REMOTE CONTROL
Examining changes in military engagement

In Afghanistan, more is not the answer

Briefing - July 2017 - Emily Knowles

Summary

At the time of press, NATO had just confirmed that the alliance will increase the number of troops in Afghanistan by several thousand,[1] while General John Nicholson had just gone on record to call conditions on the ground a "stalemate".[2] The pressures of delivering on security on the ground against the backdrop of small troop numbers are keenly felt. But as one soldier remarked to us in an interview "we face a stalemate today, but we also faced one 5, 8, 10, 15 years ago, we just didn't know it".[3]

This analysis suggests that a light-footprint approach to Afghanistan is not working. But crucially, as President Trump looks poised to ramp up American boots on the ground in a number of theatres,[4] it is not necessarily the lack of troops that is doing the most damage to chances of mission success in Afghanistan. Instead it is the lack of political will to bring maximum pressure to bear on all parties to the conflict to bring them to the negotiation table.

This briefing is based on off-the-record military interviews with both international and local Afghan troops between February and March 2017.

Introduction

The international military intervention in Afghanistan was never meant to last this long. From 2001-2014, and with a peak of 100,000 international troops on the ground,[5] NATO struggled to wrestle control from the Taliban, while building a new Afghan national defence and security apparatus behind it. With international support, elections were held in 2004, 2009 and 2014, and Taliban-controlled territory reduced to around four of 373 districts in 2014.[6]

It was in this context, and as the costs of such a lengthy campaign in both blood and treasure began to rankle NATO members' domestic constituencies, that a 'drawdown' was announced for 2014.[7] The NATO mission was slashed down to a light footprint of 15,000 personnel under a largely Train, Advise, Assist (TAA) mandate to consolidate the skills of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANSDF) with an eye to gradually handing over tasks and capabilities to local troops.[8]

By the time we went out to Kabul in February 2017 to speak to NATO troops about what this felt like on the ground, indicators were worrying. Taliban control over territory had crept up to areas holding about a third of the Afghan population,[9] and a new cell of ISIS (Islamic State Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K) had been encroaching on Afghan territory for about two years.[10] Soldiers we spoke to fretted that 2017 was going to be a tough year, with many improvements not scheduled to come online until 2018, and only 12,000 of the 15,000 NATO places actually filled.

Since we left, these gloomy predictions appear to have been borne out. Bloody attacks have rocked Kabul and shocked onlookers. An ISIS-claimed assault on a military hospital in the centre of town in March 2017 saw assailants disguised as medical personnel breach the blast walls and open fire on doctors, nurses, and patients alike in an incursion that killed 38 and caused hours of firefighting on the streets of Kabul.[11]

A few weeks later, an unclaimed attack involving a rigged tanker killed more than 100 Afghan commuters and policemen when the driver detonated explosives while stationary at a checkpoint at the entrance to Kabul's international diplomatic quarter. Frustrations at deteriorating security brought protestors onto the

streets the next day, which ended with at least seven deaths when guards fired at people trying to storm the Presidential compound. At the funeral of one of the victims, three suicide bombers detonated vests, killing a further 20 bystanders.[12]

Afghanistan after the surge

Drawdown feels like more of a political imperative than a military strategy for transition or stabilisation in Afghanistan. Governments know that the terrorist activity that thrives in the world's ungoverned or weakly-governed spaces continues to threaten their security. However, they also accept that placing large numbers of their own boots on the ground can be politically unpalatable (both at home and abroad) and technically difficult to deliver during a period of economic slowdown and budget cuts.

We are now witnessing a remote form of engagement, with frontline fighting predominantly borne by local troops like the ANDSF, with Western training, advice, support, and a small number of Special Forces on the ground to accompany troops. The problem is, the ANDSF don't seem to have been ready for this shift. Attrition rates have been consistently sky-high,[13] and territorial control is being ceded to the Taliban.[14]

While the 12,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan are still a fairly significant presence (particularly when you take into account the 2:1 ratio of contractors – who don't count in official troop numbers – to soldiers, who do), soldiers remarked that "[while] we still have a fairly large footprint – [it's] at the wrong levels."[15] Most of NATO's troops are locked into train, advise, assist (TAA) roles that are largely consigned to the NATO HQ in Kabul.

