

AFGHAN VOICES

HOW AFGHANS VIEW COALITION MILITARY OPERATIONS IN KANDAHAR

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How Afghans view coalition military operations in Kandahar

Zabih Ullah*

Over the last nine months the US-led coalition in Afghanistan has been implementing a new and more comprehensive counter-Taliban strategy. This has seen the dispatch of additional troops to Afghanistan, the evolution of new tactics on the ground and the launching of major new operations in southern Afghanistan. Perhaps the most critical of these have been US-led efforts to push back the Taliban in Kandahar province.

This operation in Kandahar will be a key signal of how well the coalition's new strategy is working. It is not just that the south is where the Taliban is most active. Kandahar is the third-largest province in Afghanistan, after Helmand and Herat. It is the political and economic centre of the south and is the area from where most Afghan kings came. Kandahar city was effectively the capital during the Taliban's reign (1996-2001) and it was the coalition's capture of Kandahar in 2001 that signalled the Taliban's final overthrow.

Judged, however, by the attitudes of Afghans to the current operation and its predecessors, the prospects for success do not appear high. In informal discussions with villagers and residents of Kandahar city and surrounding districts it was evident that locals don't really understand the purpose of this so called 'surge'. Most believe it will end like previous operations in the south, in failure, bringing only more grief and sorrow to their homes and villages. Indeed, many Kandaharis have come to believe that coalition military operations result only in the death, injury, arrest and dishonouring of innocent Afghan civilians who have nothing to do with the Taliban.

This said, nor do Kandaharis want the coalition to leave. They see a role for coalition military forces in the province, albeit one that focuses less on active military operations and more on stabilisation and peace-building ones.

Kandahar Province – Administrative Divisions



Source: Adrienne Wollman / NPR

Why is the coalition failing?

There are five reasons why the coalition's military operations are failing.

First, the Taliban is never going to be defeated until its ability to find sanctuary in Pakistan is addressed. The Taliban has a very strong presence in Baluchistan, especially in Quetta, where its leadership shura is based. Taliban commanders live securely in urban areas and there is even a separate hospital for injured Taliban in the middle of Quetta city. This means simply sending more troops to Afghanistan is never going to work. Even if you clear an area in Afghanistan they will simply wait in Pakistan for troops to leave. Or they may return to these areas, but only in small teams. In addition, there are thousands and thousands of madrassas in Baluchistan where Afghan refugees are being indoctrinated to carry out attacks on Afghan forces that are being portrayed by the Taliban as 'slaves' of coalition forces, especially the United States. It is also clear to Afghans, in this regard, that the relationship between the insurgents and Pakistan is mutual. The insurgents use Pakistan as a sanctuary, but Pakistan is also using the insurgent groups as a proxy for pursuing its interests in Afghanistan.

Second, the Taliban learns quickly from their mistakes. After operation Medusa (in Pajwayi and Zhari in 2006) when the Taliban was dealt a huge defeat, losing hundreds of fighters and having many more injured, its leaders realised that they cannot fight face to face with the coalition. Yet, despite this defeat, the Taliban did not retreat, but reorganised and very soon infiltrated back into the areas they lost in a matter of weeks. The insurgents now avoid major offensives where the coalition can bring their superior technology and airpower to bear. Instead they now rely on fewer foot soldiers and use more improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which are scattered all over the place with some foot soldiers providing security to those who lay them.

Third, some coalition tactics are counterproductive. Night raids are the most important reason behind peoples' irritation. Indeed, for a Pashtun it is almost better to be killed rather than to be dishonoured by having foreign soldiers in his house at night. These actions boil the blood of local communities and often result at a minimum in a loss of support for coalition forces and even lead to people joining the Taliban.

Fourth, coalition strategy also seems to change constantly, as do the messages that coalition forces communicate to the locals, undermining any confidence amongst locals about the prospects for success. For example, coalition military forces said they would delay military operations during Ramadan, but then started operating in Arghandab and Kandahar city.

Originally the US-led coalition said that ‘the surge’ was going to start at once in all five key districts, but in reality it seems the coalition operation has been scaled back and divided into three phases: first to secure Kandahar city, then Arghandab district, and finally Zhari and Panjwayi districts.

Related to this, a key weakness of the current US-led operation in Kandahar is the decision to focus operations in five so-called ‘key’ districts (Dand, Panjwayi, Zhari, Maywand and Arghandab), plus Kandahar city, while neglecting six others that are in a very critical situation (Maynishin, Shah Wali Kot, Khakriz, Spin Boldak, Arghistan, and Ghorak district). The coalition cannot realistically stop Taliban penetration into these five key districts without controlling the other districts as well. Even if the coalition eventually gains control of these five key districts within a month or two, it is doubtful whether it can keep control in the longer term.

