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RECENT SECURITY SCENARIO IN AFGHANISTAN: ROLES AND IMPACTS OF THE ISAF AND THE WAY FORWARD

Abstract

Contemporary security scenario in Afghanistan appears remote from achieving peace, security and stability in a country that has had been experiencing decades-long armed conflict, insurgency, extremism, terrorism and violence of all kinds. Lately, incidences of armed conflicts, insurgent and terrorist activities are on the rise leading to increased casualties and deaths of the civilians. Principal factors responsible for undermining security and stability in Afghanistan include, but not limited to the continuing insurgency by the Taliban fighters and the terrorism perpetrated by various militant armed groups based both in Afghanistan and across the border. The United States-led International Security Assistance Force, a multinational stabilisation force, on the other hand, is responsible to provide security and stability in Afghanistan since its deployment in 2001. After thirteen years of prolonged counter insurgency and counter terrorism efforts of the ISAF, Taliban insurgency is still showing remarkable strength and little sign of receding shortly making prospects for peace and security in Afghanistan very much obscure. After reviewing the recent security situation in Afghanistan, questions can be raised as to the roles of ISAF in Afghanistan and what are the impacts of their initiatives as insurgency and terrorism continue to bleed the country. The paper argues that lack of success on the part of ISAF in achieving its objectives in Afghanistan is explicitly evident given the rising state of insecurity and instability in recent times. The paper, however, also discusses the various challenges confronted by ISAF in continuing its operations in Afghanistan. At the end, the analysis exhibits some ways forward in achieving peace and security in Afghanistan and establishing sustainable democratic governance in the country.

1. Introduction

Contemporary security scenario in Afghanistan is one of the worst in its complicated and equally conflict-ridden modern history. After thirteen years of the United States (US) and International Security Assistance Forces' (ISAF) prolonged counter insurgency (COIN) and counter terrorism (CT) efforts, prospects for peace and security remain elusive in Afghanistan. Compelled by the intense pressure from domestic support base due to the agonising costs both in terms of loss of life and colossal financing, the US and its allies chalked out a withdrawal plan from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. And the plan is proceeding rapidly even ahead of the schedule.¹

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¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan in 2013: On the Cusp...or on the Brink?", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 54, No.1, 2014, p. 165.

The transition process is also moving forward at an accelerated pace as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) already took over principal responsibility for security throughout the country. On the political development and governance front, the country has been able to conduct the 2014 Presidential election amid serious tension created by the overt Taliban threats. Although, the post-election allegations of vote-rigging are delaying the sworn-in of a new President. However, these few positive developments are largely frustrated by the continuing insurgency of the Taliban and the terrorism perpetrated by militant armed groups based both in Afghanistan and across the border. In spite of more than a decade long COIN efforts by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led ISAF and also recently in collaboration with the ANSF, the Taliban insurgency is showing remarkable resilience and little sign of receding shortly. Therefore, security scenario in contemporary Afghanistan continues in a war-like situation causing death of the civilians and upsetting global efforts in bringing normalcy and stability to the Afghan imbroglio.

The US led multilateral efforts in Afghanistan commenced following the catastrophic incident of 9/11. The US invaded Afghanistan with the objective of eradicating the Taliban regime that was harbouring the transnational terrorist network al-Qaeda supreme commander Osama bin Laden. While the Taliban regime had dismantled rapidly, the US military failed to kill or apprehend Osama. The US forces remained in Afghanistan and also brought-in the multinational stabilisation force under the rubric of ISAF and combinedly sought to eliminate Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants from the country. After thirteen years of the US-led NATO/ISAF counter insurgency and CT efforts, Taliban insurgency still holds strong grounds in Afghanistan especially in the eastern and southern part of the country. Terrorist attacks are also regularly carried out by various militant groups including al-Qaeda. Questions, therefore, can be raised as to what is the current security scenario in Afghanistan? What are the factors/issues hampering Afghanistan's security? What have been the roles of ISAF in Afghanistan and what are the impacts of their initiatives as insurgency and terrorism continue to bleed Afghanistan? What are the challenges? And finally, the way forward? The paper aims to seek answers of these questions. First, in section two, the paper elaborates the present security scenario in Afghanistan in terms of increasing death of civilians and casualties as well as increasing incidences and intensities of insurgency and terrorism in the country. Section three highlights the mandates and roles of the ISAF in Afghanistan. Section four provides a brief review of the impacts of ISAF operations in Afghanistan as lack of success on ISAF's part is explicitly evident. Section five makes an effort to understand the reasons for such deficits in attaining the objectives. Challenges currently faced by the US-led NATO/ISAF forces in realising its objectives and the way forward are discussed in section six followed by conclusion in section seven.

2. Recent Security Scenario in Afghanistan

The present security scenario in Afghanistan is such that the prospects for peace and stability appear elusive at the moment. As mentioned in the United States' *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, Afghanistan continued to experience aggressive and coordinated attacks by the Afghan Taliban and other insurgent and terrorist groups, severely impacting security and stability in the country.² According to the report, in 2013, 1,144 terrorist attacks (12 percent of the world) occurred in Afghanistan causing 3,111 deaths (17 percent of the world) while 3,717 persons (11 percent of the world total) were wounded (see Table 1).

Table 1: Terrorist Attacks in 2013

	Total Attacks	% of the World	Total Killed	% of the World	Total Wounded	% of the World
Iraq	2,495	25.70	6,378	35.65	14,956	45.77
Pakistan	1,920	19.78	2,315	12.94	4,989	15.27
Afghanistan	1,144	11.79	3,111	17.39	3,717	11.37
World Total	9,707	100	17,891	100	32,677	100

Source: *Annex of Statistical Information to the United States' Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, p. 4.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Interior data, the insurgents, on the other hand, during April-October 2013, mounted 6,604 attacks in 30 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, including 50 suicide bombings, 1,704 shootings and shellings, 1,186 bombings and 920 ambushes.³ To safeguard morale, the Afghan military did not disclose the casualty rates for the Afghan army. The Interior Ministry, however, revealed that 2,052 members of both the Afghan national and local police were killed and more than 5,000 wounded during 2013.⁴ The numbers of civilian casualties are also staggering. According to the United Nations' Annual Report,⁵ armed conflict in Afghanistan took an unrelenting toll on Afghan civilians in 2013. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 8,615 civilian casualties (2,959 deaths and 5,656 injured) in 2013, marking a 7 percent increase in deaths, 17 percent increase in injured and a 14 percent increase in total civilian casualties compared to 2012. The report depicts similar rising trend since 2009 (see Figure 1). The midyear report of the United Nations for the year 2014 depicts a further degrading scenario as it shows during January-June 2014, 4,853 civilian casualties occurred (1,564 civilian deaths and 3,289 injured), recording a 17 percent increase in

