

SHASHANK JOSHI

Assessing Britain's Role in Afghanistan

ABSTRACT

This article assesses Britain's contemporary relationship with Afghanistan, its goals and interests there, and its possible post-2014 role. It is argued that Britain might continue to play a limited but non-negligible military, intelligence, fiscal, and diplomatic role, even as British policymakers are increasingly bound by fiscal and domestic political constraints.

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan, U.K., Britain, U.S., strategy

INTRODUCTION

On October 7, 2001, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that U.K. forces had initiated military operations in Afghanistan, in parallel to Operation Enduring Freedom of the U.S. At their peak in 2012, approximately 10,000 British troops were based in Afghanistan, the second largest foreign contingent in the NATO-led coalition.¹

It is argued here that British interests have been centered on counterterrorism but included, at various times, a fluid combination of counter-narcotics, nation-building, human rights, prestige, alliance solidarity, and regional stability. British forces formally ended their combat mission in October 2014. At the time of this drawdown, they had been engaged in combat for 14 years, the most intense period coming between 2006 and 2012 in Afghanistan's southern Helmand Province. British forces are likely to continue to play a limited but non-negligible role in Afghanistan for

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1. Providing security and training the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), U.K. government, February 28, 2013, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/establishing-stability-in-afghanistan/supporting-pages/providing-security-for-and-training-the-afghan-national-security-force>>.

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several years. This is expected to include mentoring the ANSF; deployment of special forces and intelligence capabilities; and participation in the diplomacy around a potential political solution to the war, including incipient talks with the Taliban.

This scope makes Britain worthy of consideration as an important extra-regional actor, second only to the U.S., and as more than a mere adjunct of American policy in and around Afghanistan in the years ahead. At the same time, domestic political constraints on continued British involvement are severe and growing. To assess British involvement, this article first examines Britain's pre- and post-war engagement; then examines British interests and goals, as well as how those relate to the interests and goals of other interested powers; and finally explores Britain's possible post-2014 role and various limiting factors.

BRITAIN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH AFGHANISTAN

The British experience in Afghanistan has colored British foreign and security policy for the past decade, touching on deep-rooted issues pertaining to Britain's role in the world, the effectiveness and sustainability of its armed forces, its relationship with the U.S., and the nature of threats faced by the British homeland.² Britain's withdrawal from Iraq in 2009 was widely perceived to have been a strategic defeat, and the prospect of a second consecutive military campaign ending in failure weighed heavily upon British political and military elites. As General David Richards (later chief of defense staff) put it in 2009, "[S]uccess in Afghanistan—redefined on less ambitious aims, certainly—is truly a grand strategic issue for our nation." He called it "our generation's horse and tank moment."³ Yet, a sense of failure is already

2. Warren Chin, "British Counter-Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Defense & Security Analysis* 23 (2007), pp. 201–25, p. 218; John F. Burns, "Britain's Fourth Afghan War, Through the Lens of Three Others," *New York Times*, 2010, <<http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/25/britains-fourth-afghan-war-through-the-lens-of-three-others/>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

3. David Richards, quoted in Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 257–58; idem, "Twenty-First Century Armed Forces: Agile, Useable, Relevant" (London: RUSI, 2009), <<http://www.rusi.org/events/ref:E496B737B57852/info:public/infoID:E4A4253226F582/#.UIQLo2R4ZfQ>>. "Horse and tank moment" refers to inter-war debates over the relative utility and relationship between mechanized armor (including tanks) and traditional cavalry; it therefore conveys the sense of an epochal shift in the way of war.

evident. Frank Ledwidge argues, “[T]he reputation of the British army has been seriously damaged”; the former British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sherard Cowper-Coles, has drawn explicit comparisons to Vietnam.⁴ This section briefly traces Britain’s contemporary engagement with and in Afghanistan and the forms it has taken, providing the context in which British policy is made today.

Britain has a long, complex, and contentious relationship with modern Afghanistan. The Taliban’s leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar himself, “drew a historical line connecting the Taliban’s struggle post-2001 with the wars against the British over a century ago.”⁵ But even excluding the colonial-era relationship during the period of British rule over India, the U.K.’s role in Afghanistan has been understood largely in terms of security, rather than culture, economics, diplomacy, or other dimensions of interaction.

Britain played a tertiary and largely clandestine, though non-trivial, role during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or more colloquially, MI6) established an “annual mission” to anti-Soviet Tajik Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. This comprised “a couple of SIS officers and a handful of ‘freelance’ military or ex-military instructors . . . to provide organizational and operational training to Massoud’s commanders,” including the provision of weaponry independent of the Pakistani conduit on which the U.S. relied.⁶ Steve Coll writes that “the British liaison appears to have begun very early in the war”;⁷ Massoud, who later became a key opponent of the Taliban, was a “British favorite”;⁸ and that British intelligence, unlike its U.S. counterpart, was able to travel within Afghanistan. The result was that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) “relied on British intelligence for reports about

4. Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars*, p. 261; Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West’s Afghanistan Campaign* (London: HarperPress, 2012), p. 286.

5. Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al-Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, Ltd., 2012), p. 263.

6. Philip Davies, *MI6 and the Machinery of Spying* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 290–91; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (London: Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 135, 602, fn. 35; see also George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), pp. 200–01; Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan—The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown: Casemate Pub. & Book Dist., LLC., 1992), pp. 96–97, 226; Gordon Corera, *MI6: Life and Death in the British Secret Service* (London: Hachette, U.K., 2011), pp. 300–03.

7. Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 602, fn. 7.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 605.

Massoud.⁹ Britain's strategic approach later in the war, mirroring its own approach as a direct combatant a quarter century later, was to favor continued supplies to anti-Soviet fighters but a simultaneous U.N.-led political solution to the war.¹⁰

Between the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the onset of the war in 2001, Britain was relatively disengaged from Afghanistan. For instance, Jason Burke writes that "MI6 did not have a single Pashto-speaker on its staff in 2001."¹¹ The U.K. had no representation in Kabul between 1989 and 2001: like the U.S., France, and Germany, it dealt with Afghanistan from its embassy in Islamabad.¹² But Britain did draw on its clandestine connections with northern and central ethnic groups in Afghanistan, including Tajiks and Shia Hazaras, both for counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics purposes in the 1990s. These ties were also significant during the opening stages of the war in 2001, as part of the broader American effort to employ the Northern Alliance bloc as a proxy land force operating under British and American airpower.¹³ Britain also proved important in areas where it had less coverage. As Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn explain:

[T]here was no significant Pashtun resistance in the south and the east of the country. In the absence of any information, the CIA turned to [MI6] for support. MI6 mobilized a number of Pashtun leaders, supplying them with large amounts of cash and weapons in order to persuade them to move into Afghanistan. Much of the group was hastily put together out of old 1980s and 1990s mujahedeen or militia commanders.¹⁴

9. Ibid., p. 123.

10. Ibid., p. 197; Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 110, 233, 237.

11. Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars* (London: Penguin Global, 2011), p. 33.

12. Abdul Salam Zaef, *My Life with the Taliban* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 101–02; Ewen MacAskill, "Spotlight Falls on Afghan Expert," *Guardian*, 2001, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/20/september11.afghanistan>>, accessed October 8, 2013.

