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The Spring Offensive

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Introduction

With the winter receding, the forces involved in the Afghan conflict are preparing to fight. While past years witnessed a complete stoppage of fighting during the winter, this year, the NATO/ISAF coalition forces were engaged in increased friction all through the months of winter. This could in part, be attributed to the resurgence of the Taliban that has strengthened through 2006. Civilian deaths have been numerous and ISAF fighters have lost lives and are falling short in their battle against growing public empathy for the Taliban, especially in the south. To reverse this trend, the NATO/ISAF coalition forces have launched a spring offensive codenamed Operation Achilles.

The first section of this report begins with a quick survey of the on-ground situation from the past year into 2007. The second section deals with the proposed Spring Offensive, both that of the Taliban as well as of NATO/ISAF forces. The third and fourth sections talk about the strategies that are likely be deployed. In the conclusion, an attempt is made to posit capabilities against one another to derive a conclusion as to whose favor this spring will sway in.

Situation

In 2006, over 4000 deaths were reported in Afghanistan – more than a quarter of these were of civilians and a large number were of foreign soldiers. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, this is the biggest death toll in a year and it has taken place mostly in the south. The southern part of Afghanistan is the heartland of the Taliban and it is the areas of Helmand and Qandahar that have witnessed maximum fighting and damage.

Last summer, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a NATO-led coalition of 37 countries, was caught unawares as it deployed for the first time in the south and east of Afghanistan. The coalition forces fell behind in terms of military strategy and were also largely alienated from the local population and viewed as a threat. This gave the Taliban a much-needed break and they wedged their way back into the battlefield just as their defeat seemed imminent. The alliance fell short of their proposed plan to eliminate the Taliban threat. Instead, they sought to regain lost balance and maintain their foothold in the south.

Last year, the Taliban fought what was termed “positional warfare.” This entailed fighting for a territory and holding on to it. The districts of Uruzgan, Helmand and Qan were the strongholds last year. As efforts by the coalition forces to contain the Taliban went in vain, the Taliban gained confidence and raided numerous towns, especially in the south. Although these towns were then regained by the coalition forces, the purpose of



Flashpoints in the present conflict (bbc.co.uk)

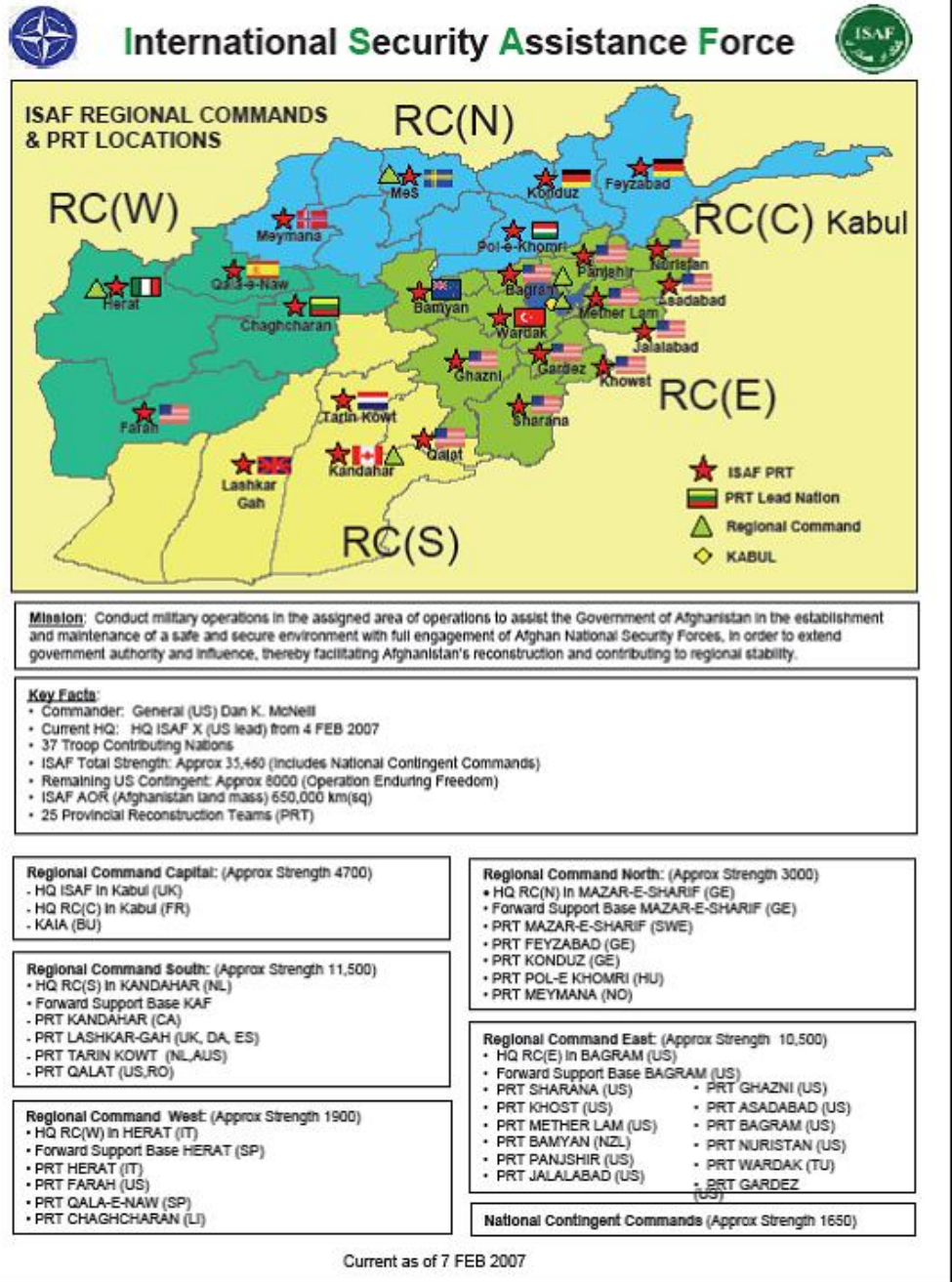
distracting the forces with asymmetrical warfare was thus achieved.