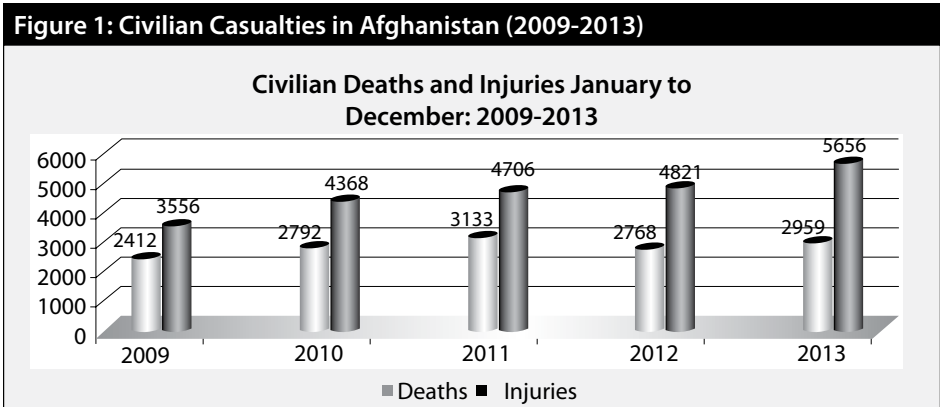
² Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, United States Department of State, April 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/>, accessed on 15 August 2014, p. 179.

³ Cited in Patrick Quinn, "Fighting Alone, Afghans Said to Hold Taliban Back", *Associated Press*, 03 November 2013, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/fighting-alone-afghans-said-hold-taliban-back-141944175.html>, accessed on 13 August 2014.

⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁵ United Nations, "Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict", *Annual Report 2013*, Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA and UNHCR, February 2014, p. 1.

civilian deaths and a 28 percent increase in civilians injured for a 24 percent overall increase in civilian casualties compared to the first six months of 2013.⁶ So, casualties in Afghanistan are on a rising trend in 2014 compared to the years 2012 and 2013.



Source: UN Annual Report 2013 on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

The factors causing this insecurity include, but are not limited to the continuing insurgency by the Taliban fighters, terrorism perpetrated by the terrorist groups i.e., the Haqqani Network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), Islamic Movements of Uzbekistan and by al-Qaeda. Some terrorist groups based in Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas and in Pakistan, having interests in Afghanistan are also involved in mounting terrorism in Afghanistan viz, the Lashkar-e-Tayiba, Therik-e-Taliban, Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-i-Jangvi, etc. For few details about these insurgent and terrorist groups currently active in Afghanistan see Table 2. Following discussion also reviews these insurgent and terrorist groups functioning in Afghanistan and how they are impacting its peace and security scenario.

Table 2: Militant Groups Active in Afghanistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Regions
<p>1. Afghan Taliban Leader: Mullah Mohammad Omar; Established: Kandahar, Afghanistan, mid-1980s; Estimated Strength: 30,000 Notable Attacks: Major attack on town Mosa Qala, Helmand, May 2006, numerous attacks on NATO supply convoys and NATO bases.</p>
<p>2. Al-Qaeda Leader: Ayman al-Zawahiri Established: Peshawar, Pakistan, 1988; Estimated Strength: 500-1,000 Notable Attacks: World Trade Center bombing, February 1993; 9/11/2001 attacks in New York, Washington DC and Pennsylvania</p>

⁶ United Nations, “Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict”, *Midyear Report 2014*, Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA and UNHCR, July 2014, p. 1.

<p>3. Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) Leader: Gulbuddin Hekmatyr Established: Eastern Afghanistan, 1977; Estimated Strength: 5000-7,000 Notable Attacks: Attack on US forces in Khost, Afghanistan, February 2009; murder of a foreign medical team in Badakhshan, August 2010.</p>
<p>4. Haqqani Network Leader: Sirajuddin Haqqani Established: Khost, Afghanistan, 1980s; Estimated Strength: 5000-7,000 Notable Attacks: Assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai, April 2008; various suicide attacks in Kabul (on 5-star hotel Serena, January 2008; on Indian Embassy, July 2008; on UN guesthouse, October 2009).</p>
<p>5. Lashkar-e-Tayiba (LET) Leader: Hafiz Mohammed Saifullah Saeed (under house arrest in Pakistan) Established: Muridke, near Lahore, Pakistan, 1989; Estimated Strength: 300-1,000 Notable Attacks: Mumbai attacks, India, November 2008; Lahore attack on Pakistan cricket team, March 2009.</p>
<p>6. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Leader: Hakimullah Mehsud Established: Northwest Pakistan, 2007; Estimated Strength: 20,000-25,000 Notable Attacks: Suicide attacks on mosque in Lahore, killing 80, May 2010; suspected in the assassination of Pakistani presidential candidate Benazir Bhutto, December 2007.</p>
<p>7. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Leader: Abu Usman Adil Established: 1998; Estimated Strength: 2,000-4,000 Notable Attacks: Several attacks on the new NATO supply route from Tajikistan through the province of Kunduz and Baghlan.</p>
<p>8. Tehrik-e-Nefaz-e-Shariat-Mohammadi (TNSM) Leader: Sufi Mohammad Established: Pakistan, 1989; Estimated Strength: 5,000-6,000 Notable Attacks: Suicide attack on an army convoy in Mingora, Swat, Pakistan, Dec., 2007.</p>

Source: Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman (eds.), *Afghanistan: To 2015 and Beyond*, Adelphi 425-426, London: Routledge and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011, p. III.

2.1 The Taliban Insurgency

Afghanistan's Taliban is probably the only armed group that, having gained command and complete control all over a country, Afghanistan, lost it because of its abstinence to the urges of the US to end its protection of al-Qaeda and its supreme commander Osama bin Laden.⁷ Following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, most of the Taliban either hid or disposed of their weapons and returned to their homes whereas Taliban commanders and other high-profile figures fled to Pakistan⁸ or to the

⁷ Kristian Berg Harpviken, "The Transnationalization of the Taliban", *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2012, p. 203.

