By Professor Julian Lindley-French

The first few years of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) engagement were marred by failures at the strategic level. Lack of consensus over what was achievable was compounded by a lack of strategy and cohesion. A US administration distracted by Iraq and much of Europe lost in the Euro world compounded a sense of lost opportunity.

However, with the arrival of the Obama administration and more specifically the Afghanistan and Pakistan Strategy, new optimism abounds. Taken together with forthcoming elections in Afghanistan and the Pakistani Army offensive in the Swat Valley and surroundings, a new beginning has been afforded the Coalition. Building on the base provided by the sacrifice of Coalition Armed Forces the next two years will be critical if the Afghanistan/ Pakistan region is to be denied those who could and would do Britain and its partners great harm.

The US Comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan has five main elements: establishing an attainable objective; a regional approach; building capacity and more training; using all elements of national power; and bringing new international elements to the effort.

It is worth re-stating why British forces are in Afghanistan, the vital and important nature of the work they are doing there and how 'success' is going to be crafted. The rationale for the mission is undeniable; for the first time in history terrorists and criminals have global reach and are able and willing to use ungoverned spaces and huge illicit flows of capital to seek access to ageing but massively destructive weaponry and/ or to organise attacks not only upon the West, but all the many states in the Middle East upon which Britain depends for vast amounts of energy.

Make no mistake, Britain is engaged in a strategic struggle with terror, the outcome of which will shape British strategic credibility in all security areas for a generation to come. Afghanistan is thus about Britain's strategic credibility, both at home and abroad. For if London is unable to protect the British home base against such threats, it will be unable to project security elsewhere.

The UK strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan is based on several guiding principles: an international approach; a regional approach; a joint civil-military approach; a better co-ordinated approach; a long-term approach calling for the respect for sovereignty and local values with respect for international standards with the demand for a hard-headed approach. Britain is offering a further £665 million of aid and development to Pakistan over the 2009-2013 period and £510 million, over the same period, to Afghanistan.

Southern Afghanistan is the centre of gravity of the struggle in a war that bestrides the Afghan-Pakistan border. 'Success' therein is dependent on six interlocking elements; destruction of the will and structure of the enemy, a plan worthy of the name, a counternarcotics plan embedded in regional economic development, de-Westernisation of the mission together with a regional political strategy, and both Afghan and Pakistani Governments gripped of the seriousness of the moment and prepared to confront inner contradictions as much as external threats. Above all,

an agreed definition of what actually would constitute success – an Afghan state that shares the same attributes as its immediate neighbours to the north, the fellow 'stans' most of whom (with the possible exception of Uzbekistan) share basic but robust systems of government with a 'democratic' process of sorts that places stability at the top of the political agenda. Why? Because Afghanistan is Afghanistan and the West went there to deny that space to the likes of Al Qaeda.

Destruction of the enemy: The new US administration is rightly increasing the effort along the lines of Taliban communication in south and east Afghanistan. Moreover, as part of its new Regional Strategy it is working with the Pakistani Government and Armed Forces to break the safe havens around Quetta and Peshawar, as well as flush out the foreign fighters from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). However, destroying the Taliban must be balanced with the aim of transforming the Taliban, they are after all part of the Pashtun landscape. That will require the political reconciliation central to the Afghanistan/Pakistan strategy to bring all but the hard core back into mainstream Afghan and Pakistani political processes. This in turn will require breaking the link between drugs money and the insurgency that will necessarily be linked to returning land rights to many tier two Taliban.

The exact number of Taliban and foreign fighters in Afghanistan is complex. The Taliban can field up to 10,000 fighters but only 2,000 to 3,000 are highly motivated, full-time insurgents. The rest are part-time fighters, young afghan men who have been alienated by government corruption and unemployment, often angry at civilian deaths caused by American bombing raids, or are simply paid. Some 5-10 per cent of full-time insurgents are believed to be foreigners: Arabs, Chechens, Uighurs (Western China), Uzbeks and Russians from the Siberian region.

In other words, political reconciliation will cost money and must run in parallel with the maintenance of military pressure. Here the likes of Saudi Arabia can be of significant help in reducing the funding that flows from Saudi Arabia to the Taliban and the foreign fighters and which fuels radical teaching in the Madrassas in the NWFP.

A Plan

ISAF has only had a strategic campaign plan worthy of the name since 2008. Campaign plans are not the be all and end all of success because much of the work by necessity is about local relationships. However, with the new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan in place, the appointment of counterinsurgency specialist General David Petraeus to lead CENTCOM and General Stanley McCrystal to lead ISAF, and given a reasonable definition of success and a proper grip of strategic communications both at home and abroad, a new realism abounds.