13. Michael Smith, *The Spying Game: The Secret History of British Espionage* (London, U.K.: Politico's Publishing, Ltd., 2003), pp. 6–7; Corera, pp. 312–13, 337–40; Michael Clarke, "Introduction," in *The Afghan Papers: Committing Britain to War in Helmand, 2005–06* [hereafter, *The Afghan Papers*], Whitehall Paper, no. 8 (London: RUIS, 2011), p. 1; Stephen Biddle provides an overview of the "Afghan mode of warfare" employed in 2001, involving the combination of "indigenous allies," "airpower," and "small numbers of American [and British] special operations forces." See Stephen D. Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq," *International Security* 30 (2006), pp. 161–76.

14. Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, p. 229.

Although the U.K. is seen as having been at war in Afghanistan since 2001, from 2001–06 Britain’s military involvement was quite limited with respect to manpower and extremely limited in the intensity of combat.

The mandate of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) was restricted to Kabul until 2003, after which a series of so-called provisional reconstruction teams (PRTs) were formed. The U.K. commanded two of these (in Mazar-e-Sharif and Meymana), swapping them in 2006 for a much bigger undertaking in Helmand Province.¹⁵ Britain leapt from roughly 1,000 troops during 2001–06 to 10,000 at various points since 2010.¹⁶ Throughout this period, Britain’s was the second largest foreign contingent in Afghanistan. At the time of writing, it had suffered 448 casualties, of which *all but five* came after the re-deployment to Helmand.¹⁷ In the summer of 2006, General David Richards, then commanding all U.K. forces in Afghanistan, observed that Britain had not experienced such intense combat “so consistently . . . since the Korean war or the second world war” other than “for periods in the Falklands [and] the Gulf [Wars].”¹⁸ By spring 2010, 78% of all IED (improvised explosive device) attacks in Afghanistan were in British areas.¹⁹

What was the sum total of these efforts? Despite significant achievements, the British mission in Helmand was widely criticized both in Britain and abroad.²⁰ In 2008, a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable recorded the assessment of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul that “we and [President Hamid] Karzai agree the

15. *The UK Deployment to Afghanistan: Fifth Report of Session 2005–06* (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2006), pp. 8–10.

16. Michael Clarke and Valentina Soria, “Charging up the Valley,” *The RUSI Journal* 156 (2011), pp. 80–88 (p. 81).

17. Op Herrick casualty and fatality tables, up to March 31, 2014, U.K. Ministry of Defence, <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/304154/casualties_afghanistan_7oct01_to_31march14.pdf>.

18. Richard Norton-Taylor, “British Troops in Afghanistan ‘in Most Intense Conflict in 50 Years’,” *Guardian*, August 11, 2006, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/11/afghanistan.military>>, accessed October 22, 2013.

19. Michael Clarke, “The Helmand Decision,” in *The Afghan Papers*, p. 7.

20. Frank Ledwidge, *Investment in Blood: The True Cost of Britain’s Afghan War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 217–28; Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, ch. 16; Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, “Campaign Disconnect: Operational Progress and Strategic Obstacles in Afghanistan, 2009–2011,” *International Affairs* 87 (2011), pp. 271–96; Robert Egnell, “Lessons from Helmand, Afghanistan: What Now for British Counterinsurgency?” *ibid.*, pp. 297–315; Anthony King, “Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Afghanistan,” *ibid.*, 86 (2010), pp. 311–32; Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon, “COIN Machine: The British Military in Afghanistan,” *Orbis* 53 (2009), pp. 665–83.

British are not up to the task of securing Helmand.”²¹ Indeed, the cumulative effect of British operations in Helmand, including after the “surge” of forces, was disappointing. Mike Martin, a Pashto-speaking former British Army officer who advised senior military commanders, concludes his in-depth study of Helmand by arguing that Britain’s choice to deploy into the province was inexplicable, for several reasons: Helmand had only 4% of Afghanistan’s population, Helmandis attributed this decision to “revenge” (for nineteenth and twentieth-century military defeats), and Britain (like its allies) so deeply misunderstood the nature of Afghan political violence that London did little more than aggravate a “localized civil war.”²² A 2013 field study by Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi concluded that “a resilient insurgency . . . has adapted under immense military pressure to become more centralized and more professional. The Taliban have suffered very heavy attrition in Helmand, but they are far from defeated.”²³ The researchers argue further that “the British made the situation far worse when they deployed forces to Helmand in 2006,” owing to the “heavy use of airpower,” “indiscriminate use of [weapons] fire” on the ground, and a deeply unpopular though short-lived program of poppy (opium) eradication.²⁴ U.K.-built schools and health centers in Helmand have shut down because the Afghan government cannot pay for them, suggesting that the governance gains enabled by tactical military successes might be short-lived. A total of 119 schools in Helmand have remained shut into 2015 as a result of insecurity.²⁵ Violence in the province has remained high, with major attacks occurring toward the end of 2014. As of Spring 2015, the Syria- and Iraq-based Islamic State (IS) appears to have established a presence, albeit small and vulnerable, in several districts of Helmand.²⁶

21. “US Embassy Cables: UK ‘Not up to Task’ of Securing Helmand, Says US,” *Guardian*, 2010, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/181930>>, accessed October 8, 2013.

22. Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict* (London: C. Hurst and Co.), pp. 235–36, 156.

23. Theo Farrell and Antonio Giustozzi, “The Taliban at War: Inside the Helmand Insurgency, 2004–2012,” *International Affairs* 89 (2013), pp. 845–71 (p. 845).

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 851–52.

25. 119 schools shut in Helmand, *RAWA* [Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan] *News*, January 11, 2015, <www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2015/01/11/119-schools-shut-in-helmand.html>.

26. Borhan Osman, “The Shadows of ‘Islamic State’ in Afghanistan: What Threat Does It Hold?” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 2015, <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-shadows-of-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-what-threat-does-it-hold/>>, accessed March 3, 2015.

Current and Future British Interests and Goals

In his memoirs, the Taliban's co-founder and former envoy to Pakistan Mullah Zaeef declares: "As for the British, I think everyone agrees that they have come to Afghanistan to avenge their fathers and grandfathers."²⁷ Naturally, there is little evidence for this view, but it is harder to find consensus on what British interests and goals in Afghanistan *are*.

Michael Clarke and Valentina Soria quote one British minister as asking another, "How the hell did we get ourselves into this position? How did we go charging up the valley without it ever being put to [the] Cabinet?"²⁸ In July 2011, a House of Commons Defence Committee report criticized British decision-making on the basis that it was not "fully thought through" and said there had been "a failure of military and political co-ordination."²⁹ A study by former British diplomat James de Waal notes the following:

Some key military decisions were also taken with insufficient political oversight. In 2006, ministers took little interest in the military planning for the deployment of British forces to Helmand, and were not consulted when they moved into the north of the province, radically changing the nature of the military operation in Afghanistan.³⁰

These decision-making pathologies were not, of course, confined to the U.K. But this confusion over the decision-making process was closely connected to a deeper uncertainty over what the country wanted in Afghanistan. British policymakers and the broader British strategic community have identified a variety of (sometimes conflicting) aims: counter-terrorism, human rights, nation building, regional stabilization (e.g., of Pakistan), counter-narcotics, Atlanticism/alliance solidarity,³¹ and political and military prestige. These aims have shifted over time. Britain escalated its involvement significantly in 2006, but the limited and mixed results of the campaign thereafter led to a moderation in objectives. The U.K.'s post-2014 goals and interests will

27. Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, p. 232. See also Martin, *An Intimate War*, pp. 159–60.

