

By Dr. Liam Fox MP - Shadow Secretary of State for Defence

This year in Afghanistan has been the bloodiest for both British and American forces since the war started in 2001.

Compared with this time last year, there has been a 55 percent increase in coalition deaths, IED (improvised explosive device) incidents are up by 80 percent, and there has been a 90 percent increase in attacks on the Afghan government. On top of this increase in kinetic activity, Afghanistan's political future is filled with uncertainty pending the results of the recent presidential elections.

It is possible that the situation in Afghanistan will get worse before it gets better. It is because of this that we must repeatedly make it clear why we are there.

### Why We Are in Afghanistan

It is an unavoidable fact that we are in Afghanistan out of necessity, not choice. It was in Afghanistan that the 9/11 attacks were planned and put into motion, and we are in Afghanistan now to ensure that it does not again become a launch-pad for terrorist attacks on the rest of the world.

There are many other laudable aims. It is wonderful when we can get Afghan girls back into school and when we see the extension of human rights, but we are primarily there for reasons of national security. We need to remind the public of that if we are to maintain public support and the necessary resilience to see this conflict through.

It is sometimes difficult for us to express what we mean by winning in Afghanistan, but it is easy to describe what we mean by losing. Were we to lose and be forced out of Afghanistan against our will, it would be a shot in the arm for every jihadist globally. It would send out the signal that we did not have the moral fortitude to see through what we believe to be a national security emergency. It would suggest that NATO, in its first great challenge since the end of the Cold War, did not have what it takes to see a difficult challenge through.

The European countries in NATO that are failing to engage in proper burden sharing in Afghanistan might like to reflect on what the collapse of NATO would mean. They also need to remember that not only are we in Afghanistan out of necessity; we are also there as a legal requirement as part of our treaty obligations when Article 5 of the NATO treaty has been invoked. That is not pointed out often enough when we discuss Afghanistan.

Quite simply, NATO is failing to deliver its promises. After NATO's last summit in Strasbourg, 5,000 extra troops were pledged by European leaders to provide support for the recent

elections. Now that the elections have come and gone, we see that nowhere near this number of extra troops were sent. European countries sent an extra 2,300 troops by the elections--but brought another 600 home. Roughly two-thirds of the promised troops never materialized.

It is time to stop making excuses.

Those countries in NATO that have failed to match the 2 percent of GDP requirement in respect of their defense spending and that are failing to play an active and robust role in Afghanistan might want to reflect on the effect that a world with an isolationist United States might have on their security. I hope that those in many capitals--not least the capitals of the European NATO member states--are reflecting on what life might look like if NATO were to start to fall apart.

### Defining Victory

When it comes to what we mean by winning, we have to stand back and recognize that this is a geopolitical struggle. The reason why we can define what we mean by winning is that we want to see a stable Afghanistan, able to manage its own internal and external security to a degree that stops interference from outside powers and allows the country to resist the reestablishment of the terrorist bases and the training camps that were there before.

That is what success means in Afghanistan. We are not trying to apply, or we should not be trying to apply, a Jeffersonian democracy to a broken 13th century state--and certainly should not be expecting it to function within a decade. Unrealistic aims are likely only to disappoint public opinion and to frustrate those in Afghanistan who are finding it difficult to build on the ground.

The problems of governance in Afghanistan, including widespread corruption, must be tackled because they are undermining our efforts for stability. Focus needs to be placed on empowering local and district governments. Local solutions for local problems has been the only way in most of Afghanistan for thousands of years.

On my last trip to Helmand, I was pleased to find a renewed shift of emphasis from central government in Kabul to more focus on provincial and district governments across all of Afghanistan. To believe that we can have a working democratic, central government without first having working local governments is naïve, especially when in many cases we are dealing with tribal codes that predate Islam.

Everything must be done to build the capability of Afghan security forces. I agree with General Stanley McChrystal's goal of increasing the size of the Afghan National Army and getting it to the front line as soon as possible. No resource should be spared to accomplish this. The international community needs to come together in this regard. I personally told General McChrystal during my last visit to Kabul that a Conservative government would be very sympathetic to a request for more British troops for training the ANA.

The Afghan National Police are viewed as incompetent and corrupt by most of the population and will present the biggest challenge for the West in terms of capacity building.

