

We cannot win in Afghanistan

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The dilemma

President Obama has declared it to be the central front in the war on terrorism and has ordered a build-up of American troops to fight a stubborn insurgency led by the Taliban, but many commentators say it's a war the West cannot win.

Background

The War in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001 with allied air strikes on Taliban and al-Qaeda targets. On the ground, American, British and other Allied troops worked with the Northern Alliance, a group of Afghan warlords opposed to the Taliban, to begin a military offensive. This led, within little more than a month, to the fall of Kabul and the retreat of the Taliban from most of northern Afghanistan. As more Allied troops entered the war and the Northern Alliance forces fought their way southwards, many Taliban fighters retreated to their villages while others followed their leadership and al-Qaeda towards the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At the time many predicted a quick victory, but from 2002 onwards, the Taliban began regrouping. As time passed, and the American military focus was diverted to Iraq, the organisation began to extend its influence from the eastern border area to the southern part of Afghanistan - Helmand province in particular, where the British have concentrated their military effort. The Taliban's return was assisted by a resurgent opium trade, which helped to fill the group's coffers.

From 2005 onwards it increased its attacks, using suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to attack strategic targets and allied troop deployments. Dealing with vast areas and limited manpower, the coalition continued to hold the cities and highways, but faced with an increasingly vigorous insurgency, was forced to cede large parts of the countryside to the Taliban.

Nato took command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in August 2003, with troops in the north, west and south of the country, as well as Kabul. In 2006 it extended its remit to Afghanistan's eastern provinces, which had previously been under US control. But Nato operations in Afghanistan have been bedevilled by disagreements over troop deployments, with many Nato members refusing to deploy their troops where there is a significant danger of casualties.

In February 2009, incoming President Obama announced he would be sending an additional 17,000 American troops to Afghanistan to add to the 36,000 American troops already there. Obama has said "success" in the war is denying al-Qaeda and its affiliates "safe havens from which to attack Americans", a stance which has led to a shift in emphasis from building democracy in Afghanistan to preventing the Taliban from extending their grip on the country. This places greater emphasis on "going beyond military capacity" to dealing with good governance, judicial reform, a focus on the police, and the "war on drugs". Success, on this definition, implies not only defeating the Taliban, but establishing some sort of stable administration in the country acceptable to most Afghans, and training the Afghan army to withstand the Taliban on their own.

Unfortunately the government of Hamid Karzai has failed to establish its authority far outside Kabul and has gained an unenviable reputation for corruption.

The debate

Opponents of the war in Afghanistan argue that the coalition cannot achieve all its goals in Afghanistan, but they are divided between those who argue that the best option is to admit defeat and pull out now and those who think that something can be salvaged from the wreckage. Defenders of the war say that we cannot afford to lose because the consequences would be unthinkable, and they argue that success depends upon making progress on all aspects of the coalition strategy, from counter-insurgency to nation building. We must, they say, do whatever it takes to win.

We cannot win in Afghanistan

Agree

We are fighting in the wrong country

We will be defeated by the shifting allegiances of tribal politics

It is impossible to beat the Taliban and tackle drugs and corruption

Disagree

We have to spend what it takes to win

With the right resources and determination we can win

We can win with more boots on the ground

We can win providing Afghanistan is seen as part of a

We cannot build a functioning state in Afghanistan
We lack the resources and will to win
The conditions for success in Afghanistan are not there
We can't win because of demographics
We cannot win with Karzai
We cannot create a stable state in Afghanistan
Nato's modus operandi is doomed to failure
The West has misread the lessons of history
The war in Afghanistan is fomenting Islamic militancy
None of the arguments to justify the war are valid

regional security problem
We must prevent al-Qaeda getting hold of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal
The war is winnable because most Afghans hate the Taliban
Progress is being made towards building a stable Afghanistan
We can win, despite history

We are fighting in the wrong country

Former *Guardian* editor Peter Preston expresses the view of many when he points out that even if it were possible, winning in Afghanistan will not defeat al-Qaeda because the world is full of places where the organisation can hide and operate, from Somalia and Sudan to the twisting back streets of Jakarta and Casablanca. "You don't need the full military monty to wreak death and destruction. A few deluded kids from Bradford will serve quite as well." In any case, as Gordon Brown has admitted, three quarters of the most serious terrorist plots investigated by the British security services have links to al-Qaeda in Pakistan. "Our soldiers are fighting and dying in the wrong country - and that's the idiocy that has got to stop."