Indeed, it is only the American contingent (who admittedly still occupy the lion's share of the NATO postings at 8,400) who have expeditionary rules of engagement (RoEs) that allow them to accompany Afghan troops in the field, plus a small counter-terrorism mission (SOJTF-A/NSOCC-A) that runs separate to NATO's Resolute Support (RS) mission but sits under the same Commander – General John Nicholson.

Given the ailing security situation in the country, the relatively small numbers of international troops able to assist their Afghan counterparts is leading to real difficulties in the field. One soldier remarked that "We don't have the visibility we'd like – we're very Kabul-centric. It's difficult to see below the corps level."[16] Another was blunter: "When a local ANDSF unit comes under fire… sometimes they will get support, sometimes not."[17]

Meanwhile, early attempts to hand over roles and responsibilities to Afghan troops have had to be quickly reversed. The management of fuel supplies, for example, was one of the things that had begun to be delegated to local troops, but graft, mismanagement, and poor book-keeping forced NATO to cancel the transfer of power. As one soldier explained, "the trust isn't there at the moment".[18]

It is the lack of international support for regular troops at the unit level, springing from low NATO troop numbers and fuelled by the restrictive RoEs that keep them consigned to their bases, which are at the heart of Nicholson's recent call for more troops to be sent to the country. However it is also clear that the political imperatives of drawdown have imposed a difficult set of tasks and a challenging timetable for success on the small contingent of troops who are left in the country.

Helping allies is an insurance policy, and it's running low

> "What we're doing here, it's an insurance policy. And the smaller you go the less insurance you have."
>
> – military interviewee, NATO RS

The departure of thousands of NATO troops is just one aspect of the drawdown that has taken place since 2014. While the lighter military presence would shock those who were in the country around the time of the surge, interviewees emphasised that "– there has been a drawdown across other agencies too."[19] The political imperative to 'end' NATO operations in the country compounded problems that can be seen vividly on the ground today. As one put it, "We went too far and shed capacities that we needed – things like counter-narcotics, counter-corruption, the ability to trace money through the Afghan system…" [20]

While acknowledging that ultimately "it is the job of the military to carry out the political mandate", we were reminded again and again that "ideally any force should have its size based on the conditions on the ground, and the end you are trying to achieve."[21]

The plea was clear. "The lighter you go, the more dangerous it becomes for your troops. 25% of our advisors cannot currently advise because they don't have force protection. Plus, we know that if anyone gets killed, we could lose our strategic freedom of action… Contractors can help… [but we'd] rather reduce [our activity] than put contractors where they shouldn't be."[22]

There is a real feeling that the military has borne the brunt of a reflex towards drawdown that was firmly rooted in political over military realities. On top of this is the sense that drawdown has meant that the mission, and its aims, have long been eclipsed in the

international spotlight. One interviewee declared that they had been deployed on a "forgotten mission",[23] while another recounted how people at home almost didn't believe it when told that they had been sent out to Afghanistan – blithely believing that NATO's operations there "were done"[24] and that Iraq and Syria were the only places that their troops were still fighting – and then only from the air.

One interviewee warned that the primacy of political restrictions on troop numbers was not only to the detriment of their own ability to fulfil their duties on the ground, but also that "[go] too light, and you embolden the enemy".[25] The announcement of the drawdown in 2014 altered the strategic calculations of adversaries, who suddenly saw that they only needed to outlast NATO troops to stand a chance of increasing their hold over Afghan territory.

Risk aversion is leading to mission stifle

The need to signal that "we're in this"[26] for the coming years was frequently presented as being vital if NATO and its Afghan partners were to succeed. However, the political appetite among NATO contributing countries struggling against low popular support[27] for enduring operations in Afghanistan translates into a situation on the ground where extreme risk aversion is leading to "a very low appetite for accepting casualties on the NATO side."[28]

This is having a huge effect on the ability of troops to get out and build relationships with the people that they are meant to be training. One remarked dryly that "even to go to the Afghan MoD [down the road from RS HQ], that is a three car manoeuvre now. I would need armoured cars, cover… Even to walk to the US Embassy [opposite RS HQ], I could do that with top armour, but would also need escort."[29]

The change from earlier points in the mission seemed stark. "People remember when it was different... Staff who have come back now at a higher rank ask us 'why aren't you talking to so and so?', using their contacts from before... [It's] because we haven't been able to build those relationships. We can't get out there." [30]