This year, the situation is more complicated and so a change in tactics is expected. Guerilla warfare and suicide attacks are likely to be employed. Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah told Al-Jazeera television on 22 February 2007 that 6,000 Taliban fighters were now deployed across Afghanistan and were ready to carry out more guerrilla and suicide attacks. There might also be additional volunteers if NATO troops increased – Mullah Dadullah claims that “The suicide martyrs and those willing to blow themselves up are countless.” Last year, Taliban-led militants carried out about 140 suicide attacks in a wave of violence.

Operation Achilles

This spring, fighting the resurgent Taliban is a similar coalition force drawing its troops from 37 countries – these comprise of about 35,000 soldiers from NATO's ISAF, and 22,000 American troops. The US has about 13,000 troops under ISAF control while the rest are US-led coalition troops operating under the mission “Enduring Freedom.” Afghanistan’s national security forces are in state of flux and not in the least capable of countering the Taliban threat alone. To strengthen the troops, President Bush has secured a sanction for 3500 additional troops to add to the existing force.

Together, these NATO and Afghan troops are looking to combat the Taliban in their biggest-ever joint offensive codenamed Operation Achilles. The focal point of the offensive is to regain lost control over the Helmand province of southern Afghanistan. This operation will involve more than



4,500 NATO troops and close to 1,000 Afghan personnel. Operation Achilles in Afghanistan's volatile Helmand province was launched at the request of the Afghan government and will focus on northern Helmand, a NATO statement said. It also said that the Operation signified the beginning of a planned offensive to bring security to northern Helmand and set the conditions for meaningful development that will fundamentally improve the quality of life for Afghans in the area. This is certainly a very broad plan of action, but not an impossible one considering that Achilles is the largest ever multi-national combined operation by the ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

The Taliban have also announced a spring offensive of their own. In a marked move towards suicide bombing attacks, a series of bomb blasts have rocked the country with a stronger concentration in the south and in the west. For most analysts, this trend seems to have signaled the beginning of the Taliban offensive. Taliban commanders, however quote the seizure of the town of Musa Qala in Helmand province on 2 February as the launch of their offensive. In effect, the Afghan government has lost control over parts of Helmand, including Musa Qala district, which is the world's biggest producer of opium. According to NATO reports, this insurgency has now spread to the districts of Helmand, Qandahar, Farah, Uruzgan and Ghor in the south and the west – areas that are now officially home to a concentration of Taliban forces.

