



24TH ASIA-PACIFIC ROUNDTABLE

7-9 JUNE 2010 • KUALA LUMPUR

**STRENGTHENING COMPREHENSIVE AND
COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC**

**“Counterinsurgency and Nation Building in
Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects “**

by

**Robert Ayson
Centre for Strategic Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
New Zealand**

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CONCURRENT SESSION FOUR Wednesday, 09 June, 2010 1115hrs – 1245hrs

Paper for Session on
Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan
24th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 9 June 2010

Robert Ayson, Centre for Strategic Studies,
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

In a recent opinion piece published in last Wednesday's *International Herald Tribune*, HDS Greenway provided a slightly tongue-in-cheek depiction of the counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. He depicted that strategy as follows: 'drive the Taliban out with military force, protect the population, and bring in ready-made Afghan "government in a box"'.

This may be a somewhat sarcastic interpretation of 'clear-hold-and build' but it nonetheless highlights the crucial and unanswered issue upon which the contribution of the McChrystal/Petraeus approach rests. In short, the clearing and the holding may go well, despite some early signs of resistance, and these are processes over which the coalition has a good measure of influence. But the nation-building depends not only on the quality of the development measures which are being put in place. It also depends upon the availability and willingness of what Greenway calls the 'Afghan "government in a box"'.

If the three aspects of the Afghanistan puzzle are security, development and governance, then it is the third and last of these aspects which will define Afghanistan's long-term future rather more than the other two. And this is precisely the factor over which the international coalition has the least influence. However hard one may try, it is extremely difficult, even for a group of countries working together, to ensure the effective and legitimate functioning of the government of another country.

This is not a call for pessimism: success by some measure is not out of the question. But it is nonetheless important to remember that the working out of the strategy depends on internal political factors over which the international mission has limited control. Nor would we want it to if Afghanistan is to be a self-governing, self-sufficient and independent member of the international community.

Moreover there is much about the strategy which deserves our serious and considered attention. The emphasis on clear *and hold*, for example, reflects the judgment that it was not and is not enough simply to drive the Taliban out in the first place. This was measured rather understandably as a sign of success in the initial military efforts against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the UN-mandated coalition effort. But the capacity of the Taliban to win back lost territory and the associated growth of the insurgency (or the insurgencies) in Afghanistan, was a clear sign that this had not been enough. The Obama administration's "surge" which is bringing the US force levels in Afghanistan up to a higher plateau, is conscious recognition of the reality that to clear *and to hold*, and to do so especially in major population centres, puts greater and different demands on the armed forces than the initial

counter-terrorism approach. Greater, because forces need to remain in the areas they have cleared. Different, because of the emphasis on the protection of the local population in place of a single-minded pursuit of the adversary (although one must be careful here not to assume that the McChrystal/Petraeus approach is an entirely brand new package: elements of the population protection approach which are a cornerstone of counterinsurgency were in place in some parts of the country well before the surge was developed).

The clear and hold *and build* combination reflects a further stage of this logic: that the establishment and maintenance of a secure environment is insufficient for long-term order. Something needs to grow in that space to offer at least basic services to local populations, in part to give them a stake in that new status quo, a form of a social contract which validates political authority. Order is recognized here not simply as the absence of violence and threats and violence to peoples' everyday lives, but involves the presence of a functioning system of formal government – or at least practices of informal governance - which delivers something in exchange for the authority it has been granted (again the hardest part for the international coalition to influence).

There is also more to the Afghanistan strategy than clear, hold and build: in the middle somewhere there is also the factor of transition which the international community seeks. This includes a transfer of the responsibility for the provision of security which allows for development – and hopefully good government - to take place. Hence the training of Afghanistan armed and police forces in the hundreds of thousands is an enhanced focus of the new strategy. To the extent that this training effort provides a genuinely independent security capability for Afghanistan, and one which supports rather than inhibits good civil-military relations, this should be a further reflection of the stake Afghanistan's citizens and political leaders can have in an improved status quo. It is a sign of Afghanistan's ability to meet the minimal Weberian definition of sovereign statehood: the maintenance of a monopoly on the use of organized violence within a country. Given Afghanistan's recent history, and especially the strength of regional warlords with whom Kabul's leaders have often concluded that deals need to be struck, this Weberian criterion will not be easy to meet.