We will be defeated by the shifting allegiances of tribal politics

Times journalist Matthew Parris tells the story of Jan Mohamed Khan (JMK), the brutal and corrupt local governor of a town called Chora in Oruzgan Province. In the 1990s the Taliban removed him, so he made a pact with local Mujahidin leaders to fight the Taliban. Instead of fighting he collaborated and was later arrested and jailed in Pakistan. Meanwhile JMK's former allies helped Hamid Karzai to liberate Oruzgan from the Taliban. But JMK informed US Special Forces that his old allies were Taliban. He was believed and all but one of his former Mujahidin allies were disarmed, their wealth confiscated and their reputations destroyed. They found sanctuary with the Taliban, becoming part of the insurgency in Oruzgan. JMK, meanwhile, attached himself to Karzai and, as governor of Oruzgan, became the biggest poppy grower in the province. In 2005 Karzai, under pressure from Dutch forces in Oruzgan, removed JMK as governor but kept him on as his chief tribal adviser. The one former Mujahid who kept his power was Rozi Khan, a member of a different sub-tribe from JMK. In 2007 Khan and his followers rescued 150 Dutch troops who were surrounded by the Taliban, but a year later Khan was shot dead by mistake by an Australian SAS patrol. His illiterate 23 year old son Mohamed Daoud who has assumed his father's mantle has warned that should the Dutch ever leave then he might have to seek protection from the Taliban against Karzai and JMK. "So many stories intertwined. So many layers. So many shifting allegiances. So much memory. Such a sinuous entanglement of loyalty and treachery," writes Parris. "Now zoom out again. Chora is one small area in a huge valley system. The valley system is only part

We have to spend what it takes to win

September 11, 2001 demonstrated that Afghanistan under the Taliban provided a springboard for global terror, argues a *Daily Telegraph* editorial. It cannot be allowed to slip back into the chaos that opened the way to that disaster. As Liam Fox, the shadow defence secretary, has said, the cost of succeeding could be very high, but the cost of failure would be intolerable. At stake is the future of both Afghanistan and Nato.

With the right resources and determination we can win

Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and author of *The Search for Al Qaeda* (2008) says success is possible if Nato allies and Muslim countries like Morocco and Indonesia provide more troops and a troop surge is accompanied by rapid economic development, especially road construction. India has just finished a model \$1 billion road project in the southwest, opening a highway to link landlocked Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean via Iran.

We can win with more boots on the ground

John Nagl, the retired US **Lieutenant Colonel and author of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2002)**

, says the key to the war in Afghanistan is counterinsurgency, which requires boots on the ground - ideally 20 to 25 troops for every 1,000 people, or some 600,000 for all of Afghanistan. The long term answer has to be a much-expanded Afghan National Army. "It may need to reach 250,000, and be supported by a similarly sized police force, to provide the security that will cause the Taliban to wither." Building such a force will be a long-term effort that will require American equipment and advisers for many years, "but since the Afghans can field about 70 troops for the cost of one deployed American soldier, there is no faster, cheaper or better way to win."

We can win providing Afghanistan is seen as part of a regional security problem

Parag Khanna, author of *The Second World: How Emerging Powers are Redefining Global Competition in the Twenty-First Century* says that Afghanistan cannot be resolved in isolation. What is needed is

of the Oruzgan province. The enormous province is one minor part of Afghanistan." "Friends," he concludes, "we can't do it. This isn't do-able."