28. Clarke and Soria, "Charging up the Valley," p. 81.

29. Clarke, "The Helmand Decision," p. 6.

30. James de Waal, "Depending on the Right People: British Political-Military Relations, 2001–10," Chatham House, November 2013, p. vi, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/International%20Security/chr_deWaal1113.pdf>.

31. Atlanticism refers to British commitment to the U.K.-U.S. alliance in particular, and Euro-Atlantic solidarity (manifest in institutions such as NATO) in general.

include elements of all these, with security remaining at the core, but with fewer resources.

Counter-terrorism

The British government's officially stated position on Afghanistan puts counter-terrorism at the heart of its policy:

We are in Afghanistan for one overriding reason—to protect our national security by helping the Afghans take control of their own. We are helping Afghanistan develop the ability to maintain its own security and prevent the return of international terrorists, such as al Qaeda.³²

The threat to the British homeland from terrorists based in Afghanistan has formed a core rationale for Britain's involvement across successive governments of different political stripes. In fall 2009, Prime Minister Gordon Brown repeated the rationale set out by his predecessor: "The work of our troops . . . is vital to preventing al Qaeda once again using Afghanistan as a base for terrorist attacks against Britain and other countries."³³

Since 2010, the Conservative-led coalition government in Britain has adopted a broadly similar objective. As Aaron Ellis explains, Prime Minister David Cameron has, through his writings and remarks, consistently demonstrated "a conviction that it is better to stop states failing now than neglecting them and allowing more terrible threats to develop."³⁴ In 2011, Cameron stated that Afghanistan served as "a great example of a country that if you walk away from and ignore and forget about [it], the problems will come visiting back on your doorstep." In January 2013, he reiterated that "we must frustrate the terrorists with our security, we must beat them militarily . . . [we] must close down the ungoverned space in which they thrive."³⁵

32. "Establishing Stability in Afghanistan," U.K. government policy statement, February 28, 2013, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/establishing-stability-in-afghanistan>>.

33. Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created*, pp. 272–73.

34. Aaron Ellis, "Afghanistan and the Conservatives: Grand Strategy, Statecraft, and Party Politics" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, 2013), p. 11; Fraser Nelson, "The Cameron Doctrine: Britain's New Foreign Policy," *Spectator* 2013, <<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/02/the-cameron-doctrine-on-mali-and-beyond/>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

35. Kiran Stacey, James Blitz, and Matthew Green, "PM Hits Back at Critics of Aid to Afghanistan," *Financial Times*, July 5, 2011, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/63df9b9a-a653-11e0-ac9c-00144feabdco.html#axzz2hAQlv9NM>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

Counter-terrorism Skepticism

Yet, there has also been considerable skepticism as to the nature of the threat to Britain emanating from Afghanistan. In his first public speech, Andrew Parker, the director-general of Britain's domestic intelligence agency, the Security Service (MI5), failed to mention Afghanistan by name once, despite undertaking a wide-ranging survey of threats to Britain; indeed, he spoke of "a declining Al Qaida core in South Asia."³⁶ This is consistent with U.S. estimates that there are only 75 al-Qaida operatives left in Afghanistan, a greatly diminished number.³⁷

The 2011–12 report of the British Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee, a body that oversees the work of executive agencies and enjoys access to classified material, noted that "although a series of US drone strikes targeting the senior leadership of Al Qaida Core in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan has weakened their capability to carry out attacks on the West, the threat remains acute."³⁸ However, the report also stated that "Al Qaida Core refers to the few hundred operatives in the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas, in Pakistan] and, occasionally, in Afghanistan," i.e., suggesting that the al-Qaida presence on Afghan soil was sporadic and small.³⁹ An October 2013 assessment by the Research Analyst cadre of the U.K.'s Foreign Ministry spoke of al-Qaida's "geographical spread," and recommended that "we should stop calling Af/Pak based AQ figures 'AQ Core' since they do not necessarily have a higher standing than any of the other AQ groups—the top leadership is multi-national and in that sense 'AQ Core' is no more."⁴⁰

More recently, Britain joined the military coalition against IS in Iraq, even redeploying its entire fleet of Reaper drones away from Afghanistan

36. Andrew Parker, "Speech to the Royal United Services Institute," London, 2013, <<http://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E5254359BB8F44#.UIRy-RZsfld>>.

37. "Disputes Threaten Post-2014 U.S.-Afghan Pact: Kabul," *Dawn*, <<http://dawn.com/news/1046921>>, accessed October 9, 2013; Evan Harris, "CIA: At Most, 50–100 Al Qaeda in Afghanistan," ABC News, <<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2010/06/cia-at-most-50100-al-qaeda-in-afghanistan/>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

38. U.K. Parliament, *Annual Report, 2011–2012* (London: Intelligence and Security Committee, July 2012), p. 7, <<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm84/8403/8403.pdf>>.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 20, fn. 35.

40. "AQ Core" Is No More: *The Changing Shape of Al Qaida* (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2013), p. 1, <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/256616/Oct_2013_AQ_newsletter.pdf>.

in November 2014. An increasing proportion of MI5's casework concerns Syria-related cases, and the Paris attacks of January 2015 have refocused attention on Yemen-related threats. Over time, it would be natural for British officials to continue to reallocate resources and attention away from Afghanistan.

Former British security officials have also questioned whether Britain's undoubted *interest* in counter-terrorism does or ought to translate into the *aim* of operating in or stabilizing Afghanistan. Nigel Inkster, the former deputy director of SIS, while noting that "extremist groups will remain a threat to the security of the region and beyond," also argues that a "reduced US presence"—and, one presumes, a reduced British presence—"represents the best option for lowering the temperature and creating circumstances in which the countries of the region can best address the threats they face from militancy."⁴¹ Former British Ambassador to Afghanistan Cowper-Coles is also reported to have said that "the coalition presence is part of the problem, not the solution," as early as 2008.⁴² Matt Cavanagh, former special advisor to U.K. Defense Secretary Des Browne and then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown, in government during 2003–10, notes that Brown (who was prime minister during 2007–10) "made the same decision [as President Barack Obama] to sharpen the message by shifting the emphasis from nation-building to preventing the return of Al Qaida, only to see that [it] raise[d] as many questions as it answered. Couldn't we [the U.K.] achieve that in a different way with fewer troops and casualties, and less money? Indeed, if it's all about al Qaeda, why are we in Afghanistan at all, rather than Pakistan, or even Somalia and Yemen?"⁴³

These judgments, though far from universally held, are strikingly at odds with the statements of British leaders tasked with persuading the public to accept rising troop levels, and the views of regional powers such as India,

41. Nigel Inkster, "The International and Regional Terror Threat," in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, ed. by Nicholas Redman and Toby Dodge, Adelphi Series, no. 51 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), pp. 141–66, pp. 163–65.

42. Julian Borger and Simon Tisdall, "Our Man in Kabul Says US Strategy Is Failing," *Guardian*, October 2, 2008, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/02/afghanistan.usforeignpolicy>>; Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, p. 9.

43. Matt Cavanagh, "Inside the Anglo-Saxon War Machine," *Prospect*, November 17, 2010, <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/inside-the-anglo-saxon-war-machine/#.Umf9aZR4ZfR>>.

which have been critical of what they see as unduly rapid and unqualified drawdowns.

