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## Chapter 7 The British Case

### 7.1 Introduction: Setting the Stage

The context in which the decision was taken to commit British forces should principally be seen in relation to the on-going deployment of British forces to Iraq and the unfolding logic of NATO's expansion to the Southern provinces in Afghanistan. The 'defining moments' of the reconstruction of the British case are largely found in the dedication of Prime Minister Blair to strengthen the United Kingdom's presence in Afghanistan, military alliance politics, and a self-enforcing belief amongst senior decision-makers at the political military level in the inevitability of a leading British role in NATO's expansion to the South of Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Blair had instigated a renewed British interest in Afghanistan and made sure his intent was clearly communicated by either him personally or by his trustees. However, two major strategic decisions during the decision-making procedure to deploy British troops to the South of Afghanistan were not initiated from prior coherent strategic guidance: the selection of the province, and the number of troops.<sup>1</sup>

NATO's stabilisation operations, and the Alliance's desire to expand its footprint, is the setting in which the senior civil and military decision-makers anticipated and developed the activities that led to the use of military means for the stabilisation of Helmand.

### 7.2 The Foreign Policy Problem: The Logic of Participating in NATO's Expansion South Afghanistan

At the time a renewed interest in Afghanistan emerged, instigated by NATO's proclaimed counter clockwise expansion, the United Kingdom was still heavily engaged in the Iraq campaign. The deployment had put both British politicians and military in an uncomfortable position: the legitimacy of the campaign was questioned since intelligence on the presence of weapons of mass destruction had been wrought. Moreover, the war had been unpopular from the outset, and the already limited support was declining.<sup>2</sup>

1 Michael Clarke (ed.), *The Afghan Papers: Committing Britain to War in Helmand, 2005-06. White Hall Papers 77* (London 2011); Interview Cavanagh. Even though most individual actors relevant for the British case have been interviewed, the reconstruction of the case heavily draws on material as presented in the Afghan Papers and Britain's Afghanistan Deployment in 2006 a series of papers edited and/or collected by Michael Clarke, director of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) written by various political and military actors involved in the decision-making in the run up to the campaign. In addition, much evidence has been delivered to both the Iraq Inquiry and the House of Commons Defense Committee which has been very useful for the reconstruction of the UK case.

2 Steven Philip Kramer, 'Blair's Britain after Iraq', *Foreign Affairs* 82(4) (2003) 90-104, 90.

Across Whitehall, there seemed to be a drift towards denial of disappointing results in Iraq and a sense that redemption could be found in the proposed Afghanistan deployment.<sup>3</sup> As recollected by Prime Minister Blair, military commanders had been disenchanted by the limitations of what they could achieve in Iraq and as such expressed their desire to focus more on Afghanistan than Iraq.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the apparent success in the Multinational Division (South East) in 2003–04<sup>5</sup> supposedly had encouraged the British Chiefs of Staff to conclude that operations in Iraq could be successfully maintained and accomplished, while, concurrently, planning [in conjunction with close allies] a deployment to South Afghanistan to further expand NATO's footprint during phase III.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, both civil and military respondents indicated there was a general feeling that Afghanistan was indeed a 'good war' since the international military presence had originated from a United Nations Security Council resolution<sup>7</sup> and NATO troops had entered Afghanistan accordingly. This was a very powerful motive, given the debates about the contested legitimacy of the Iraq operation.<sup>8</sup> The argument which supposedly had swayed British Ministers most was the proclaimed responsibility of the international community to finish its efforts started in Afghanistan, by consolidating the progress made so far and ensuring the investment was not wasted.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the narrative voiced by politicians that this war needed to be fought for the Afghans and their future, seemingly had convinced large parts of the public as well.<sup>10</sup>

According to Prime Minister Blair, the United Kingdom had never turned its back on Afghanistan and referred to an ongoing commitment to the Afghan cause, even at times when operations in Iraq were not going smoothly.<sup>11</sup> As such, the renewed focus on

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- 3 Interviews respondents and Beadle, 'Afghanistan in the Context of Iraq', 79.
- 4 Tony Blair, *The Journey* (London 2010) 671.
- 5 Reportedly, pragmatism and minimum force played a key role in the success which British forces achieved in MND (SE). Also the political process, coupled with the threat of military action, increasingly pacified Shia-based elements of the insurgency such as al-Sadr and the Mahdi army was named to have played a crucial role. See *Iraq: An Initial Assessment of Post-Conflict Operations. Sixth Report of Session 2004–05* 1. House of Commons Defence Committee (2005 London), 29–35.
- 6 Robert Fry and Desmond Bowen, 'UK National Strategy and Helmand', *Whitehall Papers* 77(1) (2011) 68–72.
- 7 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001) See [http://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/unscr/resolution\\_1386.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/unscr/resolution_1386.pdf)
- 8 Foreign Secretary at the time of the invasion of Iraq, Jack Straw provided evidence to the Iraq Inquiry that he had urged Tony Blair just a week before the war to 'explore all possible alternatives' to conflict. Richard Norton, 'Taylor Iraq war inquiry: Straw urged Blair to explore alternatives to conflict', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2011. [http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/feb/02/iraq-inquiry-jack-straw-regime-change-tony-blair-\(version-02.02.2011\)](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/feb/02/iraq-inquiry-jack-straw-regime-change-tony-blair-(version-02.02.2011)). Furthermore, failure to find weapons of mass destruction as early as June 2003 had battered British support for the Iraq War from over 60% to less than a majority. By the summer of 2006, support for the war had fallen below 30%. Widespread public anger over the Iraq War likely declined support for the conflict in Afghanistan. See: <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/10/assessing-british-support-for-the-war-in-afghanistan>
- 9 Cavanagh. 'Ministerial Decision-Making in the Run-Up to the Helmand Deployment', 50.
- 10 See: <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/10/assessing-british-support-for-the-war-in-afghanistan>
- 11 Blair, *The Journey*, 671.

Afghanistan was framed as a continuous commitment to the war torn country. In a sense this was not completely incorrect as the British had engaged themselves in Afghanistan since the intervention of the ‘coalition of the willing’ in 2001. Initially, the British military efforts had concentrated around Kabul, but in the summer of 2003 they launched a PRT in Mazar-e – Sharif. Initially, the PRT originated under the OEF command, but was transferred to ISAF a year later. Simultaneously, a second PRT was launched in Meymaneh (Faryab Province).<sup>12</sup> Hence, the main focus of the United Kingdom in Afghanistan was directed to the relatively calm northern part of the country.