It is impossible to beat the Taliban and tackle drugs and corruption

The Economist recounts the saga of the district of Nad Ali, part of Helmand. Nad Ali had been held by pro-government militias, financed, in large part, by the drugs trade. However in 2008 Toor Jan, the leader of the biggest militia, was killed, security collapsed and the Taliban took over. One factor was the influx of Taliban fighters pushed out of the Garmser district, where American marines were clearing insurgents. Another was that Nad Ali, as a government-held area, was the only part of Helmand where large-scale eradication of opium poppies took place, helping to turn the population against the government. Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is one of many who have argued that anti-drug efforts may fatally undermine the far more important anti-terrorism campaign. "For many Afghan farmers, growing opium poppies is the difference between prosperity and destitution. There is a serious risk that they will turn against the United States and the US-supported government of President Hamid Karzai if Washington and Kabul pursue vigorous anti-drug programs."

We cannot build a functioning state in Afghanistan

Matthew Parris lists the bewildering fog of acronyms of international organisations involved in Afghanistan: "AFPAK, ANCOP, ANDS, ANP, ANSF, APPS, ASNF, AAQ/FF, APP, CARD, CDC, CISCA, CISTICA, CJTF, CN, CNPA (ANP), COMISAF, CPCC, CSOFC, CSTC, ECC, EUPOL, FDD, FTD, GPI, HIG, HIGHK, ICPT, IDLG, IGLC, INFO-OPS, IRCTA, ISAF, IU, MCN, NDCS, NDS, OCCO, OEF, OMLET, OPDIESEL, PC, PRT, SITC, UNODC, UNPOL, TB..." The acronyms, he says speak of a "crazy-paving of assistance and command, with aid money leaking through the cracks in billions. It tells of baffled expatriates and aid workers - well-meaning, clever men and women - in flight from reality. It tells of an international effort chasing its own tail." The aim is to support the building of a secure, freestanding state in Afghanistan. But this is not happening. "So take a look at the whole damn thing; see that occupying Afghanistan was a mistake. We must harden our hearts against this beautiful country and these handsome, noble, crazy people."

We lack the resources and will to win

US generals have spoken openly about their desire for a combined Afghan army-police-security apparatus of 450,000 soldiers (in a country with a population half the size of Britain's), says former soldier and diplomat Rory Stewart, who runs a conservation charity in Kabul. (The Afghan army now numbers 85,000. The Afghan National Police force numbers around 80,000). But such a force would cost \$2 or \$3 billion a year to maintain; the annual revenue of the Afghan government is just \$600 million. "We criticise developing countries for spending 30% of their budget on defence; we are encouraging Afghanistan to spend 500% of its budget". Expanding Afghan forces will cost donor countries several billion dollars a year indefinitely. Such

independent regional security institutions, beginning with a joint Afghan-Pakistan force empowered to conduct operations on both sides of the border, as proposed by Abdul Rahim Wardak, Afghanistan's defence minister. At the same time, America will have to accept Afghan and Pakistani negotiations with Taliban commanders, who have emerged from a deep Punjabi and Pashtun social base that cannot be eradicated. There will need to be reconstruction in Pakistan's tribal areas as well as increased reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

We must prevent al-Qaeda getting hold of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal

Al-Qaeda's senior commander in Afghanistan, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, recently told *Al Jazeera* that he was confident of a jihadist victory in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. After that, armed with Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, he said, the jihad would take on America around the world from its base in South Asia. The prospect of a resurgent Taliban, free to control Afghanistan, and able to concentrate on the takeover of Pakistan, is a hideous nightmare, argues an editorial in the *Daily Telegraph*. "Control of Pakistan would give the Taliban, and hence al-Qaeda, access to nuclear weapons". Withdrawal would destabilise the region profoundly, with potentially horrendous consequences for global security. It would discredit Nato, and send a signal to terrorists round the world that neither America, nor Britain, nor any European country is prepared to persevere with intractable conflicts that involve its soldiers being killed.

