

by Commander of NATO's Regional Command (South), Major General Nick Carter:

Regional Command South is a multinational NATO command. It has within it around 25,000 Americans, fractionally under 10,000 Brits, about 2,500 Dutch, around 1,500 Australian and around 2,500 to 3,000 Canadians. So it consists of about 45,000 coalition troops.

The span of command is an area that is roughly the size of England and Wales put together, so east to west about 900 kilometres, north to south about 500 kilometres.

Since General McChrystal has arrived in Afghanistan the mission statement has very slightly changed. Up until July last year we were talking about defeating an insurgency; what we are now doing is talking about protecting a population. In other words, we are adopting a population centric, counter insurgency strategy.

What is important about that is that it does require a slightly different approach, but the key points of the population centric, counter insurgency strategy is you need to go to where the population is. The two key population centres in regional Command South are the city of Kandahar and its environs which includes the district of Arghandab to the north of the city, the eastern Zharay and Panjawa'i districts which are just to the west of the city, the district of Dand, which is just to the south of the city, and the district of Daman, which is to the east of the city. Now, within that area, around 1.2 million people live.

The other population centre which is very important is that of central Helmand, and by central Helmand I'm describing a piece of ground that runs from Gereshk down to Gamsir in the south, and from western Nad Ali across to eastern Lashkar Gah. Now, within that area around 75,000 people live.

Some have mistakenly described this as a city based strategy; the plain fact is that other than the urban area of Kandahar city, which is genuinely urban, the majority of the population lives in very tightly compact, rural communities. And territory in Helmand is very heavily irrigated with ditches and canals in which villagers are packed. So it's not a city based strategy, it's a population based strategy.

The other part of protecting the population is to protect their ability to move freely between the population centres and thus Highway One, which is the new road which connects Kabul via Kandahar to Herat, is a key piece of ground. The other road that is important is Highway Four which connects Kandahar city with the Chaman border crossing on the direction of travel towards Pakistan. Also important is Route 601 which connects Lashkar Gah in an easterly direction to Route One and that's called Route Bear which connects Kandahar City up to Tarin Kot.

Freedom of movement is critical in that what will regenerate the economy in the south of

Afghanistan will be agriculture, and the ability for people to move their agriculture to market. At the moment it doesn't pay to grow a pomegranate in the orchards of the Arghandab, other than to feed yourself and your family, because if you wanted to move your pomegranates out of Pakistan - or more locally even - you will be so taxed by illegal checkpoints on those routes that you simply won't be able to generate any progress or profit margin, at all. And small wonder that you will grow poppy, because it's the man who takes the poppy off your doorstep who carries the risk.

It's also the case that in counter insurgency campaigns it's about trying to win an argument between the forces of the government and the forces of the insurgency. And in the days of the Taliban it was possible for you to put your mother-in-law on a bus in Kabul, and to be sure in the knowledge that she would arrive in Kandahar several hours later in one piece. It is not the case that you could do that in southern Afghanistan at the moment or, for that matter, in eastern Afghanistan, and we have to change that dynamic and we have to change that paradigm if we are going to genuinely protect the population.

The corollary of the population centric, counter insurgency strategy is that you must have a more sophisticated understanding of your enemy, who has often been regarded as purely being the Taliban with a capital T. There is no doubt that there is a Taliban with a capital T and that he is inspired by an ideological agenda and is generally labelled under the term insurgent. But it's also the case that there are many other people who might wish to make mischief who are probably not motivated by Jihadism or ideology or, indeed, simply trying to get rid of their government. They are more likely motivated by tribal interests, by power, by money, or simply by trying to protect themselves.

An example: The British battle groups that over the last 18 months have had a very difficult time in Sangin have been in the middle of a complicated tribal dispute. When Sher Mohammed Akinzada was removed from the governorate of Helmand at the end of 2005, the delicate balance of power that existed between his Alizai tribe and that of Dan Mohammed Khan up in Sangin, who are Allakozai, was disrupted. The upshot of that was that the Ishaqzai tribe, which had been reasonably downtrodden for several years, saw an opportunity to rise up and have a go at the Allakozai tribe. And Dan Mohammed Khan, the leader of the Allakozai tribe, found himself under significant pressure.