⁸ Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004-2012", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4, 2013, p. 847.

Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas to be more specific. However, since mid-2006, the Taliban rebounded and commenced relentless insurgency against what they consider the foreign occupation by the US and the NATO/ISAF. Today, the core insurgent faction in Afghanistan remains the Taliban movement, much of which remains at least nominally loyal to Mullah Muhammad Umar, the supreme Taliban leader. He and his subordinates reportedly still operate from Pakistan, probably areas near the border or near the Pakistani city of Quetta.⁹ This accounts for the term usually applied to Umar and his aides: "Quetta Shura Taliban" (QST). In recent years, Umar has lost some of his top aides and commanders to combat or arrest, including Mullah Dadullah, Mullah Obeidullah Akhund and Mullah Usmani. Nevertheless, some of Umar's inner circle has remained intact. Mullah Umar, however, over the years, shows signs of pragmatism as he has on many occasions, signals potentials for compromise by making several statements including one on 24 October 2012, that the Taliban does not seek to regain a monopoly of power. He is now believed to be surrounded by other pragmatists as well including Noorudin Turabi, logistics expert Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor and head of the Taliban's senior *shura* council Shahabuddin Delawar. He also was reportedly pivotal in reaching final agreement in the 31 May 2014 release of 'prisoner of war' Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl.¹⁰ The pragmatists, nevertheless, are facing strong opposition from younger and reputedly hardline, anti-compromise leaders such as Mullah Najibullah (A.K.A. Umar Khatab) and Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, who purportedly believes that outright Taliban victory is possible after 2014.¹¹

2.2 Terrorism by al-Qaeda, HiG and Haqqani Network

For some time now, al-Qaeda has been considered to have a minimal presence in Afghanistan itself and to act there more as a facilitator rather than active fighting force. Analysts have put the number of al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan at between 500-1000, who operate mostly in provinces of eastern Afghanistan such as Kunar. Some of these fighters belong to al-Qaeda affiliates such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which are active in Faryab and Konduz provinces. Still, there are concerns that al-Qaeda could regroup in Afghanistan in the post-2014 period. According to a press report, a key al-Qaeda operative, Faruq a-Qahtani al-Qatari, is working with Afghan militants to train a new generation of al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan.¹² Nevertheless, the al-Qaeda in recent years have also suffered heavy loss since the killing of Osama bin Laden and is considered now as an organisation enduring leadership decapitation. The US has been able to kill numerous senior al-Qaeda operatives in recent years primarily through drone operations. In August

⁹ Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and US Policy", *CRS Report RL30588*, Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 11 July 2014, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² Kimberly Dozier, "Officials: Al-Qaida Plots Comeback in Afghanistan", 28 February 2014, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20140228/us--afghanistan-al-qaida/?utm_hp_ref=homepage&ir=home page](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20140228/us--afghanistan-al-qaida/?utm_hp_ref=homepage&ir=home%20page), accessed on 14 August 2014.

2008, an airstrike was confirmed to have killed al-Qaeda chemical weapons expert Abu Khabab al-Masri.¹³ Three top leaders, Ilyas Kashmiri, Attiyah Abd al-Rahman and Abu Yahya al-Libi were also killed in Pakistan by reported US drone strikes in June and August 2011 and June 2012, respectively.¹⁴ Nevertheless, some senior al-Qaeda leaders are said to be in Iran, including Sayf al Adl. Sulayman Abu Ghaith, son-in-law of bin Laden.¹⁵ The new supreme leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is presumed to be living on the Pakistani side of the border also remain functional in abating and assisting the Taliban insurgency.

HiG of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, a former *mujahedeen*, is also a significant armed group involved in insurgency in Afghanistan and committing terrorism especially in the northern part of the country. HiG is particularly involved in high-profile attacks. A suicide bombing on 18 September 2012, which killed 12 persons, including eight South African nationals working for a USAID-chartered air service, was allegedly carried out by a female HiG member. HiG claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Kabul on 16 May 2013, that also killed six Americans.¹⁶

The "Haqqani Network," founded by Jalaludin Haqqani is also posing severe threat to security and stability in Afghanistan. The US Department of Defense report on Afghan security calls the faction "the most virulent strain of the insurgency, the greatest risk to coalition forces, and a critical enabler of al-Qaeda."¹⁷ The Haqqani Network is believed closer to al-Qaeda than to the Taliban. Sirajuddin Haqqani now believed is the key leader of the network and operates in the areas of Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces. The network has also targeted several Indian interests in Afghanistan viz, attacks on India's embassy in Kabul (July 2008 and October 2009). The US officials also attributed to the group the 10 September 2011 truck bombing in Wardak Province that injured 77 US soldiers and attacks on the US Embassy and ISAF headquarters in Kabul on 13 September 2011.¹⁸

2.3 Cross-border Terrorism

There are few militant armed groups who originally based in Pakistan and having different political objectives related to Pakistan and India, also support the Taliban insurgency and commit acts of terrorism in Afghanistan impacting peace and security in the country. Pakistani Taliban or the TTP is a major such group which, primarily challenges the government of Pakistan and supports the Afghan Taliban. Some TTP fighters reportedly operate from safe havens in Taliban-controlled areas on the Afghan side of the border. The US State Department designated the TTP as an Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) entity on 02 September 2010.¹⁹

¹³ Kenneth Katzman, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

Another Pakistani Islamist militant group said to be increasingly active inside Afghanistan is LET, or Army of the Righteous. LET was initially focused on operations against Indian control of Kashmir, but reportedly is increasingly active in Afghanistan. The State Department has stated that the group was responsible for the 23 May 2014 attack on India’s consulate in Herat.²⁰ The other Pakistan-based group that is said to be somewhat active in Afghanistan is Lashkar-i-Janghvi - it was accused of several attacks on Afghanistan’s Hazara Shiite community during 2011-2012.²¹ All the active militant groups including Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, HiG and Haqqani Network and their strongholds in Afghanistan are depicted in Figure 2.



Source: Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. III

All these insurgent and militant groups originating from different tribal ethnicity engaged in both insurgency and terrorism are posing severe challenges for the US-led coalition and NATO/ISAF forces in Afghanistan. The ISAF, therefore, has critical role to play in securing peace and stability in Afghanistan and any failure on its part in achieving this daunting responsibility will engender disaster for Afghanistan.