The war is winnable because most Afghans hate the Taliban

Gareth Price, Head of the Asia programme at Chatham House, says that despite the slow progress, the war is winnable because most Afghans don't want the Taliban to return. "If Afghans feel safe and believe that their government is on their side, we will have won. If this doesn't happen, by default the Taliban will win." It is vital that western troops remain in Afghanistan until the Afghan security forces are strong enough to take over. Without them "Afghanistan will quickly fall into a vicious circle: more Afghans will sit on the fence; government officials will try to amass as much money as possible before the Taliban return; this will turn more people against the government shifting support to the only plausible opposition, namely the Taliban." Afghans may feel anger over the death of civilians killed by foreign forces, frustration at the chaos and insecurity, and dismay at the corruption of President Hamid Karzai's government. But opinion polls say that most want western troops to stay; they remember the misery of the civil war and the oppression of Taliban rule too well. They want the West to do a better job of securing the country.

Progress is being made towards building a stable Afghanistan

Dr Paul Cornish, head of the international security programme at Chatham House, says he thinks the coalition mission is worth it. "Things may not be going perfectly, but I think it is getting to the point where you can see momentum in terms of key development factors, like the numbers of children going into education, access to health services, the spread of the

a commitment is clearly unrealistic.

The conditions for success in Afghanistan are not there

Western leaders are being implausibly optimistic about Afghanistan, says Rory Stewart. "The ingredients of successful counter-insurgency campaigns in places like Malaya - control of the borders, large numbers of troops in relation to the population, strong support from the majority ethnic groups, a long-term commitment and a credible local government - are lacking in Afghanistan." The situation is also much more complicated than it was in Iraq. In Afghanistan there are no mass political parties, and the Kabul government lacks the base, strength or legitimacy of the government in Baghdad. In comparison with Iraqi Sunni tribes, Afghan tribal groups are much less coherent, and they do not have as strong a relationship to state structures. And whereas Sunni tribes ended up fighting against their former al-Qaeda allies, Afghan tribal groups generally try to co-exist as peacefully as possible with the Taliban. Meanwhile, the Taliban can exploit the ideology of religious resistance that the West fostered in the 1980s to defeat the Russians. They can portray the Kabul government as US slaves, Nato as an infidel occupying force and its own insurgency as a jihad.

We can't win because of demographics

Even in the age of high-tech warfare, argues Richard Ehrman, author of *'The Power of Numbers'*, shifts in the world population give a military advantage to "underdeveloped" countries. In terms of population the West still held the upper hand compared to the Middle East until well after the Second World War. Now the demographic balance has changed dramatically. In Afghanistan population has risen from 8 million to approaching 30 million today. Thanks to their high fertility, it is also comparatively young. The average age in the US is around 35, and in Europe 38. In Afghanistan the average age is 16. The result is that the country has "disproportionately large reserves of fighting-age men". Not only is the power of numbers now on their side and not ours, but in future the disparity is only going to increase.

We cannot win with Karzai

A political solution is the only guarantee of success, says Mary Riddell in the *Daily Telegraph*, yet western hopes are pinned on the appalling regime of Hamid Karzai, who presides over the fifth most corrupt government in the world. Between March 2007 and March 2008, the Afghan finance ministry allegedly collected only a third - \$800 million out of an expected \$2.4 billion - of the revenue they should have. This meant that, because of government graft, Afghanistan lost 14% of its GDP. Karzai's victory, after a low voter turnout in the 2009 presidential election, came amid widespread claims of bribery, intimidation and electoral fraud, and his leading opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, decided not to participate in a second round run-off, claiming that a transparent election wasn't possible. As Matthew Parris says, Karzai is "an arch survivor focussed only on survival, in whom the world has already lost confidence and can have little reason for future hope."

media and so on. There are signs of positive returns." Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former British ambassador to Afghanistan, has highlighted many achievements: "a constitution is in place; presidential and parliamentary elections have been held; millions of children, particularly girls, are back in school; dramatically improved health-care means that tens of thousands of young Afghans are alive today who would not otherwise have been; schools and clinics have been built, wells sunk, roads laid; millions of Afghans are connected not just to the next village but to the world by mobile telephone; and, perhaps most significantly, Afghanistan enjoys a robustly free media in which her problems are debated." Much remains to be done, he acknowledges, and it is being done by a huge international coalition that gave its word "that it would help the Afghans rebuild their shattered land."