The US has ordered the deployment of an additional 21,000 troops to the afghan theatre, while US troop strength in Afghanistan should hit 68,000 by late 2009. There are an additional 33,000 allied troops under US and NATO commands with afghan security forces planned to reach 232,000 by 2012.

That realism must itself be founded on three basic realities. First, the Afghan people are the

critical ground and General McCrystal has made reducing their casualties and improving life quality a priority. Second, the three-phase strategy identifies end-2011 as the moment when Afghan civil primacy must come to the fore with the security effort having been by and large successful. Third, the new Afghan Government must begin to fulfil its side of the Afghan National Development Strategy. Above all, the provincial reconstruction teams need to become much more efficient in delivering development across the country that is relevant to the needs of the people, measurable and sustainable. Only then will Afghans stop sitting on the political fence between support for the Coalition and fear of the Taliban.

A Counter narcotics strategy embedded in Development

Some 85 per cent of the population of Regional Command South are dependent on agriculture and much of that in turn is poppy. The insurgency is funded to a very significant extent by the fruits of the crop. Breaking those links will require a proper investment in alternatives for the Afghan people.

A mark of the problem is apparent in the gap that exists between the stated aid sent by the

British Government for Helmand and the actual amount that reaches the province – 10 per cent.

Moreover, while sustained and effective substitution crops will be essential to guarantee incomes, other steps must be taken.

These will include: breaking the hold Narco-Khans have over farmers through loans; improving the daily access to power supplies; the Afghan Government removing said individuals from Government; and, above all, a regional economic strategy to embed the future Afghan economy in its wider region. Indeed, the Afghan National Development Strategy only makes real sense when seen from the perspective of wider regional development.

The Afghan National Police force (ANP) will total 82,000 personnel. The ANP can only cover 50 per cent of police districts at present due to lack of available personnel. There are 365 police districts with the need for at least ten officers per district. The Afghan Government claims that there are now 40,000 police officers on the ANP payroll. The US checked these figures and confirmed that some 32,000 (80 per cent) can be accounted for. ANP casualties are 20-times higher than ANA. 3,000 ANP are planned for RC south.

De-Westernisation

Too much of the narrative surrounding the ISAF mission has been about NATO in Asia. In fact, NATO is only an agent for a UN-sanctioned mission agreed by UN Security Council resolution. Two political initiatives are underway to ease that problem.

First, there is a strong push for a stronger UN role focused on the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). Thus far a very cautious UN Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon has been unwilling to give the UN agencies on the ground the support needed to lead the governance and development tracks vital to mission success. This task has been passed on to

overstretched Coalition Armed Forces, which reinforce an impression of NATO versus the Taliban rather than the international community engaging extremism. Of course, a key element of de-Westernisation will be the enhanced role Afghans themselves must play in the years to come.

Good work has been done to enhance the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces, particularly the Army, but much more needs to be done. The establishment of a functioning and reasonably functioning civil service is a vital pre-requisite for functioning governance. Sadly, the Soviets destroyed much of the Afghan middle class in the 1980s and many of Afghanistan's best and brightest remain outside the country.

The regional strategy

The Obama administration recognised early into its term of office that any political reconciliation strategy in Afghanistan must include a wider regional strategy aimed at solving the one nation (Pashtun), two state (Afghanistan and Pakistan) problem and thus separating those issues from Al Qaeda-inspired Jihadism.

For that reason President Obama appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to lead the wider regional effort. The effort is primarily focused on strengthening Pakistani state institutions, particularly in the tribal lands of the NWFP, not least the Pakistani Army – the effectiveness of which is vital for Pakistan's future and Coalition strategy.

However, there is a wider agenda. For example, one problem faced by the Coalition is the deleterious effect of the conflict between Pakistan and India over Jammu-Kashmir. Unable to concentrate on both the Indians and the NWFP, the Pakistanis have tended to play down threats from the latter, while India has traditionally seen instability in southern Afghanistan as a way to keep the Pakistani military off balance.

Holbrooke has already made significant progress with British support to ease those tensions. Importantly, a new Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan is being formed to include all those with a stake in regional security – NATO allies and partners, Central Asian states, the Gulf States, Iran, India, Russia and China.

"The cornerstone of this strategy... is that it's a regional approach. And for the first time, we will treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries, but as one challenge in one region. Our strategy focuses more intensively on Pakistan than in the past, and this is normal, because it's a newer problem. And this calls for more significant increases in US and international support, both economic and military, linked to performance against terror."

General James l Jones, US national security advisor, 27 March, 2009

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The articles that make up this publication have been submitted by a wide selection of authors, many of whom are not members of the British Army. The views are their own. I have

encouraged them to submit opinions and ideas which may run contrary to those of the Army, in order to stimulate and broaden debate.

Chris Donnelly, Editor