The building of this capacity is also an essential pre-condition for the transition desired by all governments which have organized the international forces in Afghanistan: a transition to that point it will be safe to leave, or at least safe to move to substantial reductions. Hence President Obama surge came with a corresponding hope for a reasonably timely return of combat forces to their home countries, although we can expect this to occur stage-by-stage, and for other parts of the overseas presence in Afghanistan to remain for a considerable time: that is, *if* the international community determines that this should be so.

This could be a rather big "if" in some cases. Some of the countries which have made significant contributions in Afghanistan have decided that the costs of maintaining a military presence are higher than the advantages which come from doing so. Here domestic political factors have often played a role. Canada is expecting to remove by the end of 2011 the bulk of its forces from Afghanistan which have numbered nearly 3000 and served in some of the most difficult areas

such as Kandahar for several years, sustaining significant casualties in the process. The end of the Dutch military contribution of about 1600 personnel in Oruzgun Province was made certain when the government collapsed over the issue, and Germany's President has recently had to resign after he expressed his opinion about the rationale for his country's commitment there.

But we should probably be careful not to generalize from these experiences which have been particularly challenging for some western democracies. First while the governments of some of the main contributors, including the United States and the United Kingdom have been anxious to reassure their domestic audiences that Afghanistan will be a finite commitment, this does not mean that they are envisaging a precipitate withdrawal. For both the Obama and Cameron governments, a three to five year time-frame is probably a good guide for current thinking on how long the combat presence may continue, even though the scale of this commitment will be reduced during that period.

That the United States and Britain have in mind medium-term commitments rather than short-term exits is notable not least because of the casualties both countries have already sustained in Afghanistan. This is a reminder that we should be careful about making too many assumptions about the way that liberal democracies will respond to casualties. Yesterday, for example, following the sad news of the recent deaths of two Australian soldiers, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith indicated that Australia would stay the course in Afghanistan, although Australia's Chief of Defence Force has indicated that any further increase in Australia's presence – which numbers about 1500 personnel – would likely degrade the Australian Defence Force's ability to operate closer to home.

In the case of the Republic of Korea, we have an example of an expanded commitment and a sign that Asian as well as Western countries are represented in Afghanistan. Late last year the ROK government announced that in July it will be sending 350 defence force personnel to offer protection to the 140-strong reconstruction and aid team which is already based in Afghanistan. That does not end the story for this region. In previous years, Singapore has deployed engineering, medical, and dental teams to Afghanistan, a number of which have worked in conjunction with the New Zealand PRT in Bamyan. In March 2010 Mongolia became the 45th country to commit forces to ISAF. While the JDP government ended Japan's refueling support in January 2010, it had also offered an additional multi-billion dollar aid package over five years to Afghanistan. India is also one of the main contributors of non-military aid to Afghanistan, although its increasing involvement has not gone without notice in Pakistan.

For its part New Zealand announced last year the return of its special forces to Afghanistan: 70 personnel for three rotations over an 18 month period. This is in addition to New Zealand's contribution of defence staff to ISAF Headquarters and the PRT it has maintained in Bamyan since 2003. This province is by many accounts amongst the most peaceful in Afghanistan, and is further along the way than some other areas to a situation where the responsibility for the provision of security can be transferred to Afghan personnel. While a gradual reduction and civilianisation of the 140 strong PRT is on the cards, its mission, including the training of Afghan police forces by their New Zealand counterparts, looks set to

continue for the foreseeable future. The PRT will remain in Bamyan at least until September 2011, and one might anticipate that the 3-5 year period which appears to be part of the thinking in Washington and London is also something that has crossed minds in Wellington in terms of the length of New Zealand's military presence in Afghanistan. In the meantime, New Zealand has appointed a resident Ambassador in Kabul and a special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Those skeptical about the international commitment to Afghanistan, and especially those who remain pessimistic about ISAF's chances there, may be inclined to wonder why there have not been more signs of withdrawal and drawing down of force levels than has already been the case. An obvious answer to this conundrum is credibility and reputation: the United States in particular, does not want to end up in a position where it can be argued that a victory was handed to insurgent forces in Afghanistan and those of similar persuasion elsewhere in the region and the world. That feeling is certainly shared by a number of other countries, although it must be admitted that the scale of the additional commitment of forces to Afghanistan by countries other than the United States since the announcement of the surge has not been overwhelming.

