POLICY ANALYSIS ASPI

Charting a course for Afghanistan

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The Rudd Government has inherited plans for a military build-up and a rising aid budget in Afghanistan. In December, the Defence Minister, Joel Fitzgibbon, assessed that 'We are winning the battles and not the war...We have been very successful in clearing areas of the Taliban but it's having no real strategic effect.' In part, that's because the 'war' is a state-building project. To have lasting effect, it must establish a functional government that can compete successfully for legitimacy and territory with its predecessor, the Taliban.

Our alliance and counter-terrorism interests currently point in the same direction. We need a legitimate Afghan government that can lead the counter-insurgency campaign, a campaign whose success depends on external events and which stretches well into the future.

With an ongoing insurgency, military assistance is necessary to control territory for the Kabul Government. However, governance is ultimately a civilian affair and sustainable success in Afghanistan requires different mixes of military and non-military tools across a country divided between west–north and east–south. In areas of active insurgency, we should hold the line through force and rapid reconstruction projects. Behind the line, we should work on governance, prioritising law and order.

NATO has begun reviewing its aid and military strategies for the next 3–5 years.[1] The following analysis offers a 15-year vision for Afghanistan and derives from it a medium-term strategy for assistance, leading to recommendations on Australia's role.

The story so far – military conflict

As of 5 December 2007, thirty-nine countries were contributing 41,700 troop to Afghanistan (see figure 1),[2] not including 7,000 soldiers under the separate command of Operation Enduring Freedom. Australia is one of a handful of countries operating in the dangerous south (see figure 2).

49,000 soldiers are too few for the ambitious objective of controlling territory and pacifying a significant insurgency. The continuing challenge induced most countries to increase their deployments in 2007. This was a positive—and somewhat unexpected—outcome of alliance politics.

Figure 1: Troops in Afghanistan (5 December 2007)

US	15038	Croatia	211
UK	7753	Lithuania	196
Germany	3155	Portugal	163
Italy	2358	Greece	143
Canada	1730	Albania	138
Netherlands	1512	Estonia	125
France	1292	FYRM	125
Turkey	1219	Latvia	96
Poland	1141	Jordan	90
Australia	892	Finland	86
Spain	763	NZ	74
Denmark	628	Slovakia	70
Romania	537	Slovenia	66
Norway	508	Azerbaijan	22
Bulgaria	401	Iceland	10
Belgium	369	Luxembourg	9
Sweden	350	Ireland	7
Czech Rep.	240	Austria	3
Hungary	219	Switzerland	2

Georgian troops not yet deployed
Source: NATO

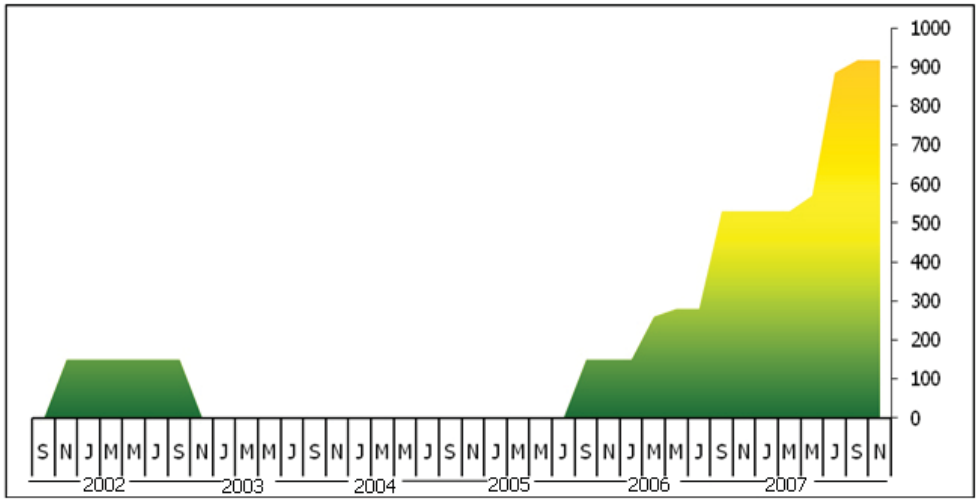
Involvement in Afghanistan remains vaguely unpopular in many NATO publics and firmly unpopular in a few. 2008 is a crunch year: demonstrable progress will sustain momentum; perceptions of stagnation will likely initiate withdrawals.

