture a permanent political solution.

***The need for information operations, focused reconstruction and development, and joined-up government-donor-military action is fundamental***

**New Centres of Gravity: Developing a Response**

Today's insurgencies contain other important differences with Malaya and Vietnam. These differences have to be reflected in meeting the core challenge of improving the unity and efficiency of the local, regional and international response.

For one, they have become infinitely more complex and dispersed, involving groups separated by geography and nationality, but organically linked by a core issue: in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, Muslims

uniting against perceived American hegemony. This demands understanding the centre of gravity of both the insurgent and ISAF: in the case of the former this requires evaluating both what local constituencies need and what the insurgents offer. The success of the ink spot strategy depends fundamentally on understanding the nature of the insurgent threat. For example, do they constitute a relative minority? Are they an umbrella under which cluster a variety of grievances, many of which are profoundly local and tactical, not grand or political? This requires, in turn, very clear intelligence mapping of clans, local allegiances, power structures, feuds, sources of power and legitimacy, ideological affiliations, sources of support, economic activities, trade networks, and so on.

Contemporary operations also occur within new parameters, ranging in the extremes from development in a virtually benign environment to war-fighting. There is a corresponding need to understand such new cycles of conflict and to identify points of transition – 'cusps', if you like – between war-fighting and more traditional peace-support operations and vice versa. Without such an understanding no clear exit strategy for the international community can be formulated. In the case of Afghanistan (and Iraq) it is vital that the international forces obtain ascendancy through strategic manoeuvre and get out of, in John Mackinlay's words, 'reactive attritional mode'.<sup>14</sup> In particular, they must gain the upper hand in the highly contested terrain of virtual (media) warfare where, as the BBC veteran Nik Gowing has observed, commanders must now accept

*an ever sharper political and military vulnerability which forces the machinery of government to be reactive and provide political accountability to a public which swiftly sees and hears unfiltered and possibly distorted versions of events that are not channelled through the public information processes of the military or government.*<sup>15</sup>

In this environment expectations are also raised – and patience shortened – by the absence of overarching security concerns in the contemporary counter-insurgency operation. The strategic imperative provided by the Cold War excused a lack of instant results and the body bags of Vietnam. Even though 9/11 and its policy corollary – the war on terror – was offered as this rationale, attention spans are shorter today, a condition exacerbated by a fast-moving and changing global media. In the case of Afghanistan, this alters ISAF's centre of gravity: it is most vulnerable to an increase in casualties and/or a change in political sentiment back home. Moreover, international media – especially the Internet – has offered jihadist insurgencies a network linking their otherwise disparate aims and furnishing ostensibly local events with 'global' significance. As such, managing the counter-insurgency thus requires more nuance and sophistication, but it also provides enhanced means to harmonize actions and develop collective transnational strategies. Here the nexus between the virtual and actual wars comprises the political sentiment and following – yes, hearts and minds – of the Afghan population.

The need for information operations, focused reconstruction and development, and joined-up government-donor-military action is fundamental to the success of a contemporary counter-insurgency. For there is an imperative to build coalitions not just amongst dissonant military alliances but across diplomatic, political and non-governmental sectors, including donors, multilateral actors such as the United Nations and the World Bank, private security companies and humanitarian agencies. Each of these operations have to be, in turn, managed across a number of contemporary 'fronts' – local, regional, international and in the media.

Information and expectation management go hand in hand. Media operations have to be front and centre of any strategy to stabilize Afghanistan as, indeed, in Iraq. It is through the media that an alternative national vision – free of terror, steadfast in its application of the rule of law, and grounded in the

respective cultural frameworks – will need to be championed. A media strategy has to be proactive, dictating its own tempo through managing access and information and not simply responding to events. It has to aim to overtly identify and articulate common interests across political divides. In this war, the propaganda of the deed is likely as important as the deed itself. The PAG's Communications' Directorate is designed to tackle this critical issue.

