

British plans to arm Afghan militias reignite tensions with US

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Comments by a US general on British policy in Afghanistan have once again brought to the fore tensions between the two major occupation powers in the country.

Major-General Robert Cone, the US general in charge of training an Afghan police force, has criticised British-backed plans to arm local militias in the south of the country to aid them in defeating the insurgency. The remarks by the second most senior US soldier in Afghanistan are likely to deepen an ongoing dispute between London and Washington over how to fight the insurgency.

Cone said, "Anything that detracts from a professional, well-trained, well-led police force is not the answer."

Cone is the second US commander to condemn the initiative.

Last month, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Britain intended to increase its support for "community defence initiatives, where local volunteers are recruited to defend homes and families modelled on traditional Afghan *arbakai*." The *arbakai* system involves arming untrained Afghan men, who agree to come running at the beating of a drum if their village elders feel threatened.

British diplomats and military strategists in the volatile southern province of Helmand had hoped the *arbakai* initiative might help to shore up Afghanistan's avowedly corrupt police force, which is unable to defend itself against attacks by mainly Taliban insurgents. At least 10 police officers died this month in a single Taliban attack on a checkpoint in Kandahar.

According to the *Independent*, Cone is leading a "root-and-branch reform" of the Afghan police force, which has "been ill-equipped, badly paid, poorly trained and dogged by corruption since 2001. The US government has pledged US\$7.4 billion (£3.7 billion) to improve Afghan security forces between now and October. But Cone admitted there was no "model of what policing should be" in the country. "When Afghan people understand what well-trained, well-paid police do, they will demand it," he added. "But right now they are just not familiar." "

US officials have made it clear that they do not intend to risk armed militia emerging that may fall under the command of warlords disloyal to the US-backed Karzai government.

Major-General Cone, as well as other US officials, have drawn comparisons between Brown's plan and a disastrous international initiative to build an auxiliary police force that was scrapped last year.

Auxiliary officers were given assault rifles and uniforms after just a few days of basic training, on the understanding that they would police the area from which they came.

Cone said, "The auxiliary police was an attempt to take short-cuts. It is very important to understand why the Afghan National Auxiliary Police Force did not work, as we look at any informal programme that

doesn't promote professional policing."

The UN was also unsettled by Brown's *arbakai* plan as it threatened to undermine the work it had done previously in disarming proscribed militias. The plan has reportedly not found favour amongst most NATO countries, either.

Last year, General Dan McNeill, the US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the plan would probably fuel the insurgency. He did add, diplomatically, that it may work only in small parts of the countryside that did not include Helmand, where most of Britain's 7,700 troops are stationed. He had said, "My information, from studying Afghan history, is that *arbakai* works only in Paktia, Khost and the southern portion of Paktika, and it's not likely to work beyond those geographic locations."

When McNeill replaced British General David Richards as head of NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in July of last year, one of his first moves was to deliver a fierce condemnation of a failed British-sponsored plan whereby the security of the Helmand town of Musa Qala was entrusted to local tribal elders.

Recent weeks have also seen a flaring of tensions between the US and its NATO allies over Washington's constant refrain that the other most prominent nations of the alliance are not shouldering their military responsibility in Afghanistan.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said other NATO countries did not know how to fight insurgencies. On January 16, Gates told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I'm worried we're deploying [military advisers] that are not properly trained and I'm worried we have some military forces that don't know how to do counterinsurgency operations."

He added, "Most of the European forces, NATO forces, are not trained in counterinsurgency; they were trained for the Fulda gap." The Fulda gap is the region in Germany where NATO Cold War strategists considered a Soviet land invasion of Western Europe was most likely.

In the Netherlands, the defence ministry summoned the US ambassador to explain Gates' comments.

British defence officials told the press that Gates promptly telephoned the UK defence secretary, Des Browne, saying his comments were not directed at the 7,000-plus UK forces deployed in Helmand province along with Dutch, Canadian, American, Czech and Estonian troops.

British sources said pointedly that Gates was directing his criticism at NATO as a whole, not at any particular country.

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said, "The totality of the piece leaves the impression that the [defence] secretary is disturbed with the performance of individual countries in Afghanistan. He is not."

Official denials, however, cannot mask the deep divisions between

the occupation forces. As the *Guardian* put it, “Gates’s remarks reflect increasing tension and frustration within NATO about how to cope with the Taliban insurgency. Ironically, given the concerns expressed by Gates, British military commanders have accused the US of heavy-handed tactics, including aerial bombing—a tactic which frequently leads to civilian casualties—and have suggested that is the result of America’s lack of experience in counterinsurgency warfare. In turn, US commanders in Afghanistan have recently criticised British plans to support local militia and civil defence forces in the south of the country.”

