

Should British soldiers be walking kids to school in Afghanistan?

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The UK is committing over £140 million a year to assisting Afghan aid projects, but these expenditures are dwarfed by the billions of pounds spent annually on the military effort there. [Avery Hancock](#) argues that so far the new government has let slip signs of 'realist' unease on Afghanistan policy, but no new strategy has yet emerged.



When Foreign Secretary William Hague, Defence Secretary Liam Fox and International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell visited Kabul in late May 2010 for face-to-face talks with President Hamid Karzai and US General Stanley McChrystal, there was not a Liberal Democrat in sight – all the personnel involved were Conservatives. Yet confusion reigned almost at once.

First [Liam Fox](#) told a newspaper: “We are not in Afghanistan for the sake of the education policy in a broken 13th-century country. We are there so the people of Britain and our interests are not threatened.” Cue [Andrew Mitchell](#), who told reporters: “We need to ensure we help the Afghan people build a functioning state. That’s about providing basic education and healthcare. If we are going to prioritise making sure there is a functioning state, development is crucial.” Then Fox, for good measure, said that British troops should to be withdrawn ‘as soon as possible’ – a comment which the Foreign Secretary then called both ‘unwise and unhelpful’, since the British government has refused to put any end dates on the UK’s military role.

The Fox-Mitchell spat brings back memories of [Condoleezza Rice](#) circa 2000, when as a top adviser to presidential candidate George W. Bush, she said that the 82nd Airborne Division (one of the USA’s crack units) should not be walking kids to school. Pre 9/11, of course, the comment was a sharp rebuke to the Clinton administration’s nation-building programme in the Balkans. George W. himself put it more simply: ‘I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation building.’ (Of course after 9/11 the Bush administration embarked on the most ambitious nation-building projects in American history – in Iraq and Afghanistan- before shifting back to a more conventional ‘realist’ policy agenda toward the end of the administration.)



Source: ISAF

Closer to home the [Blair Doctrine](#) – articulated by the UK’s then Prime Minister in a speech made in Chicago in 1999, at the height of the Kosovo crisis – set out the necessary conditions for military intervention in the affairs in another state:

- First, are we sure of our case?
- Second, have we exhausted all diplomatic options?
- Third, are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake?
- Fourth, are we prepared for the long term?
- And finally, Do we have national interests involved?

For the Blair government Afghanistan in 2001 seemed to fit the bill.

Since then, however, the British public has endured numerous flip-flops from the government about what role the military effort in Afghanistan is serving. That could in large part be because the ISAF mission as a whole seems to be pursuing up to [8 different missions](#)- from counter-terrorism, peace-building, and 'stability-enabling' to state-building and nation-building. If Fox's comment on Britain 'not being a global policeman' was a bit glib, his desire to reset expectations and timelines are more welcome. With the Ministry of Defence facing a £36bn [budget black hole](#) over the next decade and increasing casualty rates, it seems reasonable to reduce the scope of the mission in the country to training the Afghan police and army and sealing the border with Pakistan. In the meantime around 8,000 British troops in Helmand province have been placed under [US command](#), while Washington sends more troops to insurgent-held areas before a planned withdrawal starting in July 2011.

So what about the schools? Fox later [backtracked](#) on his earlier statement- saying the priority is to deal with the security situation in the country – but that in order to achieve security 'we must rebuild and repair the society in Afghanistan...and that does include things like education policy, the economy, and governance.'

This seems to place the ball back in Andrew Mitchell's territory, because these longer-term development needs are decidedly civilian tasks, and should be supported by the Department for International Development (DFID) and other donors. But instead, ISAF's mission creep has resulted in the subjugation of aid to military and security priorities- as military-led Provincial Reconstruction Units (PRTs) provide quick-fix 'hearts and minds' assistance and infrastructure projects in return for short-term security gains.

A report last year from [Oxfam](#) and other NGOs working in Afghanistan pointed out that this approach is dangerous, ineffective, and costly. It is dangerous because blurring the lines between military and humanitarian activities places neutral aid workers and local populations at risk of being associated with belligerent forces. It is ineffective, as military-led projects tend to sideline local communities when sustainable aid and development is as much about building trust and confidence as building schools and hospitals. Finally funding for Provincial Reconstruction Units diverts badly needed funds away from Afghan civilian development processes and institutions (whose weaknesses ultimately prolong the military presence). The report finds that the annual funding available to some PRT commanders exceeds the combined Afghan national budget for health and education. In some highly insecure environments military actors may be better placed to respond to rapid-onset humanitarian emergencies; however, extending that role to longer-term development projects should be avoided.

Liam Fox's original comments strongly suggest that he shares the view that military actors should limit themselves to activities that are suitable and legitimate for their engagement – such as providing security. It is civilian actors on this view who must determine and implement policies that address the wide range of reconstruction, development and humanitarian challenges currently facing the country. After fears that the [Tories](#) would give the military an even larger role in the reconstruction of the country, investing in civilian capabilities would be a step in the right direction.

The UK is the second-largest aid donor in Afghanistan (after the US), having spent £143m in Afghanistan in 2008-09. It is a considerable sum but it is obviously dwarfed by the billions spent by the MoD in the country. When the soldiers go home, it will have to be the Afghan government and local civil society – with international support – that lay the foundation for long-term peace and development.

*The [International Rescue Committee](#) is hosting its Annual lecture on June 14 in London entitled 'Soldiers on the School Run: Sensible strategy or disastrous compromise?' featuring **Major-General (ret'd) Tim Cross**, commander of the British Army in Iraq and **Dr Ashraf Ghani**, chairman of the Institute for State Effectiveness and 2009 Afghan presidential candidate.*