3. The ISAF Mission in Afghanistan: Mandates and Roles

ISAF in Afghanistan operates under a peace enforcement mandate pursuant to Chapter VII of the UN Charter. ISAF’s creation was authorised by the UN Security

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Council in December 2001, two months after the US' Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan.²² UNSC Resolution 1386 deployed ISAF for 6 months and laid out its objectives as "to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment"²³ ISAF's responsibility also included "to provide assistance to help the Afghan Interim Authority in the establishment and training of new Afghan security and armed forces"²⁴

In August 2003, on the request of the Government of Afghanistan and the UN, NATO took command of ISAF and subsequently ISAF's areas of responsibility also extended all over the country. As of 04 August 2014, the ISAF force comprised approximately 44,299 soldiers from 47 Troop Contributing Nations (TCN) (see Table 3), organised in six regional commands plus ISAF Headquarters in Kabul.²⁵

Table 3: ISAF Troops No. and Contributing Nations (as of 04 August 2014)

Sl.	Country	No. of Troops	Sl.	Country	No. of Troops	Sl.	Country	No. of Troops
1	United States	30,700	17	Croatia	157	33	Estonia	19
2	United Kingdom	3,936	18	The former Yugoslavia	152	34	Ukraine	12
3	Germany	2,250	19	Armenia	121	35	Sweden	12
4	Italy	1,653	20	United Arab Emirates	118	36	Latvia	11
5	Jordan	1,066	21	Hungary	100	37	Luxembourg	10
6	Romania	921	22	Azerbaijan	94	38	Greece	10
7	Georgia	755	23	France	88	39	Bosnia & Herzegovina	8
8	Turkey	392	24	Finland	88	40	Ireland	7
9	Poland	322	25	Lithuania	80	41	Tonga	7
10	Bulgaria	318	26	Denmark	75	42	New Zealand	4
11	Slovakia	277	27	Albania	72	43	El Salvador	4
12	Australia	272	28	Norway	66	44	Austria	3
13	Czech Republic	224	29	Republic of Korea	50	45	Iceland	2
14	Netherlands	200	30	Portugal	50	46	Slovenia	2
15	Spain	184	31	Mongolia	40	47	Malaysia	2
16	Belgium	161	32	Montenegro	25		Total	44,299

Source: ISAF official website, available at <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>, accessed on 13 August 2014.

²² See, the UN Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001). The Security Council has extended ISAF's mandate on an annual basis since 2001, most recently in October 2013. See, the UN Security Council Resolutions 1413, 1444, 1510, 1563, 1623, 1707, 1776, 1833, 1890, 1943, 2011, 2069 and 2120.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The six Regional Commands (RCs) are: RC South, RC North, RC Capital, RC West, RC East and RC Southwest - and different TCNs are in charge of individual regional command. The US is in charge of RC (SW) and RC (E), Britain holds RC (S), Germany RC (N), Italy RC (W) and Turkey is in charge of RC (C).

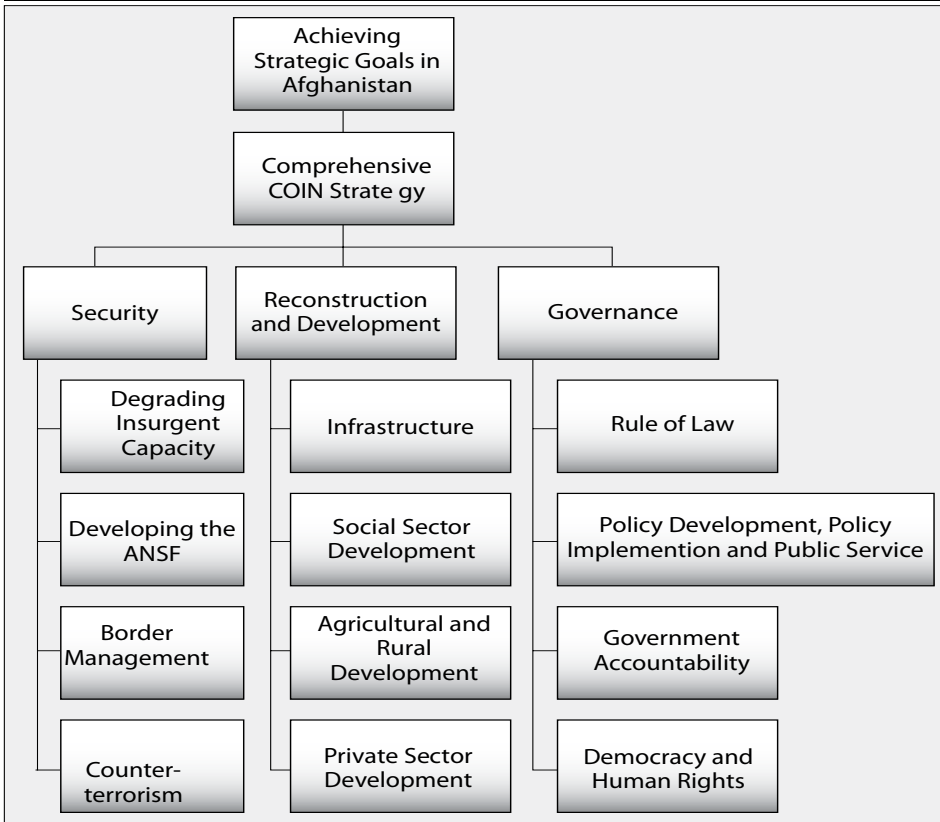
Since November 2008, the Commander of ISAF has served as Commander of the US Forces in Afghanistan (joint hating), although the chains of command has remained separate. The UN Security Council Resolution 2120 (2013) reaffirms previous resolutions on ISAF and extends the authorisation of ISAF for another 14 months until 31 December 2014. However, ISAF's activities in Afghanistan include counter insurgency and counter terrorism roles, building the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and nation-building roles in terms of reconstruction and development and promoting governance in the country.

3.1 Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorism Roles

ISAF in Afghanistan carries out COIN efforts commensurate with its mandated roles and responsibilities. In pursuant with the strategic goals of the US and international community that Afghanistan is: 1) never again a safe haven for terrorists and is a reliable, stable ally in the War on Terror; 2) moderate and democratic, with a thriving private sector economy; 3) capable of governing its territory and borders; and 4) respectful of the rights of all its citizens, ISAF and the US are pursuing allegedly a comprehensive COIN strategy that brings together all military, diplomatic and economic assets.

