



Timing is everything

A caution for changes to New Zealand's Provincial Reconstruction Team in the midst of the Surge

Josh Wineera

January 2010

On 1 December 2009 President Barrack Obama confirmed an increase of 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan.¹ Obama warned of the likelihood of more casualties. Speaking in New Zealand two months earlier, counterinsurgency expert Dr David Kilcullen also concluded that *“even with more troops there would still be a few years of hard fighting ahead.”*² Like the 2007 surge in Iraq, this decision may be one of the turning points in the 8-year war.

So what is New Zealand doing about this change to the Afghanistan landscape? More specifically is there any serious war-gaming or contingency planning in regards to the configuration of the New Zealand Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to take into account the second order effects of the surge? Do we need to consider these potential effects at all and has the situation really changed?

This article highlights potential changes to the Bamiyan operational ecosystem.³ It also considers current assumptions surrounding the civil-military transition in the contemporary operating environment. This article is not intended to challenge any political or military strategic decision. It is an attempt to highlight the unpredictable and potentially chaotic effects of the surge and their potential for impact upon any changes to the configuration of the PRT.

In October 2009 the Minister of Defence, Dr Wayne Mapp, visited the PRT and stated *"The PRT will soon begin its transition towards an increased civilian component, in line with the Cabinet decision of 10 August [2009]. It is clear that Bamiyan is ready for the next stage of economic development."*⁴ Given the progress of the previous six years and the relatively benign environment in Bamiyan, this is a natural step on the path to enduring stability and economic progress. It would indicate a major measure of success for New Zealand. An important condition however, must be to transition during a period of not just local but national stability. Stable is hardly the term to describe the likely effects of the massive surge of troops in to Afghanistan. The 2007 surge in Iraq initially saw a spike in violent activity (and casualties) throughout the country before tangible changes began to bring about better security conditions. 'Better' is probably a more useful and accurate term rather than 'victory'. The driving force behind the surge in Iraq, US General David Petraeus, was cautious of using the 'V' word.⁵

In December 2009, Dr R. Scott Moore of the US Center for Complex Operations gave a presentation to the US Army/USMC Counterinsurgency Center re-examining complex operations.⁶ Moore's assessment of the civil-military transition is particularly insightful. The current presumption is to transition from military forces, to international civil agencies and then on to indigenous institutions. The historical reality has been that military forces conduct the full spectrum of counterinsurgency tasks, advised and supported by civil agencies and expertise.

In New Zealand's case the Bougainville peace operation mission of 1997-2003, and the subsequent transition from a military-led mission to a total civilian effort (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), is arguably the most recent blue-print. Acknowledging that Bougainville and Afghanistan represent opposite ends of the spectrum of counterinsurgency and stability operations, the critical point in the Bougainville mission was that the area of operations ecosystem had remained in a steady-state for a number of years. More importantly the transition was made at a time when no other major events or activities were taking place allowing the second order effects of the transition to be war-gamed and potential scenarios better mitigated.

Any decision to transition or reconfigure to a civilian-led or civilian-weighted effort is one that requires an innate sense of timing and consideration of events outside of the immediate environment.⁷ A question that New Zealand must pose is "has the situation changed as a result of the US-led troop surge?" A review of the situation is an intrinsic part of the military appreciation process and the degree of change may require a rethink of the original analysis and subsequent decision making.⁸ History has many examples of situations changing and plans being executed despite this new knowledge.

In its current military form the New Zealand PRT is perhaps adequately structured to adapt to and weather the effects of the surge as they occur in other provinces. These effects however are unlikely to be bound by borders or geographical boundaries, and will, in some way or another, affect the situation in Bamiyan.