### 7.3 Occasion for Decision I: Blair’s Desire to Lead NATO’s Expansion to The South

At the NATO conference in Istanbul in June 2004, Prime Minister Blair announced that Britain would increase its contribution to ISAF by deploying the largely British-staffed ARRC headquarters to Afghanistan to lead the stage three expansion of ISAF.<sup>13</sup> This announcement reportedly took General Dannatt, at that time commanding the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps<sup>14</sup>, by surprise: ‘Very quickly at the NATO summit in June, very quickly after that, an announcement was made which I was totally unaware of, that in the middle of 2006 or thereabouts the UK would take a major lead in an enhanced NATO operation in Afghanistan and that we, the UK, would be a significant player in that and that Headquarters ARRC would lead that. Wow, where did that come from?’<sup>15</sup>

Most likely, it had originated from Prime Minister Blair’s conviction that the United Kingdom needed to commit more forces to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Consequently, he had offered the earlier mentioned deployment of the ARRC and showed great interest in a deployment of British forces to the South.<sup>16</sup> The alteration of the British effort in Afghanistan from the North to the South was formally agreed to by the Chiefs of Staff and consequently articulated to NATO by the Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, on the 10th of February 2005 at the NATO Ministerial conference in Nice.<sup>17</sup>

12 Eronen Oskari, ‘PRT models in Afghanistan’, *Civilian Crisis Management Studies* 1(5) (2008) 20.

13 James Ferguson, *A Million Bullets, the Real Story of the British Army in Afghanistan* (London 2009).

14 Headquarters Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (HQ ARRC) is ‘a highly capable multinational, NATO operational headquarters, fully ready for rapid deployment worldwide within five to thirty days, with dedicated and integrated support to sustain and protect the headquarters once deployed’. See: NATO ‘HQ ARRC’, <http://www.rrc.nato.int/alliedrapidreactioncorps.aspx> (last accessed, 10.05.2014).

15 Evidence delivered by general Dannatt to the Chilcot Inquiry, on the 28th of July, 2010. <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/53218/Dannatt%202010-07-28%2051.pdf>

16 Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*; interviews respondents.

17 Cavanagh, ‘Ministerial Decision-Making in the Run-Up to the Helmand Deployment’, 54-55.

The respondents all indicated that the political context of NATO's expansion had seemingly informed the reasoning for committing British forces. It appeared as if it was a logical step in a direction already taken by Prime Minister Blair and his government and in line with NATO's plans to expand its area of operations to the South. Some even argued, if NATO failed in Afghanistan, the British strategic end would fail with it. In other words, the national strategic imperative became the renaissance of the NATO's campaign through a deployment of British forces to the South of Afghanistan. The deployment of forces would potentially serve as a catalyst for the completion of the NATO plan and, essentially, to a significant commitment of American forces which was assessed as a precondition for success as well.<sup>18</sup>

According to a special advisor to the government, Matt Cavanagh, the military came close to arguing that only Britain could assume responsibility over the South, thereby rescuing the campaign and prompting the Americans and other allies to reinforce their efforts and commit to the ISAF plan. Even though many military resources were still committed in Iraq, the deployment to South Afghanistan was considered manageable, he explained.<sup>19</sup>

The evidence as presented during the hearing [of those involved in the decision-making in the run up to the deployment to Helmand] in the House of Commons Defence Committee<sup>20</sup> and the Iraq Inquiry<sup>21</sup> indicated the military did in fact provide the information, both in briefings and memos that the mission was do-able, [which will be dealt with in a more extensive manner later on in the chapter]. There was however often a reference to the deployment to Iraq, and the fact that this put a restriction on the number of forces and equipment available for Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

As alluded to by Clarke: 'Whatever interpretation was made of the desire to re-engage in Afghanistan from around 2003, there can be little doubt that carrying it through at a time when operations in Iraq so dominated the minds of policy-makers, made strategic coherence extremely difficult to maintain by mid-2005. Critical military decision-makers at the time, including military service chiefs, struggled to recall any occasions on which a genuine strategic discussion of the upcoming Afghan commitment took place. Regular meetings and

- 18 Fry and D Bowen, 'UK national strategy and Helmand', 70; Michael Clarke, 'Conclusion', *Whitehall Papers* 70(1) (2011) 81-93, 84.
- 19 Interview Cavanagh; Cavanagh, *Ministerial Decision-Making in the Run-Up to the Helmand Deployment*, 50.
- 20 The Defence Committee 'is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies. It chooses its own subjects of inquiry'. UK Parliament, 'Defence Committee', <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/Defence-committee/role/> (last accessed 10.11.2013).
- 21 The Chilcot inquiry [named after its chairman, Sir John Chilcot] 'is a public inquiry into the United's Kingdom role in the Iraq War. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, on 15 June 2009 announced with an initial statement that proceedings would take place in private. This decision which was subsequently reversed after receiving criticism in the media and the House of Commons'. The Iraq Inquiry, 'About the inquiry', <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/about.aspx> (last accessed 10.11.2013).
- 22 See: The Iraq Inquiry, 'Evidence', <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/transcripts.aspx>; UK Parliament, 'Operations in Helmand 2006' <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55405.htm#n26>

transatlantic video conferences were overwhelmingly dominated by Iraq operations'.<sup>23</sup> Even more tellingly, as put forward by General Jackson, he had no idea why the UK had gone to Helmand, even though he was Chief of the General Staff at the time the decision was taken.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, as indicated by the private secretary of the Secretary of State for Defence, a long-term strategy for the region in which British interests were spelled out for departments of state, had not been developed. Furthermore, the Foreign Office had difficulties articulating British long-term interests and relative priorities for Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as explained by the Permanent Undersecretary of Defence: 'The motives were clearly political [...] There was a strong and clear political and strategic rationale for the mission'.<sup>26</sup> His observation was underlined by Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (commitments)<sup>27</sup> Charles Style: 'The idea of deploying troops to the South was not bad. Both the UN and NATO had a real aspiration to 'do good'.<sup>28</sup> The rationale of, amongst other things, supporting NATO, had gained ground with the military planning circles as well. Chief plans at the Permanent Joint Headquarters called to mind: 'Given the reality of the NATO expansion to the South, I – and most people involved in the planning of the operation – never questioned the lack of clarity [about the mission] or raised any doubts about the political/military direction of the operation.'<sup>29</sup>

However, some questioned the endeavour in terms of the desire to do good. One of them, former ambassador to Kabul, Sir Sherard Cowper Coles, claimed the only political objective for the United Kingdom sending troops to the South of Afghanistan was 'keeping up with the Joneses'. In other words, trying to be like the rest, in this case, a reliable NATO partner. 'We wanted to impress the Americans' he said.<sup>30</sup>

23 Clarke, 'The Helmand Decision', 14.

24 Elliot, *High Command*, 254.

25 A view presented by Nick Beadle, private secretary in the Private Office of the Ministry of Defense from late summer 2005 to mid-2007 for respectively Defense secretaries John Reid and Des Browne. See: Beadle, 'Afghanistan and the Context of Iraq'.

26 Interview Tebbit.

27 Later on, the term for this post changed to deputy Chief of Defence Staff operations. The post entails the provision of oversight over upcoming and ongoing operations.

28 Interview Style.

29 Interview Chief plans PJHQ.

30 Interview Coper Coles.

## 7.4 Occasion for Decision II: NATO's Force Generation Meeting

In February 2005, a month before NATO's Stage III informal force generation<sup>31</sup> meeting took place, Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, announced his intention to deploy British forces to the South of Afghanistan in parliament. However, deliberations about a deployment to the South were already well underway. As already outlined in the Dutch case, informal meetings with partnering nations - Canada and the Netherlands – that had occurred since the summer of 2004, served to cater for an enhanced trilateral cooperation with the intention to assume responsibility for NATO's Stage III expansion.

