Air Historical Branch (RAF)

Operation Herrick IV: The Background to UK Involvement in Southern Afghanistan, 2006

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Cover Photograph:

Movements staff meet British forces recently deployed to Kandahar air base by USAF C-17, 5 March 2006
(Air Historical Branch)

Introduction

The aim of this narrative is to consider the background to Operation Herrick IV, when, in the spring of 2006, the UK sought to lead the expansion of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) into southern Afghanistan. This was not the beginning of UK involvement in Afghanistan nor even the beginning of Operation Herrick, but the 2006 deployment must nevertheless be considered a key development in British strategy – the start of the UK's extended military commitment in Helmand Province and the watershed between the early, limited missions of the 2001-2005 period and the continuous expansion of UK forces in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2011.

From a historical perspective, Herrick IV represents something of a paradox. There are, in the most general terms, two broad types of military operation. Many are launched unexpectedly and at very short notice, with the minimum of preparatory activity, but some are planned far more deliberately and systematically over time. Herrick IV obviously falls within this second category, originating, as it did, in a strategic assessment initiated in July 2003. And yet, despite the long lead time (and acknowledging that all military undertakings involve elements of the unexpected), it was manifestly not the operation anticipated by the government, the MOD and the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ). Indeed, it massively exceeded expectations in terms of difficulty, scale, duration and cost. Moreover, when British and other ISAF forces ultimately withdrew, they left behind a situation still characterised by great uncertainty, instability and insecurity. The subsequent tendency was not to view Operation Herrick in terms of victory or defeat, but it would certainly be very difficult to argue that it ended in outright victory.

The yawning gulf between expectation and reality raises obvious questions about the background to Herrick IV. Why did the UK volunteer to lead ISAF expansion into southern Afghanistan? What were the main factors shaping British strategy and planning? What were the key strengths and weaknesses of the plan, why was it so quickly blown off course in 2006, and what lessons can be learnt from the experience? The following attempt to answer these questions drew on a range of sources archived at the Air Historical Branch more than 20 years ago.

The process by which the UK committed itself to Herrick IV is not well recorded in the official archives. The scrupulous minuting of higher-level decision-making so long undertaken by departments of state had fallen into decline by the turn of the century. Paper filing systems were being replaced by computerised alternatives across Whitehall, but the consequence, initially, was a substantial fall in the volume of records retained. The route to Helmand was a complex and circuitous one, in any case, involving many different stakeholders. It was perhaps to be expected that the development of the Herrick IV plan would be more fully recorded in some areas than others. For all these reasons, the preparation of this study proved particularly

challenging, and the result cannot be deemed comprehensive. It is nevertheless hoped that it will advance our knowledge and understanding of Operation Herrick and serve as a useful reference source for future crisis management and operational planning. The approach throughout is chronological: a clear factual grasp of the events and their historical context is essential if they are to be properly explained.

Background

In 2001, the British government declared its intention to 'stand shoulder to shoulder' with President George W. Bush's US administration following the strategic shock delivered by the series of Al Qaeda-sponsored terrorist attacks on the US mainland on 11 September. Declaring a Global War on Terror, President Bush sought to align the world against terrorism, while there was an inevitable clamour in the US for rapid retaliation. In response, the Bush administration set out to eliminate Al Qaeda by targeting its leadership and network of training camps in Afghanistan, then (as now) under the government of the Taliban. When predictably the Taliban refused to co-operate, their overthrow became the primary US goal. This was to be achieved under the auspices of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). British forces were first committed to Afghanistan to underpin UK support for President Bush's strategy. The basic objectives of OEF could hardly have been clearer, but what would happen after they had been achieved? Initially, this fundamental question did not receive any significant consideration in London and Washington. This lack of strategic thinking was noted as early as March 2002 in an official British report on UK participation in OEF, which occurred under the operation name Operation Veritas.

With speed of response deemed critically important, the operational design for OEF was substantially based on exploiting the large US air presence in the Gulf, deployed largely for operations over Iraq. Air was assessed to provide precisely the means required to strike Al Qaeda and the Taliban quickly and at relatively low risk. Combined with Special Forces (SF) operations and employed in support of 'proxy' Afghan ground forces (the so-called Northern Alliance), it offered a low-footprint alternative to a conventional ground campaign that would in any case have been far more difficult and expensive to plan and execute. No RAF combat aircraft were committed, but the UK provided a range of enabling air assets – Nimrod R1s and MR2s, Canberra PR9s, E-3Ds, air-to-air refuelling platforms, Hercules C-130 transports and Chinooks – and SF, and authorised US air operations from the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. On the basis of the UK's favoured coalition partner status, RAF personnel also continued to fill key positions in the well-established Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC), then located at Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia. Yet there was no coalition or UK planning in campaign terms. Essentially, the UK followed a US crisis plan that involved the extensive deployment of reinforcements into theatre before any clear concept of operations had been formulated. UK planning was confined to the selection, deployment and

committal of forces where they might have the most effect, complementing rather than duplicating US capabilities.

The subsequent operation, initiated on 7 October, quickly secured the Taliban's overthrow. In early November, in the face of precise, heavy air attack and mounting pressure from Northern Alliance forces, resistance began to crumble. Mazar-e-Sharif fell on 10 November and most other urban centres, including Kabul, capitulated over the next week. The remaining Taliban either fled or became absorbed into the local population. American and Northern Alliance forces then targeted pockets of Taliban and Al Qaeda resistance in the north and east of Afghanistan, notably in the region of Kunduz and the Tora Bora and other fortified cave complexes, in a series of operations extending into the spring of 2002. To assist them, the UK Task Force Jacana – a battlegroup based around the Royal Marines of 45 Commando – deployed to Afghanistan. In the meantime, the UN established ISAF under British leadership, which was at first charged with securing Kabul and its environs; British and foreign troops would now also be deployed in support of this commitment. From then on, there were two operations running concurrently in Afghanistan under the respective auspices of OEF and ISAF with quite different and often conflicting aims and chains of command. OEF was highly kinetic, aiming to defeat insurgents and terrorists through military action; ISAF, on the other hand, sought to employ cross-government activity with the aim of reconstruction, stabilisation and the restoration of state institutions.

By mid-2002, Afghanistan was viewed by the West as something of a success story. The Secretary of State for Defence told Parliament in June: 'There is now a degree of optimism in Afghanistan that was unthinkable just a few months ago'. The UK would hand over ISAF leadership to Turkey and reduce force levels from 3,000 to just 400 troops, although the majority of deployed RAF assets would remain committed to Afghan operations.

Initial Proposals

The US and UK focus then shifted to Iraq, leaving ISAF's authority substantially confined to Kabul; OEF continued but on a scale insufficient to bring stability to many parts of Afghanistan. With the US main effort now geared to Iraq, the Taliban were given an opportunity to recuperate; many fighters who had fled during OEF now returned. In keeping with a seasonal pattern that was to become all too familiar over the following years, the spring of 2003 witnessed an upsurge in Taliban activity. On 1 May, a PJHQ operational summary recorded concerns about the security situation in southern Afghanistan, particularly around Kandahar – for long the main Taliban stronghold.

> Reports are contradictory, but it appears that Taliban forces from several areas, totalling between 2-800, managed to capture a complete district of ZABOL province on 24 April 03. Although the reporting is confused, it appears to indicate the largest co-ordinated Taliban attack yet. Whilst still controllable, this could prove more serious as the summer goes on … This is a further escalation of the Taliban raiding policy, which has apparently now expanded to include seizing ground and holding it.

In August, against this background, NATO assumed leadership of ISAF, and (under UNSCR 1510) took responsibility for its subsequent multi-stage expansion beyond Kabul, where reconstruction was to be effected via the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept.[1] NATO – specifically SHAPE[2] – sought to introduce programming stability and continuity to the ISAF headquarters role by devising a six-monthly rotation of the NATO High Readiness Force (HRF) headquarters. There was also an aspiration in the medium term to bring ISAF and OEF operations under unified command.

NATO leadership of ISAF led directly to an MOD reassessment of UK military options in Afghanistan. This was undertaken in the later stages of 2003 for the Chiefs of Staff (COS), then under the chairmanship of General Sir Michael Walker, by the Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Commitments)(DCDS(C)), then Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fry (RM), in conjunction with PJHQ, then under the command of Lieutenant General Sir John Reith. While it was still ongoing, the MOD came under increasing pressure from Downing Street, where the Prime Minister was said to be 'seeking "a viable military plan" to resolve the lack of security in Afghanistan'. It was difficult for the MOD to produce a meaningful response while their review was still in progress; equally, the review could not be concluded until there was more certainty about NATO planning.

DCDS(C)'s analysis of the UK's future military posture in Afghanistan appeared at the end of January 2004. It noted that, while 'COS and SofS have consistently endorsed the fact that Iraq is our main effort for the foreseeable future … the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the SofS for International Development have all suggested that we must be prepared to put more effort into Afghanistan.' Indeed, the Foreign Secretary had only recently advised Mr Blair that success in Afghanistan was 'crucial' and had recommended further UK investment, including the potential deployment of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC), to ensure the delivery of strategic success. DCDS(C)'s proposals by way of response were primarily concerned with the initial expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul – ISAF Stages 1 and 2 – in northern

1. Originally an American concept, a Provincial Reconstruction Team is a unit consisting of military personnel, diplomats and reconstruction subject matter experts, working to support reconstruction efforts in unstable states. They were first established in Afghanistan in 2002.

2. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe.

Afghanistan, under NATO OPLAN 10302. However, he then turned his attention elsewhere, posing the fateful question: 'Should the UK military effort shift later to the south?

> HMG has strategic interests across Afghanistan and is especially keen for the UK military to engage in the south, where the Pashtun majority live and where security to date has been poor … At some stage in the future, there might be occasion to review the UK's posture again, potentially hand over command of the Group North to the NORDICS or another nation and redeploy UK military effort to a more difficult task in the south. This would potentially be during Phases 3 or 4.

He went on to propose the possible deployment of HQ ARRC to Afghanistan in 2005 subject to certain explicit conditions, including satisfactory progress with the initial stages of ISAF expansion and 'whether the UK possessed sufficient capacity to deploy a manoeuvre element' alongside the ARRC, and also whether 'the achievement of unity of command in Afghanistan was realistic early in HQ ARRC's tenure (no later than 6 months after assuming command of ISAF).' The deployment of a 'manoeuvre element' effectively implied the dispatch of a UK battlegroup.

