

The Conflict in Afghanistan

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With the second Leaders' Debate focusing on International and Defence Policy, the UK's policy on the war in Afghanistan, on the casualties involved for British troops, and on their mission's basic feasibility, has swung into sharp focus. Here [Professor Christopher Coker](#) of LSE's International Relations Department considers the prospects.



I am sure that the Afghan mission can survive the attacks of its critics; it is much more difficult imagining it surviving the defence of its apologists. It would be nice if they could get the story straight, but they can't. At one point I counted up to 8 different missions that ISAF is supposed to be pursuing in Afghanistan:

- counter-terrorism,
- counter-insurgency,
- state building,
- nation building ,
- opium eradication;
- peace building,
- peace support and now
- 'stability-enabling',

-NATO speak for making a difference – though exactly what the difference will look like when we eventually leave is far from clear.

In part, terms such as 'stability enabling' are the political vocabulary of the last decade, so familiar to us at home from Blairisms such as 'core values' and 'performance indicators' that have now been th

oroughly discredited. But they are also part of the military jargon which soldiers find themselves using when on campaign. At the ISAF HQ they talk of

- 'agents for change';
- 'capability milestones';
- 'demand-reduction';
- 'injectors of risk';
- 'kinetic situations';
- 'light footprints';
- 'capacity building',
- 'upskilling '

and many more.

In part, this reflects an embarrassment about war (a 'kinetic situation' is a fight) which all western countries even the US now share. However, in part it reflects the utter confusion at HQ itself about what the mission is meant to accomplish. Since 2005 NATO has no agreed strategic objective; this is war which is tactically driven. With every failure in the field targets are recalibrated – usually downwards. We have even stopped telling ourselves that President Karzai is one of the good guys; we are now trying to sideline him and talk directly to the tribal leaders, as we once talked to the warlords who remained in place when Taliban was driven from power nine years ago. 'Leveraging local capacity' is the latest buzzword, and one that is just as hollow as the rest.

This photo is currently unavailable



Image Courtesy of the Foreign Office

As for 'victory' that aim was abandoned by the military long before David Milliband became the first major political figure to declare that it was no longer a valid objective. "Are we winning" Gen Dannat was asked by a journalist last year. "It is not a term I use" he replied. "I prefer the word 'success'. Are we being successful? Yes, however success is defined". Precisely. This is a non-winnable war which should never have been undertaken.

Once al-Qaeda was out of the country it didn't matter whether it would return (which no-one expected it would). If it had returned, it could have been taken out by drones, cruise missiles and special forces. The original ouster of Taliban was only intended to make a point; 'Don't give refuge to terrorist movements'. As PJ O'Rourke wrote of Iraq "Sure it is a message but it is mess with a message: 'Don't mess with us!' End of story except we got trapped into thinking we could terra-form a semi-medieval society, and use force to do it. So what will be the eventual outcome?

We will spin our way to withdrawal, probably within the next 2 years. In 1922 Ernest Hemingway wrote a piece for the *Toronto Star* in which he noted that the British having this time actually defeated the Afghans in the often forgotten Third Afghan war, had celebrated the fact by allowing the Afghan government for the very first time to establish diplomatic relations with Russia, the old enemy. The Afghans, he added, used to hate the British; now they despised them. It won't be long before we leave the country, relocating perhaps to Somalia or Yemen for the next adventure. But we won't be any more secure. For there is only one thing more dangerous than being hated, and that is being despised.