We can win, despite history

Afghanistan is said to be the graveyard of empires, says *The Economist*. The British army came to grief there in the 19th century, the Soviet one in the 20th. After eight years of disheartening warfare, it is tempting to see Nato's mission as a repeat of past misadventures. The Soviets lost even though they had more troops than Nato has today, a more powerful Afghan army and were supported by a cadre of motivated Afghan communists. But such comparisons are wrong. Unlike the anti-Soviet mujahidin, who were backed by America, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Taliban have no superpower sponsor. In the 1980s Soviet aircraft were shot down with American-made Stinger missiles; today Nato has mastery of the skies. The Taliban are a Pashtun faction, not a national movement; their insurgency is largely limited to the southern half of the country. This is not the time to lose heart. Security must be improved, economic activity encouraged, government strengthened and insurgents offered inducements to defect. "But for those things to happen, the Taliban must see that the Afghan government and its foreign friends are winning, not losing."

We cannot create a stable state in Afghanistan

Some aims have been achieved in the years since the US led invasion, says Rory Stewart, but objectives such as creating a multi-ethnic centralised state based on democracy, respect for human rights, gender equality and the rule of law are impossible. Rural areas of Afghanistan remain isolated, conservative and resistant to change. War has eroded social structures and entrenched ethnic suspicion between Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik populations. Pakistan and Iran continue to exercise a dangerous influence. There is a widespread insurgency. Power is in the hands of tribal leaders and militia commanders. Much of Afghanistan is barren and most people cannot read or write. Our efforts in counter-narcotics are a failure. Most of these problems are beyond the power of the coalition to solve. We can't create key Afghan institutions from outside and we don't have the power, knowledge or legitimacy to change those societies.

Nato's modus operandi is doomed to failure

US General Stanley McChrystal talks of the need to "clear" Taliban strongholds in Helmand says Sonali Kolhatkar, co-director of the Afghan Women's Mission. But if "clear" means to kill, US Marines will have to distinguish between Taliban and non-Taliban Afghans to achieve the stated goal of avoiding more civilian casualties. This is a near-impossible task. In any case it may be too late to win civilian hearts and minds. The US Marines are facing a Taliban force bolstered by the survivors of US bombs and the loved ones of those killed. Coalition troops have only two options: risk letting the Taliban escape, or kill the Taliban even if it means killing civilians in the process. Both scenarios lead to a Taliban victory. If "clear" simply means pushing the Taliban out of the areas where they are operating, that just displaces the problem to new areas. "The likelihood of American success in Afghanistan is at best dim and, at worst, heading inevitably toward a lose-lose situation. Given the impossibility of surgically identifying and killing a moving and elusive target, there are only two possible outcomes: killing a lot of civilians, or pushing the insurgency to the rest of the country, or both."

The West has misread the lessons of history

Martin Jacques, a co-founder of Demos, the centre-left think tank, accuses the West of a catastrophic misreading of history. "Afghanistan has proved the deathbed of every imperial project that has sought to tame it - the British in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Soviet Union in the late 20th century, and the United States (with Britain now cast in the role of minnow) in the early 21st century." By any criteria used to measure the success of the Afghan mission, it has failed already and will not succeed in the future. "Bin Laden will never be captured; al-Qaeda will continue to operate in Afghanistan and, more pertinently, elsewhere as well; and Afghanistan will not become a western-style state. Ultimately, there can only be one winner - the Taliban." Military historian Max Hastings agrees. Time and again, invading nations have come a cropper in Afghanistan. A close look at these misadventures helps explain why. "Even at the height of British imperialism, when Victorian proconsuls prided themselves on their ability to impose order upon the most unlikely subjects - dervishes and Zulus notable among them - they failed with the Afghans" and "neither

its people nor the mistakes made by meddling foreigners have changed much in between."