Overall, while the U.K. still sees terrorism emanating from the region as a serious threat, it (1) no longer sees the complete stabilization of Afghanistan as critical to addressing that threat; (2) sees the threat as located primarily in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan; and (3) sees the threat as considerably more diffuse, with the operationally most potent part of al-Qaida no longer in Afghanistan or Pakistan but instead in Yemen.

Counter-narcotics

Counter-narcotics, another issue couched in terms of transnational threats, has also played an important role in Britain's calculations. Around 95% of the heroin in Britain is of Afghan origin (20 tons per annum).⁴⁴ In 2002, Britain was assigned responsibility for overseeing international counter-narcotics operations in Afghanistan. Its initial programs to compensate Afghan farmers in exchange for poppy eradication failed. Later efforts backfired by hitting smaller producers, which effected a "significant vertical integration of the drug industry" and "allowed the Taliban to integrate itself back into the drugs trade."⁴⁵

Although counter-narcotics ostensibly remains a British interest, British officials in Kabul are deeply skeptical that direct policy intervention can ameliorate the situation. However, this is still considered an area of policy where Britain might fruitfully work with regional powers.⁴⁶ In 2006, Britain's Foreign Ministry estimated that 60% of all heroin entering the U.K. transited Iran.⁴⁷ Between 2004 and 2007, the U.K. provided Iran border patrol guards

44. Charlie Edwards, "Afghanistan's Opium Trade: Why Britain Should Not Kick the Drug Habit after 2014," RUSI, July 12, 2013, <<http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C57E00BEAC9471/#.UIU0lzR4bWQ>>.

45. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Counterinsurgency, Counternarcotics, and Illicit Economies in Afghanistan: Lessons for State-Building," in *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jacqueline Brewer and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2013), pp. 190–91; Farrell and Giustozzi, "The Taliban at War," p. 852.

46. Yudhvir Rana, "Withdrawal of NATO Forces from Afghanistan Increases Heroin Smuggling," *Times of India*, 2013, <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Withdrawal-of-Nato-forces-from-Afghanistan-increases-heroin-smuggling/articleshow/23912347.cms>>, accessed October 10, 2013.

47. *UK Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry, Global Security: Iran* (London: Stationary Office, 2007–08), p. 31.

with grants for equipment totaling £ 1 million (\$1.54 million).⁴⁸ At the same time, there was evidence that “corrupt Iranian intelligence agents protect traffickers” and worked with some, particularly ethnic Baluchis, to “coordinate Taliban attacks on NATO troops.”⁴⁹ The rapprochement following the election of President Hassan Rohani might enable renewed cooperation.

Transnational Threats, Human Rights, and Nation-building

In truth, the objectives of counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, human rights, and the broader umbrella term “nation-building” are fluid and inter-related parts of the same, nebulous objective, bound up with concepts of a “failed state.”⁵⁰ Human rights in Afghanistan—and particularly women’s rights, heavily curbed under Taliban rule during 1996–2001—are a recurrent point in British policy discourse on Afghanistan, and resonate in popular media discussions of the subject. The stability of Afghanistan is also seen as closely connected to that of the region as a whole, and Pakistan in particular. Given Britain’s multifaceted relationship to Pakistan, discussed below, this is also a British concern.

Yet, over time, Britain’s broader nation-building approach has been diluted in line with the insurgency’s resilience and broad disillusionment with the war. In 2009, for instance, Prime Minister Gordon Brown described the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area as a “crucible of terrorism,” but set out differing objectives for the two countries. Whereas Britain sought to help Pakistan “achieve its vision of becoming a stable economically and socially developed democracy,” the aim in Afghanistan was merely to create an “effective and accountable state increasingly able to handle its security and deliver basic services to the people,” i.e., not necessarily a democracy, or even

48. “Letter to the Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee from Kim Howells,” 2007, <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmfaff/142/7112814.htm>>.

49. Gretchen S. Peters, “The Taliban and the Opium Trade,” in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, ed. by Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 7–22 (p. 17).

50. Stewart Patrick, “‘Failed’ States and Global Security: Empirical Questions and Policy Dilemmas,” *International Studies Review* 9 (2007), pp. 644–62; Edward Newman, “Failed States and International Order: Constructing a Post-Westphalian World,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30 (2009), pp. 421–43; Aidan Hehir, “The Myth of the Failed State and the War on Terror: A Challenge to the Conventional Wisdom,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1 (2007), pp. 307–32; Stewart Patrick, “Weak States and Global Threats: Fact or Fiction?” *Washington Quarterly* 29 (2006), pp. 27–53.

particularly stable.⁵¹ And, in opposition, David Cameron himself derided the attempt to “create Switzerland in the Hindu Kush.”⁵²

The U.K.’s broad ambitions for Afghanistan are likely to remain extremely low after 2014: priorities will be ensuring that urban areas do not fall to insurgents; that areas of the formerly British operation in Helmand are not overrun; that the government is not seen to be imposing measures contrary to human rights but is seen to operate in a reasonably democratic manner; and that prominent attacks, notably, those in Kabul, are kept to a minimum.

Atlanticism/Alliance Solidarity

In addition to these security interests, Britain has other interests and goals at work. Reflecting on his decision-making in 2001, Prime Minister Tony Blair argued that

it was in our national interest to defeat this menace [terrorism] and if we wanted to play a major part in shaping the conduct of any war, we had to be there at the outset with a clear and unequivocal demonstration of support. I believed in the alliance with America. I thought its maintenance and enhancement a core objective of British policy.⁵³

Britain’s “special relationship” with the U.S., a longstanding source of British angst and resentment, has played a crucial role in British decision-making over military involvement in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and even more recently in the Persian Gulf more broadly.⁵⁴ In 2001, Blair reportedly asked President

51. Patrick Wintour, “Gordon Brown Redefines British Goals in Afghanistan,” *Guardian*, 2009, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/30/uk-strategic-goals-afghanistan-pakistan>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

52. Ellis, “Afghanistan and the Conservatives,” p. 28; on the ubiquity of the Afghanistan-Switzerland trope, see Thomas Ruttig, “2010 Elections 6: All Together Now: ‘This Is Not Switzerland,’” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010, <<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/2010-elections-6-all-together-now-this-is-not-switzerland>>.

53. Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Arrow, 2011), p. 352.

54. Andrew Gamble and Ian Kearns, “Recasting the Special Relationship,” in *Progressive Foreign Policy: New Directions for the UK*, ed. by David Held and David Mepham (London: Polity, 2007), pp. 129–30; David Hastings Dunn, “The Double Interregnum: UK–US Relations beyond Blair and Bush,” *International Affairs* 84 (2008), pp. 1131–43; John Dumbrell, “The US–UK Special Relationship: Taking the 21st-Century Temperature,” *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 11 (2009), pp. 64–78; William Wallace and Christopher Phillips, “Reassessing the Special Relationship,” *International Affairs* 85 (2009), pp. 263–84; on the role of Atlanticism in driving British military engagement with Gulf states and Jordan, see Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, *A Return*

George W. Bush directly if he “wanted his [British] forces to take part in the first night of raids, as a gesture of solidarity.”⁵⁵ Part of British apprehension over strategic failure in Afghanistan is that it represents not just a lone military defeat but also inflicts damage on Britain’s perceived military utility to, and therefore political influence with, the U.S. at a time of declining British economic and military power (British defense spending in 2015 is likely to fall below the NATO-mandated target of 2% of gross domestic product [GDP], to the express concern of senior U.S. military officers).