These informal talks between the three nations carried great value because without this partnering, neither one of these nations would likely have deployed their forces. In addition, shared thinking and observations about available provinces and probable time-frames, amongst other things, are known to have figured in their calculations.<sup>32</sup>

As explained by a senior government official: 'It was a grouping of people that thought they could be working together. This idea had emerged amongst the militaries of these countries. Personally, I do not recall or believe, the United States had initiated the idea of these countries working together in order to take on the counter clockwise expansion to the South [...]'.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, a military liaison process instigated these three partners to engage in South Afghanistan, rather than a political initiative. However, it followed a direction already explicated by Blair when he announced the United Kingdom was to play a larger role in Afghanistan and subsequently made the offer of deploying the ARRC at the NATO summit in the summer of 2004, as described earlier. This initiative was instrumental in shaping the subsequent process from then on.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, some argued the decision-making process mission for the deployment of British forces to South Afghanistan contained a democratic deficit. 'There ought to be something underneath military enthusiasm. Further down the system, there should be strategic literates to guide the effort. We should have said, well hang on, let's stop, let's think. By the time doubts were raised [in the autumn of 2005 MGM] reflection about what was going

31 The procedure for staffing an operation or mission is often referred to as "force generation". This procedure ensures that Alliance operations or missions have the manpower and materials required to achieve set objectives. NATO, 'Troop Contributions', [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50316.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50316.htm) (last accessed 08.08.2013).

32 Willis, *An Unexpected War, A Not-Unexpected Mission*. PP 2, 8

33 Interview government official.

34 Matthew Willis, 'Canada in Regional Command South: Alliance Dynamics and National Imperatives', *Whitehall Papers* 77(1) (2011) 49-67, 56.

on was no longer possible. It has to be said though; there were opponents and supporters for the mission in both the civilian and military community'.<sup>35</sup>

Some even argued NATO's expansion to the South of Afghanistan embodied political guidance and respectively approval in itself. As alluded to by a military planner: 'The very fact that there was an ISAF campaign plan in place, contradicts the suggestion that politicians were behind on the deployment of forces to the South of Afghanistan. This plan was NAC [North Atlantic Council] approved and as such is evidence that there was political approval and direction'.<sup>36</sup>

### 7.5 Emergence of a Decision Unit: The Actions of a Single Group with a Dominant Leader

Prime Minister Blair had set out the decision path for a British engagement at the NATO conference in Istanbul. His dedication to revive the NATO mission in Afghanistan by committing British troops for its Stage III expansion had reportedly set the tone for the detailed planning that followed in the Ministry of Defence and subordinated military headquarters.<sup>37</sup>

The closed features of the Reid group which was to oversee the planning for the mission to South Afghanistan were very much a reflection of Prime Minister Blair's personal style of leadership. According to a special advisor to the government, Matt Cavanagh, Blair was more practiced in questioning advice telling him he could not do something than he was in spotting the risks in advice reassuring him that he could. In fact, the Prime Minister already seemed to have made up his mind and envisioned a leading role in the expansion of the Afghan campaign.<sup>38</sup> It facilitated an emphasis on the accomplishment of the task that had been set out for them.

The relations within the Reid Group were furthermore heavily influenced by the Prime Minister's predilection for the military as his preferred institution. This engendered a dominant position of the military as a pivotal actor in the process: they were not only the providers of the majority of resources required for the task but also already heavily engaged in the preparations for the deployment within the trilateral military working groups.

As articulated by a high government official: 'Blair liked the approach of the military. They would tell him what they could do. Unfortunately, the military – in this case – made

35 Interview Clarke.

36 Interview Southall.

37 Interviews respondents

38 Cavanagh, 'Ministerial Decision-Making in the Run-Up to the Helmand Deployment', 50.

a rather bad judgment caused by over-enthusiasm about their own capability. As such, the question needs to be asked whether the military made the proper assessment as to what it was they were getting into'.<sup>39</sup> Hence, looming political desire articulated by Prime Minister Blair coincided with military enthusiasm to commence a novel endeavour.

## 7.6 Decision Unit Dynamics: The Process of Interpretation

The interpretation of the task at hand was very much geared in the direction of how to deploy instead of first thoroughly addressing the question of if a deployment had in fact to materialise. Yet the planning of the deployment at hand had already been considered, for all practical purposes, with important choices that had to be made. One of these choices was the selection of the province the United Kingdom were to deploy their forces to. A decision entailing strategic guidance, but in fact precisely that had been lacking.

### *Selection of the Province*

In the first half of 2005, the British never intended to go into Helmand, presuming they would be lead nation and they anticipated being deployed to Kandahar due to its strategic importance.<sup>40</sup> The permanent joint headquarters had sent off a reconnaissance party to South Afghanistan headed by General Messenger, to provide them with recommendations about the Southern provinces. Messenger came back recommending Kandahar, but decided after another recce that British troops would have to deploy to Helmand.<sup>41</sup> In April 2005<sup>42</sup> the decision had been made to assume responsibility over the biggest opium producing province<sup>43</sup> of Afghanistan: Helmand.

The chief reason for the decision to deploy British forces to the province Helmand instead of another province appeared to be coalition military politics instead of a well thought through strategic political decision. In fact, according to senior military sources, the Director of operations at the Ministry of Defence had been sent to one of the working level planning

39 Interview senior government official.

40 Carl Forsberg, *The Taliban's Campaign for Kandahar. Afghanistan Report 3*. Institute for the Study of War (2009 Washington DC); Carl Forsberg, *Politics and Power in Kandahar. Afghanistan Report 5*. Institute for the Study of War (2010 Washington DC).

41 Interview Messenger.

42 According to Matthew Willis this decision to have been made in December 2004 since Canada announced the deployment of their PRT to Kandahar province. He argues the announcement would not have been made unless negotiations between UK and Canada would not have progressed to a final stage. Willis, 'Canada in Regional Command South', 60.

43 See: Jonathan Goodhand, 'Frontiers and Wars: the Opium Economy in Afghanistan', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 5(2) (2005) 191-216; Adam Pain, *Opium Trading Systems in Helmand and Ghor. Issues Paper Series*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (2006); Peter Dahl Thruelsen, 'Counterinsurgency and a Comprehensive Approach: Helmand Province, Afghanistan', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19(2) (2008) 201-220.

conferences in Ottawa (June 2005) with the guidance to opt for Kandahar. He nevertheless returned with the message British forces were to deploy to Helmand.<sup>44</sup>

General Richards was preparing to assume command over ISAF from May 2006 onwards and had assessed Kandahar as the centre of gravity of the insurgency and the vital ground of the campaign.<sup>45</sup> As explained by the general: 'Until today I do not understand why we deployed to Helmand since my guidance delivered to the Director of operations at the MoD was to assume responsibility for Kandahar'.<sup>46</sup>

The explanation provided by those involved at the informal military planning conferences was that Canada had been granted responsibility over Kandahar because the United Kingdom wanted to safeguard the trilateral cooperation. Apparently, Canada had announced their troop contribution non-negotiable and conditional on being given Kandahar. The Canadian focus on Kandahar seemed to be founded in the fact that a Canadian battle group had already been present in Kandahar since 2002.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the British delegation had accepted responsibility for Helmand as a 'necessary concession' in the cooperation with its partners in South Afghanistan.<sup>48</sup>

