

The military campaign in Afghanistan

Claire Taylor

When will the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan be able to hand over to Afghan forces?

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is currently mandated under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1890 (2009), although operational command of ISAF was assumed by NATO in August 2003. Since 2006, calls have consistently been made for the NATO Member States to meet the force requirements of the ISAF operation amid allegations of unequal burden-sharing within the Alliance. Military commanders on the ground have in the past also criticised the imposition of national caveats on the deployment of military forces, arguing that restrictions on the rules of engagement of certain countries' forces undermine the overall effectiveness of the ISAF operation. In addition to the deployment of ISAF, American and other forces have also continued to conduct counter-terrorism operations independently in the

country under *Operation Enduring Freedom*. To provide coherence between both operations, the Commander of ISAF is also the Head of US Forces in Afghanistan.

ISAF's main role in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority across the country and creating a secure environment, with a view to paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance. ISAF therefore has the following mission objectives: to conduct stability and security operations throughout the country in conjunction with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF); mentor, train and equip the ANSF; provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance; and support the counter-narcotics efforts of the Afghan government.

STRATEGY

Under the overarching framework of the Obama Administration's 2009 'Af-Pak' strategy and the political framework agreed at the London conference in January 2010, the focus of the ISAF mission is shifting towards counter-insurgency operations, with specific emphasis on establishing effective political governance and expanding the size and capabilities of the ANSF. The intention is to begin transitioning security control to the ANSF on a district-by-district basis, provided security conditions are met, from the end of 2010, so that coalition forces can gradually withdraw from mid-2011. Coalition allies have, however, emphasised that this does not constitute an 'exit strategy' from the country.

ranging from counter-narcotics to economic development, is based in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand.

US troops have largely been situated in the eastern provinces around Kabul. However, as part of the surge process, they are currently being deployed into Regional Command South (RC(S)) areas, including Helmand. This process is due to be completed by the end of August 2010. Canadian troops in Kandahar and Dutch troops in Uruzgan (Tarin Kowt) are due to withdraw in 2011 and late 2010, respectively.

IS THE TIMETABLE REALISTIC?

It remains debatable whether the security situation on the ground in the southern provinces will have progressed sufficiently for a handover of control to be achieved within the timeframes envisaged. Political pressure on countries to retain their force levels in southern Afghanistan beyond 2010/2011 is considered likely if the US, and possibly the UK, are to avoid filling the breach in the longer term. Both the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Chief of the General Staff have expressed the view that British forces will remain in Afghanistan until at least 2014, when the role of UK forces could become more focussed on development, governance and security sector reform. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has also argued that the process of handing over security to the ANSF could take up to 15 years and has therefore cautioned against a hasty withdrawal.

The plan is for Coalition forces to begin withdrawal in mid-2011

In order to deliver on those objectives, a surge of military forces has been agreed, with primarily the US and other coalition allies deploying an additional 40,000 troops to Afghanistan over the course of 2010, which will take the size of the overall ISAF contingent to over 100,000 troops. In Autumn 2009 the Prime Minister announced that the UK would deploy 9,500 personnel to ISAF for the foreseeable future.

These UK troops are situated in Helmand province in the south west of Afghanistan. The UK Provincial Reconstruction Team, which supports the Afghan Government in matters