DCDS(C)'s proposals were subsequently endorsed by the COS. In the meantime, however, the MOD received a further communiqué from Downing Street reflecting what was described as 'the PM's wish ahead of next week's DOP [Defence and Overseas Policy Committee][3] meeting for an overview of the current military contribution to Afghanistan, and the potential for enhancing that contribution.' It is clear that the ARRC's deployment was now being viewed by some at the MOD as a viable means of satisfying the Prime Minister's aspirations but, as one official noted,

> We shall also need to consider separately whether we would wish to deploy a reasonably substantial manoeuvre element to give effect on the ground, since this would potentially increase our commitment in Afghanistan close to medium scale. This would have significant impact on air transport and on logistic support, in addition to the obvious requirement for ground troops.

The DOP duly met to discuss Afghanistan on 12 February. The same day, the Secretary of State for Defence signified his agreement that, subject to satisfactory progress with the initial stages of ISAF expansion, the UK should consider the deployment of HQ ARRC to Afghanistan to implement the transition to unified

3. The DOP was responsible for the strategic direction of UK defence and overseas policy. It was chaired by the Prime Minister and members included the Foreign Secretary, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for International Development and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

command of ISAF and OEF, as envisaged by SHAPE. But a further DOP meeting on the 25th led the MOD to conduct what it described as 'a new strategic military estimate from first principles'. In the absence of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), the estimate was submitted to the Secretary of State on 3 March by the Vice-Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS), Air Chief Marshal Sir Anthony Bagnall. It contended that 'a total force of some 71,000 troops would be necessary to achieve any significantly faster progress towards a stable, secure and self-sustaining Afghanistan (this is set against a projected force in the NATO OPLAN of circa 25,000).' It was pointed out that the logistic challenges of supporting such a force were likely to be extremely demanding; 'indeed, pending further analysis, it would be the limiting factor on the size of a deployable/sustainable force.' Opposition was also likely.

> Afghans are a proud and independent people whose tribalism (rather than loyalty to the country) dominates. Their culture and religion also plays a significant part and it cannot be assumed that the presence of a force larger than currently deployed (in the region of 15,000) would be welcomed. Such an increased presence is likely to act as a 'magnet' for increased AQ insurgent and terrorist activity. In addition, eradication of the poppy crop could be the catalyst for the growth of a national insurgency movement.

The paper went on to postulate that 'significant effect might be noticeable after 2 years, but the desired End State is only likely to be achieved after 10-15 years, predicated on the time it takes to establish good governance, judiciary, economy and security sector reform.' In a covering minute, VCDS reminded the Secretary of State of the pressures confronting UK forces at the time, notably in Iraq. 'Without a shift in strategic priorities, in my view, the UK could not make any contribution (beyond our intended role in OPLAN 10302[4]) to any wider Afghanistan Force.' An accompanying draft letter to the Foreign Secretary (sent out to the Foreign Office the same day) reiterated this point: 'As you are aware, Iraq remains the UK main military effort and while this remains the case we would not be able to commit substantially more to Afghanistan than is currently planned' – i.e., for Stages 1 and 2 of ISAF expansion.

It is evident that VCDS's conclusions were not welcomed elsewhere in Whitehall. Undoubtedly, there was a perception that a substantially greater UK military commitment to Afghanistan was essential for several reasons. These included:

1. ISAF's limited progress beyond Kabul.

2. The Taliban's resurgence in a number of areas – especially the south.

4. Then assessed at 510 personnel.

3. What the UK perceived to be the half-hearted response of many NATO members to the ISAF leadership challenge since August 2003; a force generation conference held on 11 March left a number of substantial shortfalls. A greater UK commitment to ISAF might encourage other countries to increase their contributions.

4. The situation in Iraq, where the insurgency was imposing ever greater burdens on US forces. If NATO could assume more responsibility for the security task in Afghanistan, the Americans would be able to focus more effort and resources on defeating the Iraqi insurgents.

Some within the MOD evidently shared this outlook. Moreover, the apparent success of UK operations in south-eastern Iraq at this stage implied that commitments there would probably decline, freeing up more resources for Afghanistan. Later in March, speaking notes for CDS prepared by the Directorate of Joint Commitments for a forthcoming discussion with SACEUR suggested that he 'should advise in confidence of the UK's willingness in principle to deploy the HQ ARRC Group to command the ISAF in 2005'. This was despite the fact that 'the chance of achieving the major condition, unified command, cannot be guaranteed.' It was argued that the ARRC's deployment would meet 'the UK's political aspirations for an increased engagement in Afghanistan.' It might also 'serve to hasten unity of command'. The notes again raised the possibility that the ARRC might be accompanied by a UK battlegroup as well as a brigade headquarters. They acknowledged that this 'could be influenced by developments in, *inter alia*, Iraq', but an accompanying annex postulated that 'TELIC[5] and/or NI [Northern Ireland] drawdown in 2004 would mitigate against impacts.'

On the 25th, CDS spoke to SACEUR, raising the prospect of the ARRC's deployment, but adding that:

> We wanted to be sure that the use of such a large and capable formation delivered as much impact as possible, and … the UK wanted unified command with the coalition early enough in the ARRC's tenure for it to be able to make the difference we seek (this was a prerequisite for its deployment), and would get the concept properly and thoroughly established.

5. UK Operations in Iraq from 2003-2011.

SACEUR replied that there was a cultural divide in NATO. So long as 'combat operations' were being conducted in any counterinsurgency operation (i.e., under the auspices of OEF), then 'unity of command was more than the NATO market would bear.'

Iraq or Afghanistan?

SACEUR's response appears to have halted deliberations on the ARRC's deployment to Afghanistan for a while. In the meantime, however, there was a marked deterioration of security in the American-controlled areas of Iraq, a development made more worrying from Washington's perspective as it coincided with the withdrawal of some coalition force elements – notably the Spanish. At the end of April, the US formally requested additional UK assistance, including the deployment of a three-star headquarters to assume responsibility for the whole of the Shia south. The only such headquarters that the UK possessed was HQ ARRC.

The request was politically awkward. By this time, the Iraq war had become extremely unpopular in the UK. The government was bracing itself for heavy losses in the local government and European Parliament elections in June, and for an adverse public response to the report of the Butler Enquiry concerning the intelligence used to justify the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which was expected in July. There was no political appetite for an increased military commitment to Iraq – at least in the short term. Beyond this, some within the UK defence community harboured doubts about US strategy and campaign management in Iraq and about the Americans' apparent unwillingness to grant the UK significant influence within the operational planning process. The COS therefore advised that the concept of an ARRC deployment to Iraq be 'parked' for the time being.

The MOD further considered the American request during May, but the political sensitivities remained so pronounced that a decision was deferred. The strategic desirability of assisting the US was fully acknowledged, but there were concerns that the proposed deployment might prove very challenging. A brief prepared for the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) on 18 May observed that campaign success was 'far from assured' and warned that the UK's 'strategic CoG[6] (political will to remain engaged) is threatened, and being compromised by the increasing perception of a doomed campaign which we are mishandling.' A Cabinet Office paper produced on the 25th similarly pointed out that the impact of the proposed deployment was hard to predict given the rapidly changing situation on the ground. The dispatch of additional UK forces was at odds with the government's avowed commitment to the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty and governmental institutions and did not necessarily promise to buy more influence with American commanders in theatre. Little was known about the areas for which the UK would assume responsibility, and civil development

6. Centre of Gravity.

support beyond the existing British area of operations was weak. Finally, from a political perspective, both opposition parties were against any enlargement of the UK military presence in Iraq. Given the depth of these reservations, it is not surprising that CDS should have informed his US counterpart on 5 June 'that the UK was unlikely to make an early decision.' In the meantime, however, the COS agreed that 'were HQ ARRC not to deploy to Iraq, the priority for its deployment would be Afghanistan.'

The alternative options were subsequently addressed by DCDS(C) in papers prepared for the COS on 14 June. His brief on Iraq merely took the form of an objective appraisal of the ongoing MOD deliberations. The Afghanistan paper could hardly have been more different. Essentially, it was a fully-fledged recommendation to deploy HQ ARRC in November 2005 – later than originally proposed – for a period of nine months, immediately after a similar nine-month deployment by the Italian high-readiness headquarters. As such, it was supported by a multiplicity of arguments in favour and by hardly any counterbalancing words of caution.

> Thus the proposed option would: provide 18 months of stability for ISAF; enable the UK to optimise ISAF expansion while shaping ISAF operations to best effect; hold out the continued prospect of unified ISAF/OEF command; yield considerable political capital for the UK within NATO; enhance NATO's credibility at a crucial point in the organisation's development; meet with the approbation of the Afghan Transitional Authority (ATA), for whom the UK is a cornerstone of the international community's commitment to Afghanistan; and consolidate the working relationship with Italy, an ally of increasing importance for the UK. This option should also find favour in No 10 and the FCO, where deployment of the ARRC to Afghanistan has long been an aspiration.

As for the original conditions attached to HQ ARRC's deployment, Lieutenant General Fry argued that Stage 1 of ISAF expansion had been successfully achieved and that the prospect of HQ ARRC assuming ISAF command might expedite the fulfilment of Stages 2 to 4. He noted that unified ISAF/OEF command was still by no means guaranteed but maintained that the later deployment 'would increase the feasibility of unified command … To further enhance this concept we would need effective lobbying in NATO, and reassurance that unified command remained acceptable to the US.' Once again, HQ ARRC's deployment raised the prospect of dispatching an accompanying 'manoeuvre element', also referred to as a 'critical mass'. This force was not expected to exceed a 1-Star headquarters with an all-arms battalion group, plus supporting elements, including support helicopters – around 1,700 personnel in total. This was assessed to be achievable even with a continuing

medium-scale commitment in Iraq, although it was clearly expected that a UK drawdown would be under way there by 2006.

Lieutenant General Fry feared for the ARRC's future reputation in the absence of a decision. If there were no deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, it 'would represent a considerable decline in the status of NATO's pre-eminent warfighting formation. As currently envisaged, a deployment to Afghanistan would be appropriate and proportionate to the ARRC's capabilities, while being worthwhile from military and political perspectives.' And there was one further incentive – a planned NATO summit at Istanbul at the end of the month. Offering the maximum publicity and impact, this would provide a perfect forum for the Prime Minister to reveal at least part of the UK plan to the world.

A paper that was evidently couched in very similar terms was submitted by the Director General of Operational Policy (DG Op Pol) to the Secretary of State four days later. This was discussed on 22 June at a meeting attended by the Secretary of State, CDS, the Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS), DCDS(C), the Policy Director, and DG Op Pol himself.