Australia has followed the trend, with belated recognition that Afghanistan's history of militarism is not amenable to a quick fix (see figure 3). On current plans, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) contingent will exceed 1,000 in mid-2008.

Figure 2: Primary deployments of NATO members

Source: NATO

Figure 3: ADF Personnel in Afghanistan, 2001–07



NATO confronts a fluid opposition, including transnational jihadis, drug barons and warlords. Some of these have fought on all sides over decades of conflict. The difficulty of defining this spectrum of opponents has spawned the term 'anti-coalition militia' (ACM). An important point of consistency is that all groups rely heavily on locals for foot soldiers. Many fighters are part-time and will change sides or stand down when confronted with inducements or costs.

As a rough guide, around a quarter of the ACM are full-time insurgents. They are the leadership and dedicated cadre of the Taliban, a traditionally Pashtun organisation that has trended towards greater transnationalism since losing power in Afghanistan. The Taliban operates mostly in the south and east and opposes any foreign presence in Pashtun areas. If successful there, they would become expansionist.

Another quarter of the ACM is spread across the country and resists Kabul out of concerns for local power, often linked to drug revenues. Such people are rarely motivated by religion, although they use traditional power structures and cultural justifications for rebellion. Sensitive to the winds of fortune, they will partner with the government or jihadis as their interests dictate.

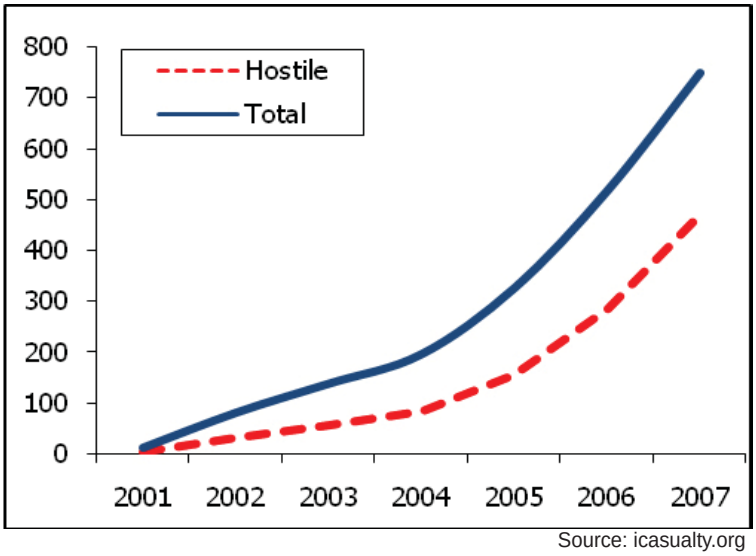
The remaining 50% of ACM numbers would don an Afghan National Army (ANA) shirt if conditions were attractive. Most of them are in the south and east. Pay, power and prestige induce them to take direction from local warlords and/or the Taliban. They snipe and lay improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for a wage and participate in the drug trade as an economic opportunity. To a greater extent in Pashtun areas, their motivations may include personal loss or hostility to cultural encroachment. Ultimately, productive employment will drain their numbers.

Given the nature of the ACM, high-level political negotiation will not be successful. At the top, many Taliban leaders would gladly shift base from Pakistan if offered control of southern provinces. However, they would not abandon designs on Kabul and would not facilitate development in Pashtun areas.

As for local power-holders or power-seekers that occasionally associate with the Taliban out of expedience, negotiations are continuous. Many of them have a stake in the formal political system and in the north and west they have little interest in southern violence. The ongoing development of national political structures will reduce further their incentives for armed resistance.

In the south, however, their cost-benefit framework is radically different, as it may include physical threats from the Taliban and cash from opium cultivation. The coalition struggles to provide security for or deliver inducements to would-be collaborators, who therefore stand aside or assist the insurgency. With troops spread thinly, NATO has often not stayed in southern districts long enough to disburse non-drug wealth and protect those who show loyalty.