Figure 3, depicts the comprehensive COIN strategy of the ISAF. The ISAF Joint Command (IJC) carries out the COIN throughout Afghanistan. The reconstruction and development responsibility is carried out by the ISAF through its Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) employed currently at 28 provinces of Afghanistan.

Figure 3: ISAF’s Comprehensive COIN Strategy



Source: Author’s own depiction after reviewing relevant literatures.

However, to counter the rebounding Taliban insurgency since 2007, the leading partner of the ISAF, the US decided in late 2009 for a ‘surge’ in its COIN strategy through increasing its troops’ contributions by 40,000 in 2009 and later upto 60,000 during 2010-11.²⁶ Other TCNs also followed the lead. During the same period, the Obama administration also declared the phased withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. According to the June 2011 announcement by President Obama, 10,000 of the US forces had been withdrawn by the end of 2011 that brought the US force levels in Afghanistan down to 90,000. By September 2012, 23,000 forces had also been withdrawn bringing the US force levels to 68,000. The US forces level dropped to 34,000 by February 2014 and in August at 30,000.

²⁶ Kenneth Katzman, *op. cit.*, p.21.

3.2 *Building the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)*

ISAF's responsibility to build the ANSFs dates back to the UNSC Resolution 1386. However, the withdrawal plan necessitated and emphasised rapid building of the ANSF for ensuring peace and security in the post-withdrawal Afghanistan. The ANSFs include Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Army Air Force (ANAAF) and Afghan National Police (ANP). On 21 January 2010, the joint UN-Afghan "Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board" (JCMB) agreed that, by October 2011, the ANA would expand to 171,600 and the ANP to about 134,000, (total ANSF of 305,600). Both forces reached that level by September 2011. In August 2011, a larger target size of 352,000 was set, to be reached by November 2012. The gross size of the forces reached approximately that level by the end of September 2012. This figure, however, does not include the approximately 30,000 local security forces active at the provincial level. About 1,700 women serve in the ANSF, of which about 1,370 are in police.²⁷ ISAF along with the US forces and contractors, continue to train the ANSF.

Funding for the ANSF is also provided by the ISAF. Assuming that the post-2014 ANSF force would shrink to 228,000, it was determined that sustaining a force of that size would cost US\$ 4.1 billion annually. The US pledged US\$ 2.3 billion yearly; the Afghan government pledged US\$ 500 million yearly and allied contributions constituted the remaining US\$ 1.3 billion.²⁸ In 2007, ISAF set up a trust fund for donor contributions to fund the transportation of equipment donated to and the training of the ANA. As of March 2014, donor contributions and pledges to the ANA Trust Fund totaled about US\$ 855 million. The US funding for the ANA is provided separately. There is also a separate "Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan" (LOTFA)²⁹, run by the UN Development Program (UNDP), that is used to pay the salaries of the ANP and other police related functions. From 2002 to 2012, donors contributed US\$ 2.75 billion to the Fund.

3.3 *Nation-building Roles and the PRTs*

Through its Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), ISAF supports reconstruction and development (R&D) in Afghanistan. It also carries out the governance related functions that broadly falls within the purview of the larger objective of building the Afghan nation. Major responsibility of the PRTs is to secure areas in which reconstruction work is conducted by other national and international actors. Where appropriate and in close cooperation and coordination with Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and UNAMA, ISAF also provides practical support for R&D and humanitarian assistance efforts conducted by Afghan government organisations, international organisations and NGOs. ISAF, through its

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁹ James Sperling and Mark Webber, "NATO: from Kosovo to Kabul", *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 3, 2009, p. 502.

PRTs also helps the Afghan authorities strengthen the institutions required to fully establish good governance and rule of law and to promote human rights. Among the 28 PRTs, the US provides leadership to 11 PRTs whereas the remaining 17 PRTs functions under the authority of ISAF.

4. Impacts of ISAF's Efforts in Afghanistan

While the international community, the US and the ISAF carries out multifarious roles ranging from counter insurgency and counter terrorism to building the state of Afghanistan, the present security scenario in Afghanistan testifies little to the success of the ISAF's efforts. There is no denying to the fact that as a stabilisation force, ISAF has been instrumental in generating and maintaining sufficient security in Kabul and its immediate environs for more than a decade. It has been also enabling the processes of Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction to commence and move forward.³⁰ In fact, "It has served virtually as the security backbone for the internationally backed post-Taliban administration of President Hamid Karzai, enabling it not only to consolidate its writ over the capital, but also to expand its influence gradually into some other parts of the country".³¹ Nevertheless, in any dispassionate account, the impacts of ISAF's operations and R&D efforts remain mixed. While some successes have been achieved in the areas of R&D and governance, failure in ensuring peace and security keeps ISAF's roles and activities well within the scope of debate and deliberation.

4.1 ISAF's Earlier COIN has been Counterproductive

The counter insurgency and counter terrorism strategy pursued by the ISAF during 2002-2006 remained counterproductive. The Taliban, who gave up arms and fled Afghanistan, regrouped and rebounded and mounted extreme insurgency against the ISAF and ANSF forces severely impacting peace and security in Afghanistan. Intensity of insurgency increased in the southern part of Afghanistan especially the Helmand province, which Farrell and Giustozzi³² ascribed to misplaced and wrongly conceived British COIN strategy in the region.

4.2 Emergence of the Neo-Talibans

ISAF's failure in eradicating Taliban insurgency and terrorism by the militant armed groups have contributed to the emergence of a new Taliban force often termed as 'neo-Taliban'. The indiscriminate use of violence by the counter insurgency forces is also held responsible in providing conducive environments to the Taliban to regroup

³⁰ See, Amin Saikal, "Afghanistan's Transition: ISAF's stabilisation role?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 525-26.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 526.

³² Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, *op. cit.*, pp. 847-49.

and rebound. In the process, as Farrell and Giustozzi noted, they have brought with them large numbers of 'foreign' fighters.³³ They also noted that after returning back in 2006, the Taliban as an insurgent organisation had undergone tremendous transformations during 2006-2011. Three aspects of such transformation were remarkable: first, at the strategic level, the Taliban had strengthened a centralised command and control of field units. Second, they have been able to establish shadow governments in local areas of Afghanistan especially in Helmand province, resulting in a gradual militarisation of Taliban administration. Third, at the tactical level, the Taliban has improved the professionalism of its field units in order to facilitate a shift in tactics. The changes have occurred in the context of growing Taliban appreciation of the need to wage guerrilla warfare against the foreign occupation forces.

