The US and its allies should take a much harder look at our partners against the Taliban, says Dan Jarvis MP, as the Commons international development select committee says the UK should reconsider its ambition of building Afghan government institutions in favour of more traditional aid targets.

My involvement in Afghanistan goes back to 2004, when, as a Major in the Paras, I was part of a small team which conducted a reconnaissance mission to southern Afghanistan. The UK was considering moving its military effort from the north to the south, but the question was where? I vividly remember standing on the edge of a remote base in Uruzgan province surrounded by mountains, pouring over a map and discussing options with the team leader. Helmand was a key narcotics hub, the UK had the counter-narcotics lead at the time, and there were no other workable options: the only way was Helmand.

So began a commitment that would take me back to Afghanistan twice in 2005 and then again in 2007, when I commanded a company of Paratroopers and a sizeable Afghan force. We fought and lived alongside our Afghan colleagues. For the most part they were committed and brave – sometimes too brave, with a tendency to charge the enemy without waiting for the formality of an order. But it was always clear that while this partnership was essential, it came with significant and deadly risk.

One aspect of that risk has been thrown into sharp focus, with the rise in so-called 'green on blue' attacks and new restrictions on joint ISAF-Afghan operations. The fear is that this could undermine the entire effort to train Afghan forces, and with it our exit strategy. It is a very real concern: but it misses a larger danger.

If the Afghan troops that I served with are not part of a minimally functioning and legitimate body politic, if the men who ultimately command them are not something more than factional leaders vying for their own self-interest, then all the training in the world won't help. Even if ISAF was able to create effective Afghan National Security Forces, it will only help to the extent it is part of a broader move to address the underlying political problems – otherwise we are just swapping one set of uniforms for another.

The fundamental problem is that the ISAF partners have never been able to make enough progress on the underlying strategic goal in Afghanistan; a state with enough legitimacy, integrity and capacity to not provoke major conflict, and to be able to provide reasonable levels of security. That's not some utopian dream of "nation-building" – it's a statement of our most basic self-interest.

In theory that's always been the objective. It is there in General Petraeus' Counterinsurgency (COIN) manual:""Long-term success in COIN depends on the people taking charge of their own affairs and consenting to the government's rule". But in practice the international actors have

never resolved the tension between longer-term, more political concerns and shorter-term pressures.

There are some genuine dilemmas here – but it is also clear that expediency has been the rule far too often. While there has been much talk of the dangers of bad governance, too often we've witnessed the re-empowering of discredited commanders who went on to abuse the population. The talk has been about democracy, but the constitution provides few checks to presidential power. We've witnessed more worries about elections happening than about their substance as a way to mediate political forces. Vast resource has been committed, but often with more regard for getting money out the door than actual impact.

Generals and politicians alike have stressed the governance aspect of counter-insurgency, but that has largely meant technical measures – building courts and training staff. It is in effect an apolitical political strategy: one with little relevance to the way power is distributed, used, and abused. But politics in that sense has been the most important internal driver of the rise of the insurgency.

That is not a mandate for interference: Afghans are rightly sensitive to issues of sovereignty. But it is legitimate to hold ourselves and our Afghan partners to the commitments we have made, and for the international community to have an interest in an Afghan political process that is as healthy as possible. That includes bringing the Taliban into the tent – however uncomfortable that might be for those who have faced them on the battlefield.

But there is opportunity as well as risk in the current situation. Withdrawal in 2014 will undermine a key Taliban argument, make a settlement easier – and increase pressure on the Afghan government to step up to its responsibilities. Fewer actors should make it easier to have a coherent international policy. The peace process, and elections in 2014, are key challenges, but they provide a context to revisit the political contract among Afghans.

At the same time the temptation of expediency is stronger than ever. The scenario we are drifting towards is a clientalist relationship – one where the US and its allies back whoever can fight the Taliban and deliver the international jihadists, giving up on the supposed luxuries of governance and human rights along the way. This would be a mistake. How long will western publics want to back the Afghan government if it loses all legitimacy? How well will such a government avoid civil war? The clientalist model may be the lowest common denominator strategy, but it is far from the lowest risk.

Some might argue it is the best we can hope for given where we are. The alternative is certainly no guarantee of success – which in any case will be messy, and incomplete. But it is clearly worth trying. There are plausible paths to a much better outcome, for the world and for Afghans, and the actions of the US and its allies can help determine whether they are taken. We cannot work with angels, but we can avoid working with devils – taking a much harder look at our partners in the field and in Kabul, albeit I remember from my time there, that often, difficult judgements have to be made, involving what is morally right against what is politically expedient.

We cannot hope to solve Afghanistan's political problems ourselves, but we can do everything in our power to encourage Afghans to do so. The Labour Party has warned against a lack of progress on the political settlement for a while but the government has now been quiet for some time. We must be sure the Taliban know they cannot win, and we must press forward with the peace process. Above all we should take a longer view, based on a clear understanding of our interests – and of the costs of expediency.

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