

NATO-ISAF – Multinational Operations – Southern Afghanistan – May 2008

Afghan South: Will NATO-ISAF Adopt the Strategies & Tactics for Counterinsurgency brought to RC South by the US Marines ?

Changes in US Centcom and the implications for the CF in southern Afghanistan

In a recent press conference, US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, said that the same kind of Taliban insurgency that has plagued eastern Afghanistan had now become entrenched in southern Afghanistan. [1] Secretary Gates remarked that many of the NATO troops deployed to the south were not trained for counterinsurgency warfare. He was not trying to be unkind – he saw this simply as a military problem which needed to be addressed. General Dan McNeil, who, until recently, was the US commander of ISAF, expressed his frustration at trying to fight insurgents with soldiers from different countries, all working under very different 'Rules of Engagement' and varying terms of deployment.



For example, while US troops deploy for 15 months at a time, each Canadian Forces rotation lasts only six months – not long enough to be useful and effective to a commander who is planning military operations over a longer time period. Furthermore, the command of ISAF's Regional Command (RC) South rotates among Canadian, British, and Dutch officers. It is difficult to develop productive, long-term relationships with local civilian leaders or Afghan National Army (ANA) officers, let alone plan for effective, integrated, and sustained action against Taliban insurgents under these conditions of constantly changing commands.



As the new chief of US Central Command, General David Petraeus has been appointed to take charge of all forces in the Middle East and Asia, including Afghanistan. Gen Petraeus was responsible for the so-called 'surge' of US troops in Iraq. He wants to see a more comprehensive strategic plan devised for counterinsurgency war-fighting in southern Afghanistan. Gen. Petraeus was also selected to head an Army board responsible for promotions. He is focusing on combat-tested, counterinsurgency experts who will be moved up to the rank of Brigadier-General. The promotions board has looked over the records of more than 1000 colonels in order to

identify the few 'innovative' leaders who will determine the shape and thrust of the US Army for the mid-21st century.

It was considered an unusual decision for the top US officer in Iraq to also be put in charge of the US Army's promotions board. But the move has generated new thinking about the qualities required to make an effective US Army officer. Petraeus' choices for promotion will make a deep and lasting imprint on the US Army. He is creating the same kind of integrated, agile, manoeuvrable military units that General Rick Hillier was trying to forge out of the raw material available to him in the Canadian Forces. Such a transformation requires the support of the defence establishment, elected political leaders, and the top civilian bureaucrats. So far, General Petraeus seems to have that requisite political and bureaucratic support.

Proof of the US Department of Defense's commitment to bring to southern Afghanistan solid counterinsurgency tactics, integrated military units, and manoeuvre warfare, is the recent deployment of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit. An integrated insertion force with its own air assets, the 24th MEU was deployed to southern Afghanistan to help British, Canadian, and Dutch units find a way to hold turf that they repeatedly take from the Taliban only to lose again. The problem? A shortage of both trained personnel and appropriate equipment such as medium transport helicopters.



Above all, ISAF in RC South lacks the resources – human, material, and political – to coordinate the sustained pressure required to first push back and then hold the line against Taliban insurgents. The presence of 2400 US Marines will help temporarily. The 24th MEU is scheduled to leave in November of 2008, but it is likely that some other formation of US ground forces will be deployed to take their place. There will be growing pressure on Canadian political and military leaders to change the way that Canada does business in southern Afghanistan.

Canada will be urged to take on the US counterinsurgency strategies and tactics that have been developed in RC East and in Iraq. Gen. Dan McNeill has said that Canadians and other NATO forces should deploy their soldiers for much longer periods – anywhere from twelve to fifteen months. They should also have their soldiers more involved in reconstruction and humanitarian work. International aid NGOs are vigorously opposed to having any military participate in construction, food aid, health care, and the like. The US military argues that the south is too dangerous

aid, health care, and the like. The US military argues that the south is too dangerous for civilian agencies. Furthermore, it is good for the 'hearts-and-minds' aspect of counterinsurgency for Afghan citizens to see soldiers helping out in the reconstruction and other humanitarian aid programs.

There are 7500 British troops in RC South and the UK is committed to sending more. It is likely that Britain will take over the command of the region on a permanent basis. The US has far more faith in the UK than in either Canada or the Netherlands, especially when it comes to fighting insurgents. The critical questions facing Canada are these: Where do we fit in? What roles do we excel at? What do we want our soldiers to do? How far are we willing to go – militarily or politically – in our desire to cooperate with US forces? Canadians must be clear in our own minds what we are able to offer in Afghanistan, before we start reacting to the inevitable pressures from the US military.



[1] Most troops in eastern Afghanistan operate under a different chain of command from those in southern Afghanistan. In the East, the Combined Forces Command - Afghanistan (CFC-A) reports to US Central Command. In the south, deployed member-states of NATO take turns overseeing 'RC South', reporting to the multi-national NATO-ISAF Command.