Figure 4: Cumulative coalition casualties, 2001–07



Source: icasualty.org

Finally, for the locally-recruited bulk of the ACM, 'negotiations' require territorial control and development. Mercenary fighting is a time-honoured income in Afghanistan and this source of insurgents will be a problem until other opportunities are available. Notably, reports from the south suggest that the Taliban offer higher salaries than the ANA.[3]

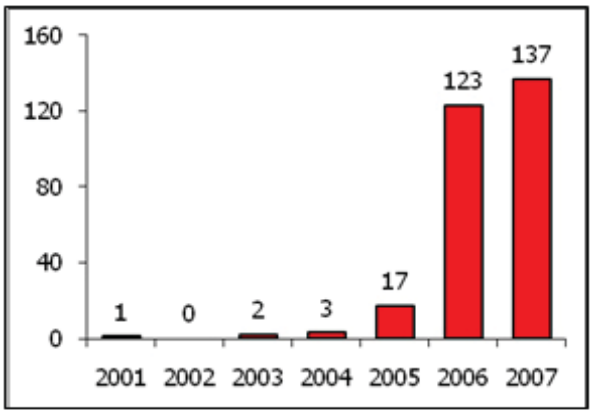
In the face of continuing insurgency, coalition fatalities have been increasing steadily (see figure 4). Note that 'hostile' includes indirect attacks such as land mines and IEDs, as well as friendly fire.

However, aggregate figures obscure the geographical concentration of conflict. Divided by NATO's regional commands, almost 90% of coalition combat casualties have occurred in the south and east. Proximity to Pakistan and the strength of Pashtun nationalism are strongly correlated with the number of fatalities. The north and west are unstable but not hostile to international assistance.

Counting international casualties is a poor way to judge prospects for long-term stability. Each NATO member naturally focuses on its troops' safety, but the more important predictor of success is local enthusiasm for the government.

Opinion polls in Afghanistan return low support for the Taliban and surprisingly resilient support for international forces and the government in Kabul.[4] However, their methodological limitations warrant caution when interpreting the results.

Figure 5: Successful suicide attacks



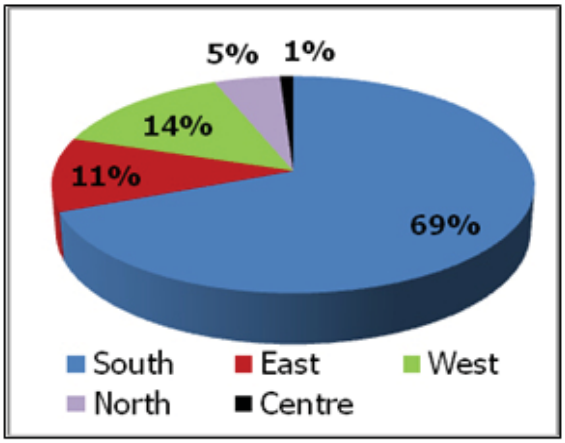
Source: UN Department of Safety and Security ('01–'06); Pajhwak Afghan News Agency ('07)

Nevertheless, if local opinion is important, civilian casualties should be avoided and military tactics should reflect the strategic objective of winning public support. This balance of aims appears to have been forgotten or badly calculated in numerous incidents instigated by the coalition. Legitimacy is undermined, although in keeping with the practice of not tracking civilian deaths, the coalition makes it difficult to assess negative impacts.

The insurgency has made similar mistakes, particularly in escalating suicide attacks, which were unheard of in Afghanistan before 2001 (see figure 5). Generally, governments can function in the face of endemic terrorism and suicide bombers rarely threaten territorial control. Moreover, the tactic has a tendency to backfire: in 2007, suicide attacks killed 300 civilians but only 12 NATO soldiers.[5] Just as indiscriminate coalition bombing reduces support for international intervention, civilian casualties from suicide attacks erode the legitimacy of the ACM. Insurgency commanders acknowledge this downside by occasionally issuing apologies.

Opium

Figure 6: Proportion of total opium cultivation, by NATO regional command



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Another security issue is opium and again it is concentrated geographically (see figure 6). Across Afghanistan, cultivation, production, processing and trafficking create power bases outside the formal economic and political systems. One outcome is the fragmentation of governance structures between those that the coalition supports and those that thrive on illicit activities.