The battle groups that have been based in Sangin in the district's centre providing security and stability in that area in partnership with Afghans, have therefore been labelled alongside the Allakozai tribe, and so the Alizai and the Ishaqzai who wished to make mischief at the expense of the Allakozai have made life difficult for British battle groups. Understanding those motivations will define a different strategy in terms of working out how you will defeat the problem, than if you simply labelled them as Taliban.

One needs to understand the motivation of one's opponent if you're genuinely going to be able to defeat him. The "shape, clear, hold, build" piece in Afghanistan is invariably the whole space, or it is the prospect of the whole space which you explain before you start a clearance operation which is likely to make the difference.

And the reason for that comes down the motivation of your opponent. Invariably what you find

in Afghanistan is that people are not insurgents, they are simply people who are protecting themselves. And if they can be confident that the forces of the government, with support from my staff, will protect them then there is the very reasonable chance that they will lay their weapons down and they will no longer act as your opponent.

Some of the very successful operations that have been mounted in RC South during the course of the last three months by Canadians, Americans and British soldiers have had that premise at the forefront of what they've done. The operation has invariably started with a conversation by an Afghan district governor with the Maliks of the villages concerned, and the consequence of that has been that the Maliks have invited the forces in led by ANA, or even policemen, with ISAF support. And the net effect of this is that you secure the area in a way that requires a lot less attrition than has happened in the past.

Of course, the key to this approach is having adequate force densities in terms of coalition forces but, more importantly, in terms of Afghan forces. And the great advantage that RC South now has is that 21,000 Americans arrived during the course of last year, and a further 15,000 to 20,000 will arrive during the course of the next calendar year. When these are partnered with Afghan forces the net effect is to achieve a density in force ratio terms that is much greater than anything we have had in the past.

It is partnering that provides us with the wherewithal to make a significant difference. It's partnering with the coalition, as I've described, but it's also in fundamentally partnering with the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police Force.

In the south we have issues with the Afghan National Army. Whilst it is an immensely respected institution by Afghans, it is predominantly recruited from the north of the country. Whilst it is representative of the broad, ethnic balance in Afghanistan, 40% Pashtun, the fact of the matter is that the Pashtuns within it invariably are Dari speakers as their first language rather than Pashtun speakers. And this means that they don't necessarily regard the population in the south as being something that they wish to protect; what perhaps they regard the population in the south as, as often as not, is the enemy. And the trick we have to finesse is getting them out on the same work patrol in partnership with our ISAF forces, with a view to protecting the population, but a real goal has to be to recruit a southern based Pashtun security force to be able to provide that protection of the population.

And that, to my mind, is where the police force is really important in this, because it is through recruiting a police force on a regional basis, training it on a regional basis and then assigning it on a regional basis, that we will begin to make a significant difference.

There's a virtuous circle with this, because if you don't protect the population then you won't get recruits coming forward because they will fear the intimidatory factor against their families. So as we get the virtuous circle flowing then we will discover that we begin to recruit policemen in the way I've described, and we will proceed with that process through the course of the first three or four months of this year as we conduct operations in central Helmand, genuinely to assert government control in areas where no control exists at the moment.

We will only demonstrate the sort of positive trends that need to be demonstrated this year if we do it on all lines of operation, and governance is fundamental in this - if we get adequate governance at district level there is a very reasonable chance that we will get the sort of progress that I've described.

And you see that bubbling up all over RC South at the moment. You find it is Garmsir and Nawa in southern Helmand, you find it in the Arghandab to the north and northwest of Kandahar city, and you find it in Panjwa'i to the south west of Kandahar city - and indeed you find it in Tarin Kot where the Dutch are operating, as well. And as it bubbles up, and is properly supported by representation from Kabul, then you'll find that the notion of representative governance at district level will begin to bite and take effect. And you'll begin to see development being fed through those district governance through the Afghan Social Outreach Programme, which I believe has a genuine opportunity to deliver the sort of results that we need to see on the ground. But it must happen with governance, security and development being pushed forward together in relation to each other.