Some perspectives on the choice for Helmand province:

How then did we end up going to Helmand, rather than to Kandahar? I can offer nothing more as a reason than a failure to persuade the US to support us, as against the preference of the Canadians to go to Kandahar. The US rightly guessed we would go into Southern Afghanistan anyway. Ministers were advised not to try to reverse decisions that had been made in military circles some time previously. The tail was wagging the dog: coalition military politics were driving national strategic interest. With hindsight, my impression is that diplomacy and politics followed rather tamely. Notable commanders, including General Richards, instinctively understood the strategic significance of Kandahar, with its links to Quetta in less-troubled times. If our long-term strategic priorities are in Pakistan and our security interests lie in the border regions, then we should have pushed harder to be at the centre of gravity of the region.<sup>49</sup>

How did our nations go about getting which province? There was no strategic foresight on where to go. Canada selected Kandahar because of its strategic importance. Other

44 Interview Richards.

45 Fergusson, *Million Bullets*, 231-233

46 Interview Richards.

47 Willis, *Alliance Dynamics and National Imperatives*, 60

48 The conference took place on the 21st of June 2005 in Ottawa.

49 Beadle, 'Afghanistan and the context of Iraq', 75.

provinces in the South such as Uruzgan were significantly important but not the most important. The UK made a strategic error in this case by choosing Helmand.<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, the arrangement that had taken shape between the military and defence staffs in London, Ottawa, and The Hague was that the Canadians would send an enlarged battle group to Kandahar; the Dutch would send a battle group to Uruzgan province; and the British would deploy their forces to Helmand. The three partnering nations agreed to mutually support one another. Uruzgan was important for its 'stay behind potential' and training facility for insurgents<sup>51</sup> but Helmand and Kandahar were deemed key in the strategic sense that they were at the centre of attention of both criminal and insurgent activities. Kandahar especially embodied the heart of the Taliban resurgence and needed to be secured.<sup>52</sup>

Later on, the choice for Helmand was rhetorically repackaged in the sense that it would be consistent with the British counter-narcotics role in Afghanistan, a role Prime Minister Blair identified as vital for British interests. As recollected by Clarke, based on his personal interviews with the involved actors: 'The impetus for Downing Street to stage a deployment to Helmand was so strong that Blair would have redirected the decision if one would have chosen to assume responsibility for Kandahar'.<sup>53</sup> His observation is underlined by the Permanent Undersecretary for Defence, Tebbit, who described Blair's dedication towards the countering of narcotics to have been prevalent before 9/11. 'It has always been a strong British stand, even when we were chasing after Al Qaeda [during operation Enduring Freedom]'.<sup>54</sup>

Some media reported on the presupposed relation between the drugs on the streets of London and the deployment to Helmand as imaginary. An article in the Guardian ironically stated: 'Lost in some Lawrence of Arabia fantasy, he is walking the fields of Helmand when he should be patrolling the streets of Glasgow. Offered a virtuous circle, he has opted for a vicious one'.<sup>55</sup>

Interestingly enough, Prime Minister Blair himself hardly made any reference to the decision-making with regard to the deployment to Helmand or his interest in fighting narcotics on the streets of London as a reason for the British engagement in South Afghanistan in his biography.<sup>56</sup> However in all truth, the counter-narcotics pillar of the

50 Interview Southall.

51 As indicated by Sean M. Maloney small stay-behind groups were present in Uruzgan. Maloney, Sean, 'A Violent Impediment: the Evolution of Insurgent Operations in Kandahar Province 2003–07', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19(2) (2008) 201–220.

52 Giustozzi, Antonio and Noor Ullah. 'The Inverted Cycle: Kabul and the Strongmen's Competition for Control over Kandahar, 2001–2006', *Central Asian Survey* 26(2) (2007) 167–184.

53 Interview Clarke.

54 Interview Tebbit.

55 Simon Jenkins, 'Blair's latest expedition is a Lawrence of Arabia fantasy', *The Guardian*, 01.02.2006.

56 The deployment to Helmand is even not named in the index nor are major players or committees as the Reid group mentioned in his writings about his time in office. Blair, *The Journey*.

ISAF campaign had been a British responsibility since 2002.<sup>57</sup> Soon thereafter, the counter-narcotics programs in Afghanistan became a Foreign Office priority. The department seemed to be even more determined to carry it out effectively when Helmand, the centre of Afghan opium production, became a British concern.<sup>58</sup>

### *Force Package and Expenditure*

The second strategic issue that needed to be dealt with was the size and composition of the British military contribution. Somewhere in August 2005, the 16 Brigade and 3 PARA regiment received a warning order about a deployment to Helmand which was due to commence in the beginning 2006.<sup>59</sup> This warning order to particular units confirmed that prior to any operational planning and formal appreciation of the task, the Ministry of Defence - very likely with the support of the Treasury - already decided to limit the size of the force to a reinforced battle group of 3150 men.<sup>60</sup> In addition, it was communicated to the planners that expenditure had been capped at 1 billion for a three-year deployment.<sup>61</sup>

Secretary of State for Defence, tasked by Prime Minister Blair to prepare the British deployment to South Afghanistan, asked for a more detailed plan for a force of approximately 3000 men. He and his Defence Chiefs acknowledged that 'the further down the planning route they went, the harder it would be to pull back'.<sup>62</sup>

As recollected by General Messenger, the permanent joint headquarters presented the force estimate to the Ministry of Defence in August 2005.<sup>63</sup> This plan was then presented by the director of operations at the MOD to the Secretary of State for Defence in September 2005.<sup>64</sup> However, the planners at the permanent joint headquarters had not even begun drawing the composition of the taskforce. As explained by chief plans of the Permanent Joint Headquarters: 'The NATO plan was to send a taskforce. None of us knew what a taskforce was.

57 The 'lead nation' model of international assistance to Afghanistan was agreed to at a donors' conference held in Tokyo in early 2002. Five countries each agreed to assume lead coordination responsibility for assistance to a single area of security-related Afghan administration: the United States for the army, Germany for the police, Italy for the judiciary, the United Kingdom for counter-narcotics, and Japan for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of militias. The Afghanistan Compact, a formal statement of commitment by the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the international community, finalized in January 2006, shifted responsibility from lead nations to Afghanistan itself. Steve Bowman and Catherine Dale, *War in Afghanistan: Strategy, Military Operations, and Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service (2010) 12.

58 Valentina Soria, 'Flawed Comprehensiveness: the Joint Plan for Helmand', *Whitehall Papers* 77(1) (2011) 30-48, 35

59 Rodwell, 'Between Idea and the Reality', 19; Interview Stuart Tootal.

60 Tom Rodwell, 'Between Idea and Reality', 19

61 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 224-225; Soria, 'Flawed Comprehensiveness'.

62 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 224.

63 Interview Messenger.

64 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 224-225

No doctrine was available. If that would have been the case, we would have understood the estimate of the composition and size of the taskforce better'.<sup>65</sup>

At the trilateral working conferences, the United States briefed the three partnering nations about what should at least be included in the formatted taskforces. Of course, every nation remained autonomous with regard to the composition of the respective taskforces, but had in the back of their minds the suggestions about the composition of the task force as put forward by the American representatives.