Fifth, coalition military leaders have said that a key difference between this current operation and previous ones is that troops will stay in villages they secure for the long term. This is not really new, however. It was tried first by the Soviets in the 1980s and more recently by the Canadian forces in Mushan in Panjwayi district. All of these efforts failed. The Canadian base in Mushan was abandoned in 2009, mainly because the military could not control more than a small radius around it. The base became little more than a garrison in enemy territory.

Coalition military leaders have responded to such criticisms by arguing that the key difference between the current operations and previous ones is the increased number of troops now available. But numbers do not matter in the type of warfare the Taliban is waging. While in theory greater numbers should allow the control of a greater geographic territory, this is not happening, at least not in the perception of Kandaharis. The local population sees only a lot of troop movement in and out of Kandahar city, but they fail to see any results from these ‘operations’. Kandaharis can still hear gunfights at night at Mala Jat (an area just outside south to Kandahar city) Arghandab, Zhari and Panjwayi districts. They still see ordinary people getting assassinated in Kandahar city if not every day then every second day. Even in rural areas that have seen a decline in violence it has more to do with Taliban troops leaving for the winter rather than any coalition troop presence

Understanding the local context

If there is, however, one overriding reason why locals have little confidence in US-led operations in Kandahar it is the continued failure of American and coalition forces to understand local context and dynamics and the impact of their stalled operations on the local population. Instead of narrowly focussing on a particular area, the coalition needs to understand Kandahar province, and the south, as a whole.

For example, for the recently-begun operations in Kandahar city the coalition has established a new body, called the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP). ANCOP police check posts are now all around Kandahar city. Initially people thought this would help to improve security because ANCOP policemen seemed very well organised. This, however, only lasted for few days. Moreover, their presence has added a new dimension to the already strong rivalry between the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Afghan National Army (ANA). Local policemen look at ANCOP not as reinforcements, but as their replacements. They feel threatened by them, especially because ANCOP always have American mentors with them. The risk is that local policemen will increase their involvement in criminal activities simply to show that their new rival, ANCOP, is making things worse, not better.

Another example is the way that the actions of US-led forces are drawing locals to the Taliban. Arghandab district, which is mostly Alkozai and pro-government, is a case in point. Even after several weeks of heavy fighting in the district, with local communities bearing the brunt of the casualties, coalition forces were still unable to claim victory. This had a huge negative impact on people's perceptions, with locals convinced that coalition forces would be unable to win this war, no matter what they did. Fearing that the Taliban will win, locals are siding with the Taliban for no other reason than to avoid future retribution.

The story of a farmer who recently fled from Arghandab illustrates how locals feel caught between a rock and a hard place. Taliban began planting IEDs in his village to target coalition forces. He claimed that if he told the Americans about the IEDs, he would be surely dead within hours. However, if he did not tell the Americans, and an IED killed US forces, he feared he would be killed in retaliation. He said that US forces were said to shoot everyone within the range of their weapons when attacked, regardless if civilian or insurgent. Therefore, he left his land and currently lives in very difficult circumstances in Loy Wiala in Kandahar city. While this farmer fled, other locals simply succumb to the pressure and join the Taliban.

Indeed, often what seem like good intentions on the part of the coalition backfire. For example, public statements by coalition military leaders that they would consult with local tribal elders about their military operation have made these elders into a key target of the Taliban. Locals do not understand if the coalition military leaders are simply ignorant, or have made these statements on purpose in order to eliminate the local leadership.

There is now a general scepticism amongst Afghans about coalition consultations. Afghans have now seen hundreds of these meetings come and go (including by General McChrystal and the Afghan President), where foreigners promise a lot but deliver very little. Moreover, often these meetings – aimed at gaining trust and support and/or winning hearts and minds – fail because no actual tribal elders attend. Rather, self-proclaimed tribal elders, who hold no power and do not represent anybody, attend many meetings. They are often outcasts of their own tribe and are trying to regain importance by working with the coalition forces. This has made security worse in Kandahar city.

How is the Taliban responding to the coalition ‘surge’ in Kandahar?

Ironically, whilst the failure of operations earlier this year in neighbouring Helmand province (Operation Moshstarak) delayed the current operation in Kandahar, it did scare the Taliban, prompting its leaders to rely even more on asymmetric operations. Indeed, the delays surrounding the current operation in Kandahar and public debates about the failure of Moshtarak boosted the Taliban’s morale. The insurgents now think they are winning, and in places such as Zhari or Panjwayi, they stopped recruiting as too many fighters were trying to join.