The war in Afghanistan is fomenting Islamic militancy

Former British diplomat Craig Murray argues in the *Mail on Sunday* that the presence of western troops in Afghanistan and Iraq is the greatest recruiting sergeant for Islamic militants. "As the great diplomat, soldier and adventurer Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Alexander Burnes pointed out before his death in the First Afghan War in 1841, there is no point in a military campaign in Afghanistan as every time you beat them, you just swell their numbers. Our only real achievement to date is falling street prices for heroin in London." And the longer foreign troops remain in the country, the worse it will get. Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, refutes former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's view that America should not withdraw from Afghanistan because doing so would boost jihadism globally and make America look weak. The reality, Innocent argues, is that the US military presence in the region strengthens the very jihadist forces it seeks to defeat and erodes America's already tattered reputation abroad. "Remaining in Afghanistan to protect America's reputation demonstrates flawed reasoning: prolonging combat operations will kill even more civilians and reinforce the narrative that militants are fighting against the injustice of foreign occupation." The coalition should prepare an exit strategy because, as in Vietnam, "the longer America stays and the more money it spends, the more it will feel it must remain in the country to validate the investment. That's not a winning strategy."

None of the arguments to justify the war are valid

They say our soldiers are dying in order to achieve a stable democratic regime ruling a united country, says historian Correlli Barnett. "What a hope! Afghanistan is an ancient society of fierce tribal rivalries and has no democratic 'DNA' whatsoever." We are told that our forces 'are winning hearts and minds' among the local people, when the truth is that support for the Taliban is growing. We are told that we are fighting to make the world a safer place but the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001 has not prevented a string of al-Qaeda outrages, including Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. "All the arguments used by No. 10 and Whitehall to justify our continued and ever-bloodier entanglement in Afghanistan are spurious and utterly unconvincing," Barnett concludes.

We can win, but only if we redefine what success means

Agree

We do not need to defeat the Taliban

It is not necessary to build a stable Afghan state

There will not be a decisive victory in Afghanistan

Most wars do not end in outright victory

Disagree

Partial victory is not the answer

Effective partition would destabilise Pakistan

We will only be able to negotiate with the Taliban if we are seen to be winning militarily

Everyone knows we can't win, so there's no point in wasting more lives

We do not need to defeat the Taliban

We cannot defeat the Taliban, believes Rory Stewart, but the Taliban is very unlikely to take over Afghanistan as a whole in any case. The Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek populations are wealthier, more established and more powerful than they were in 1996 when the Taliban took power and would strongly resist any attempt by the Taliban to occupy their areas. Nor is Pakistan in a position to support the Taliban as it did before. Even if the Taliban did stage a comeback, it is doubtful whether they would repeat their error of providing a safe haven for al Qaeda (which probably doesn't need one anyway).

It is not necessary to build a stable Afghan state

It is impossible for the coalition to build an Afghan state, argues Rory Stewart; such a thing could come only from an Afghan national movement, not as a gift from foreigners. In any case there is no necessary connection between state building and counter-terrorism. From a western security perspective, a poor failed state could be easier to handle than a more developed one: Yemen is less threatening than Iran, Somalia than Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan than Pakistan. The best policy, he suggests, would be to reduce the number of foreign troops from the current 90,000 to perhaps 20,000 and concentrate on two key objectives: development and counter-terrorism. If the West believed it essential to exclude al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, then it could be done with special forces. At the same time the West should provide generous development assistance in areas outside Taliban control - not only to keep consent for the counter-terrorism operations, but as an end in itself. Vyacheslav Kuznetsov, a veteran of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, agrees with the idea of concentrating on counter-terrorism: "Afghanistan is the worst place to conduct a war. If the British want to tackle terrorism there they should send in special forces to seek out and attack specific targets. Get in fast and out fast. If the aim is to pacify Afghanistan, you will have to kill every man, woman and child. Committing troops to a ground war in Afghanistan is doomed to failure."