This, too, highlights the importance of linking actions with wider economic developments, so that they are not isolated or unsustainable in economic terms. However, this requires a clear understanding of the comparative economic advantage of Afghanistan – region by region, district by district: what they can produce and sell, what they can export, how might they improve their economic fortunes. The Afghan people are the key centre of gravity in this strategy, where a clear balance has to be maintained by ISAF between being viewed as a source of combat power and authority and a means of economic opportunity and prosperity. But if there is a common denominator between Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is the need for a counter-insurgency strategy that will win over the populace, the vital strategic ground, enabling them to carry on their lives in relative safety and prosperity.

Prosperity is therefore central to denying the insurgent operating space. An economic revitalization package that is not only cognizant of the important role to be played by the non-governmental sector, but actively seeks to establish modes of co-operation with the non-governmental community is fundamental. International organizations including the United Nations and the World Bank are important facilitators of this engagement, though the challenges in managing institutional self-interest in this process should not be underestimated. Focus and coherency of effort is vital. As Mark Joyce observes:

*Complex operations demand multi-faceted responses: the various government agencies, allies, NGOs,*

*international organisations, commercial companies and other agents involved in cusp operations all have a stake in, and a contribution to make to, this process.<sup>16</sup>*

Ideological and strategic clarity and cohesion is one thing, but the challenges of undoing what has become in some instances a self-fulfilling institutional and personal commercial tautology should not be underestimated. A functioning economy free from foreign aid is the stuff of which nations are made – but that requires NGOs and international organizations to commit, in essence, to do themselves out of a job, and to abrogate a degree of autonomy in the process. Here, too, there is a need to establish and build on donor best practice, and to manage the image of delivery. Much has been done since 2002 though few positive developments have been reported on.<sup>17</sup>

### Identifying and securing strategic populations

There are five significant challenges in employing a strategy of focused security-development effort:

- First, knowing where to place resources.
- Second, understanding what resources to employ for maximum effect.
- Third, linking the intended effect with sustainable economic activity.
- Fourth, a (political) challenge to potentially favour some geographic areas over others.
- Fifth, establishing reliable metrics for measuring the effect of this strategy.

There is a logical sequence of events to this strategy, which more or less follows Krepinevich's proposal for Iraq: first, the army goes in and cleans out areas. Second, they maintain a presence to ensure security of extant development projects by embedding security to the local army and police forces and



through the PRTs. Third, they should also employ the PRTs among other means to roll-out concentrated spending on development projects which have a key economic and social multiplier value, such as bridges and roads (for trade) or wells and clinics (for well-being). Fourth, the foreign military offers a quick reaction spine as a guarantee against insurgent activity. Fifth, the military also plays its part in ensuring top-down development-government-donor co-ordination.

In essence, the ink spot strategy might best be explained as being akin to expanding Kabul's Green Zone – now known in more politically-correct terminology as the International Zone – outwards to the entire country, where the benefits of the international presence, security, spending and government are visible and obvious for all. But since ISAF and its partners obviously do not have sufficient resources to cover the entire country all at once, and certain areas are less secure than others, this begs the question: Where to go first?

## **X marks the Spot**

It is logical that projects and geographic areas should be selected where the security-development-governance nexus is weakest, most critical and will have the greatest multiplier effect. However, this may not have the desired effect and may suck up a large amount of resources with minimal results.

There is a correlation between the presence of the Taliban, security problems, large population concentrations, and little development. 'Where to go' must then be led by intelligence, by a mapping of past development spending and requirements making up the extant Afghan Country Stability Picture (ACSP), by how large an area can be adequately secured by suitable security forces, and be guided by a consistent and clear evaluation of economic activity. How to evaluate this economic potential is a fundamental challenge. It will inevitably involve difficult political choices as communities bargain, twist and

posture for development assistance; and is complicated by the political tension around dealing with narcotics, particularly since the bulk of the development and security attention will inevitably be on the 'narco-provinces' in Afghanistan's south. Given, too, that unless carefully managed and explained this strategy could be seen to reward failure and will, by definition, be protracted in nature, it may be difficult to sell within parts of Afghanistan and within certain ISAF/NATO countries.