In a way, the British decision to take on Helmand in 2006 was not just a function of overconfidence but also a gamble to demonstrate British capabilities, including to its American ally: a “good war” to Iraq’s increasingly unpopular one.⁵⁶ Robert Fry and Desmond Bowen record that “the [British] chiefs of staff were mindful that the south of Afghanistan was redolent with imperial legacy, as Kabul and Jalalabad had been previously, but this seemed a justifiable risk when taken alongside strategic failure.”⁵⁷ In one reading, Helmand was redemption for Basra.⁵⁸

Matt Cavanagh, the former special advisor introduced above, has noted that “in the British [government’s policy] debate, a great deal of time and effort went into working out what the Americans were thinking.”⁵⁹ More recently, Britain has been wary of getting ahead of the U.S. with regard to the pace of troop withdrawals. Unlike France, which announced its intended withdrawal of combat troops in June 2012 and completed the process by November, but like Germany, Britain has been eager to show that it will coordinate policy with Washington.⁶⁰ Occasionally, this has left British officials

to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf (London: RUIS, April 2013), <http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/East_of_Suez_Return_042013.pdf>; Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, p. 28.

55. John Kampfner, *Blair’s Wars* (London: Free, 2004), p. 129; referenced in Mark Bell, *The Policy of Prestige: Explaining British Post-Cold War Military Interventions* (Rochester, N. Y.: Social Science Research Network, April 9, 2013), p. 21, <<http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2247639>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

56. Nick Beadle, “Afghanistan and the Context of Iraq,” in *The Afghan Papers*, pp. 73–74.

57. Robert Fry and Desmond Bowen, “UK National Strategy and Helmand,” in *ibid.*, p. 71.

58. See Sherard Cowper-Coles, his supplementary written evidence, in *The UK’s Foreign Policy Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan*, 2010, <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmfaff/514/10110901.htm>>; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), p. 214.

59. Cavanagh, “Inside the Anglo-Saxon War Machine.”

60. James Kirkup and Ben Farmer, “David Cameron and Francois Hollande Heading for Showdown over French Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Telegraph*, May 11, 2012, <<http://www>

hamstrung while they wait for American interagency discussions on Afghanistan to play out.

What does this mean? Simply put, Britain's future policies toward Afghanistan will be shaped by the choices made by the U.S. As Sherard Cowper-Coles told the British Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, a perceived British divergence from U.S. objectives would have "a major impact on the transatlantic relationship," and that "we [Britain] still deceive ourselves in thinking that we can somehow operate independently, but we can have a major influence on collective strategy, above all through our relationship with the United States."⁶¹

Prestige

On a separate but related note, Mark Bell argues that contemporary British military interventionism, including in Afghanistan, can be explained by reference to a "policy of prestige" whereby "declining, secure" states attempt to "demonstrate military capabilities to arrest perceptions of decline and retain influence in world politics, but also seek to minimize the costs and risks of doing so."⁶² Blair's personal request to President Bush that Britain be allowed to participate in the first day of strikes in 2001—despite the questionable military utility and marginal costs of such coordination—can be read in terms of prestige rather than solidarity.

A particularly important subset of the prestige argument refers to *military prestige*, i.e., the British military's view that deployment in Afghanistan would further its "organizational essence" of combat.⁶³ Nick Beadle, a former British defense official, reflects that

[i]n the period leading up to the political agreement to the UK deployment to southern Afghanistan, there was a feeling in the Ministry of Defence that this was the "military's war." Aspiring and talented middle-ranking officers, particularly those that felt they had missed out on the early Iraq deployments, enthusiastically welcomed the idea of the Afghanistan deployment.⁶⁴

telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9260696/David-Cameron-and-Francois-Hollande-heading-for-showdown-over-French-withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.html.

61. See Cowper-Coles, *The UK's Foreign Policy Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan*.

62. Bell, *The Policy of Prestige*, pp. 1–3.

63. Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), p. 28.

64. Beadle, "Afghanistan and the Context of Iraq," p. 74.

James de Waal also cites an authoritative biography of Gordon Brown to note that Brown “acquiesced to the military’s demands for additional forces in Afghanistan not because he was convinced by its professional advice but because he had simply been ground down by the media and public storm,” a storm enabled by the military’s strong links to a sympathetic press.⁶⁵

THE BRITISH ROLE POST-2014

Post-2014, what instruments of national power and influence will Britain be able to bear in pursuit of these interests and goals, and how will these interact with the choices of other regional and extra-regional actors in and around Afghanistan?

We might look at these British instruments under three categories, coercive, financial, and diplomatic. In each category, it should be remembered that Britain’s role will be highly limited both in relation to its 2001–14 role, and in relation to that of the U.S. and more proximate regional actors. It will also be highly dependent on the scale and nature of the U.S. role and vulnerable to further domestic political shifts, both electoral and parliamentary, away from support for the war.

Coercive Instruments

Britain drew down only *combat* forces from Afghanistan in 2014; other forces, notably those for mentoring their Afghan counterparts, might remain for longer, albeit in relatively small numbers.⁶⁶ This tends to get lost in the parlance of “withdrawal.” Any residual British forces are unlikely to have meaningful combat capability, other than a quick reaction force (QRF) that protects the unit as a whole. But their role in training the ANSF will be crucial. Although the ISAF formally handed leadership for the war over to the ANSF in June 2013, the force lacks key capabilities in airpower, airlift, medical

65. de Waal, “Depending on the Right People,” p. 23.

66. Josh Smith, “No Plans for Complete Withdrawal from Afghanistan, ISAF General Says,” *Stars and Stripes*, <<http://www.stripes.com/no-plans-for-complete-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-isaf-general-says-1.238952>>, accessed October 9, 2013; “Establishing Stability in Afghanistan,” U.K. government, 2013, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/establishing-stability-in-afghanistan>>, accessed October 10, 2013.

evacuation, logistics, surveillance, and intelligence.⁶⁷ As the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A) itself acknowledges, the “ANA [Afghan National Army] will continue to require assistance with logistics and acquisition processes beyond December 2014.”⁶⁸ Attrition rates are extremely high: between October 2011 and September 2012, the ANA lost 27% of its personnel (killed, captured, disabled, or merely removed from rolls as a result of, say, desertion), a total made worse by extremely low retention rates of soldiers who complete their three-year enlistment (7%).⁶⁹

Such embryonic forces might be able to hold the line—to lock in present levels of violence in Afghanistan (higher than before the 2010 surge)—but they will not be able to mount sustained offensive operations to clear out insurgent-held areas. Even if they could, it is doubtful that the Afghan government could provide the requisite governance subsequently. Training, mentoring, advising, and assisting a post-2014 ANSF that is undergoing rapid annual change (as a result of said attrition), will be necessary to ensure that a still-strong insurgency can be contained. In November 2013, the Obama administration agreed to a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with President Karzai that would pave the way for U.S. forces to remain in Afghanistan. The text was endorsed by a Loya Jirga, but Karzai insisted that he would want his successor to sign the accord, and then too only if further conditions were met. In May 2014, President Obama announced that U.S. troop levels would fall to 9,800 after the end of 2014, and a complete withdrawal would take place by the end of 2016. In September 2014, the new Afghan government signed the BSA, and two months later Obama authorized U.S. troops to undertake a wider range of combat missions, over the year 2015, including the sustained

67. Interviews with ISAF personnel, Kabul, June 2013. See also Gary Owen, “Another Post-2014 Capability Gap: Spin and Reality of the Afghan Air Force’s Readiness,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2013, <<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/another-post-2014-capability-gap-spin-and-reality-of-the-afghan-air-forces-readiness>>; Ruttig, “2010 Elections 6: All Together Now: ‘This Is Not Switzerland.’”