This appears to be a problem shared by other Western troops operating in today's 'remote' wars. While interviewing recent returnees from the British training mission to AMISOM, Somalia, a soldier remarked that "if I, or anyone, had got shot, that would have been it, the whole thing over. I had to operate outside of the areas that I had the authorities to be in all of the time, to go to meetings, to do my job…"[31]

The stifling effect of these restrictions on troops who are there to train, advise, and assist Afghan units that they can hardly access is evident. It is only since June 2016 that the US have had the RoEs that allows advisers to be out on the front lines – before this had to be done ad-hoc by a US reserve force. While Special Forces are able to operate with more latitude, which frees up some units to go out with troops, they are a finite resource, and have enough to do trying to help Afghan SF units like the Ktah Khas in the field while keeping Kabul under 24/7 surveillance under the Kabul Security Force to help Afghan units respond to the increasing tempo of attacks in the capital.[32]

If less is not more, will more fix it?

> "The purpose of war is to fulfil policy – policy should aim for some sort of peace. Warfare exists to serve itself. So if uncoupled from policy, it can be meaningless"
>
> – military interviews, SOJTF-A/NSOCC-A

When one soldier was asked what they thought to having more NATO troops on the ground in Afghanistan, they paused, and then shrugged: "I'm not sure that wouldn't just make us a bigger target."[33]

Another reflected that "if all you've got in the toolbox is kill/capture, that might be better than nothing – but are you going to do it forever? Kill all the people?"[34] – there was general consensus that, not only was it going to be impossible to eradicate the Taliban in four years, but that attempting to kill your way out of the problem was never going to work. Many of the functions that the military are currently doing are not inherently military tasks – troops just find themselves "filling the vacuum left by other actors and agencies."[35] As one reflected, "Those things don't have an exit strategy, nor can they."[36]

Instead, interviewees spoke of the need to bring pressure to bear on states like Pakistan to restrict assistance flowing to the Taliban, to start supporting the delivery of a functioning economy alongside the provision of security, and to build the trust necessary between NATO troops and their Afghan counterparts so that more roles and responsibilities can be handed over.[37]

None of these problems are easily tackled by the deployment of larger numbers of NATO troops to the country. Instead, a lack of political will – fed by low popular enthusiasm for greater commitments to security in a country which has already cost so much in lives and treasure – appears to be at the root of the current stalemate. As one soldier remarked, "This is the US' longest war. It is a war. This puts us into the mental construct of it having a beginning and an end… But look at Korea, look at our commitments to West Germany, we were there for 70 years. But politicians don't want to hear that."[38]

Conclusions

So far, a sort of stalemate is holding. This is largely down to the gains made during the surge, plus the Afghan government's openness towards receiving support, the continuing commitment of NATO members, and significant injections of cash into the Afghan defence and security sector.

How this bodes for the chances of peace in places like Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq, where not all of these conditions are present varies. However, it is alarming that a case like Afghanistan –where international military access to ministers, military commanders, and the President is so extensive –is still facing severe difficulties when it comes to delivering on security in the context of dwindling military presence and political interest.

In the meantime, NATO is struggling to fulfil its commitments with the limited time, mandate, and troops that it has been given. While political reactions to changing domestic demands are an inevitable part of most international military activity, the case of Afghanistan stands as testament to the fact that a compromise force constrained by low political will, small numbers of Western troops, and high risk aversion can undermine important gains and the chances of future stability.

Without the political will to bring maximum pressure to bear on all parties to the conflict, Afghanistan seems set to remain locked into a battleground for groups intent on getting the best possible hand before coming to the peace table. This is bad news for all of our security.

We strongly need Afghanistan to succeed. But until political will catches up with the realities on the ground, throwing a few thousand more troops at the problems is not going to fix anything. After sixteen years of operations, it is time for a more strategic approach.

Remote Control
Oxford Research Group
Development House
56-64 Leonard Street
London EC2A 4LT
United Kingdom
+44 (0)207 549 0298

info@remotecontrolproject.org

http://remotecontrolproject.org

Remote Control is a project of the **Network for Social Change** hosted by **Oxford Research Group**. The project examines changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This form of intervention takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and air strikes from above, with special forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground.

Endnotes

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