## **Road and telecoms infrastructure is arguably the most important means to extend governance and government reach**

Where to place resources also has to be part-and-parcel of a local compact within a wider 'grand' political bargain. The political, military, social and economic dimensions of a counter-insurgency strategy are inter-related and should aim to deliver a critical mass of support to Afghan society. Hence there is both a need to reward loyalty and to win over those disloyal. Either way, this requires a sense of priorities and the hammering out of local political bargains within a national framework. It will to an extent be guided by the presence of governance – or at least demand as a precondition a minimum governance requirement – and should be aimed at productive rather than consumptive areas of development spending.

## **Spreading the Stain**

The means of development spending are both bottom-up and top-down: the former through the PRTs and local district and provincial bodies; the latter via the national government's overall development strategy and in concert with international donors. ISAF has an important role to play in leveraging effect by mobilizing donors with

the Policy Action Group at the operational level.

PRTs have an important role in expediting resource flows from the bottom-up particularly by meshing experienced local and foreign military and civilian leadership as champions of projects. ISAF will, after Stages Three and Four have been completed, have the greatest national coverage of any international (and arguably local) organization: a geographical and numerical footprint, reach and communications on a theatre-wide basis. Even the smallest PRTs are 100-strong, enabling them to assist in supporting and empowering government structures. In phases, increasing volumes of security and reconstruction resources would be carefully applied to areas selected to expand these Afghan Development Zones – or perhaps more attractive (and accurate) Afghan Prosperity Zones. These would have to be consistent with (and a catalyst for) the overall ANDS and the sub-tier Provincial Development Plans. In theory, development spending and ISAF presence should go where required geographically; in reality, given the limitations in troop numbers and resources, increased effort is likely to gather around extant PRTs. In doing so, the ADZs offer a means to refocus existing capacity and tasks. Border crossing points might also offer opportunities for ADZ construction.

The government recognizes the centrality of the PRTs in this process. As the Minister for Counter-Narcotics, Habibullah Qaderi, has argued:

*We want the PRTs to come forward and give us expertise to assist in the design of various projects, to turn ideas into proper projects. This would help Afghans and would also serve another purpose in improving ISAF's image among Afghans.<sup>18</sup>*

Delivering development should not reinvent the wheel. There are a number of best practice examples, which could be copied wholesale or adapted to suit new programmes, though the PAG has an important role to play in

streamlining the multiplicity of current donor and government bodies and programmes. Combat engineering elements offer a key enabling development capacity for this strategy. This might be speedily assembled through a Generic Infrastructure Design Package to deliver, with minimum delay, quick impact infrastructure projects with the use of an infrastructure tool-kit for roads, micro-power, housing, water, and health clinics, all of which are designed around the use of locally-available labour and materials. The World Bank-supported National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which has reached all thirty-four provinces and touched 11 million Afghans, offers a further illustration of best practice that should be consolidated and extended in this bottom-up approach. The Ministry for Rural Reconstruction and Development-run NSP started out by creating village-level community organizations (shuras) before any work is done. Block grants are made to support these community organizations (which are elected by secret ballot and include women) in the project choices they make.

Road and telecommunication infrastructure is arguably the most important means to extend governance and government reach. Along with electrification, this offers visible evidence to citizenry of government activity and benefit. The speed at which Afghanistan's civilian mobile telecommunications network has spread over four years (from a zero base to more than 1.2 million subscribers) is an indication of the market potential given even the slightest security window. Security for contractors establishing this infrastructure is critical, if only on a quick-reaction basis.

### Metrics of Success

Until now the metrics of success in counter-insurgency operations have hinged on the acceptability of the political dispensation. But it is clear that in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, where, seemingly, a small minority can employ asymmetric techniques to

hold the majority of the country hostage to their political (and religious) beliefs, a widespread acceptance of a form of democracy is not enough. And if they cannot be defeated politically, they cannot be defeated militarily either. More than that, the greater the kinetic activity employed against them, the greater the civilian fall-out in violence, casualties and support for the government. A high body count may, indeed, be an inverse indicator of success.

Yet simply spending money or rolling out a large number of projects is also not necessarily a positive indicator of development. Indeed, it may well be the opposite, given that it increases dependency and diminishes the sort of local entrepreneurial self-sufficiency imperative for economic vitality.

