

Inflict enough pain and Taliban will negotiate

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In February Pakistan's ISI intelligence service captured Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar at a madrassa in the Pakistani port city of Karachi. Mullah Baradar was the Taliban's second in command, surpassed in seniority only by Mullah Omar.

At the time of his capture he was responsible for the planning of Taliban strategy across the whole of southern Afghanistan. Baradar's capture was unusual and unexpected. That morning raid may mark the point at which a failing Afghan war was turned around.

In the months since Baradar was captured, coalition forces have captured or killed a succession of senior Taliban commanders across Afghanistan. In three weeks last June, three successive Taliban shadow governors for the province of Baghlan were killed or captured within days of being appointed to their role.

The Haqqani insurgent network that facilitates the majority of attacks on Kabul has lost three leaders due to coalition operations this year. As one NATO senior official put it, this year "the Taliban are experiencing a whole new level of pain".

Ask most Australians, though, and they will probably answer that the war in Afghanistan is a lost cause. Some 49 per cent of respondents in an Essential Report poll this week would withdraw our soldiers immediately. Greens Senator Bob Brown believes "all MPs owe it to our troops to be fully informed on Afghanistan and the reality is that military success is not on the horizon". He's only partially wrong.

At the tactical level the war in Afghanistan this year has been remarkably successful. The surge of troops and equipment, the last portion of which is only now arriving in Afghanistan, has allowed the coalition to strike into distant areas such as Marjah that previously had to be left to the Taliban.

But at the strategic level the war has been a disaster. The Dutch have withdrawn from Uruzgan province, the Canadians, Poles and Italians have all set withdrawal dates, and President Barack Obama has signalled that the US will contemplate troop reductions from July.

The UK has little appetite to remain in Afghanistan. Its coalition government has one eye on forthcoming defence budget cuts and the other on the morose procession of fallen soldiers returning through the streets of Wootton Bassett.

Unlike the Taliban, coalition leaders are subject to the vicissitudes of democratic electoral cycles. Politics is indeed the enemy of strategy and nowhere more so than in Afghanistan.

Perceptions in Afghanistan of the war are more important than reality. In a counter-insurgency fight the support of the population is the difference between victory and defeat. As an Afghan friend explained to me in Kabul last year, history has shown Afghans the folly of casting their lot before they know which will be the victorious side.

For the past nine years the Taliban have waged a propaganda war against the coalition that has been much more sophisticated than their tactical military operations. Taliban spokesmen have massaged media relationships to paint a picture of themselves as a monolithic insurgent force.

Successful spin conducted via satellite phone has taken a mix of ragtag local fighters, criminal networks and ideological extremists and linked them to the mythology of the Soviet-destroying mujahideen. For a long time we've all been convinced that the Taliban are winning.

Taliban propaganda has become more shrill in recent weeks. Their efforts have been devoted to denying reports that reconciliation talks are under way between the Taliban and the Karzai government.

Something is changing in the way our enemies are fighting this war. The Taliban are becoming more political. Their spokesmen are sounding more like Sinn Fein and less like the IRA.

In the Malayan counterinsurgency, the British learnt that the best way to convince insurgents to lay down their arms was to have ex-insurgents deliver messages of reconciliation to their former colleagues.

For the coalition to win in Afghanistan it will have to negotiate with the moderate Taliban while continuing to hunt the irreconcilable insurgent extremists. Winning in Afghanistan will also mean tolerating the corrupt Karzai government — a traumatic concept for many Afghans. This is far from an ideal outcome but it is an achievable one.

The key to defeating the Taliban in the near future is to inflict enough military pain to force them to the negotiating table. The key to defeating the Taliban in the long term is to create enough opportunities for education for the Afghan people so that they will never again let the Taliban re-assert themselves.

Mullah Baradar was born in a small village in Deh Rahwood, Uruzgan, not far from the Tangi Valley where Australian soldiers recently fought a fierce and controversial battle. In Uruzgan our Special Operations Task Group continues to track down Taliban leaders who spread civilian casualties and fear among the population. They've been helped no doubt by information passed on from Baradar's captors.

While our politicians debate Afghanistan in the Parliament this week our soldiers in Uruzgan will be training Afghan National Army officers to read as well as lead. AusAID staff will be teaching modern agricultural techniques to Afghan farmers. The AFP will be training Afghan National Police to track down narcotics networks. In Kabul UN workers will be training Afghan journalists to investigate corruption in their own government.

Our coalition partners will be building roads connecting remote Afghan valleys and allowing villagers to judge the world for themselves, rather than submitting to the world-view of their local Taliban commander.

Progress in Afghanistan is possible, and our soldiers can make a tangible difference there. Let's just hope that our politics don't get in the way of a strategy that has just barely had time to start working.

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