It is believed that the Taliban military structure since 2007 has also been centred on two military commissions, both based in Pakistan: one in Quetta and the other in Peshawar. In principle, these two commissions have divided territorial responsibility between themselves, with Quetta being in charge of the west, south and the north and Peshawar of the south-east, east, north-east and the Kabul region.³⁴ This regrouping of Taliban with centralised organisation and professionalism of the field level operatives transformed it into a formidable insurgent entity in contemporary Afghanistan. Therefore, any reasoning of Taliban emerging as an unrestrained insurgent force in the post-2014 period has strong grounds thereby rendering whatever success achieved by the ISAF as ineffective and irrelevant.

5. Reasons for the Lack of Success

A number of factors can be identified as instrumental in effecting lack of success on the part of the ISAF in realising its objectives in Afghanistan. Some of these are: pursuing a wrong or at least half-hearted strategy as far as COIN is concerned, flawed state-building approach, failure in negotiating peace with the Taliban and last but not the least, the 'policy-making errors' by the US, the leading partner of the ISAF.

5.1 *Wrong Strategy*

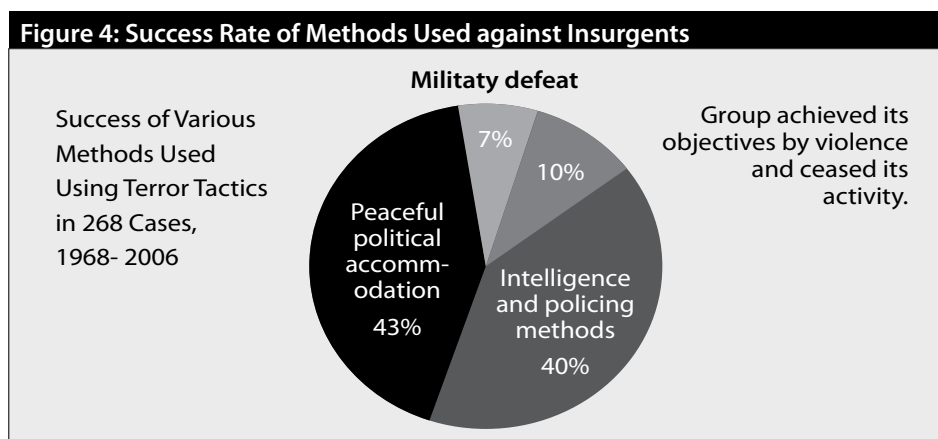
An effective COIN campaign must include all military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions undertaken by a government or the counter insurgency force. Counter-insurgents need to use all instruments of national power to sustain the established or emerging government. Long-term success in COIN requires diminishing the capacity of insurgent organisations to undertake operations and enabling the country to provide for its own security, social services and economic growth and cannot be accomplished by military means alone.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 847.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 855.

5.1.1 *Military Solution to the Insurgency*

Since commencement of the operations till 2007-08, ISAF followed a COIN strategy mostly based on military solutions i.e., eradicating and eliminating insurgent and terrorist entities. It is only very recently that the ISAF adopted the comprehensive COIN approach including DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration). Earlier, UNAMA was the entity mostly carried out the DDR activities in Afghanistan. Historical facts also show that reliance on military solutions alone has been less successful. The Watson Institute of Brown University, USA, carried out a comprehensive research in examining 268 cases of insurgencies that had used terror tactics. The findings of the research show that only 7 percent of the insurgencies had been militarily defeated whereas successes by employing peaceful political accommodation had been achieved in 43 percent of the cases (Figure 4).



Source: Watson Institute, Brown University, available at <http://costsofwar.org/article/alternatives-military-response-911>, accessed on 17 August 2014.

5.1.2 *Flawed State-building Approach*

Afghanistan is a state artificially carved out by the big powers in late nineteenth century.³⁵ In 1885, Czarist Russia occupied Afghan territory, north of Oxus River and established the new northern boundary for Afghanistan. A decade later, the British-Indian Empire drew the Durand Line, which divided Pashtun areas between British-India (now parts of Pakistan) and Afghanistan.³⁶ The state-building in Afghanistan, therefore, is a daunting business. The 2001 intervention, being largely retaliatory, lacked a clear, coherent and long-term plan. The Bonn Agreement and subsequent international plans envisioned the swift establishment of a highly

³⁵ Kaushik Roy, "Introduction: Warfare and the state in Afghanistan", *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2012, p. 195.

³⁶ Colonel TX Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century*, St Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006, p. 157, quoted in *ibid.*

centralised democratic state and set over-ambitious modernising goals.³⁷ Despite immense needs resulting from two decades of war and mis-governance, initially only limited resources or energies were devoted to state-building and reconstruction.³⁸ By the mid-2000s, the US assistance had brought substantial improvements, but much of this assistance was ineffective, wasteful or exploited by the local power-holders. The subsequent significant expansion of financial resources inadvertently compounded corruption and reinforced criminal and patronage networks.³⁹

According to Arreguin-Toft, state-building attempts by the US and NATO in Afghanistan are bound to fail.⁴⁰ The geography, climate, history, economy and culture of Afghanistan have all militated against the formation of a centralised Western-style nation-state in the country.⁴¹ Moreover, there is a lack of demand among the public in Afghanistan for a centralised state with its capital in Kabul. Construction of a state requires indigenous human capital, especially public servants imbued with specialised skills and a sense of 'national' public values. Unavailability of skilled national minded Afghan public servants is hampering the Western state-building project.⁴²

5.2 The US Policy-making Errors

As highlighted by Waldman, some fundamental, pre-existing or structural policy-making errors by the US in formulating its Afghanistan policy have contributed to the continuing instability in Afghanistan and thwarting ISAF's efforts in the country. One such error has been extensive reliance on the northern warlords and regional strongmen alone, many of whom are reviled by ordinary Afghans. The Pashtuns in the process have been marginalised.

Other policy-making errors are misreading the history and false analogies and lack of unity of efforts and resources. Afghanistan's history was oversimplified. Lessons from America's own military history, such as the Vietnam War, were overlooked rather, examples of Germany and Japan were perhaps compared. The Iraq analogy as far as the 'surge' is concerned also produced mixed results. As Waldman quoted a US intelligence official as saying, "lessons were applied arbitrarily. We carried all the Iraq lessons to Afghanistan. Some were applicable, many were not. No one was looking and saying, are these the right lessons or not?"⁴³ One notable example is that from

³⁷ Matt Waldman, "System Failure: The Underlying Causes of US Policy-making Errors in Afghanistan", *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4, 2013, p. 826.