As a recent *Washington Post* piece made clear, even the latest announcement to send a further 3,200 US troops to Afghanistan, far from easing international rifts, merely led to a series of mutual accusations among the occupation nations:

“The US plan to send an additional 3,200 Marines to troubled southern Afghanistan this spring reflects the Pentagon’s belief that if it can’t bully its recalcitrant NATO allies into sending more troops to the Afghan front, perhaps it can shame them into doing so, U.S. officials said. But the immediate reaction to the proposed deployment from NATO partners fighting alongside US forces was that it was about time the United States stepped up its own effort.”

NATO, the *Post* wrote, “is a bundle of frayed nerves and tension over nearly every aspect of the conflict, including troop levels and missions, reconstruction, anti-narcotics efforts, and even counterinsurgency strategy.” Senior US and NATO officials, speaking under condition of anonymity, revealed the stresses caused by rising casualty figures, domestic pressures and the sense that the war is not improving.

Washington’s NATO allies are aggrieved that they have been involved in some of the fiercest fighting and are taking the heaviest losses. Half the foreign troops in Afghanistan are American, but Britain, Canada and the Netherlands are engaged in regular combat in the volatile south.

“We have one-tenth of the troops and we do more fighting than you do,” a Canadian official said of his country’s 2,500 troops in Kandahar province. “So do the Dutch.” The Canadian death rate, proportional to the overall size of its force, is higher than that of US troops in Afghanistan or Iraq, a Canadian government analysis concluded last year.

British operations are centred in Helmand, the main opium-producing area and where NATO troops are engaged in intense fighting. US troops are based in the eastern region, which has been much quieter. A US official told the *Post* that if the eastern region was quieter, it was because superior US tactics had made it so.

Underlying all of the various disagreements is the fact that, seven years into the occupation of the country, US and NATO forces have been unable to subdue the Afghan insurgency.

Security in much of Afghanistan has deteriorated in the past two years. And although the worst of the violence has been largely concentrated in the south and east of the country, where the majority of NATO/US troops are deployed, instability is also significantly spreading to other areas. An estimated 140 suicide attacks took place throughout 2007, the deadliest 12 months of the occupation.

But perhaps most alarming for NATO/US forces in Afghanistan is the increase in instability in the heavily garrisoned capital itself. In December, the Taliban carried out two suicide bombings in Kabul, killing 13 people in one attack. Later that month, a rocket attack near the Kabul governor’s residence killed 5 people.

But the most audacious attack occurred on January 14 when

Kabul’s Serena Hotel—a heavily protected luxury hotel and showcase of post-invasion Afghanistan—was attacked by gunfire and bomb devices. Seven people were killed, while guests, including the Norwegian foreign minister, were bundled into the hotel cellar during the attack.

The Serena Hotel is used by a number of foreign embassies and businesses and is frequented by wealthy businessmen, diplomats and dignitaries, as well as journalists and NGOs. The hotel is heavily barricaded and constantly guarded against security threats.

The Serena Hotel’s web site gives the following candid description of its Kabul outlet: “An oasis of luxury in a war-ravaged city, the hotel offers such unheard of luxuries (by local standards) as: 177 rooms, all with stylish soft furnishings, marble bathrooms, satellite TV and Internet connections on demand. Guest amenities include a business centre, health club, swimming pool and a beauty salon.”

The presidential suite is currently priced at US\$1,350 per night. Average income for an employed Afghan worker is presently US\$1 a day.

Although post-war UK foreign policy has tightly dovetailed that of the US, especially since the Suez crisis, there are significant individual differences that the two powers represent in their geopolitical interests. In Afghanistan, the two imperialist powers have come to realise they need each other; the US military needs additional troops, and the British can assume more leverage by acting as the second biggest deployment.

Britain’s colonial past in central Asia, however, is an historical catalogue of brutal, yet ultimately failed attempts to quell insurgent populations. Even though these lessons of history are lost on the main political and military leaders of the day, they resonate in some unlikely places.

The former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown, who served in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, has been negotiating terms for a new role in Afghanistan this month coordinating the international effort and its links with the Karzai government. In summing up the US/NATO mission in Afghanistan, he said, “We have lost and success is unlikely.”



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