There will not be a decisive victory in Afghanistan

We should not expect "a decisive military victory" in Afghanistan, Britain's most senior military commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, said in October 2008, shortly before his departure from the country. "We're not going to win this war. It's about reducing it to a manageable level of insurgency that's not a strategic threat and can be managed by the Afghan army. We may well leave with there still being a low but steady ebb of rural insurgency." The aim should be to change the nature of the debate in Afghanistan so that disputes are settled by negotiation and not violence. "If the Taliban were prepared to sit on the other side of the table and talk about a political

Partial victory is not the answer

During a 2007 correspondence with Rory Stewart in *Prospect* magazine, Sherard Cowper-Coles argued that if we gave up trying to build a stable state and defeating the Taliban, concentrating on counter-terrorism operations, "the Taliban would sweep back to power across the south and east, destroying all that has been achieved in the past six years. The people - especially the women - of the Pashtun belt would be plunged back into a new dark age. The warlords would regroup and come down from the north. Kandahar would fall. Kabul would be fought over again. A new and even bloodier civil war would erupt while the West stood on the sidelines". Pulling out would hand a huge propaganda victory to Islamic extremists everywhere, not just in Afghanistan. It would mean breaking our word to the Afghan people and our partners. "The Taliban would retake the south, the warlords would come down from the north and the civil war would restart. Everything we have done here would unravel, these lands would become a haven for terrorism, and there could be millions of refugees."

Effective partition would destabilise Pakistan

Though veteran foreign correspondent Robert Fisk believes the war is unwinnable and the idea of crushing the Taliban unrealistic, he agrees that a lesser option of effectively partitioning Afghanistan could be disastrous: "Giving the southern part of Afghanistan to the Taliban and keeping the rest...will only open another crisis with Pakistan because the Pashtuns, who form most of the Taliban, would want all of what they regard as "Pashtunistan"; and that would have to include much of Pakistan's own tribal territories. It will also be a return to the "Great Game" and the redrawing of borders in south-west Asia, something which - history shows - has always been accompanied by great bloodshed."

We will only be able to negotiate with the Taliban if we are seen to be winning militarily

As in Northern Ireland, argues the former Lib Dem leader, Lord Paddy Ashdown, the Taliban, or moderate elements of it, will only be prepared to come to the negotiating table if it understands that it cannot achieve what it wants by military means.

settlement, then that's precisely the sort of progress that concludes insurgencies like this," he said.

Most wars do not end in outright victory

Most wars do not end like the Second World War, or even with a successful negotiation between the two sides, argues Peter Beaumont, Foreign Affairs editor of *The Observer*. Instead, they grind to a halt with a peace settlement that is incomplete, and whose partiality contains within it the conditions for a return to violence. Afghanistan is one of these conflicts. Even at the time of the invasion in 2001 the risks were clear: "a dangerous competition for power and the spoils of international aid at the new political centre; the hazard of renewed conflict that would follow the failure to mediate between Pashtu interests in the south and the new centre; and the potential for renewed social strife." Inevitably as all these dangers came to pass they acted as the accelerator for the renewed Taliban insurgency that has succeeded partly because many Afghans have been persuaded that the Taliban is a better bet than the Karzai regime. The only real question now is whether it is too late to salvage anything from this mess and the answer is that it may be. What is necessary is to identify and then mediate areas of dangerous competition - what some specialists call "conflictual peace-building".