In addition to the lack of understanding about the composition of the task force, the force package discussion was fraught with debates on reducing operational activities in Iraq. Also, the planning assumption of the campaign in Helmand was – according to most respondents – informed by the belief that the United Kingdom would deploy its forces to a relative benign region with a main focus on stabilisation and reconstruction activities.<sup>66</sup>

The question remained whether the proposed size of the taskforce was indeed realistic. The estimate allegedly relied heavily on the already committed British forces in Iraq. However, political and military decision-makers believed these two operations could be carried out concurrently.<sup>67</sup> As explained by the Prime Minister; 'Afghanistan did not affect decisions on drawing down troop levels. Had it been said to me at any time in early 2003 that we could not fulfil our task because of shortages of troops, I would not have committed us'.<sup>68</sup>

In various accounts<sup>69</sup> military commanders were accused of providing advice that politicians and civil servants wanted to hear, rather than the cold facts that might have led to a less enthusiastic political imperative about leading the NATO campaign into Southern Afghanistan.<sup>70</sup> One of the architects of the alteration from Iraq to Afghanistan was the director of operations at the Ministry of Defence, General Fry. Along with Blair's foreign policy advisor, Nigel Sheinwald, and the Chief of Defence, General Walker, he became instrumental in moving forward the deployment through Whitehall.<sup>71</sup> General Fry dismissed suggestions that commanders had not provided straightforward advice to conform to the political mood, or out of fear of promotional prospects: 'That's not being spinelessly compliant with

65 Interview chief plans PJHQ.

66 Interviews Hill and McNeil.

67 Interview respondents; Fairweather, *A War of Choice*..

68 Statement delivered by Tony Blair to the Iraq Inquiry on the 14th of January 2011. Iraq Inquiry, 'Statement delivered by Tony Blair to the Iraq Inquiry 14.01.2011', <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50743/Blair-statement.pdf> (last accessed 15.11.2013).

69 Iraq Inquiry, Defence Committee Hearings on Afghanistan, media reports, amongst others: Deborah Haynes, 'They went into Helmand with eyes shut and fingers crossed', *The Times*, 9 June 2010. (version 09.06.2013) <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/Defence/article2547216.ece> (last accessed 06.12.2013); Waal, *Depending on the Right People*; Frank Ledwige, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT 2011); Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (London 2011).

70 Haynes, 'They went into Helmand with eyes shut and fingers crossed'.

71 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 224

what you know the political intentions are. It's taking upon you a responsibility for making judgments and recommendations which are properly yours. You don't delegate these things up to politicians who are probably less well qualified to make the judgments than you are'.<sup>72</sup>

However, military officers working on the Afghanistan estimate expressed severe doubts about the feasibility of the mission and composition of the force and consequently chose to raise their concerns on various occasions. One of them was the chief planner at the permanent joint headquarters in Northwood. He and his deputy wrote a paper questioning the estimate that had been provided to the Ministry of Defence by PJHQ stating it to be sub-optimal because it had insufficient intelligence and other shortcomings. The general refers to the paper as 'not that mature in that it was long and needed further work but it commented that J2 [intelligence]<sup>73</sup> was inadequate. It commented that the proposed order of battle [ORBAT] and equipment table was inadequate. It proposed further Prelim Ops and strengthening of the ORBAT and equipment table including more weaponry and better armoured vehicles'.<sup>74</sup>

The paper was consequently criticised by the Chief of Staff of PJHQ and the operations staff at the Ministry of Defence on the basis that if the shortcomings as mentioned in the paper, became a matter of knowledge to senior MOD staff and the Defence Secretary, they would not give permission for the deployment to go ahead. Consequently, the paper was not published.<sup>75</sup>

The subsequent months were used by the Ministry of Defence to set about winning Treasury approval for a three year mission costing close to 1 billion pounds.<sup>76</sup> According to a civilian involved in the planning, the time frame of three years was questioned as well. 'We said the time frame didn't make sense. We got a huge push back from Whitehall, who wanted us to write something different for the Ministers'.<sup>77</sup>

## 7.7 Process Outcome: Sequential Decisions

72 General Frye cited in: Haynes, *They went into Helmand with eyes shut and fingers crossed*.

73 Chief plans PJHQ felt left out of the cycle of crucial information since information collected by the preliminary ops team was with-held from the planning division by chief intelligence of PJHQ. He supposedly refused to attend planning meetings and reported separately to the higher echelons. Chief intelligence refers to this information as 'nonsense' and stated he did attend the meetings. He did however conduct regular sensitive reporting/discussions directly with CJO and Gen Wall eg on the SF reconnaissance preliminary operation PJHQ mounted to assess Helmand in more detail before main deployment (email correspondence general Newton, 13 December 2013).

74 Interview chief plans PJHQ

75 Interview chief plans PJHQ and email correspondence December 2013.

76 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 224

77 Civilian planner quoted in: Haynes, *They went into Helmand with eyes shut and fingers crossed*.

At this point, choices were made with regard to the size of the force, the expenditure, and the duration of the mission, but none of these choices were founded on a proper analysis of the task at hand. That is to say, a thorough understanding of what one could encounter in Helmand. The main planning assumption about the forthcoming mission was that the British anticipated a rather benign environment. Opinions differ about the planning assumptions of the operation to Helmand. As already referred to earlier, most respondents - most prominently those who executed recess to the province and those who were involved in the planning - indicated they had not anticipated an insurgency. Hence, the original assumption was that combat operations would only be conducted when necessary, since the main focus would lie on the stabilisation of the province through the implementation of reconstruction activities and the facilitation of 'good governance'.

Indeed, the Secretary of State for Defence told a reporter that 'if we came for three years there to accomplish our mission and had not fired one shot at the end of it, we would be very happy indeed'.<sup>78</sup> What was not highlighted by the media, however, was the fact that Reid had also said [during that same interview] that he expected the mission to be 'complex and dangerous' because 'the terrorists will want to destroy the economy and the legitimate trade and the government that we are helping to build up'. In addition, he added that 'if this didn't involve the necessity to use force, we wouldn't send soldiers'.<sup>79</sup>

Even though the latest deployment to Iraq had taught the armed forces that intelligence in these kinds of operations was crucial<sup>80</sup>, it seemed that yet again, the (lack) of intelligence was foundational for the underestimation of the task at hand. In retrospect, the intelligence community was criticised for failing to provide a reliable analysis of the real condition of the Taliban insurgency, which presumably led to an underestimation of the threat and fuelled a sense of misplaced confidence in Whitehall<sup>81</sup> as to what could be achieved.<sup>82</sup>

The situation in Helmand was discussed in Whitehall as General Fry presented the earlier mentioned plan about the size of the force and the budget in September 2005. At this meeting several critical questions were asked about the security situation and possible threats to the British forces, all of which were downplayed by General Fry. This was much to the frustration of secret intelligence service personnel and military officers present who were aware of information collected during a Special Forces reconnaissance mission earlier

78 See: BBC, 'UK troops "to target terrorists"' (version 24.04.2006), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4935532.stm> (last accessed 10.05.2014).