The sooner we get the Afghan security forces trained and on the front line the sooner we can get our own troops home. One very senior military officer told me that if he had a choice between more helicopters or more trained ANA soldiers, he would choose the latter--no counterinsurgency has ever been won without doing this.

### Filling the Political Gap

Of course, no one believes that we can have a purely military victory in Afghanistan. As has been pointed out, we will have to deal with those who are reconcilable, even from among those who may have fought against us in the past, and we may have to recognize that some will be irreconcilable--and the only way to deal with them will be in a military fashion. Much as we would like everybody to be reasonable, we need to recognize that some will be utterly unreasonable; they have chosen to confront us, so we will have no option but to confront them.

Because of General McChrystal's much-anticipated report on the way ahead in Afghanistan, there has been a lot of talk of sending more ground troops to Afghanistan on top of the recent increase in U.S. troops in the south. Unless we have identified a more comprehensive political solution for Afghanistan, any increase in troop numbers would merely maintain the status quo, which is arguably an increasingly dysfunctional state apparatus surrounded by a burgeoning insurgency. Deploying more troops in isolation can only have a short-term and localized effect. They can win the tactical battle; they can buy politicians time; but ultimately, unless something fills the gap they have created, their sacrifices and efforts risk being in vain.

The surge worked in Iraq because it was fundamentally more than just an increase in troops. It was part of a bigger solution, designed to suit conditions on the ground and built around a revitalized political process which included the reengagement of the Sunni minority. After all, the aim of any counterinsurgency campaign is to allow those with grievances to address their grievances through a political process rather than through violence. To get this result, we will need a sound political plan moving alongside any military plan.

### The Central Importance of Pakistan

We cannot achieve stability and security in Afghanistan until we disrupt the Taliban/al-Qaeda network attacking from Pakistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan have to be viewed as a single entity--a single issue. We must give Pakistan every support we possibly can financially, politically, and militarily because a collapse in Pakistan would make what we want to see in the region utterly impossible. If we think we have problems with a broken state such as Afghanistan, we should try a broken Pakistan nuclearly armed and with a vastly greater population.

Pakistan already has deep-rooted political problems and very deep-seated economic problems. It has problems with its relationship with India, and the situation is still very tense, which causes the country to keep a large proportion of its armed forces facing in that direction. Now we are asking Pakistan to do more in the North West Frontier and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA, which is a tall order. Other countries in the region and traditional allies of Pakistan should also ask what they can do to help on that particular front.

Just across the border, Pakistan is facing an existential threat from Islamist extremism. Unfortunately for Pakistan, and for the West, this is a threat against which they are ill equipped to fight. The Pakistani armed forces are trained, resourced, and manned for state-on-state warfare against a perceived threat from India.

Roughly 65 percent of the Pakistani military is Punjabi, yet the area along the border where they are operating is predominately Pashtun. For all intents and purposes, the Pakistani military are foreigners in the FATA, and their presence can at times exacerbate things. While we must help train and equip the Pakistani military for counterinsurgency operations, we must do all we can to build Pakistani capacity in the round, especially in the policing sectors and the Frontier Corps in FATA.

### Conclusion

Let us make no mistake: We are engaged in a crucial and historic struggle in Afghanistan. It is a geopolitical necessity. It is a national security imperative.

It is vital that we maintain the public's trust if we are to have the will and resilience to see it through. It is the ultimate asymmetry: Maintaining democratic support is not a handicap our enemies suffer.

As William Hague put it recently, "We are in Afghanistan not to occupy it, but to help make it safe and secure, so that it can be governed by Afghans for Afghans. These efforts require the taking of difficult decisions to turn the war around."

We need to find the will to see it through. That is the test, and time is short.

Dr. Liam Fox has been a Member of Parliament since 1992 and was appointed Shadow Defense Secretary in 2005. He has served as Shadow Foreign Secretary, Shadow Health Secretary, and Co-Chairman of the opposition Conservative Party and was a Foreign Office Minister in the last Conservative government. Dr. Fox established his think tank, The Atlantic Bridge, in 2003 and is a leading advocate of increased defense spending within the NATO alliance and a key opponent of defense integration within the European Union.

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