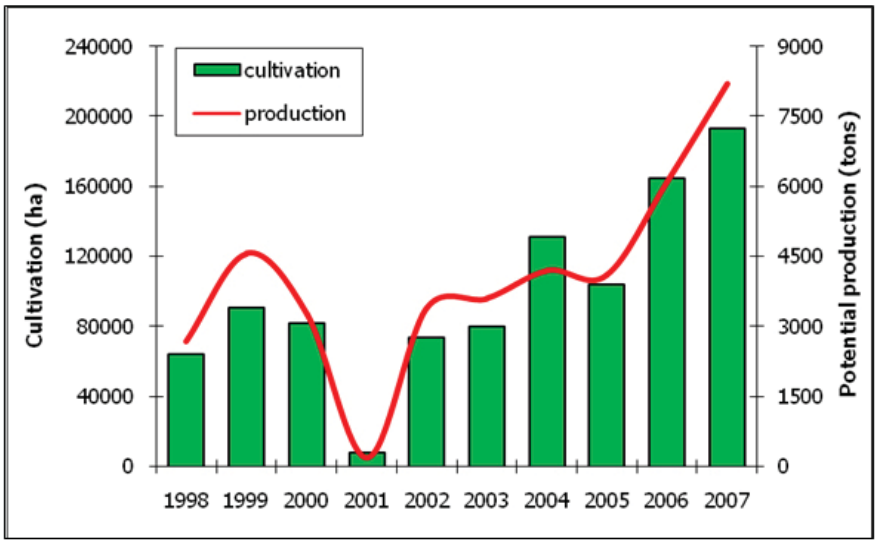
Opium was a primary source of finance for the Taliban regime and production expanded to 8,200 tons in 2007 (figure 7).[6] Coalition fatalities, opium cultivation and ACM influence are spatially correlated. Cultivation creates a symbiosis between insurgents and opium farmers: the insurgency derives funds from opium and farmers fear a loss of income if the government has its way.

Encouragingly, the number of poppy-free provinces increased to thirteen in 2007. These are areas where improved governance, promises of aid and negotiated eradication of crops have encouraged compliance with the law. In order to sustain this trajectory, the national government and international donors need to demonstrate quickly the benefits they can deliver.

Some observers have suggested that opium should be legalised, bought by donors and distributed to developing countries as medicinal opiates.[7] This strategy has two major flaws. First, according to the International Narcotics Control Board—which licenses opium cultivation—the global supply of medicinal opiates has exceeded demand since 1999.

Second, major producing areas are outside government control. It would be impossible to enforce a licensing regime. Opium production would expand, with farmers taking payments from the government while continuing to supply illicit buyers. There are better prospects for licensing in small areas amenable to enforcement, although this would create an additional market without displacing the larger illegal one.[8]

Figure 7: Opium cultivation and production



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Aid

Long-term stability in Afghanistan requires the establishment of a functional national government that receives public support. Foreign forces are not capable of such a feat; the most they can do is hold territory and protect infrastructure while others tend to governance.

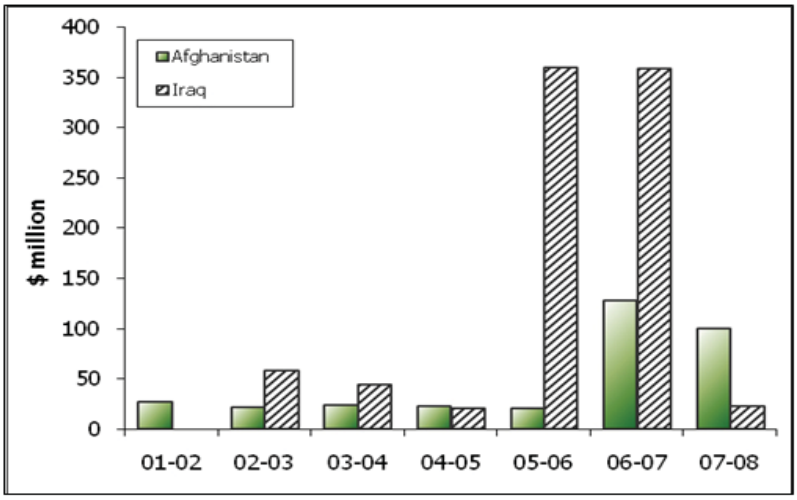
Overseas development assistance to Afghanistan has been growing in response to perceptions that the volume of aid has been below what is required. Nevertheless, two trends have remained consistent. First, a majority of funding has bypassed government structures and been managed by NGOs, international organisations and private consultancies. The proportion spent without local administration has been around 70% of total commitments.