68. *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan: Report to Congress in Accordance with Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 (Public Law 110-181) as Amended, and Section 1221 of the National Defense Authorizations Act for Fiscal Year 2012* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, December 2012), p. 62, <http://www.defense.gov/news/1230_Report_final.pdf>.

69. Gary Owen, “Beans and Bullets: Pentagon Report Puts ANSF Logistical and Combat Capabilities in Doubt,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2013, <<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/beans-and-bullets-pentagon-report-puts-ansf-logistical-and-combat-capabilities-in-doubt>>.

use of manned and unmanned aircraft, than had previously been thought likely.⁷⁰

U.S. officials anticipate that a further 4,000 NATO troops will add to U.S. numbers, although uncertainty around these commitments prompted Washington to announce that it would keep an extra 1,000 troops, up to 10,800, through 2015.⁷¹ Britain is unlikely to represent the second-largest contingent as it did during 2001–13. However, one of Britain's most important undertakings in this regard is the Afghan National Army Officers' Academy (ANAOA) in the Qargha area of Kabul, colloquially known in the British press as Afghanistan's "Sandhurst in the Sand."⁷² The U.K. has spent £ 75 million (\$115 million) on its facility, and most of its approximately 120 foreign mentors will be British.⁷³ In August 2014, an attack on its site, Camp Qargha, resulted in the death of two generals (from the U.S. and Germany) and injuries to 15 other foreign troops.⁷⁴

In addition to these training efforts, Britain has two other sorts of coercive instruments. The first is special forces, in which Britain has world-class capabilities that have been used intensively in Afghanistan.⁷⁵ These are likely to remain active through 2015 alongside their American counterparts, with perhaps as many as 200 troops from the Special Air Service (SAS) remaining.⁷⁶ However, the very substantial cuts being made to special forces units

70. Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "In a Shift, Obama Extends U.S. Role in Afghan Combat," *New York Times*, November 21, 2014.

71. Arshad Mohammed, "U.S. Stands by Plan to Pull Troops from Afghanistan," Reuters, January 5, 2015.

72. A reference to Britain's famous officer training academy, Sandhurst. See *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, p. 59; Ben Farmer, "Afghanistan 'Sandhurst in the Sand' Academy Announced by Philip Hammond," *Telegraph*, March 29, 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9173032/Afghanistan-Sandhurst-in-the-sand-academy-announced-by-Philip-Hammond.html>>.

73. Rob Crilly, "Afghanistan's 'Sandhurst in the Sand' Opens Its Doors," *Telegraph*, October 23, 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/10399386/Afghanistans-Sandhurst-in-the-Sand-opens-its-doors.html>>, accessed October 23, 2013.

74. "U.S. General Shot Dead and 15 Soldiers Injured at Afghan Base," Associated Press, August 6, 2014.

75. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2009), pp. 301–02; Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Portfolio Penguin, 2013), pp. 265, 371.

76. Farmer, "Afghanistan 'Sandhurst in the Sand' Academy Announced by Philip Hammond"; Stacey, Blitz, and Green, "PM Hits Back at Critics of Aid to Afghanistan"; interviews with military officials, London, August–September 2013.

for budgetary reasons may affect these deployments, particularly if emerging terrorist threats in North Africa and the Middle East become more pressing.⁷⁷ The special forces' ability to operate would also be affected—though not necessarily determined—by the implementation of the BSA eventually agreed to by Washington and Kabul in 2014, where one point of contention had been the “US insistence on freedom to conduct intelligence and counterterrorism operations.”⁷⁸ The closure of bases in eastern Afghanistan, around areas such as Nuristan where al-Qaida elements have been most active, would also be problematic.⁷⁹

The other coercive instrument is intelligence. As described earlier, British intelligence operations, including both human intelligence collection and clandestine disruption, were evident in Afghanistan through the 1980s and 1990s. Given the counter-terrorism interests outlined above, Afghanistan is likely to remain on the list of British intelligence priorities. The present chief of MI6, Alex Younger, appointed in October 2014, was formerly the station chief in Kabul. The British press has reported that MI6 is “appealing for extra staff from other intelligence agencies amid growing concern about a [continued] terrorist threat from Afghanistan after British troops withdraw” and “senior officials are discussing a plan to second members of Defence Intelligence (DI), the Ministry of Defence’s own agency, to MI6.”⁸⁰ However, it should be noted that these reports might simply reflect the threat inflation characteristic of bureaucratic political contests involving security agencies. Moreover, the reported withdrawal of U.S. CIA and NSA (National Security Agency) personnel from satellite bases and their redeployment to Kabul is

77. Sean Rayment, “Revealed: Nearly Half of Special Forces Could Go in Deepest Cuts in 50 Years,” *Telegraph*, March 3, 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9904772/Revealed-nearly-half-of-Special-Forces-could-go-in-deepest-cuts-in-50-years.html>>, accessed October 11, 2013.

78. Karen DeYoung and Ernesto Londoño, “In Afghanistan, U.S. Losing Patience as Deadline for Long-Term Deal Nears,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-afghanistan-us-losing-patience-as-deadline-for-long-term-deal-nears/2013/10/10/3cf8464-31be-11e3-9c68-1cf643210300_story_1.html>, accessed October 11, 2013.

79. Rob Taylor, “U.S. General Says Al Qaeda Just Surviving in Afghanistan,” Reuters (Kabul), July 26, 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/26/us-afghanistan-qaeda-idUSBRE96P09M20130726>>, accessed October 11, 2013.

80. “MI6 Demands More Spies in Afghanistan to Fight Terrorism,” *Telegraph*, October 20, 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10392691/MI6-demands-more-spies-in-Afghanistan-to-fight-terrorism.html>>, accessed October 23, 2013.

indicative of the constraints that smaller and more resource-challenged British agencies will face in Afghanistan.⁸¹

Funding

Second, Britain is committed to providing a proportion of the funds on which the ANSF and the Afghan state as a whole will depend. Stephen Biddle observes that, “in fiscal year 2013, the ANSF’s operating budget of \$6.5 billion was more than twice as large as the Afghan government’s entire federal revenue.”⁸² External donors must therefore meet almost all of the ANSF’s resource needs after 2015.