79 Ferguson, *A million bullets*, 21

80 Robert Jervis, 'Reports, Politics, and Intelligence Failures: The Case of Iraq', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 29(1) (2006) 3-52; Davies, Philip HJ., 'Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17(3) (2004) 495-520.

81 Whitehall is the popular term for the Cabinet Office.

82 Soria, 'Flawed 'Comprehensiveness'', 34,35, 40.

that year: an increase of coalition forces in the province could provoke a fight especially if the opium trade was endangered.<sup>83</sup>

Others, however, suggested that the intelligence picture was as good as it could get but was certainly limited. When asked about the intelligence estimate with regard to Helmand, General Fry called to mind the British mission to Sierra Leone. ‘Even though we did not know what we would be facing in Sierra Leone, the operation turned into a success’.<sup>84</sup>

Some chose to voice their disquiet about the limited intelligence. One of the military officers who attended the meeting questioned the General’s characterisation of the security situation in Helmand. Consequently, he confronted General Fry’s deputy, General Hughes, and told him that in fact they had no idea what they would find on the ground. He asked him to put his concerns forward to the Secretary of State for Defence, but General Hughes reportedly refused to do so.<sup>85</sup>

Also, the secret intelligence service operative who was present at the meeting raised his doubts by delivering a formal letter of concern to Reid, but by then the Secretary of State for Defence seemed to have made up his mind.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Air Chief Marshal Stirrup stated to the Defence Committee [which investigated the decision to move into the South of Afghanistan] that senior military staff was aware that Helmand was a hostile environment and halted their planning for a time because of this: ‘I personally said, We need to call a halt to our planning. We cannot possibly deploy UK Forces when we don’t know what the environment is going to be like and we don’t know who will be in the adjoining provinces, so we don’t know what the total picture will look like. We did halt for a time, but then concern grew within NATO, the Dutch resolved their difficulties and then at that stage we were seen by NATO as holding up the whole process. We were asked [by NATO] to step forward again, which we consequently did’.<sup>87</sup>

## 7.8 The Process of Interpretation Continues

Strategic guidance was to direct the course of events in order to arrive at more definitive actions with regard to the deployment instead of the provisional decisions made thus far.

83 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 225

84 Interview Fry.

85 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 225

86 *Ibid.*

87 UK Parliament, ‘Operations in Helmand 2006’ (version 17.07.2011) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55405.htm#note37>.

In order do so, more information on the situation in Helmand needed to be collected. Hitherto, several recces were already conducted by, amongst others, teams of the Permanent Joint Headquarters in Northwood. However, limited information was available about the situation in Helmand since the only military activity on the ground in Helmand prior to 2006 had been the American led counter-terrorist operation Enduring Freedom. Its main focus was the search for al-Qaeda and while doing so attempted not to intimidate or alienate the local population or the Taliban. Hence, the American armed forces acted in a 'live and let live' way<sup>88</sup> resulting in a limited intelligence picture.<sup>89</sup> 'At that stage, it was not clear yet that it would turn into a counterinsurgency operation', recollected Messenger.<sup>90</sup>

In April 2005, the Chiefs of Staff formally agreed to commence preliminary operations later that year. The deployment of this team had been a result of the requirement of good intelligence, since as explained by General Wall (director of operations at PJHQ), this had been one of the things that had not gone 'terribly well in Iraq'.<sup>91</sup> Colonel Messenger had been appointed as head of the preliminary operations team [also known as advance force] in October 2005.

His appointment was much to the dismay of General Butler who was chosen to lead the initial deployment task force in Helmand. He himself would have preferred to have made the initial reconnaissance of the province and to draw up the operational plan accordingly since it was his troops who were tasked to do the job. Nevertheless, he had to accept he was to follow the dictates as provided by the permanent joint headquarters in Northwood.<sup>92</sup>

Messenger was provided with the following orders: to write a comprehensive campaign plan, to conduct intelligence gathering operations, to supervise the building of the necessary infrastructure [for the incoming taskforce], and lastly to liaise with forward elements of other nations.<sup>93</sup> 'I had received political guidance in broad terms: it would have to be a stabilisation mission and it was not to last more than three years[...] but we did not have a view why we were there [...] Nobody, including ourselves, understood the challenge', recollected General Messenger, who had executed two recces to Helmand in early 2005.<sup>94</sup>

88 Evidence delivered to the House of Commons Defence Committee by General Fry. UK Parliament, 'Operations in Helmand 2006' (version 17.07.2011 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55405.htm#n34>)

89 Warren Chin, 'Colonial Warfare in a Post Colonial State: British Military Operations in Helmand Province, Afghanistan', *Defence Studies* 10(1-2) (2010) 215-247, 230.

90 Interview Messenger.

91 Iraq Inquiry, 'Statement General Wall to Iraq Inquiry'. <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/49687/20100106-wall-day-final.pdf>

92 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 225-226

93 Interview Messenger.

94 Interview Messenger.

Brigadier Mungo Melvin, director of operational capability of the Ministry of Defence, had executed an interim study of the mission to Helmand in the summer of 2006.<sup>95</sup> He had argued that a miscomprehension of the political situation, scope, and complexity of the threat facing British forces in 2006 had been instrumental in the meagre assessment. ‘The British disposition to thrive on managing crises, if not muddling through them, counts against a longer-term imperative to make plans well ahead and to resource them properly. Pragmatism is one of Britain’s national virtues, and is all very necessary. But expediency can prove self-defeating if one does not get the strategic idea right in the first place’.<sup>96</sup>

### Strategic Guidance

From September 2005 onwards<sup>97</sup>, the Reid group was to provide strategic guidance to the planning of the Helmand campaign. Within the group itself, there appeared to be a systemic lack of understanding of the situation the United Kingdom was getting itself and their armed forces into.<sup>98</sup> This was compounded by the fact that there seemed to be a commonly shared belief, within government, and the military, that this deployment was going to happen. According to the Permanent Under Secretary of State, Kevin Tebbit, his superior was ‘to kick the MOD into action’. He described how there had been pressure on John Reid from Number 10 to undertake this mission. This pressure was reportedly heavily exercised by the special advisor to No. 10, Nigel Sheinwald.<sup>99</sup>

Hence, the question was not if the deployment was to happen but more a question of how. This is an important notion because it indicates the existence of a single idea that seemed to dominate the whole political military system<sup>100</sup>:

We failed to ask enough probing questions [...] Equally seriously, we were responsible for setting the tone which made other people in the system, military and civilian, who might otherwise have pressed harder on these questions, assume that to do so would be pointless or be seen as unhelpful [...] the senior military were equal partners in the failings in pre-deployment planning and after deployment they were equally slow to grasp the

95 Sean Rayment, ‘British troops in Afghanistan “on the brink of exhaustion”’, *The Telegraph*, 06.08.2006 (version 06.08.2006), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1525678/British-troops-in-Afghanistan-on-the-brink-of-exhaustion.html>.

96 Melvin, ‘Learning the Strategic Lessons from Afghanistan’, 59–60.

97 In the recollection of those respondents that have been involved in the Reid group, this committee had been initiated in September 2005.