³⁸ For detail discussions see, James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-building in Afghanistan*, Washington DC: Potomac, 2008.

³⁹ See, Astri Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*, London: Hurst, 2011; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan*, New York: Knopf, 2012.

⁴⁰ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "The meaning of 'state failure': Public service, public servants, and the contemporary Afghan state", *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2012, pp. 263-278.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Matt Waldman, *op. cit.*, p. 835.

2006 ISAF has been making concerted efforts to establish pro-government militias, after having spent millions of dollars if not billions in the first five years of intervention in Afghanistan, trying to dismantle and occasionally eliminate the same forces.

Lack of self-evaluation mechanism has also hindered formulating appropriate policies for Afghanistan. The US oversight bodies, such as the Government Accountability Office or Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, have developed tools for monitoring and evaluating a range of the US activities in Afghanistan. But too many project indicators are skewed towards showing progress, by quantifying direct inputs or outputs rather than rigorously measuring quality, utility or impact. The pouring of excessive money in the country caused the emergence of rampant corruption. According to one estimate, US\$ 55 billion in assistance have been provided to Afghanistan during 2009-2013 which is more than seven times of the total Afghanistan government's revenue over this period. Excessive corruption taking root in Afghanistan is a formidable reason for governance failure in the country.

5.3 *Failure of the Peace Initiative*

Whoever is responsible, the failure of the Peace Initiative i.e., a negotiated settlement with the Taliban can naturally be considered as a prime reason for continuing insurgency in Afghanistan. It can be claimed that here, the US lacked a political strategy in Afghanistan with regard to Taliban, the Karzai government and/or regional actors. The first high-level US-Taliban dialogue took place in November 2010, nine years after the October 2001 intervention by which point mistrust between the parties was acute and the commencement of the US withdrawal was only eight months away. Failure to reach a negotiated peace with the Taliban appeared as one of the key factors constraining ISAF's stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan.

6. Challenges and the Way Forward

Apart from the factors that are responsible for lack of success of the ISAF and the US, there are few other challenges that the multinational security assistance force in Afghanistan has to endure and overcome to achieve its desired objectives.

6.1 *Challenges*

6.1.1 *Countering Taliban Insurgency*

Countering Taliban insurgency and terrorist activities of the armed groups operating both within Afghanistan and from across the border, in any account remains the most formidable challenge for the US-led NATO/ISAF. For long, ISAF's COIN goal has been eliminating and subjugating the Taliban, which backfired and

remain counterproductive. Even when the COIN strategy adopted ‘wining hearts and minds’ approach, in many cases, coalition operations were seen as invasive, unjustified or as expanding the authority of a centralised and illegitimate regime. This perception is excessively prevalent in remote tribal areas of Afghanistan as far as the centralised Karzai government is concerned. Moreover, the ‘surge’ of 2009-2010 also lacked appropriate understanding of the impact of the surge. Given the existence of insurgent sanctuaries as discussed above in Pakistan including major training, operations and logistical bases, the capacity for strategic adaptation and a continuous stream of recruits, the Taliban not only survived the surge but also, as discussed above, emerged even stronger.

6.1.2 *Building an Effective Afghan National Security Force (ANSF)*

Construction of effective ANSFs also remains as a major challenge for the ISAF. The ANSF comprised of the ANA, the ANP and the ANAAF. The army is generally considered more effective than the police. However, in spite of some advances made, challenges persist as to the building of an effective Afghan security forces within the stipulated deadline. These challenges are: (a) *Shortfall of trainers*: There is a severe lack of trainers. As estimated, by March 2012, some 1,000 training positions remained unfulfilled⁴⁴; (b) *High attrition*: The desertion from the army is very high plaguing the establishment of an adequate security force. Of 111,000 recruits in 2010, only 79,000 stayed with the force. As many as 50,000 desertions are haemorrhaging ANSF every year⁴⁵; (c) *Low Literacy*: Only 14 percent of recruits can read; (d) *Lack of leadership skills*: 26 percent of NCO positions remain unfulfilled; and (e) *Drug Abuse*: 30 percent applications have been rejected because of their drug abuses.⁴⁶

Defection and the insider attacks are two more crucial challenges. Leaving the ANSF and joining the Taliban remain as a crucial challenge. The latest high-profile defector was a Special Forces Commander, Monsif Khan who joined the Hizb-e-Islami organisation, a Taliban-affiliated group, taking with him guns and high-tech military equipment.⁴⁷ Similarly, the insider attack, often referred to as ‘green on the blue’ poses another significant challenge in building the ANSF. The most recent incident of the death of a two star US General, General Green, the first such high level military personnel of the US army’s death since the Vietnam War caused serious concern for both ANSF and the ISAF as the incident have definitely emboldened the insurgents.

⁴⁴ “Strategic Geography”, in Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman (eds.), *Afghanistan: To 2015 and Beyond*, Adelphi 425-426, London: Routledge and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011, p. XX.

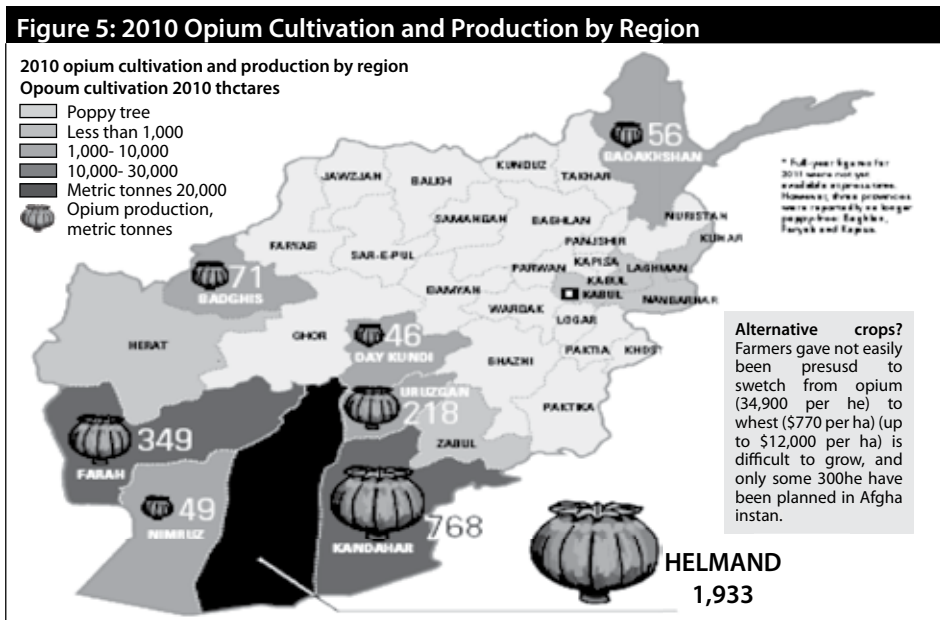
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ “Afghan army commander defects to rival side”, *Aljazeera*, 21 October 2013, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/10/afghan-army-commander-defects-rival-side> 20131021103222455867.html, accessed on 14 August 2014.