Second, the Afghan Government struggles to spend the money it does receive, disbursing 50–80% of grants. Kabul's pleas for more help are justified, but it is a weak link in the assistance chain.

Both trends indicate a need to reconsider delivery mechanisms. Building government capacity to plan and implement development should be the aim. Unsustainable, foreign-managed interventions lacking interaction with local government do not help.

Australia's aid contribution has increased substantially from a low base (see figure 8).[9] Early indications from the Rudd Government suggest that the 2007–08 estimate will be a minimum.

Figure 8: AusAID expenditure in Iraq and Afghanistan



Source: AusAID budget papers

The modalities of Australian aid have also changed. Our early spending went almost entirely through the international donor funds for Afghanistan. With bigger budgets has come a mandate for AusAID to implement projects directly. Current policy is to focus heavily on Oruzgan in a whole-of-government approach to our area of military operations, although in dollar terms, spending there has been a minority.

AusAID only has one representative in Afghanistan. As it attempts to ramp up its program, a challenge is to ensure the security of staff. One solution is to place civilians under the protection of the military. Another solution has been adopted to protect four Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers—engage private security contractors.

There are significant drawbacks to such arrangements. Private contractors are expensive and divert a sizeable portion of the budget from development to self-protection. Placing aid workers with the ADF might seem an attractive alternative, but costs re-appear as constraints on military operations. Regardless, either option reduces the effectiveness of aid—it's difficult to build positive relationships and legitimacy when surrounded by machine guns.

Furthermore, if aid workers mingle with armed foreigners they become valid targets to the insurgency. In contrast to Iraq, the ACM in Afghanistan has generally avoided development targets because attacks that reduce living standards undermine the legitimacy of resistance. There are three major exceptions to this rule. First, ACM legitimacy is derived locally, so out-of-area operations are acceptable. Second, faith-based NGOs and military reconstruction teams attract attacks regardless of their good intentions. Examples are the South Korean hostages from Saemmul Presbyterian Church and the British Army's ongoing battle to refurbish the Kajaki Dam.

Third, some groups in the ACM consider criminal behaviour such as kidnapping justified to fund their struggle—and Westerners are tempting targets. Compared to other conflict zones, such behaviour has been surprisingly limited, but it remains a risk for any foreigner.

When considering these exceptions, the underlying reality is inescapable. In areas where the insurgency is active, violence and lawlessness affect everyone, be they locals, government employees, or aid workers. Surrounding development actors with armed personnel does not dispel the risk and may make it worse.

Fifteen years from now

The Taliban has succeeded in the primary aim of every insurgency—survival—and will maintain a threatening military strength for many years. Opium production will continue at a level that provides financial power to the ACM and underpins southern resistance to rule from Kabul.

Events beyond Afghanistan will impact on its internal security and on how NATO perceives the conflict, including developments in Iraq and the occurrence of major terrorist events. For the purposes of this *Policy Analysis*, Pakistan is an independent variable, and a grim one at that. Australia has limited leverage over events there, although we can advise better-positioned allies, such as the US. Pakistan is unlikely to make definitive progress in controlling its western borderlands for at least a decade. Areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan will therefore remain militarily unstable, narrowing the set of realistic coalition aims.

In fifteen years time, Afghanistan is likely to be divided geographically. An optimistic vision sees the government in Kabul with a tangible writ across the north and west. Provincial leaders will respond to central directives because Kabul is delivering the benefits of international assistance. Opiate trafficking will continue but production and processing will be minimal. These parts of Afghanistan—the majority—will resemble other very poor countries.

In the south and east, Pashtun provincial leaders will take part in national governance and several provinces will be passive. However, areas of Kandahar, Helmand and the eastern provinces that border Pakistan will suffer from insurgency. Insurgent formations of more than a handful of men will be rare and will be deterred by coalition air assets. IEDs, suicide attacks and opportunistic sniping and rocket fire will occur. Territorial control will be contested in these areas and opium production will be intense.

In social spending and military support, the Afghan Government will still rely on international assistance. By then, it will have a capacity to absorb significant donations and funnel them

into development outputs. A number of foreigners will work in-line but the government will have control over its development trajectory.

If dedicated hostility to government rule is corralled into enclaves in the south and east, a stalemate will ensue. As NATO's military commitment wanes, Kabul will struggle to take the fight into hostile districts.