98 Interviews Clarke, Cavanagh, Foster.

99 Interview Tebbit.

100 Interview Cavanagh.

full implementations of the new reality, losing sight of strategy in their determination to crack on and merely focusing on troop numbers.<sup>101</sup>

Des Browne, Chief Secretary to the Treasury [later on in May 2006 he became the Secretary of State for Defence] indicated the Treasury had been involved since they were represented in the Reid Group.<sup>102</sup> 'I had the responsibility to ensure that we had the resources to be able to support that [the deployment] financially. [...] John Reid was very clear that he would not take to the Cabinet a recommendation that we deploy into Afghanistan unless the military advice was that we were able to do that with the resources that we had'.<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless, it was evident that assumptions existed in the Ministry of Defence about troops and equipment coming back from Iraq, which would allow some flexibility in the Afghan deployment. Senior officers, however, confirmed no detailed staff work had been done on this matter. If a drawdown of forces in Iraq had to be halted or delayed, no contingency planning had been done on how the two simultaneous theatres of operation would be manned and supplied.<sup>104</sup>

Some members of the Reid Group, particularly Reid himself, were adequately concerned by the small number of troops needed relative to the size of the task and the consequent risk of overstretch.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, formal written reassurance was asked from the Chief of the Defence Staff acknowledging the feasibility of the deployment. Chief of Defence General Walker did acknowledge [in a letter to Reid] it would cause some logistical 'pain and grief' to specialist assets but that the plan for Afghanistan was not predicated on withdrawal of such capabilities from Iraq.<sup>106</sup>

Supposedly other members of the Reid group, and within the various levels of the departments represented in the group, had decided not to speak up or question the information presented to them. Notably, the permanent undersecretary of defence, Kevin Tebbit, indicated he had been indeed seriously concerned about a new commitment and stated he felt it could be a mission too far, but at the same time admitted he had not pressed

101 Cavanagh, 'Ministerial Decision-Making in the Run-Up to the Helmand Deployment', 52-53.

102 Evidence provided to the Iraq Inquiry by Des Browne on the 25th of January 2010. Iraq Inquiry, 'Evidence provided to the Iraq Inquiry by Des Browne 25.01.2010' <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/45531/100125-browne-final.pdf>

103 Evidence provided to the Iraq Inquiry by Des Browne 25 January 2010.

104 Clarke, *The Helmand Decision*, 21.

105 Rodwell, 'Between the Idea and Reality', 19.

106 On the 12th of September Reid had sent a personal memo to the Chief of Defence asking for a formal confirmation that the commitment in Iraq would be sustainable if a deployment to Afghanistan would be carried out simultaneously. Iraq Inquiry, 'Secretary of State to CDS about Iraq/Afghanistan commitments 12.09.05', <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/54458/120905aps-pso.pdf>. He received an answer on the 19th of December in which the CDS confirmed the achievability of the deployment to South Afghanistan. Iraq Inquiry, 'CDS to Secretary of State about Iraq/Afghanistan commitments 19.09.05', <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44491/190905pso-aps.pdf> This correspondence was made public and declassified for the Iraq inquiry.

his objections fully. He had raised his concerns to his planning staff and the Chiefs of Staff but they told him the mission [to Helmand] was manageable. Another factor that had played into the decision of Tebbit not to press his objections to the fullest was his belief that if the United Kingdom did not come forward, nobody else would. He and others hoped for a ‘snowball effect’ to occur: the planning assumption was that other countries would follow the British initiative.<sup>107</sup>

Also, Cavanagh stated he had spoken to several people within the ‘system’ who became silent witnesses to the process instead of voicing their concerns or critique.<sup>108</sup> Some chose to speak up later in the evidence they presented to parliamentary hearings or committees or in publications or interviews.<sup>109</sup>

Besides the worries about the feasibility of the mission and the force configuration, another challenge had surfaced. Two objectives that had been set for the mission needed to be reconciled: the stabilisation of the province and the conduct of counter-narcotics operations. Given the fact that the majority of the inhabitants of Helmand were one way or another involved in the production or trading of opium<sup>110</sup>, one needed to come up with alternative livelihoods. However, no alternatives had been defined yet and thus the military had not been very enthusiastic about including counter-narcotics operations into their campaign plan.

As explained by Brigadier Ed Butler, commander of 16 Air Assault Brigade, the military ‘took a tactical view that we couldn’t get involved in those [counter-narcotics operations] because we could see that that was the quickest way of upsetting the ordinary Afghan farmer. We didn’t want to turn the farmer into an insurgent, so counter-narcotics was another contradictory objective’.<sup>111</sup>

All the concerns mentioned above were made public by the Secretary for Defence two months after he had been appointed to oversee the deployment to South Afghanistan. On the 14th of November 2005, John Reid made the following declaration to the House of Commons:

107 Interview Tebbit; Iraq Inquiry, ‘Evidence delivered by Kevin Tebbit to the Iraq Inquiry on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2010’ <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/transcripts/oralevidence-bydate/091203.aspx>

108 Interview Cavanagh.

109 See: Iraq hearing, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/transcripts.aspx>; House of Commons Defence Committee on Afghanistan, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55405.htm>; The Afghan Papers on the decision –making on Helmand (RUSI).

110 Helmand holds a dominant position in Afghanistan as an opium producer, accounting for around 25 percent of the national opium poppy cultivated area in recent years. For more information see: Pain, *Opium Trading Systems in Helmand and Ghor*; Vanda Felbab-Brown, ‘Peacekeepers among Poppies: Afghanistan, Illicit Economies and Intervention’, *International Peacekeeping* 16(1) (2009) 100–114.

111 Evidence by Ed Butler to the HCD, *Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report of Session 2010–12 I*, House of Commons (2011 London), Evidence 102.

I will not announce the deployment to Helmand until I am satisfied that we have the military configuration that we ourselves need, and until we have the necessary back-up and resources across government here to provide alternative livelihoods to farmers whose current livelihood may be dependent on narcotics. To take away one form of income without substituting another would encourage insurgency rather than stability. Finally, I will not make that announcement until I believe that the multinational jigsaw has been put together and we have the necessary input from our NATO colleagues both in and around Helmand.<sup>112</sup>

In other words, he required more assurances that the costs of the mission would be met in full by the Treasury; that the Canadians would definitely be in place in Kandahar to the east of the British and the Dutch in Uruzgan to the north; and thirdly, that the Department for International Development (DfID) would provide sufficient resources for the nation-building activities that would have to follow immediately.<sup>113</sup>

Besides concerning itself with the configurations of the deployment, the Reid Group had been tasked with the provision of a strategic concept outlining the purpose of the deployment. However, most respondents and reports have indicated such a concept was missing. According to the Director of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) the decision [to deploy to Helmand] should be seen as a momentous example of the British<sup>114</sup> problem with the formulation of a national strategy and carrying it through with military coherence. He refers to this problem as ‘strategic illiteracy’<sup>115</sup> a theme put on the research agenda of the research institute ever since Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, delivered a lecture claiming a lacking habit of thinking strategically among British Defence professionals in December 2009.<sup>116</sup>

Some perspectives on (the alleged absence of) strategy:

I am not quite sure you can call Helmand a strategic issue, more an operational issue. There should have been a strategy for [our involvement in] Afghanistan as a whole.<sup>117</sup>

112 UK Parliament, ‘Minutes House of Commons, 14.11.2005, column 683’, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/v0051114/debtext/51114-02.htm>.