> It was noted that there were good arguments to plan to commit the ARRC to Afghanistan in 2006. This would eliminate uncertainty amongst partners about our planning; demonstrate to NATO our commitment to use ARRC in an operational context; be well timed from the perspective of smoothing out the UK's commitments so as to avoid simultaneous medium-scale deployments, assuming a reduction in commitment to Iraq in 2006; [and] well timed in relation to having broad strategic effect in Afghanistan, where back-to-back deployments following the Italians would allow us the option for decisive impact in the latter stages of SACEUR's plan, and the *option* to bring OEF and ISAF together in a single command.

It was also observed that the Prime Minister was likely to want to make a public commitment to deploy HQ ARRC to Afghanistan at the Istanbul Summit.

The meeting duly agreed that the Secretary of State would write to the Prime Minister recommending the Afghanistan option; as yet, there was no decision about the 'critical mass', but – as we have seen – it was always a fundamental element of DCDS(C)'s proposal, and the decision to deploy HQ ARRC substantially increased the likelihood that it would be sent to southern Afghanistan too. To maximise the impact of the announcement, measures were taken to prevent any premature disclosure of the decision. The US Chiefs of Staff were not advised until the very last moment, and the Commander of HQ ARRC (COMARRC) only learned of the plans for his headquarters when they were made public by the Prime Minister at Istanbul.

It is appropriate to offer several observations regarding this decision-making process here. First, from the available records, it does not appear that intelligence on the situation in Afghanistan exerted any very tangible influence on the development of policy. The arguments focused overwhelmingly on the advantages – military, diplomatic, political – that the proposed deployment of HQ ARRC and, potentially, the 'critical mass' were expected to bring. The absence of any Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) representation at the 22 June meeting serves to underline this point. One possible reason for this lack of intelligence input may have been the physical separation that existed at the time between the DIS and MOD planning principals, particularly at 1, 2 and 3-Star levels. It might have been better if the core elements of the DIS had been located in MOD Main Building. But it may also be that the staffs responsible for planning Operation Herrick IV took insufficient account of DIS intelligence assessments. The DIS was not always well represented on strategic plans and current commitments groups within the Defence Crisis Management Organisation (DCMO).

Second, while UK plans for Afghanistan were clearly based on the assumption of a drawdown in Iraq, they were not considered to be dependent on one. Yet this left many potential questions unanswered about the precise relationship between the withdrawal of British forces from Iraq and their commitment to Herrick. Third, during deliberations that extended throughout the first half of 2004, certain important goalposts were moved. The conditions originally set for HQ ARRC's deployment ceased to be conditions if they threatened to become show-stoppers. The fundamental requirement of unified ISAF/OEF command, set in January, had been transformed by late June into an 'option to bring OEF and ISAF together in a single command'.

The obvious shortcomings identifiable within this process would have been less important in the context of a purely national operation envisaging the deployment of UK armed forces at a particular time and place. In this scenario, if circumstances had changed significantly between the decision to deploy and the actual deployment, plans could have been altered. However, it was a very different proposition for the Prime Minister publicly to offer, at a major international summit, an asset such as HQ ARRC to an alliance of NATO's standing to play a central and critical role in the command and control of a large-scale coalition operation. In this situation, once tabled, the offer would be impossible to withdraw if it transpired that the assumptions underpinning UK plans were unsound. Developments on the ground in Afghanistan or indeed Iraq would be immaterial; HQ ARRC would deploy and, in all probability, so too would the 'critical mass'.

From the foregoing account, it will be clear that the decision to send HQ ARRC to Afghanistan resulted in no small part from the efforts of DCDS(C), Lieutenant General Fry, to promote such a strategy. Giving evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry some years later, he himself acknowledged his key role, stating that 'This whole idea about the balance between the two theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan was quintessentially

what the DCDS Commitments was about. It was about giving sets of advice to the Chiefs of Staff on the way in which military force should be applied in pursuit of all these strategic objectives.' As we have seen, this advice was heavily weighted towards the Afghanistan option. On the decision itself, he recalled:

> We felt that the campaign in Afghanistan had become moribund at the time … We could have a transformational effect, in moving from the north to the south, bringing with us a far greater emphasis on the south, bringing with us allies into the south, which would then give the Afghan campaign a far greater sense of focus and purpose.

This, however,

> predisposed us to make certain assumptions about the speed within which we could get out of Iraq, and I think at that time there was a general strategic intent that we should disengage in Iraq … We would make certain assumptions about the speed with which we would bring about the sorts of levels of stability that we wanted to … allow us to draw down our forces. That would then allow us to relocate the emphasis of our military deployments in Afghanistan … Now, as an overall scheme of manoeuvre, that's the way it actually turned out, but where we got it entirely wrong was the timings within which it would be possible to do that. So we began to ramp up in Afghanistan before we had disinvested to the level that we had expected in Iraq, which then led to increasing tensions in terms of the availability of forces … The assumptions were that we would be out [of Iraq] far sooner than eventually we were out, and to that extent I think the assessments about the sequencing between the Iraq and the Afghan theatre were flawed.

Lieutenant General Fry also noted that there was, in his words, 'a tension between the level of strategic ambition and the degree of material resource to be able to make it work'.

> I think that we had a level of strategic ambition within the military and across government to become more significantly involved in Afghanistan, and that was driving an awful lot of what was happening ... At the time, Afghanistan was pretty thinly populated with military forces, and in some areas – and Helmand was an example of this – there was a very, very light footprint, which was primarily American at the time, and we had a less than accurate sense of precisely what Helmand would become in due

> course, and I think that it was only when we were actually into the course of the operation that the full scale became apparent … At the time the intelligence that was there actually portrayed Helmand as a reasonably benign place … We certainly at that stage did not see the scale of challenge that Afghanistan would subsequently become … So we were expecting at that stage that there would be a significantly lower investment of force than eventually proved to be the case.

Nevertheless, given the strength of support for the proposed deployment, we might legitimately question whether a different and more pessimistic intelligence appraisal would have made much difference.

Operational Planning

In the aftermath of the Prime Minister's announcement at the Istanbul summit, planning for the new operation proceeded along lines that were not entirely orthodox. The process might have been appropriate for the extension of an ongoing plan but not for the inauguration of a new one. The normal planning machinery was not established, nor is there any record to suggest that a formal strategic estimate was undertaken. HQ ARRC was duly offered to NATO on 1 July, and CDS issued a Planning Directive to the Chief of Joint Operations (CJO) in September. In the same month, in a separate development, the UK deployed a detachment of six Harrier GR7s to Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan, following an approach from the Americans and primarily to support OEF. The request provided an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with the US and continuing support for American strategy, despite the British government's unwillingness to send reinforcements to Iraq. But the GR7s were also to assist ISAF, NATO having identified requirements for close air support, airborne ISR and air presence during the Afghan presidential elections in October. The deployment was for nine months and was not funded beyond that period. At this point, the name 'Herrick' was introduced to cover all UK operations in Afghanistan.

In October, an analysis conducted by PJHQ (now under the command of Air Marshal Glenn Torpy) reaffirmed that the focus of the proposed deployment should be in southern Afghanistan if the UK wished to make a significant difference, and a further paper from MOD Joint Commitments recommended planning for the UK to hand over its commitments in the ISAF Stage 1 area and, in 2006, lead Stage 3 expansion in the south with a multi-national force. The COS duly approved the initiation of broader planning activity on this basis, which was conducted at PJHQ under the Deputy CJO Operations (DCJO Ops – Major-General Peter Wall from February 2005), supported by HQ ARRC and HQ Land.

In January 2005, a further Joint Commitments paper argued that the UK had a significant strategic opportunity to act as a catalyst not only in delivering Stage 3 Expansion in the critical southern area, but also in helping to set the conditions for achieving a single mission in Afghanistan under NATO. The COS concurred and sanctioned a PJHQ reconnaissance to Afghanistan that, among other things, would allow an assessment to be made of the scale of forces required. On 9 February, the Secretary of State for Defence announced at a NATO defence ministers meeting in Nice the UK's intention to shift its focus in Afghanistan from north to south at the end of the year or early in 2006, although he did not make any formal commitment to UK leadership of Stage 3 expansion.

In April, on the basis of their single reconnaissance and drawing on the planning work so far undertaken, PJHQ produced a draft paper on the UK's overall strategy to meet the government's intent in Afghanistan, which was duly staffed at one and two-star level. This document defined the orientation of Herrick IV, leaving no doubt that the prospective operation was to be a Land undertaking. The responsible staff officer in the A5/Contingency Plans section at Headquarters Strike Command (HQ STC) observed that, 'from an Air perspective, the paper was initially unbalanced in favour of Land.' A number of recommendations were proposed to address this bias, but they were not reflected in the final document presented to the COS. Indeed, as finalised, the proposed concept of operations (CONOPS) made no mention of Air at all and defined the mission entirely in Land terms. The only reference to Air came in a list of the combat support elements that would be required to implement what can only be described as a Land scheme of manoeuvre.

The Land orientation of the CONOPS was always to be expected given the central planning roles allocated to DCJO Ops, HQ ARRC and HQ Land. Nevertheless, as both CJO and the head of PJHQ's planning division (the ACOS J5) were RAF officers, and as all plans had to be approved by the COS, which included the Chief of the Air Staff, this issue clearly merits further consideration. One obvious point is that air operations over Afghanistan were coalition-based and not subject to the national and geographical subdivisions that inevitably prevailed on the ground. They were directed primarily by the US CENTAF CAOC (by this time based at Al Udeid, Qatar) in accordance with ISAF's declared requirements and those of OEF. This was not an arrangement conducive to the development of an air CONOPS that was specific to a particular task force or area. The air requirements of each deployed ground formation in Afghanistan would be serviced from a coalition pool so that, for example, many foreign – particularly US – air assets would be available to support British ground forces. If an air plan were to be generated, it would be generated for Afghanistan as a whole by the Combined Forces Air Component Commander (CFACC).

Second, although the Harrier GR7 detachment was only funded through to May 2005, CJO was always adamant that there was a longer-term operational requirement for the aircraft in theatre. An extension of their deployment – if approved – would certainly

have implied a far more significant investment of UK air power than envisaged in the PJHQ CONOPS, which dealt solely with the specific demands of Operation Herrick IV. The Harrier detachment was always addressed separately from the main Herrick IV force package. Third, over the preceding months, the security situation in Iraq had deteriorated significantly. It was becoming increasingly clear that the predicted drawdown of British forces would not occur before the Afghan deployments commenced. The MOD was now confronted by the unwelcome prospect of two substantial and concurrent commitments. Quite apart from the resource constraints that this situation would impose, Treasury funding now also had the potential to become much more problematic. A larger air element within the plan would have compelled a reduction in capability on the ground at a time when some senior Army officers were already beginning to doubt the adequacy of the force levels under consideration (see below).