As has already been noted, the Taliban has been very good at adapting its tactics to coalition military operations. So when coalition military commanders announced their plans for military operations in Kandahar city and surrounding districts, many Taliban, especially key commanders and assistants who would be easily recognised, left the area and went to Pakistan or nearby provinces such as Zabul, or Uruzgan. Some even remained in Kandahar city, hiding in the anonymity of the urban sprawl.

In these refuges the insurgents will prepare for a new series of attacks. Their strategy is to make the coalition forces believe they are winning, while preparing to ambush them once coalition military leaders believe they have taken control of an area. This does not mean there

will be no fighting as coalition forces enter new areas. But the Taliban will in the end allow areas to be taken, and put its energy into retaking them later rather than holding them. Its leaders know that coalition military numbers are limited and that Afghan National Security Forces are not strong enough to hold a significant amount of territory.

Kandahar city is a case in point. The Taliban fully understands that it lacks the number and capacity to take control of Kandahar city. But it also understands that it can still cause great instability in the city and instil fear into the population. All its fighters have to do is to demonstrate that neither the coalition nor the Afghan government can secure Kandahar city.

It is all about time

The current strategy of the US-led coalition forces does not inspire much confidence that they understand the insurgents, the terrain or culture of the area in which they are operating. There is little patience now amongst the Afghans for promises that seem unlikely to be fulfilled. It is difficult to defeat an enemy that does not have the word 'timetable' in its vocabulary, and which knows it can simply wait out the coalition's military operations until fatigue sets in the West.

This does not mean that coalition forces should leave. There is a mistaken belief amongst some Western observers that once foreign forces leave the Taliban will stop fighting and the violence will end. If the coalition withdraws immediately, the Taliban will quickly overrun Kandahar and take over territory from Kandahar west all the way to Badghis province in the north and Kandahar east to Kabul in less than a week. Certainly, the Taliban believes so: one young Taliban commander recounted how 'we are ready to take from Kandahar to Kabul and Kandahar to Badghis'. He went on to argue 'these areas will be under control of Taliban without a big fight because our foot soldiers have established very good presence among the communities and tribes'. It is not that the Taliban has more weapons or human resources, but the Afghan government is simply too weak to hold any territory without the help of international troops.

What happened after 2002 illustrates what would happen. The Taliban was defeated very badly by the international military with advanced weaponry. Afghan warlords and militia hunted down Taliban remnants and sympathisers. Gul Agha Sherzai, the current governor of Nangarhar Province for example, went after Arabs and Taliban hiding in Mianishin and Shah

Wali Kot with only about 30-40 men and less than five cars. Today, not even 200 policemen can secure the very same area. The reason is that the Afghan government and security forces have lost their morale. The security forces simply look to their own survival. At present only international troops keep the Taliban at bay, and if they left, the balance would shift quickly.

What the coalition needs to do is to develop better ways to work with Afghans, even if this means that what is done is not always perfect (because nor is what the coalition is doing now perfect). Key to this is a better understanding of tribal society. What the coalition needs to understand is that when you arrest a Talib you are also arresting someone's uncle, cousin, or nephew and so on. This does not mean that the coalition should do nothing against such people, but it should do it through existing tribal mechanisms. For example, the coalition should make arrests of suspected Taliban, but these should be detained locally while legitimate local elders are involved in validating that the individual was in fact an insurgent. If the individual is found to be an insurgent, in some cases it will be better to use local informal systems of justice rather than simply incarcerating them (and later releasing them) at Baghram airbase. By not doing this they disempower the very people that would otherwise be willing to support coalition efforts to bring security to an area. This also means working with local civil society to more carefully identify legitimate leaders.

The US-led coalition also needs to save its energy and work on robust peacekeeping rather than risking the lives of its soldiers and that of civilian Afghan bystanders in active attacks against the insurgents. In particular, it should continue to focus on building the capacity of the Afghan security forces. Many Afghans believe that a strong Afghan National Army is the only hope to ultimately defeat the Taliban once and for all. But at the moment the ANA is far away from being an army that can stand up to the Taliban on its own and needs continued international support. By the same token, international actors need to support Afghan national forces rather than local militias as is now happening in parts of the south. Strengthening such militias is a short-term solution that might also backfire if they join the Taliban after the withdrawal of international troops.

Finally, the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan needs to be addressed. In this regard 'reconciliation' needs to be pursued not just between Afghans and the Taliban but between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indeed, it is more important to first pursue reconciliation between the Afghan government and international forces and Pakistan first and then with the Taliban second. The Afghan government and the international community need to eliminate

Pakistan's fear that a strong and sovereign Afghanistan would threaten Pakistani security interests.

In short, the international coalition needs to send a message to the Taliban that the West also has a lot of time, and does not intend leaving any time soon. It would be interesting to see how the Taliban would react then.

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