In Colombia, Myanmar and Moldova, rebellious areas with illicit revenues are difficult for governments. Nevertheless, conflict is contained and the state can remain coherent. In the case of Afghanistan, donor funding will be necessary until there is improvement in Pakistan. A vision of fifteen years hence sees the Afghan Government receiving economic assistance but shouldering the social and physical costs of sustaining itself. The ANA will plan and lead operations across Afghanistan. International forces will provide training, air support and, rarely, a long-range strike. Backed by a secure north and west, the government in Kabul will contain rebellion in the south and east.

The medium term

Outlining a vision for Afghanistan that sees it becoming a new Colombia or Moldova is not terribly inspiring or politically palatable. But NATO needs to be realistic, at least internally, about what it can achieve and at what pace. Squeezing the ACM into a few border areas would represent major progress, as would a north and west that responds to Kabul and supports national development plans.

To realise this vision, a 3–5 year strategy for military and civilian assistance should prioritise Afghan ownership. Aid programs have reflected an emphasis on short-term action over the development of Afghan capacity. Now, donors need to complement direct delivery with improved government systems.

A major focus should be law and justice. Military manoeuvres and suicide bombers obscure the day-to-day insecurity locals experience across the country. Related to criminality and poverty, this is a much wider concern than massed conflict. One of the Taliban's key achievements was increased stability at the grassroots. Like most populations around the world, Afghans measure progress by gauging trends in their physical and economic security. Improving perceptions on this front is the best way to engender support for the government in Kabul.

On the military side, the ANA should lead in all regions by 2012. Kabul will not have complete territorial control, which means the ANA will still be conducting counter-insurgency and policing internal borders. A de facto partition of some southern and eastern provinces is likely. Geographically, Afghanistan may become a mirror image of Pakistan.

For the next 3–5 years, NATO needs to entrench positions around major settlements and across the buffer zones it controls. The conflict should not degenerate into 'Pashtuns vs. the rest'—the continuing participation of Pashtun communities in national governance is important.

ANA training should focus on internal defence, national solidarity and military policing against infiltration and trafficking. Cross-regional recruitment and rotations should continue. Many NATO members are likely to reduce their commitments, so the ANA must be prepared for less manoeuvrability and air support, but stronger command and control.

NATO should also make concerted effort to improve cross-border cooperation between the ANA and the Pakistani Army. One of the best outcomes of Afghanistan's geographic division may be the demonstration of shared interests between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Border liaison officers, meet-and-greets and exercises at all levels would produce benefits for little cost. By 2012, the coalition should aim to institute a system of communication channels between border guards—radios, direct lines, regular meetings—wherever possible.

The Australian contribution

Seven considerations for Australian assistance follow. First, the ADF's work to install Afghan contingents in fortifications in Oruzgan is a good idea and aligns with the strategy outlined above. However, it will be at least a few years until the ANA can hold the territory around these emplacements without direct assistance. The ADF should consider a localised mentoring role to build the ANA's capacity for using its fortifications. Training must reflect the reality of diminishing NATO ground support.

Second, as the front line becomes an internally fortified border, there will still be a role for ranging special forces patrols. Australian familiarity with Oruzgan suggests it would be our most effective area of operations. However, higher priorities could arise and if Australia's military contribution becomes lighter, the ADF may need to integrate special forces more fully with our allies. Effective coordination with the ANA will become increasingly important.

Third, our aid program in Oruzgan should be tightly focused. Acknowledging the province's limited capacity to absorb assistance, we should prioritise basic infrastructure, such as roads, irrigation and electricity generation. We should use local contractors, minimise our security footprint, avoid association with the military and implement projects that reduce Oruzgan's isolation. Over the next 3–5 years, we should strive to solidify those districts we control into a coherent territorial unit linked to central Afghanistan.

Fourth, Australia can help to bolster Kabul's writ across the north and west. Umbrella or programmatic agreements with United Nations agencies are one way to deliver funds quickly—in law and justice, prime partners would be the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. However, international organisations are themselves struggling with capacity constraints. While cooperation in planning is advisable, showering them with extra money may be less effective than organising programs ourselves.

Fifth and following from this, there is a need to create and fill in-line positions with the national government. The Afghan state will stand or fall on its record of applying international funds to local development. Foreigners are presently the only way to bridge many capacity gaps. They should have the dual role of delivering government services and building a local team to take their place. Such methods are standard practice in development programs and they should be expanded in Afghanistan. It would be helpful to increase Afghans' opportunities for professional training and education, including in Australia. A balance must be struck between building long-term capacity and ensuring that well-educated Afghans are available for government work.