Fourth, the British Army had traditionally made a strong claim to the effect that it should play a lead role in COIN and other internal security operations. This contention tended to underestimate the historical importance of air power in such environments and ignored the RAF's long-term association with small wars and counterinsurgencies. Nevertheless, in 2005, the Army's position was widely accepted across the defence community and was rarely challenged by senior airmen. There may thus have been a tendency to accept rather too readily that Herrick IV was primarily a Land venture that would draw on US-directed coalition air support as and when it was needed.

In the CONOPS, PJHQ recommended that the proposed 'critical mass' be sent to Helmand province. The provincial-level focus seemed to accord well with the nature of Afghan government. Additionally, the Canadians, who had also offered to contribute forces to Stage 3, were keen to take responsibility for the strategically vital Kandahar province (which might otherwise have been considered as a possible option by the UK), and, finally, the UK was G8 lead nation for counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, and Helmand produced the bulk of the Afghan poppy crop. There was a perception in certain quarters that the UK had not fulfilled this role very effectively: Opium poppy output had been rising steadily year-on-year to reach levels substantially in excess of those recorded when Afghanistan was still governed by the Taliban. The PJHQ paper proposed a three-step process:

> **Step 1**. Preliminary operations from September 2005 with the hand-over of commitments in the north and advance deployments to the south.
>
> **Step 2**. Deployment to Helmand province of a light battalion, PRT and key enablers (the Helmand Task Force) in April 2006.

Step 3. The potential subsequent deployment of a 1-Star headquarters and enablers to command a multi-national brigade in the Stage 3 area.

It is easy to see why the provincial focus should have appealed in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, as events would ultimately demonstrate, it was not entirely advantageous to view the Afghanistan task from this perspective. Doing so encouraged a tendency to plan in isolation, with insufficient regard for the complexity of the operating environment. A single province – Helmand, later jokingly referred to as Helmandshire – could be treated as a British enclave, where a British plan would be implemented irrespective of developments elsewhere in theatre, the inherent superiority of the British approach being taken for granted. Yet the truth was that Helmand could not be artificially segregated in this way. Only through close co-ordination with the other key players – the US, NATO and the Afghan government – would a realistic plan have evolved.

Included among the resource requirements identified to support the Helmand deployment were tactical air transport, close air support, support and attack helicopters, as well as a command, control and communications element, an ISR element and a PRT capability. Where ground combat capability was concerned, the need was for so-called 'framework' troops for PRT protection and projection, and a quick-reaction force, 'required for *in extremis* support at NTM[7], 24-hour cover, selective across AO[8].' In response, the COS signalled broad approval and endorsed the proposed Preliminary Operations, but they ruled Step 2 to be beyond the limited scope of the UK's declared intent. They commissioned further investigation of the broader options for deploying the Helmand Task Force (HTF – later renamed Task Force Helmand, or TFH), setting out the potential benefits, costs and risks. Separate proposals from CJO to extend the Kandahar GR7 deployment to October 2007 were rejected. It is unlikely that they would have been acceptable to the Treasury at the time; the 2005 General Election was imminent, and it is rare for such commitments to be approved so close to polling day, which was 5 May. Nevertheless, the COS's rejection of CJO's proposals contrasted markedly with their subsequent determination to ensure that the Army's AH-64 Apache attack helicopters accompanied the HTF to Afghanistan. There had been strong National Audit Office criticism of the Apache procurement programme, 40 had been mothballed in 2003 for a period of four years, and it had not been possible to deploy the helicopter in Iraq.

There followed two months of deliberation over the size and composition of the HTF; the issue had to be resolved prior to another NATO force-generation conference scheduled for 25 July. At an early stage in these proceedings, HQ ARRC identified a requirement for an in-theatre reserve to provide a theatre-level surge capability that,

7. Notice to move.

8. Area of operations.

in COMARRC's view, was essential for the success of the mission. On 27 May, HQ Land submitted proposals to CGS envisaging the deployment of a light infantry battalion and a Task Force formed around a parachute battalion and supported by a detachment of attack helicopters. The Task Force would have been available to COMARRC for tasking right across the Stage 3 area, and possibly elsewhere. HQ ARRC's first staff visit to Afghanistan resulted in similar proposals being tabled early in June. The reserve was identified as a key capability that was 'critical to mission success'.

It was in the context of these proposals that 16 Air Assault Brigade first became involved in planning for Operation Herrick. As their commanding officer, Brigadier Edward Butler, later recalled, 'The very first discussions I had were with General Richards, who was commanding the ARRC at that time. He and I discussed the concept of a Theatre Reserve, and 16 Air Assault Brigade, being a highly mobile, aviation-led brigade, would have fitted that requirement very neatly.' Additionally, Brigadier Butler had gained operational experience in Afghanistan in 2001-2002 and was thus more familiar with the environment than many of his peers.

However, the aspiration to deploy a theatre reserve *and* an additional battalion for Helmand was ultimately abandoned for two reasons. First, Afghanistan's poor internal communications, viewed in conjunction with the higher threat level in the south, suggested strongly that a robust Task Force should be based *in Helmand*. As DCDS(C) put it:

> The extended LOCs[9] and greater force protection requirements for S3 PRTs point towards a more robust capability *at the provincial level*, rather than relying solely on a regional QRF[10] or manoeuvre element. Military staffs from the main NATO S3 partners[11] assess that an effective presence for both stability and security operations should amount to a PRT plus a manoeuvre unit in each of the six S3 provinces. The expectation in NATO is that S3 nations will provide this.

Second, given the situation in Iraq, tough resource constraints were certain to be imposed on Herrick IV. To quote DCDS(C) again, 'If the MOD is to progress further towards achieving its interim Objective in support of HMG's Strategic Objective, a strong case will have to be made through the DOP process to attract sufficient HM Treasury funding for suitable military options to achieve transformational effect.' It could be expected that the MOD would have to commit to specific timescales, costings and deployed manpower levels. If the cost of the deployment in terms of

9. Lines of Communication.

10. Quick-Reaction Force.

11. The UK, Canada and the Netherlands.

both finance and personnel were to be held at levels that the DOP would accept, prioritisation would be essential. The order of priorities recommended by DCDS(C) placed Helmand Province first, and support to HQ ARRC fourth. CDS agreed, advising the Deputy SACEUR early in July:

> My immediate priority is to resource our part in Stage 3 … Once the UK's Stage 3 commitment has been decided, then we will need to consider possibilities for UK support to HQ ARRC … [but] within the UK's current operational constraints, we are unable to provide both the forces considered necessary for Stage 3 and an airmobile task force for an ISAF theatre reserve.

The logic behind COMARRC's theatre reserve concept was fully accepted, but it would represent 'a particularly heavy burden requiring JRRF[12] assets.' DCDS(C) felt that 'further conceptual development' was needed 'to examine all the ways of delivering the desired effect within the Afghan context'.

Discussions were continuing when, on 7 July, the new Secretary of State, John Reid, led his first debate on defence in the House of Commons. On the day that four Islamic extremist suicide bombers attacked the London transportation system, killing 52 civilians and injuring over 700 more, he announced the UK's intention to deploy HQ ARRC to Afghanistan in May 2006, and added: 'At that stage we anticipate that International Security Assistance Force control will move from its current location in the north and west down to the south. We will play some part in that, in addition to our role in the headquarters of the ARRC. We will move down to Helmand province.' He was not then in a position to discuss the scale of the Helmand deployment.

When the DOP convened, it was solely to consider the requirements of the HTF and a UK contribution to a multi-national brigade headquarters for the Stage 3 area. A meeting on the 14th approved the deployment of a PRT, the Task Force and an aviation package of up to 2,500 personnel, plus a contribution to the Stage 3 brigade headquarters and enablers of up to 650 personnel. Total manpower would therefore be 3,150; the DOP endorsed funding of £808 million based on an operation of three years in duration. Endorsement was subject to a requirement to ameliorate the resource burden to the UK by seeking multi-national contributions to the force package, and no further capability could be added to the package without the approval of the COS and the Secretary of State. It was suggested that there might be scope for using the Task Force as a quick-reaction force elsewhere in the Stage 3 area – i.e., in provinces other than Helmand – but any such additional tasking would require careful consideration 'given that the justification for the deployment of the Helmand TF was for use in Helmand Province alongside OGDs.'[13]

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12. Joint Rapid Reaction Force.

13. Other Government Departments.

The outcome was viewed by the MOD and PJHQ as a 'good result', and, given the subsequent controversy surrounding the manpower cap, it should be noted here that the force package was the largest of three options tabled by the MOD; indeed, in terms of personnel, it substantially exceeded the force of 1,700 originally suggested by DCDS(C). One PJHQ briefing paper acknowledged at this time that it was 'prudent to plan the ORBAT[14] for HTF based on 'worst case' assessments … of the enemy threat.' However, the same document also pointed out that UK and coalition understanding of the threat and operating environment in Helmand remained 'immature'. The package was duly announced (although not made public) at the NATO force-generation conference on the 25th, when the Dutch, Canadians and Americans also confirmed their willingness to contribute forces to ISAF Stage 3.

In the aftermath of the DOP's decision, there was a predictable flurry of activity. CDS and the Secretary of State were asked to approve the initiation of Preliminary Operations from September, although the majority of personnel would deploy in November. Their task was to conduct 'critical preparatory work to facilitate UK participation in Stage 3 expansion and … underpin the development of UK full operating capability in Area South prior to arrival of HQ ARRC in May 06.' Around 250 strong, and comprising military, Foreign Office, Department for International Development (DFID) and Post-Conflict Resolution Unit (PCRU)[15] personnel, Preliminary Operations would 'facilitate refinement of the proposed concept of operations for UK forces and planning for OGD development activity in Helmand.' At approximately the same time, it was confirmed that the HTF would be constructed around a battle-group formed by 16 Air Assault Brigade; Brigadier Butler would be appointed Commander British Forces Afghanistan (COMBRITFOR).