Everyone knows we can't win, so there's no point in wasting more lives

The expedition to Afghanistan is on the brink of something worse than defeat: a long, low-intensity war from which no government will dare to extricate itself, argues *Guardian* journalist Simon Jenkins. In seven years in Afghanistan, America, Britain and their Nato allies have made every mistake in the intervention book. Hope is buried in a "cascade of hypotheticals". Victory is possible "if only" the Afghan army were better, "if only" the poppy crop were suppressed, the Pakistan border sealed, the Taliban leadership assassinated, corruption eradicated, hearts and minds won etc. "None of this is going to happen. The generals know it but the politicians dare not admit it". It makes sense to withdraw soldiers from the provinces and forget "nation-building" in the hope that Karzai can exert some leverage over local commanders to separate the Taliban from the al-Qaeda cells in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The US-led intervention, which led to the overthrow of the Taliban, enjoyed genuine international support. Its prime purpose was to root out al-Qaeda. Regime-change was a by-product of this, and one in which Afghans themselves took the lead.

But what exactly is the mission now? Ask a different politician and you'll get a different answer. Some say it's about making the streets of New York and London safe from terrorists; some talk about the war on drugs and Afghanistan's heroin trade; some talk about the country's humanitarian and reconstruction needs; some talk about the need to promote good governance and win "hearts and minds". Some talk about the need to improve the condition of women and education for young girls.

There is, in other words, a clear element of well-intentioned mission creep which has added to an already confused situation a plethora of new objectives which are often mutually contradictory: Beating the Taliban vs. eradicating the poppy fields; beating the Taliban vs winning hearts and minds and so on.

Rory Stewart makes a convincing case that since we cannot beat the Taliban and create a stable state in Afghanistan, we would be better advised to focus on what we can do - counter-terrorism and reconstruction projects in areas where the Taliban

are weak. In 2007 Britain's then ambassador in Afghanistan Sherard Cowper-Coles made a good fist of explaining why such a strategy would not work. Yet a year later, a diplomatic cable relating a conversation between the French ambassador to Afghanistan, Francois Fitou, and Cowper-Coles, was leaked to a French newspaper. In it, Britain's man in Kabul was reported as giving a far gloomier picture of the real situation in Afghanistan. The security situation in Afghanistan was deteriorating, he was reported as saying; Nato's presence was making it worse and western leaders should be dissuaded from getting bogged down further. The only realistic policy would be to cultivate an "acceptable dictator".

Of course, the British Foreign Office denied that these thoughts reflected the British government's views and the suggestion that the coalition should avoid getting bogged down further has been spectacularly ignored by President Obama. Yet privately almost everyone who knows about the situation seems to agree that the chances of outright victory are non-existent. As Simon Jenkins has observed, optimistic prognostications are nearly always hedged around with lists of "if onlies" most of which are unrealistic. The real choice, it seems, lies somewhere between limiting our goals to what is achievable, and negotiating with elements of the Taliban that may be amenable to reason.

As for the young men and women of the coalition forces sent out to fight and die in the pursuit of goals which probably cannot ever be achieved, perhaps no one has more eloquently described their plight as Rudyard Kipling did the last time we were embroiled in an Afghan war, in his 1886 poem *Arithmetic on the Frontier*.

A scrimmage in a Border Station
A canter down some dark defile
Two thousand pounds of education
Drops to a ten-rupee jezail.
The Crammer's boast, the Squadron's pride,
Shot like a rabbit in a ride!

No proposition Euclid wrote
No formulae the text-books know,
Will turn the bullet from your coat,
Or ward the tulwar's downward blow.
Strike hard who cares - shoot straight who can
The odds are on the cheaper man.

One sword-knot stolen from the camp
Will pay for all the school expenses
Of any Kurrum Valley scamp
Who knows no word of moods and tenses,
But, being blessed with perfect sight,
Picks off our messmates left and right.

With home-bred hordes the hillsides teem.
The troopships bring us one by one,
At vast expense of time and steam,
To slay Afridis* where they run.
The "captives of our bow and spear"
Are cheap, alas! as we are dear.

(*Afridis are a Pashtun tribe on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border)