More accurate indices include the levels of local economic output over a period, as may be improvements in the quality of life (potable water, life expectancy, literacy rates, etc), or, at another level, the number of schools being attacked by militants. Other security indicators include the amounts of actionable intelligence received from local sources, or, more dramatically, the number of attacks occurring in an area, and the extent of criminality.

The ultimate metric of success is in the sustainability of the strategy; whether, indeed, these projects take root in a manner that is economically self-sustaining. While the international community can, at best, offer expanding and concentric circles of security, they can only be sustained by the activities of Afghans themselves. Herein rests a fundamental tension: the danger of doing too much, and too little. If the former, the Afghans may become complacent and the local market distorted; if the latter, the security situation might deteriorate. Finding that balance is the middle ground between occupation and exit, between denying the insurgents the popular support they need and allowing the local community to develop their own solutions.

### Ink Spots: Answering the Short-Term Challenges

President Karzai said in June 2006 that there is 'the need on behalf of the international community to reassess the manner in which this war against terror is conducted'.<sup>19</sup> Even though an upsurge in violence had been expected to greet the Stage Three and Four transition from (US) coalition to ISAF control, many observers have been shocked by its scale. This has led to calls for more troops, which have been heeded, while earlier discussions over a change in tactics have now been picked up on in earnest – hence the formulation of the Policy Action Group and the embryonic Afghan Development Zones. Behind this is the recognition that a counter-insurgency strategy is required that will not simply kill insurgents but will win over the populace. To do so, it has to explicitly link development and security spending – from the bottom-up via local shuras, district and provincial councils through the synergies of PRTs and government ministries; and from the top-down in synch with overall Afghan development programmes and in tandem with donors and other international actors.

The ink spot approach is a fundamental departure from past efforts in that it concentrates resources, seeks to unify the donor and security community, does not try to do everything (or every area) at once, and explicitly links security outcomes with development inputs. Can it achieve this? To some extent this depends on each player, donor and government, militaries and NGOs, delivering their constituencies. So far the signs are promising, even though it will require a continued political and physical commitment to keep the required number of 'boots on the ground' to help defeat any insurgency. If it succeeds in maintaining this commitment and linking the tactical use of development spending with economic needs and security difficulties, the approach followed in Afghanistan may provide a template for future counter-insurgency and peace-building doctrine – dealing with





today's 'small wars' – thus giving lie to the old adage that the military always plans for the last war.

But that is only part of the challenge. The importance of 'Afghan ownership', 'Afghan enabled', 'Afghan face', and 'Afghan delivery' to projects is *sine qua non* in development speak today. But while the patter may be polished, the practice will determine the overall success of the ink spot strategy like the ISAF mission. If it is to learn the lessons of previous counter-insurgency failures such as in Vietnam, the international community has to do itself out of a job. And to do so, it has to find ways to deal with an (until now) insurmountable intellectual and political challenge: apply successfully post-modern liberal reconstruction and social plans on a largely pre-modern society.

***If there is a new Great Game being played out in Afghanistan, it is one to be played by the Afghans themselves with the international community as a supporting cast***

**To the Longer-Term: The Hardest Part is Saying Goodbye**

Afghanistan was essentially created as a buffer state between the covetous Russian empire and Imperial India. But the correlation of geography and empire held scant regard for realities of tribe and topography, hence the ethnic amalgam that is modern Afghanistan and a political-economy that is biased towards local not national interests and influenced less by Kabul than regional actors. It has been oriented towards rent-seeking rather than productive capacity, which explains the centrality, today as fifty years ago, of aid to Kabul's reach and capacity.