At PJHQ, work began to produce a formal force estimate and CONOPS for the Task Force, and CDS issued an updated planning directive to the Joint Commander (CJO) on 10 August. Among other things, this provided formal approval of Preliminary Operations and a statement of intent to shift the UK military focus from north to south. The UK PRT would be moved to Lashkar Gar, the capital of Helmand, and would reach Full Operational Capability (FOC) in April 2006. The scale of the deployed aviation element was confirmed at eight Apaches, six Chinooks and four Lynxes, but some uncertainty surrounded the provision of fixed-wing air support – at least by the UK. The Harrier detachment at Kandahar received a funding extension through to June 2006, but the Treasury evidently hoped that another country would subsequently assume this commitment. The directive stated: 'The method by which [airborne] ISR and CAS[16] will be delivered thereafter is yet to be confirmed.' After two Harriers were damaged in a rocket attack on Kandahar, HQ STC recommended

14. Order of Battle.

15. The PCRU was a body created by the Government in 2004 to undertake reconstruction activity in overseas countries after military operations.

16. Close Air Support.

the deployment of a Force Protection Wing and an RAF Regiment Field Squadron to protect the airfield, but the proposal was rejected. The air dimension remained a largely peripheral subject during the build-up to the first Helmand deployment.

Preliminary Operations

On 15 August, PJHQ issued a Warning Order for Preliminary Operations, and the first briefing documents appeared on the force laydown and CONOPS for the HTF. The Task Force mission was:

> To conduct security and stabilisation operations jointly with GoA,[17] coalition and multinational agencies which deliver an environment conducive to legitimate economic development and capacity building in order to extend the regional influence of the GoA.

It would be based at Gereshk and Lashkar Gar; deployment was to begin in February 2006, with Initial Operational Capability (IOC) being reached in March and FOC in April.

Such was the intent. And yet, within days, events would start to hint at the true complexity of the Operation Herrick IV task. On the 18th, the Netherlands MOD hosted a Stage 3 expansion meeting at The Hague and revealed plans for the Dutch deployment into Oruzgan Province (north of Helmand) that were decidedly cautious, lagging behind the UK timetable by several months. SHAPE was left to investigate the acceleration of this process; the only realistic alternative was for the Americans to provide cover in Oruzgan until the Dutch arrived.

Four days after that, PJHQ received a letter from the senior British officer embedded within the OEF Combined Forces Command in Afghanistan – Air Vice-Marshal PD Luker – commenting on the Preliminary Operations warning order. It is evident from this document that UK planning activity was paying inadequate attention to coalition factors in Afghanistan. Air Vice-Marshal Luker pointed out that, while the warning order implied an almost immediate transition from OEF to ISAF command in the Stage 3 area upon the deployment of British forces, a two-phase process was more likely, with operations at first being conducted under the auspices of OEF. He also felt that the CONOPS for Operation Herrick (which was summarised in the warning order) was being 'developed from a purely national standpoint'; its aspirations, in his view, appeared both 'premature and parochial'. He was particularly concerned that British plans seemed to tie the Task Force to Helmand, whereas, while under OEF command, it might well be required to support operations elsewhere in the southern region.

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17. Government of Afghanistan.

Further misgivings would soon afterwards be manifested at the very top of the MOD as it became clear that there would be no drawdown of British forces in Iraq during 2005. It was the Secretary of State himself who posed the question, 'Is the decision to go into Helmand in this mission, with this force, dependent upon us drawing out of Iraq?' After twice requesting an answer verbally from CDS, and after twice receiving verbal assurances, Dr Reid decided he needed something in writing. On 12 September, having asked whether, 'in the event of a slower than expected draw-down of our forces in Iraq, our planning assumptions for deployment in Afghanistan would be achievable,' he was told that 'The short answer is yes.' Advice had been taken from CJO and he was 'clear that our plans for Afghanistan are deliverable even if events slow down our Iraq disengagement.' Essentially, this meant that the Helmand plan, as approved by the DOP, could be resourced without a drawdown in Iraq, and this was broadly true. The problem was that, as events were already suggesting, there would be very strong pressure in theatre to change the plan.

That the plan was not constructed on very firm foundations was suggested by the second PJHQ reconnaissance to Afghanistan, which occurred between 26 September and 2 October 2005. The reconnaissance team's report began with the reassuring words: 'No fundamental change to the original PJHQ J2 assessment.' It then appeared to contradict itself by declaring: 'The operating environment in Area South is significantly more complex than previously assessed, and greater situational awareness is required in order to operate intelligently.' British forces would be confronted not only by the Taliban but also by criminal elements associated with the narcotics industry, fiercely independent tribal communities and the many young men who moved between these groups and functioned as 'auxiliaries', according to motivation, primarily to generate income. Insurgency was but one source of violence; others included political rivalries, tribal disputes and criminal activity. As for Helmand, 2005 was the first year in which coalition forces (primarily US, UK and New Zealand Special Forces) had operated there on any scale, and their presence was increasing the intelligence flow considerably. From the information received, it was possible to draw the conclusion that,

> Contrary to earlier reporting, it appears that OMF[18] are present in Helmand in some strength, notably in the Washir, Now Zad and Baghran districts. The opinion of all parties consulted was that an increase in Coalition presence next year will increase the number of contacts with OMF. Narcotics were confirmed as a dominating issue in Helmand and we were informed … that there was a closer association between drugs and OMF than in other provinces.

18. Opposition Militia Forces, i.e., the Taliban and other insurgent elements.

Hard on the heels of the PJHQ report came the first report from the Commander, Preliminary Operations, Brigadier Gordon Messenger. He had apparently made encouraging progress in augmenting his establishment, drawing on FCO, DFID and PCRU personnel already in theatre, and he described ongoing work to produce an operational-level campaign plan. However, he also warned of American concerns over gaps in the plans for Stage 3. Their conviction that cross-province operations would be essential to help alleviate potential deficiencies was so strongly held that the term 'Helmand Task Force' had been deleted from US documents. For his part, Brigadier Messenger harboured concerns about the extent to which the US was still focused on counterterrorism and COIN (in the most kinetic sense) in the south – an approach that contrasted sharply with the UK's emphasis on security and stabilisation. 'Intention is to conduct spring offensive in 06, prior to TOA,'[19] he wrote. 'NATO and UK should attempt to influence this to ensure our arrival in theatre is not undermined by unduly heavy-handed US approach.' He also felt that spring 2006 would be a challenging time for British forces to arrive in Helmand: 'Annual x-border migration of insurgents complete, COIN offensive underway, poppies in full bloom … Complexity of threat demands a greater understanding of the enemy and environment.'

The next Preliminary Operations report was no more optimistic in tone. Their intelligence staff had learnt that the population of southern Afghanistan were already aware of the prospective arrival of UK forces and that Taliban-sponsored information operations were encouraging active opposition. The security situation in northern Helmand was giving particular cause for concern, and it was observed with brutal honesty that, although the number of troops-in-contact (TIC) incidents was limited by comparison with other provinces, this could be expected to 'change and rise dramatically when UK troops arrive, as we simply provide a bigger target set for the insurgents.' It was also considered that the UK's counter-narcotics agenda had the potential to derail the Helmand plan. 'Whereas insurgents continue to fight both the GoA and the Coalition, the drugs traffickers do not.'

> If UK forces were seen to openly engage any level of the drugs trade, it would create a universal enemy for both the drugs traffickers and the local population who earn their living by it … By removing their livelihood, we vilify ourselves instantly. All of this would then be in addition to the enmity demonstrated by the insurgents. Whilst the drug traffickers and local population may not necessarily unite, they may collude against the UK.

Finally, to complicate matters still further, there was a hitherto unrecognized cross-border security challenge of daunting proportions. Preliminary Operations warned that 'The border region in the south [i.e., the border with Pakistan] is a known safe

19. Transfer of Authority from OEF to ISAF.

haven for insurgents and to all intents and purposes there is no border at all, be it in the eyes of the indigenous people or the drugs traffickers and insurgents who operate there.' The significance of this statement should have been all too clear given the UK's historical experiences in Northern Ireland, Aden and Borneo.

The Dutch Dilemma

It goes without saying that the UK was not the only country receiving more detailed intelligence by October 2005; equally disturbing information was also reaching the Netherlands, raising further questions about the Dutch deployment to Oruzgan. When CDS visited Afghanistan in the middle of the month, he encountered deep concern among American commanders over the Dutch deployment timetable and, once again, the conviction that other Stage 3 forces should be free to manoeuvre between provinces to plug any gaps. A few days later, at an ISAF Stage 3 Working Group meeting in Tampa, Florida, the Dutch revealed that political approval for the Oruzgan deployment was not expected until early November. This was itself significant, as the UK Secretary of State for Defence was determined that there should be no public confirmation of British plans for Helmand until the participation of the other Stage 3 contributors was beyond all doubt, but the true scope of the Dutch problem would not become clear until the end of the month. On 31 October, the Director Joint Commitments Policy reported on the situation:

> It became clear through a variety of sources last Friday afternoon that the Dutch Government was going through a major crisis of confidence on their planned deployment to Oruzgan province in southern Afghanistan. It appears that this was fuelled primarily by a new military intelligence assessment of threat levels in Oruzgan, which suggested that it would be difficult to maintain the preferred Dutch concept of operations, centred on 'hearts and minds', in the face of the assessed insurgent threat. We understand that the Dutch plan to approach Stage 3 partners early this week to share this assessment and address the implications.

'Early November' came and went without any Dutch decision and thus without a UK announcement, although the Secretary of State found himself under considerable pressure from a variety of quarters. On 7 December, the ARRC was formally offered to NATO to lead ISAF from May 2006 to February 2007, but uncertainty continued to surround the Helmand deployment. Such was the situation when the COMBRITFOR Designate, Brigadier Butler, arrived in Afghanistan. His initial assessment of the position broadly mirrored that of Preliminary Operations: a Taliban resurgence worryingly predicted for Helmand in the spring of 2006; a bumper poppy harvest anticipated, drawing thousands of migrants across the border from Pakistan; an American requirement for his force to operate across the Stage 3 area, and 'potential CN operations upsetting the PRT cart and destabilising the province and

wider region.' Butler also expressed deep concern about the potential resource implications if commitments beyond Helmand were accepted; he considered that the force levels endorsed by the DOP were adequate for operations within the province (for which, of course, they had originally been scaled) but insisted: 'There are insufficient resources to meet both requirements.' Additionally, he was struck by the bewildering array of UK, ISAF, OEF and Afghan agencies that appeared to a greater or lesser extent to be involved in Stage 3 planning without proper co-ordination. Finally, he warned of the adverse repercussions of the delay in announcing the HTF's deployment.