At NATO’s Chicago summit in May 2012, Britain committed to providing £ 70 million (US\$107 million) per year from 2015–17 for ANSF development.⁸³ This is less than the U.S. and Germany are providing, respectively, and slightly more than Australia. On the civilian side, at the July 2012 Tokyo conference, Britain committed to providing £ 178 million (US\$273 million) per year until 2017.⁸⁴ These are small sums relative to likely U.S. expenditures, which by comparison will amount to \$4.1 billion on training and equipping the ANSF in fiscal year 2015, and \$3.8 billion the following year.⁸⁵ Moreover, given Britain’s inability to maintain its own defense spending in real (inflation-adjusted) terms, let alone to meet the NATO-mandated target of 2% of GDP, it is highly unlikely that the British financial contribution to Afghanistan will increase or remain at present levels beyond 2017.⁸⁶

81. David S. Cloud, “CIA’s Plan to Retrench in Afghanistan Worries U.S. Military,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2014, <<http://www.latimes.com/world/afghanistan-pakistan/la-fg-cia-plan-to-cut-back-in-afghanistan-worries-military-20140508-story.html#page=1>>, accessed June 9, 2014.

82. Stephen Biddle, “Ending the War in Afghanistan: How to Avoid Failure on the Installment Plan,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2013, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139644/stephen-biddle/ending-the-war-in-afghanistan>>.

83. “Working to Strengthen Security in Afghanistan,” U.K. government, 2013, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/priority/working-to-strengthen-security-in-afghanistan-3>>.

84. “Establishing Stability in Afghanistan.”

85. Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, September 19, 2013), p. 30, <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>>; Owen, “Beans and Bullets: Pentagon Report Puts ANSF Logistical and Combat Capabilities in Doubt.”

86. Sam Jones, “NATO Spending Promises Largely Ignored,” *Financial Times*, February 26, 2015, <www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7739b6aa-bceb-11e4-9902-00144feab7de.html#axzz3TKV4Mqm3>.

Diplomacy

Britain's third instrument is diplomacy, in particular, its role in the diplomacy around a potential political settlement in Afghanistan. This is precisely where Britain's interests and activities interact and conflict most sharply with those of other regional actors. Britain has been one of the earliest and most enthusiastic advocates of both reintegration (tactical-level accommodation with former insurgents) and high-level reconciliation (a political settlement involving the insurgency's leadership). In taking this stance, the U.K. has alienated, on occasion, the Afghan government itself, and India.

Britain's willingness to accommodate with the insurgency was evident at the tactical level early on. In September 2006, British commanders facing deteriorating security arrived at a deal whereby both British and Taliban forces would withdraw from the town of Musa Qala in Helmand. The U.S. viewed this as a "partial surrender," and both they and other countries—including India, which continues to invoke the episode as grounds for suspicion of British intentions—felt vindicated when Taliban forces returned in February 2007.⁸⁷

In terms of high-level reconciliation, around 2005, British intelligence was reportedly "engaged in contacts with the Taliban in an effort to explore a potential political solution."⁸⁸ This was about the same time as Germany-Taliban contacts (the Taliban reportedly trusts Germany more than any other combatant nation).⁸⁹ Britain also participated in contacts with the Taliban beginning in 2010, as well as the more recent efforts to open a Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar.⁹⁰

87. John Bew et al., *Talking to the Taliban: Hope Over History?* (Washington, D.C. and London: New America Foundation and International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, June 27, 2013), p. 24; Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2009), ch. 8; Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, p. 50; Carlotta Gall, "Briton Opposed by Afghans Won't Take U.N. Post," *New York Times*, January 28, 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/28/world/asia/28afghan.html>>, accessed October 9, 2013.

88. Bew et al., *Talking to the Taliban*, p. 24.

89. Ahmed Rashid, "How the Taliban and America Met in Munich," *Financial Times*, June 29, 2011, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/29c7b936-a286-11e0-9760-00144feabdco.html#axzzzhOsqPYSq>>; Matthias Gebauer, "Afghan President Karzai Asks for German Help with Taliban Talks," *Spiegel Online*, July 23, 2012, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghan-president-karzai-asks-for-german-help-with-taliban-talks-a-845893.html>>, accessed October 11, 2013.

90. Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Random House, LLC, 2013), ch. 2.

Over the course of the war, “the UK . . . became an increasingly loud advocate for direct negotiations with the Taliban,” which one study interprets as “Britain’s attempt to compensate for its role as a junior military partner by stressing its expertise in conflict resolution” on the basis of its experience in Northern Ireland.⁹¹ But British officials are also driven by two other considerations.

First, although British officials are not of one mind on this issue, their assessment of the Taliban’s link to al-Qaida has evolved over time, such that they tend to view the Taliban in less internationally threatening terms.⁹² Are they correct in this belief? A September 2012 study published by the RUIS, an independent defense and security think-tank in London, and based on extensive field interviews of senior Taliban personnel, concluded that “the Taliban leadership and base deeply regret their past association with al-Qaida.” Once a general ceasefire and/or political agreement are decided upon, the base would obey a call by Mullah Mohammad Omar, and only him, to completely renounce al-Qaida. Moreover, “following renunciation, the Taliban would act to assure that Al Qaida is no longer able to operate on Afghan soil”; the Taliban “are willing to accept [a] long-term U.S. military presence and bases as long as they do not constrain Afghan independence and Islamic jurisprudence.”⁹³ In other words, reconciliation is possible within the 2010 U.S. “red lines,” which demand that the Taliban split from al-Qaida.⁹⁴ Other countries, such as India, by contrast, are extremely worried about the red lines being breached.

Second, British officials, affected by their own experience in Helmand but also from their perspective as holding the second-in-command slot at ISAF headquarters in Kabul, are persuaded that the war cannot be militarily won and that the Afghan state is highly vulnerable to the insurgency over the longer term.⁹⁵ As early as 2008, Brigadier Mark Carelton-Smith, then commander of U.K. forces in Helmand, conceded that “we’re not going to win this war,” and that a political settlement would be desirable. General Nick

91. Bew et al., *Talking to the Taliban*, p. 28.

92. Interviews with British civilian and military officials, London, September 2013.

93. Michael Semple et al., *Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation* (London: RUIS, September 2012), pp. 3–4.

94. Philip J. Crowley, “Daily Press Briefing,” U.S. Department of State, 2010, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2010/10/149093.htm>>.

95. Kate Clark, “Talking to the Taliban: A British Perspective,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2013.

Carter, ISAF's deputy commander, said in 2013 that after 2014, "there will be parts of Afghanistan which will not necessarily be as closely linked to central government as others. . . . [T]here will therefore be some local political solutions," i.e., Taliban control on Afghanistan's periphery. The general added: "Talking is the answer to this problem."⁹⁶

Compare this to the view of India's former ambassador in Afghanistan, Vivek Katju, who wrote in *The Hindu* after the botched opening of the Doha office that the U.S. had shown "strategic desperation" and that Karzai "can meet the current challenge even now if he abandons the narrow politics he has pursued since 2001."⁹⁷ India believes that the Afghan state can "win," whereas Britain believes it can only hold the line, and that too at a financial cost that will become unsustainable over time.

The U.K.'s advocacy for talks and eventual reconciliation makes it a relevant actor in the regional diplomacy underway. In October 2013, Britain hosted the fourth of its trilateral summits between itself, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These meetings have caused further friction between the U.K. and India, because Pakistan used earlier summits to demand that India scale down its presence in Afghanistan, and that Britain give Pakistan surplus military equipment. The Indian journalist Indrani Bagchi wrote in February 2013 that "[t]here is growing wariness within India about the apparent consonance of interests between [the] UK and Pakistan. India believes that the UK may be helping Pakistan achieve its core interest—of facilitating a Taliban return in Afghanistan."⁹⁸ India has also been angered by some British officials' suggestions that India has used Afghan territory to support the insurgency in Pakistan's Balochistan Province.⁹⁹

British officials express frustration with these views, insisting that their Indian counterparts have been consulted at every stage, that India overstates

96. Emma Graham-Harrison, "'We Should Have Talked to Taliban' Says Top British Officer in Afghanistan," *Guardian*, June 28, 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/28/talks-taliban-british-officer-afghanistan>>.