How the campaign will evolve in the south of Afghanistan during the course of the next nine or ten months? The priority for my divisional headquarters, ever since we arrived here has been to adjust the security of arrangements around Kandahar city. We have done that by allocating battle space to Task Force Kandahar, the Canadian battle group, which is co-terminus with that of the Afghan National Army brigade that is based there, and the police force. And we have task organised to that Canadian battle group two additional American battalions, so whilst superficially it might look like a Canadian battle group brigade, the reality is it's about 75% US.

The effect of applying that amount of combat power - partnered at every level in co-terminus terms with the Afghans - has been to provide much better security around Kandahar city, and to change the perception of the residents of Kandahar city in a positive direction.

The second thing that has happened is that a US Stryker brigade, which has an interesting capability, which is completely networked so that each of its 200 or so vehicles can instantly talk to each other digitally, has been applied to the freedom of movement task on Route One, Route 601 in Helmand's area, Route Four down to the Chaman border crossing and on Route Bear up to Tarin Kot.

With some clever aviation capabilities task organised to it and some Afghan partners, as well as some engineering capabilities, this has the prospect to bring a real difference to enabling Afghan freedom of movement on these key highways, with the prospect of generating prosperity that we've not seen before.

The next phase of what will happen will be in central Helmand, and during the first course of this year what you will see is the government of Afghanistan asserting its control and authority over the whole of central Helmand. And that includes the under governed spaces in the district of Nad Ali, to the west of Lashkar Gah and to the south west of Lashkar Gah.

This operation will be led by the provincial governor, Governor Mangal, with the support of the Afghan government behind him. It will be very much demonstrated to the local population in those ungoverned spaces that what will come after the clear phase of the operation will be this

assertion of control by the government of Afghanistan, and improved governance and improved services that will come with all of that, including development. It will involve a significant number of coalition forces; 2,000 to 3,000 US marines, 1,000 plus British soldiers, partnered at every level by the Afghan National Army, with up to four National Army Kandaks linked to it. What will follow will be a significant amount of police presence and KOP to begin with, followed by Afghan uniformed police thereafter.

The net effect of all of this will be that the hold phase will be the decisive phase of the operation, and the outcome will be the government of Afghanistan, through the good offices of Governor Mangal, bringing genuine stability and control and authority to those five provinces of central Helmand, stretching from Gereshk down to Garmsir and from Nad Ali eastwards across to eastern Lashkar Gah.

What will happen after that will be that the centre of Kandahar city will see some attention. And it's our assessment that an Afghan led security solution involving checkpoints, barriers, and a range of other nifty arrangements, will bring a difference to the centre of Kandahar, and will enable genuine development to happen in the centre of Kandahar city by the end of this calendar year.

Key to that will be the delivery of electricity to Kandahar city and, inter alia, to Lashkar Gah, and that is a work in progress - that it is the goal of USAID to attend to that quickly. By attending to that what you will see is employment happening, and it is employment that we critically need around Kandahar city.

That then is how I see the campaign evolving during the course of the next ten months in the south of Afghanistan. What I will stress is the final distinction, I think, which has happened as a consequence of General McChrystal's adjustment to the campaign plan, is that what we now have is the essential gearing between the Kabul level campaign plan and the action at the tactical level in task force areas. We now have the Intermediate Joint Command headquarters in Kabul, a three star headquarters with General Rodriguez in charge of it, and a divisional headquarters in RC South.

The combination of those two factors mean we now have a plan which I felt very confident explaining to Senator John McCain, and allowing him to cascade down every level of the chain of command to see how that plan has been implemented at every level. And it is that understanding and interpretation of General McChrystal's intent at the very lowest level which is the thing that has really changed in the three or four months since I've been in Afghanistan, and that is exactly the effect that General Petraeus created when he arrived in Iraq in 2007. It is the big difference, people now understand the frame of reference of General McChrystal's intent all the way down to the lowest levels.

This is an edited version of a briefing given by Major General Nick Carter on 7th January 2010.