> Any delay beyond 6 weeks is likely to result in a deeply rooted insurgency with the initiative back in enemy hands. No overlap with ISAF IX (the ARRC tenure) will be possible and a fresh estimate and CONOPS will be required – essentially the whole force generation process will need to start again.

On the very same day, the Secretary of State was advised that the Dutch cabinet would meet to decide on the deployment to Oruzgan on 19 December. And yet, even then, it would be constitutionally necessary to refer the final decision to the Dutch parliament for approval. On the 14th, therefore, the COS decided that they had little option but to 'reduce the velocity' of the Stage 3 deployment, so creating the possibility of a delay in reaching both IOC and FOC in Helmand. The Dutch government duly approved the Oruzgan plan, but there was no likelihood by that time of a parliamentary decision until the New Year.

By January, the UK's plans for Afghanistan were beginning to unravel. A particularly unfortunate repercussion of the delay occurred in Afganistan itself, where UK pressure linked to the prospective HTF deployment had led President Karzai to replace the governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, with Mohammad Daoud. Akhundzada was characterised in British documents as corrupt and untrustworthy, yet he came from northern Helmand and retained extensive patronage networks in the province that might have been very useful during the following months. By contrast, Daoud had no previous association with Helmand. Once in post, his influence in the province would barely extend beyond Lashkar Gar, and he would be virtually powerless to confront any Taliban resurgence until the HTF deployed. If his position were compromised, Karzai's authority might also be weakened. The situation caused consternation within MOD Joint Commitments, where it was feared that the entire UK Stage 3 strategy was on the verge of collapse.

> HMG's broader and longer-term strategy for Afghanistan will become undermined; this is particularly important given HMG's G8 lead for CN.[20] It cannot succeed without tackling the south

20. Counter-Narcotics.

> and east. The strategic consequences will also be significant. ISAF's expansion will be seen to fail, placing NATO's credibility at stake, and potentially affecting the dynamics of global security. The UK's reputation will also be severely damaged particularly with the US. We have, since 9/11, consistently made statements supporting an enduring commitment to Afghanistan.

These arguments were presented to CDS on 10 January and to the COS and the Secretary of State on the 11th. A prompt decision was deemed essential and, according to Joint Commitments, the UK could not afford to wait for the Dutch parliament, which was not due to address the issue until 2 February. Even then, 'parliamentary agreement is far from assured, and consequently the Dutch Government may withdraw its offer of military capability for Oruzgan.'

The Secretary of State nevertheless remained adamant that the Helmand deployment would not be formally authorised until the Dutch committed to Oruzgan. It was not until the final week of January that the government of the Netherlands was sufficiently sure of parliamentary support to give Dr Reid the assurances he was seeking. On 26 January (ahead of the Dutch vote but on the declared basis of 'optimism' regarding its outcome) he announced the deployment of the HTF to Parliament. In February, 39 Regiment, Royal Engineers, would deploy to Helmand to build an encampment for the main UK force (soon to be named Camp Bastion), while 42 Commando, Royal Marines, provided Force Protection and three RAF Chinooks from 18 Squadron supplied them with essential lift and mobility.

The plan was that Lashkar Gar would become the base for a new, British-led, PRT, which would function within a security framework created by the HTF. The HTF would include elements of the headquarters of 16 Air Assault Brigade and an airborne infantry battle-group. Based initially around 3 Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, it would incorporate eight Apache attack helicopters, four Lynx light utility helicopters and six RAF Chinooks from 27 Squadron. The HTF would also include armoured vehicles, artillery, logistics, REME[21] and medical elements, and four additional RAF Hercules transports were to be deployed. It would come under a new Multinational Brigade (South), the command of which would alternate between Canada and the UK. The aim was to reach FOC by July – three months later than originally planned. The new deployments, together with forces already in theatre, would temporarily raise the UK presence in Afghanistan to 5,700 personnel, but this would decline to around 4,700 following the withdrawal of the various enabling elements and the RAF's Harrier GR7 detachment – still scheduled for June. The mission was focused on security and reconstruction. The Apaches were being deployed to protect the support helicopters, which were so essential to the HTF given the poor standard of Helmand's roads.

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21. Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

Dr Reid declared that the size and structure of the task force had been guided by a careful assessment of the likely tasks and threats that it would face. 'What matters is that we put the right forces in to do the job and to do it safely and well.' Despite this pronouncement, only days later, the Chief of Staff Operations at HQ STC wrote to DCJO Ops recommending a further extension of the GR7 deployment at Kandahar.

The Helmand operation was viewed by the government as an opportunity to demonstrate the utility of the so-called Comprehensive Approach, and the basic principles of truly joined-up, cross-governmental action were enshrined in a UK Strategic Plan for Afghanistan endorsed by ministers on 19 December 2005. As for the HTF itself, its tasking appeared relatively limited. Deployment would take place into a 'central lozenge' – a triangular area between Lashkar Gar, Gereshk and Camp Bastion. Once security and stability in this region were assured and PRT activity had commenced, the area under governmental control would gradually be enlarged through the combined efforts of the HTF and the Afghan security forces.

Whether such a cautious mission was well-suited to a battle-group constructed largely from an air assault brigade can only be a matter for conjecture. It should be recalled, however, that 16 Air Assault Brigade was at first approached over the deployment on the basis that it might fulfil the role of mobile theatre reserve – a very different and potentially more suitable proposition. The available records do not explain their subsequent selection for the HTF role, but the then CGS, General Sir Mike Jackson, was himself a member of the Parachute Regiment and was doubtless keen for the Brigade to play a leading role in the new operation; moreover, 16 Air Assault had not seen service in Iraq. That they might not be fitted by inclination or training for the rather sedentary posture subsequently envisaged for the HTF is suggested by a requirement submitted in March 2006 'to deliver capability for airborne [i.e., parachute] delivery of [a] company group, advance forces and aerial-delivered resupply throughout HELMAND AO with FOC 01 Jul 06.' Nevertheless, their prompt and radical departure from the original HTF mission was primarily brought about by pressures from within theatre that were beyond their control.

Deployment

The HTF began to deploy into southern Afghanistan in April 2006 in particularly unpropitious circumstances. The Taliban resurgence began as expected, targeting the main district centres in northern Helmand, and governor Daoud found himself in a desperately exposed position. Nevertheless, with US and British Embassy backing, Afghan counter-narcotics authorities embarked on a poppy eradication programme in Helmand – the very course of action that intelligence suggested would broaden local opposition to the British. It was reported on 5 April that 'our enemies were evidently purveying quite effectively the message that UK forces were arriving in order to eradicate [the] poppy.'

Similarly, as feared, OEF forces continued to shape the security environment in Helmand. After visiting Afghanistan, the new CJO, Lieutenant General Sir Nicholas Houghton, described 'a poorly conceived operation in the Sangin valley which has left Coalition troops both fixed and exposed.' This was the construction of the US Special Forces base, FOB[22] Wolf (soon renamed FOB Robinson), which quickly became a veritable honey pot for the insurgency. Lieutenant General Houghton accurately grasped the extent to which local conditions were already jeopardizing the success of the HTF's mission, commenting that 'The sooner that we can take control of our destiny the better.' Like Brigadier Butler, he was evidently concerned about the lack of inter-agency collaboration in Afghanistan, and he added that 'Throughout my visit I kept encountering situations where the potential for increased resource liability loomed.' He was especially impressed by the 'stark and sobering' degree to which the operation was 'dependent upon the air dimension'. The extension of the GR7 deployment until March 2007 was now finally authorised – 'the fruition of several months detailed and intense staff effort' at HQ STC.

Unfortunately, far from the HTF being able to take control of its own destiny, its arrival in Helmand was rendered much more complicated by the last and largest OEF operation to be mounted across southern Afghanistan. This operation, entitled Mountain Thrust, aimed to set appropriate conditions for the transfer of the Stage 3 area to ISAF; the southern provinces would from then on be known as Regional Command (South) (RC(S)). Mountain Thrust was primarily kinetic in its approach, the intention being to destroy and defeat the Taliban, and it was therefore very much at odds with UK plans with their emphasis on stabilisation, security and development. Nevertheless, as it included operations within Helmand Province, the HTF had of necessity to become involved. Subsequent British assessments of the operation were far from positive. PJHQ considered that, while coalition forces had shored up Daoud's position in the short term, this had only been achieved at a considerable cost in terms of local opinion. In northern Helmand, the security situation appeared worse at the end of the operation than at the beginning, and it was believed that the Taliban had emerged 'physically weaker but morally stronger'. The HTF's participation in Mountain Thrust had also allegedly increased the risk that the 'British Brand' might be 'lumped in with the rest', the superiority of the British Brand again being assumed.

On 24 April, the Secretary of State for Defence arrived in Afghanistan – his first visit to theatre since the previous October. He immediately focused on the vexed issue of Governor Daoud's physical and positional vulnerability and, during the subsequent deliberations, several measures were proposed to address the problem. However, Daoud was already clearly convinced that the only acceptable solution lay in the projection of his governorship across Helmand, with a particular emphasis on the north.

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22. Forward Operating Base.

Shortly afterwards, the Commander of the HTF, Colonel Charles Knaggs, met Daoud. It was concluded at the meeting that northern Helmand was 'the key to provincial stability'. Daoud argued that the Taliban were threatening his authority in the north and that he feared their influence taking hold and then spreading south. 'Northern Helmand is key. When the northern districts are secure, then the whole province will be calm.' That such flagrant over-simplification could have appeared remotely convincing plainly illustrates the limitations of UK intelligence preparation and the fact that Afghan social, tribal and governmental dynamics were at this stage poorly understood. Without this understanding, British officers were poorly placed to challenge a very questionable contention or suggest possible alternative courses of action that did not incorporate the obvious presentational disadvantage of pitting Western, Christian soldiers directly against native Afghans – Taliban or otherwise.

The deployment of UK forces beyond the central lozenge and into northern Helmand and their occupation of so-called 'platoon houses', was now very much on the agenda, more than two months before the HTF was due to reach FOC. Within days, the COS had been made aware that a radical change of direction was in prospect. To the COMBRITFOR, Brigadier Butler, it seemed that there was little realistic alternative to the platoon house strategy. British forces had been sent to Helmand to support the government of President Karzai. Both Karzai and Daoud were now insisting that the security of the entire province hinged on the situation in the north. In their view, the loss of district centres in northern Helmand – Sangin, Musa Qala, Now Zad – to the Taliban would result in the loss of Helmand; the remainder of southern Afghanistan would soon follow.