97. Vivek Katju, "In Afghanistan, Back to the Future," *Hindu*, June 24, 2013, <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/in-afghanistan-back-to-the-future/article4844564.ece>>.

98. Indrani Bagchi, "Pak Asks UK to Limit Indian Influence in Afghanistan," *Times of India*, 2013, <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-02-17/pakistan/37144391_I_taliban-reconciliation-afghanistan-taliban-return>, accessed October 11, 2013.

99. See, for instance, Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 351–52. U.S. officials, who say that they have seen the same evidence, disagree with the U.K.'s judgment on this question.

the scope and pace of existing talks with the Taliban, and that India lacks a constructive alternative to reconciliation in light of the Afghan state's severe weaknesses. British officials also emphasize that they require Pakistani assistance on a number of security issues, and cannot therefore entirely alienate either Pakistan's civilian government or the ISI. Britain has a very substantial Pakistani diaspora population, 400,000 of whom travel to Pakistan annually.¹⁰⁰ A small subset of these is connected to extremist or terrorist activity. As the House of Commons' Intelligence and Security Committee noted in 2013, "UK residents continue to travel to Pakistan to train with Al-Qaeda Core," and "in previous years investigations linked to Pakistan have accounted for up to three-quarters of all plots [i.e., terrorist plots in the U.K.]"¹⁰¹ Cooperation between SIS, the U.K.'s MI5, and Pakistan's intelligence agencies is therefore seen as crucial, even though British officials acknowledge that their Pakistani counterparts maintain ties, some supportive, to a variety of terrorist groups of concern.¹⁰²

Britain's perceived closeness to Pakistan has affected its ties into Afghanistan. Britain's former ambassador, Sherard Cowper-Coles, describes how President Karzai frequently "alluded to his suspicion that the British Government was closer to Pakistan's rulers than it should be."¹⁰³ Karzai "believed that Britain was . . . colluding secretly with Pakistan to control Afghanistan."¹⁰⁴ In 2010, while in India, Prime Minister David Cameron tried to correct this perception with the statement that Pakistan must "not look both ways" on terrorism. Pakistan's ISI chief cancelled a visit to Britain. Cameron's government has prioritized commercial ties with India, and conducted intensive high-level diplomacy to fostering a more strategic partnership. Yet, it has struggled to assuage India, and strong differences in perception and judgment remain on how the reconciliation process is being handled.

Ultimately, it is the U.S. that will exert the greatest influence on talks and reconciliation: not only are key confidence-building measures (such as prisoner swaps with the Taliban) in its power, but U.S. aid to the Afghan government

100. Arnaud De Borchgrave, Thomas M. Sanderson and Jacqueline Harned, *Force Multiplier for Intelligence: Collaborative Open Source Networks: A Report of the Transnational Threats Project*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2007), p. 1.

101. *Annual Report 2012–13* (London: Intelligence and Security Committee, U.K. Parliament, July 2013), pp. 9–10, <<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm84/8403/8403.pdf>>.

102. Interviews, British officials, London, May–September 2013.

103. Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, pp. 50–51.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

and ANSF, and therefore leverage, is much higher. Moreover, toward the end of 2014 it became clear that Ghani, who had called upon the Taliban to enter into “a political negotiation” and offered three government ministries to former high-ranking Taliban officials,¹⁰⁵ was reaching out to Pakistan in the hope of securing its support for peace talks,¹⁰⁶ with China playing an important facilitating role.¹⁰⁷ It is unlikely that the U.K. will play any substantive role in this process, if it bears fruit.

The Sustainability of Britain’s Presence

The sustainability of the British presence beyond 2014, along all of the dimensions outlined here, depends on a host of political factors: the perceived effectiveness of the unity government that resulted from Afghanistan’s contested 2014 elections, violent trends within Afghanistan, British public opinion toward Afghanistan, Britain’s fiscal position in general, and other military and fiscal commitments that might emerge.

Afghanistan’s 2014 election resulted in a standoff in the runoff between the top two candidates, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. In September they reached a power-sharing agreement with promises of constitutional reform. The coalition struggled to form a government, for which there remain potentially serious disagreements that could result in a premature rupture, as noted elsewhere in this special issue of *Asian Survey*.

When considering Britain’s future decisions toward Afghanistan, the importance of British public opinion should not be underestimated: the August 2013 vote by the House of Commons *against* proposed British military action in Syria effectively prevented Prime Minister Cameron from acting alongside France and the U.S., despite his constitutional prerogative to do so. Britain’s Parliament does not have the same granular powers of budgetary control enjoyed by committees in the U.S. Congress, but it would be able to exert substantial pressure on the government if it wished to constrict aid or participation. In October 2013, British Defense Secretary Philip Hammond

105. Thomas Ruttig, “Taleban for the Ghani Cabinet? A Look at a BBC Report,” Afghan Analysts Network, January 11, 2015.

106. Jon Boone, “Ashraf Ghani Visit May Mark New Chapter in Afghan-Pakistan Relations,” *Guardian*, November 14, 2014.

107. Nathan Hodge and Habib Khan Totakhil, “China Creates New Avenue for Afghan Peace Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2015.

acknowledged that “public appetite for expeditionary warfare is pretty low, based on the experience of ten years in Iraq and Afghanistan,” adding that “it would be realistic of me to say that I would not expect, except in the most extreme circumstances, a manifestation of great appetite for plunging into a prolonged period of expeditionary warfare any time soon.”

A 2014 public opinion survey showed that 56% of Britons believed that British involvement in Afghanistan had not been worthwhile, and 65% believed that the Taliban was likely to “return to power.”¹⁰⁸ Under these conditions, British involvement is likely to tend toward the minimalist end of the spectrum outlined in this section.

CONCLUSION

When British combat forces withdrew from Afghanistan, Britain had spent 14 years fighting the Taliban, at least six of those years at very high intensity. British special forces and intelligence capabilities will likely continue to operate in Afghanistan for some years to come, albeit at much reduced levels.

It is also likely that British officials will play a central role in regional and domestic diplomacy toward a political solution for the war. Although Britain continues to hold to the red lines for reconciliation, this diplomacy may bring the U.K. into conflict with those regional powers that believe the Afghan state can indefinitely suppress the insurgency and that talks with the Taliban are premature and reckless. However, the U.K. also shares thus far underdeveloped interests with these same powers in ensuring that the ANSF is well trained, well equipped, and well funded, and that critical enablers such as airpower and logistics are developed.

The primary British interest in Afghanistan will continue to be to ensure that al-Qaida and affiliated international terrorist groups cannot use Afghanistan and the region to plot attacks against the West. Secondary interests will include the stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the solidity of the British alliance with the U.S., and the perception that Afghanistan has not politically regressed (especially in the domain of human rights). Still, as these same interests increasingly manifest themselves in North Africa and the Middle East, the U.K.'s attention to Afghanistan may ebb considerably.

108. “Afghanistan: The Public Verdict,” YouGov, April 4, 2014, <<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/04/04/afghanistan-final-verdict/>>.