If there is a new Great Game being played out in Afghanistan, it is one to be played by the Afghans themselves with the international community as a supporting cast. Not only do the Afghans know their country better than any foreigner, but foreign involvement risks igniting Islamist-nationalist resentment which, when understood alongside sentiments of identity, honour and a sense of pride, helps to explain why young villagers are apparently so willing to take up arms against the coalition in some areas. There is a fine balance between doing more and too much in Afghanistan, between providing the level of assistance necessary for prosperity to take root and provoking more hatred and insurgency. This also requires the international community to allow the Afghans to play politics the Afghan way. As the writer and ex-British diplomat Rory Stewart has observed:

*Today you have McKinseyesque jargon being used to place bureaucratic impediments in the way of Afghans getting things done. The result is that you have now the comedy of a double-state: This jargon for Kabul and the benefit of international donors; and the reality of a patronage-run, clan-linked, personality-driven political and economic system, which most Westerners feel very uncomfortable with.<sup>20</sup>*

To do so, Afghanistan's international partners have to be clear, in an honest dialogue, about what they can and cannot support. It may demand staggering the approach to dealing with the pressing security impact of the insurgency in the South and the counter-narcotics drive, which may only, for the meantime, exacerbate tensions. Recognition of an Afghan way will also demand abandoning, at least in the interim, the vision of Afghanistan as a highly centralized state that some had hoped and planned for.

This centres on three analytical 'deficits' currently faced in finding the right approach to external intervention

in the state-building project in Afghanistan:

- First, the gap between what Kabul says it requires and what local, widely dispersed communities need. This knowledge gap has as much to do with the weakness of local institutions feeding in this information as it does the centralized government vision held by Kabul.
- Second, the world of difference between the promise of high-altitude development plans such as the ANDS and the reality of a lack of government capacity to implement them.
- Finally, the divide between the global jargon of development – of good governance, constitutions, bills of rights and institution building – and the reality of the way in which Afghanistan's political-economy operates, centred around clans, personalities and the illicit economies of arbitrage and drugs.

These are not academic considerations. In policy terms, they go to the heart of understanding whether it is possible to separate counter-insurgency from counter-narcotics, for example; and if so, how? Is it possible to create stability and conduct an aggressive counter-narcotics strategy where few realistic prospects of an alternative economy to drugs exist? But can one allow the existence of an illicit economy which potentially undermines attempts at providing even a façade of good governance? Or does one slowly attempt to improve security, build regulatory institutions including the police, and create alternative means of income, all of this while taking care not to upend the local political status quo by going after the drug lords, many of whom are reputed to be inextricably entwined with government itself?<sup>21</sup> As one UK observer has noted, there are three types of provinces in Afghanistan when it comes to drugs: those that

traffic, those that produce, and those that do both.<sup>22</sup>

One thing is clear: instability assists drug traffickers and producers in their efforts. This points the interim way towards 'selective eradication'<sup>23</sup> – the targeting of those farmers whose land has good potential for other production than for opium poppies. That way, the farmer has an alternative option that is viable, and can be made aware of the risk he takes by opting to continue poppy production. Selective eradication still signals the authority's determination to address the narcotics problem, without forcing those farmers existing on marginal land into the hands of the drug lords. As General Sir Mike Jackson, Chief of the British Army, put it recently: 'To physically eradicate [opium poppies] before all the conditions are right seems to me to be counter-productive.'<sup>24</sup>

***Is it possible to create stability and conduct an aggressive counter-narcotics strategy where few realistic prospects of an alternative economy to drugs exist?***

The overall test facing the Karzai government and his international supporters cannot only be measured against the short-term requirements of stability and capacity to roll-out development projects, but against the wider needs of nation-building, national authority and allegiance. This explains why short-term reportage of security incidents remains only pixels in the wider mosaic of national progress. While they might help to inform trends, they also have to be gauged against both the historical inheritance and the social and economic decay of the past two decades. ■