Sixth, Australia could sponsor some districts that have eschewed opium. Basic infrastructure projects would be good value, with any combination of arms-length funding, hands-on project delivery or in-line administration with provincial governments. AusAID will need staff in-country and it will need to time these activities with the poppy cycle. Time is short—in some places the harvest begins in April.

Finally, there may be scope for a bigger AFP presence in areas where the insurgency is absent but law and order is weak. Some NATO militaries are currently conducting police training. This is potentially counter-productive—just as police would not be used to train infantry, soldiers are not suited to preparing a police force. Only coordinated donor funds and the right personnel will improve the situation.

The European Union (EU) has the lead on police and is integrating its members' police assistance into a single mission. Australia should be wary of fragmentation between the police programs of the EU and the US Department of Defense. The AFP has shown some skill at improving executive police skills in developing countries. This could be a useful back-room niche for Australia at the national or provincial level, which would see less money diverted to self-protection.

Looking forward

Over the next few months, NATO's soul-searching must yield a coherent medium-term strategy to galvanise the alliance until a creditable outcome can be reached in Afghanistan. A long-term, realistic vision would help guide the process of moving Afghanistan's government and military into positions of responsibility in the most insecure areas.

The Australian media will mostly follow events in Oruzgan, but our ability to bolster government legitimacy across the north and west will be equally important. Kabul needs stable, united territory from which to pressure an insurgency that will be active for as long as Pakistan is restive.

It's not an ideal outcome, but if we can realise both aspects of this vision, we will have advanced our counter-terrorism agenda and achieved our alliance interests.

Endnotes

[1] NATO has command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, which includes non-NATO members such as Australia. Throughout this paper, 'NATO' refers to all members of ISAF.

[2] When these figures were published, Georgia had pledged troops but they had not arrived in theatre.

[3] See for example: Senlis Afghanistan, *Countering the Insurgency in Afghanistan: Losing Friends and Making Enemies*, February 2007; Ahto Lobjakas, 'NATO Downplays 'Conventional' Threat in South,' *RFE/RL*, January 23, 2007; Graeme Smith, 'Police Wages Set to Double in Afghanistan,' *Globe and Mail*, September 6, 2007.

[4] See for example 'Afghanistan in 2006: A Survey of the Afghan People,' *The Asia Foundation*, November 2006; Nicole Naurath, 'In Afghanistan, Views of Security Differ Starkly by Region,' *Gallup News Service*, October 25, 2006; Stephen Weber, *Afghan Public Opinion Amidst Rising Violence*, December 14, 2006 for World Public Opinion.org; World Public Opinion.org, 'Afghan Public Overwhelmingly Rejects al-Qaeda, Taliban', January 2006, http://65.109.167.118/pipa/articles/home_page/155.php?nid=&id=&pnt=1; Gary Langer, 'Four Years After the Fall of the Taliban, Afghans Optimistic About the Future,' *ABC News* December 7, 2005, http://abcnews.go.com/International/PollVault/story?id=1363276.

[5] Pajhwak Afghan News Agency, '2007 Ends with 137 Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan,' http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/5510. Also killed were 171 Afghan policeman and 37 members of the ANA.

[6] In 2001 the Taliban instituted a largely successful ban on opium cultivation. This is sometimes wrongly ascribed to a religious distaste for opium. Most analysts believe that the ban was imposed in order to collect a US reward and because the regime had stockpiled substantial amounts from previous harvests.

[7] See for example Senlis Afghanistan, *Countering the Insurgency in Afghanistan: Losing Friends and Making Enemies*, February 2007.

[8] Health systems in both developing and developed countries under-prescribe medicinal opiates. Cost is part of the reason in developing countries. If an enforceable regime can be established in parts of Afghanistan, donors will need to fund opium purchases and distribute cheaply to poor countries' health systems. Given the minimal impact it will have on the opium economy in Afghanistan and given that there is already a global surplus available for distribution, Australia does not have an interest in supporting this method of giving developing countries cheap opiates—including because Tasmania produces around half the world's licit supply.

[9] The figures for Iraq do not include debt forgiveness.

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