Strategy

This spring, Taliban strategy is making use of two fundamental tactics – guerilla warfare and suicide bombing. Guerilla tactics are employed to carry out isolated and scattered attacks. The topography of the region is such that the Taliban are always at an advantage over the coalition forces. As they carry out attacks in dispersed locations, the NATO will find it hard to target them for counter attacks. This is aimed at frustrating the coalition forces. Neither can they deploy air power or artillery effectively nor can they protect their infantry. What follows is an inconclusive game play – the Taliban attacks, the coalition forces counter attack and the Taliban retreats. After a gap, they resurface at some other point in the country and the process repeats itself.

What the Taliban seem to have in mind is to wear out the coalition forces and to diminish their credibility amongst the local Afghan populations. Although the NATO/ISAF forces might be content with containing the Taliban threat for the moment, this affects adversely their efficacy in the eyes of the common Afghan populace. The Taliban know of the coalition's limitations. Not only are the latter's forces overstretched (trying to counter Taliban attacks in various places across Afghanistan), they are also disorientated (they are not able to effectively target the enemy). The coalition has its forces aiming at an enemy they cannot assign to any one region – not a good sign

for the morale of forces.

Apart from their offensive, the coalition forces must also work to defend reconstruction infrastructure. Development work is underway in the country and the forces cannot afford to neglect security of all such installations as these are fetching targets for possible attacks by the Taliban. This makes NATO's task doubly strenuous.

Wider issues

There are tactical issues and there are problems with the overall strategy. The Taliban have numerous advantages over the coalition forces. They have a wide recruiting base and therefore greater staying power. The number of volunteers seems to be increasing on a daily basis. What were dismissed as boastful claims of Taliban commanders are now turning into realities. It does not help that the Pakistani border is porous and provides shelter to these militant camps. Hamid Karzai and Gen. Musharraf have had constant verbal spats on this issue but no plausible solution seems imminent.



The Taliban is resurgent in southern and western parts of the country.

The United Nations has made it clear that this year's poppy production might outdo that of the previous years. A bumper crop will only aggravate the coalition's problems. The opium trade in the south of Afghanistan funds the Taliban. Although they banned poppy cultivation briefly during their regime, it is now evident that drug money finances the insurgency. In a choice between fighting opium addiction (amongst the Afghans) and fighting the infidels (the coalition forces), the Taliban seems to have prioritized.

President Karzai's government has been drawn into a vicious circle. It is now divided between forcing eradication, which will lead to higher levels of unemployment and feed into the insurgency or fighting the insurgency, which cannot be eliminated as long as drug money reinforces it.

This leads back to the issue of border porosity, which unless solved will help fuel both the insurgency and the drug trade. Surveillance mechanisms are the only way to put an end to the dispute over Pakistan's role in fuelling this conundrum. However, this is a step that neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan can afford. Special Forces will be required and neither country can spare additional troops.

Thus, in 2007, neither the drug menace nor the border issue will reach a conclusive end. As these are all parts of the same problem, they cannot be treated on stand alone terms and this might undermine NATO's spring offensive, thus rendering it ineffective.

Conclusion

A recent report by the International Crisis Group, blamed the growth of the insurgency in Afghanistan on "the desire for a quick, cheap war followed by a quick, cheap peace." This is reflected in the half-hearted efforts that make up the reconstruction and peace building effort underway in Afghanistan. What the NATO-US alliance does not seem to realize is that by holding back troops and funds, they are complicating the situation and worsening damage, not containing it. Clearly, the option of trying to contain the Taliban is not working. They are far from being contained – if anything, the Taliban is on the rise.

Slowly and effectively, they are working their way through the country. It is well-known that government control does not extend beyond Kabul. The Taliban are looking to fill this void. They are garnering the support of the populace and are already well-funded and well-manned. This is a disastrous combination – and is much more dangerous than that of the Taliban pre-2001.

If the coalition has decided to remain in Afghanistan, they must do so with renewed commitment. A beginning can be made by better conducting this year's Spring Offensive. Instead of indulging in a zero-sum game where the only definite outcome is mounting casualties on all sides, a better strategy must be worked out. In its efforts, the coalition must engage the Afghan Army and the Afghan Police – these are tools of the state that will serve a two-fold purpose – they will help in state-building and will help integrate the Afghan population. Reconstruction and development can make an entry only once a strong centre of power is established. While the coalition countries convince their governments back home for a stronger presence in Afghanistan, they must do the same in Afghanistan itself – convince the people to be more proactive. A passive civil population will always remain an easy target for the Taliban – instead, they must be co-opted into running their own country.

While in terms of immediate action, this strategy might not amount to much, in the long run, it is the only way out of Afghanistan's chronic relapses into conflict.



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