Still, a significant array of countries have retained a presence on Afghanistan and their motivations go beyond the desire to effect change in the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. Indeed at times when that situation does not appear to be as conducive to change as originally hoped or expected, some of these other considerations have helped sustain a presence that might otherwise have been questioned more significantly by contributing governments.

In New Zealand's case, the explicit United Nations support for an international presence in Afghanistan has been both an original and sustaining justification (although a necessary rather than a sufficient condition) for the commitment of military, police, and aid assistance to Afghanistan. The opportunity to work with such a multinational coalition is one practical indication that New Zealand can provide of its commitment as a 'good international citizen' to multinational efforts to respond to threats to peace and security. New Zealand governments are likely to have felt that the Afghanistan commitment, including the New Zealand PRT, help sustain and extend the country's reputation as an effective contributor to international stabilization efforts. This has been a major focus for the operations of the New Zealand Defence Force in recent years and an increasing focus for the New Zealand Police.

It should also be noted that for New Zealand, the commitment to Afghanistan has also held promise for specific bilateral relations. As successive New Zealand governments have sought to enhance the defence relationship with the United States, (in light of the suspension of the formal alliance relationship between the two countries since the mid-1980s) they have found the NZDF commitment to Afghanistan to be of significant assistance. It is quite clear that for Washington's formal allies and also for a number of its other friends and partners, commitments to Afghanistan can be useful signs of the importance they attach to their relationship with Washington, and to the United States presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

There are other pull-factors in an Afghanistan commitment for contributing countries. For example, the multinational nature of the international presence in Afghanistan provides opportunities for their defence forces to gain experience in working with other forces. For Australia and New Zealand, the Afghanistan experience has brought with it opportunities for interaction with NATO member countries which otherwise would not have occurred, including with the United Kingdom, with whom there is also a Commonwealth dimension to the interaction. Other possibilities to work with Commonwealth friends are likely to be especially welcome.

Moreover, the multiplicity of roles for contributing countries in Afghanistan provides opportunities for those who wish to make contributions of varying types. Some, for example, have been able to place a significant emphasis on non-combat roles, which provide a means of engaging in international stabilization efforts while being able to demonstrate to their domestic audiences that there are clear limits on what these forces will and can be asked to do. Some countries are therefore able to signal their political commitment to the international effort in Afghanistan without necessarily being involved in the combat side of the operations there. Others have taken a combination approach, with some parts of their contribution more likely to be involved in combat operations and thus more exposed to risk than others.

The fact that there can be a range of reasons why countries have been and are willing to contribute to the international presence in Afghanistan is no guarantee that the mission will succeed. Nor does it mean that the overall mix of the international presence, including the mix of combat and non-combat contributions, is ideal for that mission's success. Still less does it mean that the international effort in Afghanistan will be well coordinated: the lack of that coordination was identified as a shortcoming of earlier efforts in Afghanistan and it remains to be seen whether this problem has genuinely been overcome. The sheer multiplicity of contributing governments, contributing agencies, and non-governmental organisations, suggests that this will always be a significant challenge.

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The international community's experience in Afghanistan over the last nine years is a powerful demonstration of a number of factors which apply to many conflict situations: (i) that the use of force and the commitment of military and non-military assets never occurs in a vacuum but needs to operate in demanding domestic and international political environments (ii) that the commitment of forces (and other assets) normally stems from a range of motivations rather than a single one (iii) that the relative importance of these motivations can change over the course of a conflict as can the strategy being employed (iv) that there can be a range of missions being employed at the same time, offering different opportunities as well as risks and challenges for contributing countries, and (v) that progress in one or more aspects can accompany regression in others.

This last point is worthy of some reflection: how should we really measure the success of the Afghanistan mission; in terms of the military progress accomplished by the surge?; in terms of the progress in reconstruction that this

military progress is designed to allow room for?; in terms of an effective government in Kabul which is able to deliver basic services for its people, and/or a range of provincial governments which can do the same?; in terms of the creation of sufficient well trained and prepared military and police forces in Afghanistan which can provide security as international forces depart?; in terms of the end of the insurgency? It is probably a mixture of these, although it is unfair to tag the international coalition with the responsibility for achieving every one of these goals. But there is another, external perspective. Is success instead the point when nobody, whether a friend and supporter of the international mission or more significantly an adversary and opponent of it, can argue seriously that the multinational coalition lacked commitment to Afghanistan? And how close are we to that point right now?