Butler was not helped by a perception in Afghan circles that the British were already failing to deliver on their promises. The HTF's deployment had been subject to an extended delay, and it lacked the combat capability that Daoud had expected when it finally arrived. Somehow, he had come to believe that the UK was sending 3,000 combat personnel into Helmand, whereas the combat element within the Task Force actually numbered around 600. Against this background, there were also clear signs that the situation in northern Helmand was becoming critical. On 18 May, the Taliban mounted a raid on Musa Qala and killed 20 Afghan policemen.

Even then, subject to close political scrutiny, the decision to go north might still have been challenged; but Dr Reid's replacement as Secretary of State for Defence early in May resulted in a temporary diminution of political supervision while his successor, Des Browne, acclimatised to his new department – the first he had actually led. His focus was initially on the situation in Iraq and on certain other commitments that necessitated time out of office. Subsequently, Dr Reid denied approving the move north and insisted that he would not have approved it, while Mr Browne claimed that he was only briefed on the decision retrospectively. It was also perhaps unfortunate that the change of Secretary of State occurred only a few days after the appointment of a new CDS, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, which itself took place within

weeks of the appointment of a new CJO, Lieutenant General Houghton. Continuity in these three vital positions would have been preferable at this crucial juncture in the development of UK operations in Afghanistan.

It was on 24 May, just six days after the Musa Qala attack, that the COS were briefed on the platoon house concept, which was to be initiated at Sangin on the 26th and at Musa Qala and Now Zad on the 28th. Another platoon house would soon afterwards be established at the strategically important Kajaki Dam. These commitments and the demands made by Operation Mountain Thrust would be taken on well before the HTF reached FOC; units would be tasked and deployed as soon as they reached Helmand, and there would be no opportunity to build up and consolidate the entire HTF in the central 'lozenge' area first. It was initially envisaged that the platoon houses would be occupied for 28 days.

The Taliban response was immediate and, to employ the supremely understated language of MOD briefs in this period, 'at the upper end of expectations'. In other words, as a fighting force, the Taliban had been heavily underestimated. The platoon houses soon came under sustained attack from an enemy described by CDS as 'aggressive, determined and quick to react'. While the insurgents would suffer heavy casualties over the following months, intelligence suggested that, if anything, their operational capability and effectiveness increased. One report covering this period noted 'improved C3I;[23] improved OPSEC;[24] adaptation of TTPs;[25] high awareness of, and mitigation against, ISAF capabilities, including CAS; and inflow of commanders and fighters from other areas.'

In short, far from promoting greater security in Helmand, HTF operations in the north were fuelling the insurgency. The intense pressure on the platoon houses was largely responsible for the HTF's expenditure of over 300,000 small arms, 3,800 mortar and 200 artillery rounds during more than 320 significant incidents recorded in Helmand by September 2006. Much of the HTF thus became fixed by the Taliban onslaught; withdrawal was impossible, the Task Force's limited manoeuvre capability was effectively lost, and it was confronted by a resupply task that lay beyond the capacity of deployed air transport or protected mobility. The projected parachute drop was confronted by insuperable risks and never materialised. The Harrier GR7 detachment, viewed as surplus to requirements until April, expended 49 munitions in that month; the equivalent figure for August was 279 munitions of which CRV-7 rockets accounted for 264.

Since 2006, it has repeatedly been maintained that the HTF was, from the outset, under-resourced. In fact, the issue is far from straightforward. It would be impossible

23. Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence.

24. Operational Security.

25. Tactics, Techniques and Procedures.

to prove that resourcing was insufficient for the task that the HTF was intended to perform, as the original plan was so promptly jettisoned; equally, it may be that an alternative and less confrontational strategy in Helmand and elsewhere in Afghanistan would not have been so resource-intensive. What is certain, however, is that in northern Helmand the HTF embarked on the strategy that was more likely than any other to generate almost immediate demands for extra manpower along with numerous additional supporting provisions. Moreover, in the process, they established the basic parameters for future UK deployments to Afghanistan, encouraging the perception that progress would always be inextricably tied to the resource issue. If there was ever any realistic prospect of developing a more intelligent, less kinetic and less resource-based strategy, it disappeared at the beginning of the Helmand campaign.

Expansion

At the end of May, CJO advised the COS that, if the platoon houses were to be sustained over time, 'it would put additional pressure on our logistics and sustainability in manpower terms.' On 7 June, he warned that there might be a requirement for more helicopter lift. Brigadier Butler was by this stage also arguing that 'force level enhancements [were] required to address the emerging persistency requirements of the Ink Spot/platoon house strategy, and C-in-C Land reached identical conclusions following a visit to Afghanistan. Portentous as all this might appear, it should also be noted that, when the Secretary of State made a similar visit a few days later, he 'was given a slide presentation by Ed Butler in which the process was described as a window of opportunity.'

> He said that they had achieved a dual effect. One effect was that there was a sustained presence of the Governor in the villages of the North, which was good, but he had also protected the development zone from the attacks that would inevitably have come if the Taliban had been able to occupy the villages to the North and operate with impunity in that area. So there was the dual benefit of having an extended presence beyond that which we had planned for, having secured our presence in central Helmand Province better than we could have done if we had just stayed inside our own bubble, or lozenge or ink spot. It was described to me as a window of opportunity.

Mr Browne returned to the UK and tasked the MOD to find additional troops to make up for the lost manoeuvre capability. The first increase occurred in June, when 34 Squadron RAF Regiment was deployed to Afghanistan to help defend the air base at Kandahar – as HQ STC had proposed late in 2005. On 10 July, Mr Browne announced to the House of Commons that 900 additional troops and two extra Chinooks would be sent to Afghanistan. Drawing on Butler's brief, he declared:

> The original intent was to tackle the challenges incrementally, spreading security and reconstruction from the centre of Helmand out. But the commanders on the ground grasped an early opportunity. They saw the chance to reinforce the position of the local governor and the Afghan army and police by going into northern Helmand and challenging the impunity of the Taliban there. In doing that, we moved faster towards achieving our ultimate objectives but also extended ourselves. We must respond to that development.

85. So began the expansion of the British presence in southern Afghanistan. By February 2007, the deployed forces of the three services numbered around 6,300, and a series of measures had been initiated to augment ISR provisions, including the acquisition of the first of 10 Reaper UAVs for the RAF. On the 26th, the Secretary of State for Defence announced that a further 1,400 personnel were to be sent to provide a manoeuvre battalion for RC(S), raising the total to 7,700 (out of an ISAF total of around 42,000). Four additional Harriers, four Sea King helicopters and another C-130 Hercules were also being dispatched.

During 2006 and 2007, ISAF forces in Afghanistan were confronted by an enemy that employed broadly conventional tactics. Although the scale of the fighting was far beyond anything originally anticipated by the UK and compelled the HTF to abandon one of the district centres – Musa Qala – ultimately, this approach could only favour ISAF due to their superiority in weaponry, equipment and training. In time, however, the massed attacks on well-prepared ISAF positions reduced significantly in number and a very different threat emerged – the Improvised Explosive Device (IED). By 2008, IEDs were being deployed against ISAF in ever-increasing numbers, threatening patrols, supply convoys, troop movements and every type of vehicular transport. By 2009, the IED had become the Taliban's weapon of first choice and the primary threat to ISAF ground forces, killing hundreds of troops annually and wounding many more.

The IED struck directly at a perceived ISAF vulnerability – the unwillingness of NATO governments and their electorates to accept casualties. The reasoning, presumably, was that ever-mounting casualty levels would generate steadily increasing political pressure for withdrawal. Yet beyond this, the IED threatened to derail ISAF's mission through the elementary concept of diversion. As the menace grew, ISAF was obliged to switch resources and effort towards countermeasures on a truly massive scale. As CJO put it in 2008, 'My sense is that current force adjustments are focussed on protecting rather than enabling the force.' Increasingly, the counterinsurgency campaign became a counter-IED campaign and, for every ISAF soldier deployed in Afghanistan, there would now be an escalating force protection bill; the very presence of boots on the ground would generate a requirement for still more boots and for plans, procedures, tactics, capabilities and

materiel geared to the essentially defensive and secondary force protection task. The UK spent £1.4 billion on counter-IED equipment and other capabilities in the three years to December 2011, although even this figure does not come close to capturing the true scale of UK counter-IED activity in this period, which is probably beyond meaningful quantification. When considering the subsequent expansion of British and other forces in Afghanistan, this must be kept in mind.

By June 2008, the number of UK Service personnel in Afghanistan had reached 7,800. At this stage, the Secretary of State announced the removal of around 400 posts from the Afghan Operational Establishment Table that were no longer required due to reorganisation and changes in the tactical situation but disclosed at the same time that new posts for 630 personnel had been identified – a net increase of 230, raising the total to 8,030 by the spring of 2009. They were said to be required for force protection, for training and mentoring the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and for the delivery of civil effects in an insecure or semi-secure environment.

After visiting Afghanistan in December 2008, the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, approved a further increase in British force numbers to 8,300 (total ISAF strength in December 2008 stood at 51,356). This was described as a temporary measure. However, by April 2009, COMISAF, General McKiernan, was seeking to further a new strategy based on the concept of 'shape, clear, hold and build' and the number of American troops in Afghanistan was rising sharply. Mr Brown therefore decided that the UK total should be raised to 9,000 to help strengthen security during the period of the Afghan elections, in September, and provide better force protection. The plan was to scale back down to 8,300 when the elections were over.

In August, the new US COMISAF, General Stanley McChrystal, submitted proposals for a revised counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan. Sometimes referred to as the McChrystal Doctrine, his recommendations espoused 'shape, clear, hold and build' but also sought to focus the coalition campaign more on protecting the Afghan population and enlarging the role of the Afghan security forces – an approach that required still more resources. McChrystal wrote:

> Our campaign in Afghanistan has been historically under-resourced and remains so today. Almost every aspect of our collective effort and associated resourcing has lagged a growing insurgency – historically a recipe for failure in COIN. Success will require a discrete 'jump' to gain the initiative, demonstrate progress in the short term, and secure long-term support. Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it. Resourcing communicates commitment, but we must also balance force levels to enable effective ANSF partnering and provide population security, while avoiding perceptions of

> coalition dominance. Ideally, the ANSF must lead this fight, but they will not have enough capability in the near-term given the insurgency's growth rate. In the interim, coalition forces must provide a bridge capability to protect critical segments of the population.