6.1.3 Narcotic-economy and the Insurgent Financing

Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is a significant destabilising factor that affects the security, governance and reconstruction and development of the entire country. As can be seen from Figure 5, poppy is cultivated in Afghanistan mostly in the Southern part of the country but also in the upper northern areas. 15 of 34 Afghanistan provinces are considered “poppy free”. However, the poppy production in the country amounts to nearly 3500 tonnes generating 11 percent of the GDP in 2010. Helmand province is the most densely cultivated poppy area producing 1,933 tonnes of poppy that is 55 percent of the country’s total production.



Source: “Strategic Geography”, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

The trade in opium provides tremendous resources to insurgents and criminals, promotes corruption among public officials and discourages participation in the licit economy. The mere existence of the narcotic-economy, therefore, posing severe challenges to the ISAF efforts in Afghanistan. All of the insurgent groups in Afghanistan benefit from narcotics trafficking. According to an UN estimate, narcotics generates US\$ 70-100 million per year for insurgents – about 25 percent of the insurgents’ annual budget of US\$ 400 million.⁴⁸ The ISAF has undertaken some initiatives to address poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. It, however, shifted from its earlier policy of eradicating poppy cultivation since July 2009 as that kind of measures were driving Afghans to support the Taliban as protectors of their livelihood.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Katzman, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Continuation of poppy production with no sign of serious reduction in the production level and persistence of narcotics trade pose a major challenge for ISAF.

6.2 Way Forward for Security and Stability in Afghanistan

6.2.1 A Negotiated Settlement with the Taliban

Achieving a negotiated peace settlement with the Taliban would be a significant advancement for the ISAF. In fact, given the current strength of Taliban movement and the phased withdrawal plan of ISAF and the US forces, make it absolutely essential that the ANSF is not left with the neo-Talibans created by the ISAF and the US forces.

6.2.2 Power Sharing Formula and the Decentralised Security System

The very nature of the factionalised Afghan society though created by the decade long conflicts between the ISAF and the Taliban and other insurgent and terrorist groups, an appropriate power sharing formula need to be devised to establish stable governance mechanism in the country. A centralised system of governance appears untenable given the divisive nature of the Afghan society. A power-sharing with the centre can only satisfy the local warlords to give up their support for violence against the central government.

Prior to the implementation of the US "surge", the Afghan Interior Ministry estimated in August 2009 that the Karzai government controlled about 30 percent of the country, while insurgents controlled 4 percent (13 out of 364 districts) and influenced or operated in another 30 percent.⁴⁹ Tribes and local groups with varying degrees of loyalty to the central government controlled the remainder. The Taliban had named "shadow governors" in 33 out of 34 of Afghanistan's provinces, although many provinces in northern Afghanistan were assessed as having minimal Taliban presence. A decentralised security system i.e., sharing security responsibilities with the local leaders can be one solution to the power seeking ethnic and tribal entities.

6.2.3 Overseas Financial and Development Assistance

The economy of Afghanistan remains poor in terms of productivity and industrialisation. The economy is mainly agrarian; again, poppy cultivation dominated that agrarian economy. At present, the country is receiving tremendous amount of foreign aid both in the form of economic and security assistance. In the post-2014 period, which may experience massive contraction of security assistance, the country should not be deprived of the much needed development assistance.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The international community should make all the efforts possible to construct a productive and resilient economy in Afghanistan, not one dependent on poppies or transnational illicit networks. The natural and mineral resources extraction and exploitation in this context can be of immense support to the economy. Recent studies explored enormous mineral wealth of Afghanistan, which is estimated at almost a trillion dollar worth.⁵⁰ Gradual insertion of dollars in the Afghan economy earned from selling these natural resources will ease the difficulties of looming fiscal contraction in the post-2014 period.

7. Conclusion

A review of recent security scenario in Afghanistan in terms of casualties and deaths of the civilians as well as continuing insurgency, terrorism and extremism by the Taliban and other militant groups including al-Qaeda, adequately testifies to the claim that security situation deteriorated in 2014, compared to 2012 and 2013. Data shows increasing trend of civilian casualties, while armed insurgent and militant groups exhibiting remarkable resilience against the COIN and CT efforts of ISAF and ANSF. ISAF's efforts, whose principal objective is to stabilise Afghanistan and ensure peace and security in the country, therefore, can be argued exhibiting explicit lack of success in achieving them. Many challenges remain instrumental: building effective ANSF, moving beyond narcotics economy, negotiated settlement with the Taliban and the most important flawless state-building approach.

Afghanistan is a country that has long been considered to be 'a graveyard for empires'. Prime reason for this lies with the fact that the ethnic and tribal people of Afghanistan boast deep aversion to foreign occupation and intervention. While the US sponsored international community's nation-building efforts in specific directions, inspired and modelled by the Western political thoughts and ideas, might appear inevitable for the US and its allies, a re-think for Afghanistan, given the present context seems essential. While the Afghan people and the Afghan society are exhibiting all signs of traditionalism and tribalism, building an Afghan state in line with democratic principles and values which theoretically dependent on the processes of political modernisation, can be, as experience shows in Afghanistan, counter-productive. A balanced approach between traditionalist and modernist goals need to be followed as far as nation-building in Afghanistan is concerned.

Moreover, for success in eradicating insurgency and terrorism, the international community, again, needs to re-think their policy approach in formulating strategies that are pro-active rather than reactionary. Unless the reasons breeding insurgencies and terrorism are addressed with appropriate policy initiatives, success in COIN and CT in Afghanistan will remain unattainable thereby keeping prospects for peace, stability and security in Afghanistan elusive for the moment.

⁵⁰ "Strategic Geography", in Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. XVII.