To help withstand the spill-over of these effects maintaining a good rapport with the local people, in particular the tribes within the province will be vital. The key relationships, fostered at the tribal level, will continue to form a part of the 'protective envelope' over the PRT at this juncture in the mission. It is the small military teams that have successfully engaged the tribes – something US Special Forces soldier Major Jim Gant sees as the fundamental relationship in Afghanistan.⁹ While the New Zealand view may be to help the Afghan government extend its influence beyond Kabul by promoting stability in Bamiyan Province, 'all politics is very much local'. That is, Afghanistan is more tribally pronounced than politically structured, with the latter rightfully or wrongfully tending to be the western strategic perception.

Furthermore, the chaos and unpredictability of the war in Afghanistan is still the source of much debate within the intelligence community. Just this month, the highest ranking intelligence officer in Afghanistan co-authored a rare public critique which highlighted deep seated problems. Major General Michael Flynn contends that *"...because the United States has focused the overwhelming majority of collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, our intelligence apparatus still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade..."*¹⁰ Presumably many of his observations were gathered before the decision to surge more troops. If this is the case then strategists, or more importantly tacticians, will be at this very moment attempting to predict the effects on the environment that these extra combat troops will bring - be they intentional or unintentional.

This period, into the Afghan summer may be one of the most unpredictable of the Afghanistan war. Thus a heavy responsibility rests with those charged with advising and deciding the composition and philosophy of the New Zealand PRT in Bamiyan. Has the situation changed? Given the significant environmental changes occurring beyond the 'quiet' of Bamiyan, is now the right time to commit to a shift in focus – the military to civilian transition? Perhaps is it better to wait a little, to take a moment to analyse and war-game the effects of the surge as they apply to the New Zealand area? What have we got to lose?

Notes

¹ NZ Herald, 3 December 2009, "Obama orders final push", and

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10613081

² Dr David Kilcullen visited New Zealand in October 2009 and spoke at a number of government forums.

³ MAJ Josh Wineera "Inter-Bella: Understanding the Area of Operations Ecosystem", *Colloquium*, US Army and USMC Counterinsurgency Centre, Vol 2, No. 2 (June 2009). Also see Dr David Kilcullen's Conflict Ecosystem "Counterinsurgency Redux", *Survival* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2006-07).

⁴ Minister of Defence Dr Wayne Mapp, <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/minister+visits+troops+afghanistan>

⁵ UK Guardian, 11 September 2008, "General Petraeus warns of long struggle ahead for US in Iraq", and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/11/iraq.usa>

⁶ Dr R Scott Moore's slide presentation is available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/coinsitrep4jan10.pdf> and at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/COIN/index.asp>

⁷ This would have been called the 'Area of Interest' (a geographical terrain focus) when using the more conventional form of the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield. The reference to the 'environment' gives a wider scope of potential influences and effects.

⁸ NZ Army Staff Officers Handbook, NZP86/2000, Vol 2, sect 1-4, p. 1-4-4.

⁹ MAJ Jim Gant, "A strategy for success in Afghanistan: One Tribe at a Time" (2009). A copy of his paper is available at http://blog.stevenpressfield.com/wp-content/themes/stevenpressfield/one_tribe_at_a_time.pdf

¹⁰ MGEN Michael T. Flynn, CAPT Matt Pottinger, Paul D. Batchelor, "Fixing Intel: A blueprint for making intelligence relevant in Afghanistan", Centre for a New American Security, 2010, pg. 4. A copy of the paper is available at <http://www.cnas.org/node/3927>

* Main photo credit: Google images.

About the author: Major Josh Wineera served in Iraq in 2008 as a military advisor to the United Nations mission during the 'surge'. He served in Bougainville in 2003 as chief of operations of the Peace Monitoring Group during the transition from a military-led operation to a totally civilian mission. Major Wineera has also served in Bosnia and East Timor.

Major Wineera is currently a Teaching Fellow (Tactics) at the Centre for Defence Studies, Massey University. He is a former tactics instructor at the Australian Land Warfare Centre. His paper "Inter-Bella: Understanding the Area of Operations Ecosystem" was published by the US Army/USMC Counterinsurgency Center in 2009.