There was nothing especially subtle or original about McChrystal's request for tens of thousands of additional troops, following (as it did) the continuous expansion of coalition forces since 2006; indeed, a massive troop surge could be viewed as a measure of last resort, to be implemented when all else had demonstrably failed. Nevertheless, after some delay, President Obama chose to accept his recommendations, and the number of US military personnel in Afghanistan was then raised by 30,000, while other members of the coalition agreed to contribute a further 10,000. Via this means, the manpower at ISAF's disposal climbed to 130,000, a total that would be augmented by Afghan army and police forces numbering 223,000. The UK contribution was to make permanent the increases announced in April and deploy a further 500 personnel, bringing the total to 9,500. Among other things, the US surge placed some 18,000 Marines in Helmand. It was only this American build-up that finally allowed British troops to stage a tactical withdrawal from northern districts of the province.

The year 2010 witnessed the formation of a new coalition government in the UK and waning political support both in London and Washington for the apparently open-ended Afghan mission. Casualties mounted; the financial burden weighed heavily at a time of economic crisis and drastic curbs in public expenditure. The new Prime Minister, David Cameron, became ever more questioning of campaign ends, ways and means, and of the MOD. In July 2010, he declared his intention to initiate the withdrawal of UK forces during 2011 and announced that British troops would no longer serve in a combat role in Afghanistan after 2014. The following November, a NATO summit in Lisbon committed the alliance to transferring leadership in the fight against the Taliban to the ANSF by 2015, and Mr Cameron afterwards confirmed that this would pave the way for British combat troops to leave Afghanistan within the same timescales. 'This is a firm deadline that we will meet.' The drawdown was progressively implemented between 2012 and 2014, and the last British troops left Helmand in October 2014.

Over the five-year period of coalition expansion in Afghanistan, the cost of UK military operations over and above normal MOD expenditure there rose from around £750 million in 2006-2007 to more than £2.5 billion in 2008-2009; the figure stood at approximately £3.8 billion in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, and peaked at more than £4 billion in 2011-2012. By 2012, the actual or projected cost of the operation from 2006-2013 exceeded £20 billion, and the MOD Estimate for 2013-2014 exceeded another £2 billion. It will be recalled that the DOP had originally endorsed funding of just £808 million based on an operation lasting three years. From 2006 to 30

September 2014 (inclusive), 395 personnel were killed or subsequently died of their wounds, and there were 46 additional fatalities that were not attributed to enemy action; 606 personnel were seriously or very seriously wounded or injured in this period, and 2,188 were categorised as wounded in action.

Conclusion

The decision to commit British forces to Helmand had its origins in the UK's early backing for the United States immediately after the attacks of 11 September 2001. There was no clearly defined UK strategy or end state at this time beyond supporting America. The objectives of coalition operations in Afghanistan in October 2001 were set by the US and did not extend beyond the overthrow of the Taliban and the suppression of Al Qaeda activities. These goals were achieved with a rapidity that proved deceptive, encouraging the belief by the spring of 2002 that the remaining task consisted of little more than residual mopping up. Attention could safely shift towards Iraq, or so it seemed.

Subsequently, ISAF achieved little progress beyond Kabul and the north and, while OEF continued, the operation lacked sufficient resources to achieve a decisive outcome. By 2003, the security situation in Afghanistan was again giving cause for concern. Having been involved in both OEF and ISAF from an early stage, and having also accepted the role of G8 counter-narcotics lead nation, the UK had an entirely legitimate interest in promoting stability and security in Afghanistan, and it would certainly have been very difficult to avoid at least some increased military involvement there if the position had deteriorated much further.

Nevertheless, in addition to the 'pull' generated from theatre, there was also an obvious 'push' from the UK itself. From the political perspective, it was clear by 2004 that the Iraq mission had become deeply unpopular, and there were serious misgivings within the MOD and the Army about US campaign management. Consequently, when the Americans began seeking greater British involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan appealed as an obvious alternative that would reflect continuing UK support for President Bush's strategy. Moreover, it was hoped that the UK would encourage greater involvement from other NATO countries by leading Stage 3 expansion, so achieving transformational effect in Afghanistan; by contrast, such a pronounced impact seemed unlikely in Iraq. Finally, by assuming this lead role, there appeared to be an opportunity to demonstrate the assumed superiority of the British Comprehensive Approach.

And so, less than a year after the invasion of Iraq, arguments emerged across government to the effect that greater UK involvement in Afghanistan was desirable, and the MOD was pressed to examine potential options by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Office and DFID. At the same time, influential elements inside the MOD also welcomed the prospect of a more forward British strategy in Afghanistan, notably

DCDS(C) and senior members of the Joint Commitments staff. The result was that key documents weighing the respective Afghan and Iraqi options lacked the essential ingredients of detachment and objectivity; counter-arguments were rejected or ignored, and identified criteria for the Afghan mission were changed when it seemed that they might not be fulfilled.

And yet the deliberations within the MOD and other government departments between 2003 and 2005 were not founded on an informed or realistic assessment of the situation in southern Afghanistan and were therefore divorced from reality. This would be easier to understand if the operation had been mounted at short notice, but ample lead time should have provided an opportunity to generate a more detailed and accurate intelligence picture, which might then have exerted a greater influence within the planning process. In addition, there was a failure to grasp the complexity of the coalition environment. Planning proceeded largely along national lines, in a vacuum, and such co-ordination as was attempted with the US, ISAF and the Afghan government can only be described as inadequate.

In the absence of a realistic understanding of operational conditions in theatre, there could be no firm foundation for planning nor any meaningful calculation of the resources required to fulfil the mission – a situation made worse by the prevailing lack of clarity over the issue of concurrency. The relationship between the drawdown in Iraq and expansion in Afghanistan was very hard to predict and thus to define; recorded pronouncements on the subject often appear confused and even contradictory.

Nevertheless, the deteriorating situation in Iraq was clearly influencing MOD and PJHQ deliberations on potential force scales for Afghanistan well before formal caps were set by the DOP in July 2005. The MOD asked for what it believed it might get, given the continuing demands of the Iraqi theatre, although some senior officers such as COMARRC were convinced that more was needed. The authorised scales might have been adequate for the limited role envisaged for British forces in Helmand, but they left nothing in reserve to cover unforeseen contingencies. And yet, arguably, such contingencies were always likely to arise, given the lack of intelligence on the prospective area of operations, generating an immediate requirement for additional resources that would be extremely difficult to fulfil because of the parallel Iraqi commitment.

Similarly, some UK planners failed to recognise the potential value of air power. Tight financial constraints encouraged the view that RAF air combat and ISR platforms were unnecessary, and requirements for fixed and rotary-wing air transport were underestimated. Indeed, there was a pronounced tendency to view Herrick IV as a Land undertaking rather than a joint operation, with air power being merely a bolt-on accessory to be called on as required but not integrated into the plan. The reality of UK ‘jointery’ was exposed all too graphically in 2005, when the one airman in the

senior command chain, CJO, failed in his attempt to extend the Kandahar Harrier deployment. He had later to defend before the House of Commons Defence Committee a plan that still envisaged the GR7s' withdrawal in June 2006. Lieutenant General Houghton's 'stark and sobering' assessment of the extent to which the operation was 'dependent upon the air dimension' was entirely at odds with the assumptions that underpinned the development of British policy towards Afghanistan throughout the preceding three years.

Following the HTF's arrival in theatre, far from achieving transformational effect, the Helmand operation rapidly assumed the proportions of a crisis. Local political and coalition pressures combined with far stronger and more determined opposition than expected to undermine a British plan that was, in any case, divided between a series of incompatible objectives. Within a matter of weeks, the Task Force's limited combat element became fixed in platoon houses across northern Helmand, leaving it without a manoeuvre capability and in desperate need of more helicopter lift, airborne ISR, offensive air support and much else. From then on, there would be almost constant pressure from theatre for more resources.

The implications were soon recognised in London, and manpower and funding restrictions were relaxed somewhat, but the HTF remained thinly stretched and under great pressure. If anything, the situation became even more challenging over time, as changing insurgent tactics caused a sharp rise in casualties and compelled coalition forces to devote significantly greater efforts to their own protection, both offensively and defensively. Against this background, the operational return on any given level of resource expenditure could only decline, driving up demand still further. Even after the expansion of British and coalition forces between 2006 and 2008, the officer appointed to command the HTF in April 2009 maintained that 'insufficient resources were being allocated to the challenge in southern Afghanistan,' a contention that the MOD chose not to contest.

The expansion of the ANSF and, most of all, the American surge from 2009 finally provided some relief, but there was simply not the will to pursue the drawn-out manpower-intensive COIN strategy championed by General McChrystal. The prevailing view in the UK since 2003 had been that, through intervention on the ground, foreign armies and reconstruction teams could deliver enduring security, governance and economic development in Afghanistan. By mid-2010, it was increasingly plain that this would not be possible within the prevailing constraints, defined in terms of the duration of the operation, casualty rates, and the financial and material costs involved. Such was the context for the Prime Minister's withdrawal announcement, heralding the end of Operation Herrick.

Glossary of Abbreviations

ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AO	Area of Operations
ARRC	Allied Rapid Reaction Corps
C3i	Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence
CAOC	Combined Air Operations Centre
CAS	Close Air Support
CDS	Chief of Defence Staff
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
COMARRC	Commander of HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps
CoG	Centre of Gravity
COMBRITFOR	Commander British Forces Afghanistan
CONOPS	Concept of Operations
CN	Counter-Narcotics
COS	Chiefs of Staff Committee
DCDS(C)	Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Commitments)
DCMO	Defence Crisis Management Organisation
DG Op Pol	Director General of Operational Policy
DIS	Defence Intelligence Staff
DOC	Directorate of Operational Capability
DOP	Defence and Overseas Policy Committee
FOB	Forward Operating Base

FOC	Full Operational Capability
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
HQ STC	Headquarters Strike Command
HTF	Helmand Task Force
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IOC	Interim Operational Capability
ISAF	International Security and Assistance Force
JRRF	Joint Rapid Reaction Force
LOC	Lines of Communication
NTM	Notice to Move
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OGDs	Other Government Departments
OMF	Opposition Militia Forces
OPSEC	Operational Security
ORBAT	Order of Battle
PCRU	Post-Conflict Resolution Unit
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Teams
QRF	Quick-Reaction Force
SF	Special Forces
SHAPE	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
TFH	Task Force Helmand
TOA	Transfer of Authority

TTPs	Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
VCDS	Vice Chief of Defence Staff