**NOTES**

1. Paik Sun Yup, *Tai-Gerira Sen (Anti-Guerrilla Warfare)*. Tokyo: Hara-shobo, 1993, p. 120.
2. 'For the First Time Since Vietnam, the Army Prints a Guide to Fighting Insurgents', *New York Times*, 13 November 2004 at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/2004/11/nyt111304.html>.
3. A high percentage of those polled in a Uruzgan (57 per cent), Zabul (48 per cent), Kandahar (42 per cent), Nimroz (37 per cent) and Helmand (21 per cent) said that they did not feel safe at all. During a previous survey conducted in August 2005, 92 per cent of the population said that they felt safe. *Nationwide Research and Survey on Illegal State Opposing Armed Groups: Qualitative and Quantitative Results*. Survey conducted for ISAF by altai consulting, 20 May 2006.
4. NATO took over command of ISAF in August 2003. ISAF currently numbers 9,700, though this will increase to around 18,000 by the completion of the Stage Three (south) and Stage Four (East) takeovers.
5. *The Compact sets out an ambitious programme for Afghan development over the next five years. It was launched at the London Conference 31 January - 1 February 2006 as direct follow up to the 22 December 2001 Bonn Agreement. With a focus on security, governance, reconstruction and development, and counter-narcotics, the Compact offers a framework for international engagement and support to Afghanistan, outlining outcomes, benchmarks and mutual obligations in an attempt to 'co-ordinate efforts and create greater synergies between the government and the international community.'* The London conference brought together over 60 delegates from the GoA, the UN and the international community, where the GoA presented its Interim National Development Strategy (I-ANDS) and international donors in turn pledged US\$10.5 billion in return in support of Afghanistan's reconstruction. Go to <http://www.cmi.no/afghanistan/?id=327&The-London-Conference-and-the-Afghanistan-Compact>. For details on the ANDS go to <http://www.and.s.gov.af/main.asp>.
6. At <http://www.cbc.ca/story/world/national/2006/06/22/afghanistan-karzai.html?print>.
7. Discussion with author, Mazar-e-Sharif, 15 July 2006.
8. From his *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966).
9. From May 2006-February 2007.
10. It is envisaged that the PAG will comprise ministries and those international actors operating in the geographic areas concerned, notably including the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). It is intended that the PAG will be supported by a secretariat probably located within the National Security Council to be supported in turn by four inter-government agencies: Security (to be led by the Ministry of Defence), Intelligence (National Directorate of Security), Reconstruction (Ministry of Education); and a Communications Directorate (Ministry of Culture and Information).
11. See Andrew Krepinevich, 'How to Win in Iraq', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 85, No. 5, September/October 2005).
12. For an excellent summary of these programmes, see Wade Markel, 'Draining the Swamp: The British Strategy of Population Control', *Parameters* (Spring 2006), pp. 35-48, at <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/06spring/markel.htm>.
13. *Ibid*, p. 36. See also John A Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (New York: Praeger, 2002).
14. John Mackinlay, 'Defeating Complex Insurgency with International Forces,' in Mark Joyce (ed.), 'Transformation of Military Operations on the Cusps' *Whitehall Report 1-06* (London: RUSI, 2006).
15. Nik Gowing, 'Real Time Crises: New Real Time Information Tensions', in Joyce, *ibid*, pp. 16-17.
16. 'Operations on the Cusps', *ibid*, p. 2.
17. For example, donor funding to the South (the provinces of Helmand, Nimroz, Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan and Day Kundi from 2002-2005 has totalled US\$291 million plus a further US\$604 million in strategic infrastructure spending. An additional US\$355.5 million in donor spending is committed.
18. Interview with author, Kabul, 17 July 2006.
19. At [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5107816.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5107816.stm).
20. Interview with author, Kabul, 19 July 2006.
21. Income for farmers from wheat as opposed to heroin production is around one-tenth, making current alternatives a sub-economic proposition. The government's National Drug Control Strategy hinges around targeting traffickers, building new institutions (notably the Counter-Narcotics Police, Afghan Special Narcotics Force, and the Counter-Narcotics Tribunal), alternative livelihoods and demand reduction. Public perceptions of government's seriousness are key to the success of this strategy. In an interview with the author in Kabul in July 2006, the Minister of Counter-Narcotics was enthusiastic about the need for high-profile arrests: 'We should do it tomorrow. It will have a great impact', he said. It should be noted that while drug production has increased dramatically in Afghanistan during the last season (150 per cent in Helmand alone), there has reportedly been no discernible reported increase in heroin flows to Western user countries.
22. Interview with author, Kabul, 17 July 2006.
23. I am grateful to Martin Edmonds for this term.
24. Cited in the *Guardian*, 21 July 2006.