113 Clarke, *The Afghan Papers*, 19–20.

114 In the series of papers published by the RUSI, the complexities of the formulation with strategy are dealt with within the British context. However, as addressed and discussed in Chapter 1, severe difficulties with the formulation of strategy are endemic in most Western countries that have deployed their troops in the setting of contemporary operations.

115 Clarke, ‘The Helmand Decision’, 6.

116 Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture 2009 (version 03.12.2009), <http://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E4B184DB05C4E3/>.

117 Interview Foster.

Individuals had their own views and acted with the best of intentions. But the system as a whole seemed to have no strategic brain: no self-awareness of the full scale of the potential challenge, or a settled procedure for taking new challenges in its ride.<sup>118</sup>

There was no long term strategy. This is a difficult issue. You never know in the beginning what will happen in the end. One of the lessons we have learned is to have a stronger political goal before troops were sent off to Helmand. We did not really have that.<sup>119</sup>

Strategic guidance was provided by the political desire to commit troops to NATO's expansion to South Afghanistan. The respective NATO operational order outlined the purpose of the mission.<sup>120</sup>

Yet the planning process had been complicated by additional factors. First of all, international planning between the three nations and concurrently NATO did not always occur in a coordinated manner. Secondly, the various national military commands, and Ministerial departments were engaged in their own respective planning.

The commander of the 16 Air Assault Brigade referred to the planning activities as a split planning effort: the American plan [including Operation Enduring Freedom] and planning by the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, the Permanent Joint Headquarters, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, the Department for International Development, his own headquarters and the allied commands and headquarters. Consequently, he described the mission he was to undertake as unclear because of the many players involved and proclaimed he and his staff had not known enough to come up with a coherent, long-term campaign plan.<sup>121</sup>

The split between the planning team and those who were supposed to implement the plan itself highlighted the dysfunctional nature of the planning process.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, even though most – if not all at the time – involved actors were convinced by what seemed to be a self-evident logic of committing a British taskforce for NATO's expansion to the South of Afghanistan, a certain chaos had occurred when it came to the planning of the stabilisation effort.

### *Comprehensive Campaign Plan*

Even though political approval had not been granted yet in the sense that the Cabinet had agreed to the deployment, a campaign plan needed to be written. In retrospect,<sup>123</sup> the plan

118 Clarke, 'Conclusion', 93.

119 Interview Jay.

120 Interview Southall.

121 UK Parliament, 'Operations in Helmand 2006' (version 17.07.2011) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55405.htm#note37>

122 Soria, 'Flawed Comprehensiveness', 33

123 Soria, 'Flawed Comprehensiveness'.

for the British deployment was assumed to be ‘joint’ from the start and described as an effort to promote a comprehensive approach to the stabilisation of Helmand. A proclaimed desire to do so was founded in the lessons of Iraq<sup>124</sup> and had certainly focussed governmental attention on the need for joined up governance for the stabilisation of (post) conflict states. In fact, in 2004, the post conflict and crisis response unit (PCRU)<sup>125</sup> was created with the aim of facilitating integrated missions abroad. However, from the outset, no one had called – despite the experiences from Iraq – for the drafting of a comprehensive interdepartmental plan for Helmand.

Actually, two different institutions had called for the development of a military and a civil stabilisation plan: respectively the permanent joint headquarters had ordered its preliminary operations team to draw up a plan and the Cabinet Office had ordered the head of the PCRU to draft a plan.<sup>126</sup> At that stage [October 2005] political approval had still not been granted.

Both teams<sup>127</sup> ended up at Kandahar airfield since there was no infrastructure available yet in Helmand and transportation means were rather limited as well. Etherington alluded to how the deployment of civilian personnel from the PCRU had not been popular among the three departments, but been pushed through by the Cabinet Office. He questioned to what extent there had been a true desire in London to make the deployment to Helmand a ‘civilian ends mission’. As he put it: ‘If this would have been the case, a civilian component should have been added to the planning team of the advance party from the start. Yet, there was an imbalance from the beginning’.<sup>128</sup>

Even though neither the MOD nor Cabinet Office had envisioned the civilian and military team drafting a joint plan, they ended up doing so, both on their own initiative. The whole endeavour of drafting a joint plan in the end worked rather fittingly since Messenger and Etherington had served together in Northern Ireland and knew each other rather well. As explained by the head of PCRU: ‘I was lucky enough that I knew Gordon. As such, the relationship between my team and the military became less fractured when we started working at the military HQ [in Kandahar]. The military are well practiced and have many resources. This was in stark contrast with our civilian element. Most of us could not keep up with the planning. Therefore, Gordon deliberately slowed down his planning in order to use the quality of the civilian planners. And we of course benefited from them.’<sup>129</sup> Messenger

124 Amongst other things: the absence of a civilian reconstruction and development capability.

125 The Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit was renamed Stabilization Unit (SU) in 2007. Its role was limited to providing stabilization advisers, and only upon invitation from its parent departments (FCO, DFID and the MOD) did it provide periodic planning support or facilitation, in: Stuart Gordon, *Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province*. Feinstein International Center (2011 Medford, MA) 32.

126 Interviews Messenger and Etherington,

127 Messenger and his team in September and Etherington in October 2005

128 Interview Etherington.

129 Interview Etherington.

underlined the beneficial venture of civil and military planning for the stabilisation of Helmand: 'due to our cooperation, the UKJPH was not military in its nature'.<sup>130</sup>

Since no template for the plan had been provided, they decided to employ the format of British military campaign planning as a framework. Civilian aspects of the planning, such as rule of law and alternative livelihoods, were inserted accordingly and, as indicated by both of them, they shaped it [the process of writing the plan] themselves and as such composed the 'first genuine civilian military plan'.<sup>131</sup> The documents that had informed their planning had primarily been NATO documents, amongst which the fragmentary order issued by commander ISAF, the British General Richards, calling for the establishment of Afghan Development Zones. The logic underpinning the creation of these zones was based on the famous ink spot philosophy.<sup>132</sup>

While drafting the joint plan, Etherington and Messenger quickly agreed the boundaries that had been set to the British deployment [providing stability in Helmand within a three year time frame, with a maximum of 3150 troops and a budget of 1 billion pounds and the inclusion of counter-narcotics activities] seriously complicated the drafting of a workable plan. Furthermore, both of them recognised the intelligence gap resulted in a very limited understanding of the complexity and challenges of the province and envisioned that more time was needed for the task force to scan the horizon and collect additional information. As such, they incorporated the recommendation in their plan that initial operations of the task force should primarily be focused on the gathering of intelligence about, amongst other things, the social make-up of the province.<sup>133</sup>

Shortly before Messenger was due to deliver his plan to Northwood, early November, he had persuaded the headquarters to allow him more time to incorporate the ideas of the civilian planners.<sup>134</sup> In that way, one single plan could be presented to both the military and civilian superiors. Shortly thereafter, Mark Etherington, in close coordination with Messenger, provided his initial estimate back to Whitehall before the end of November 2005 (three weeks after his arrival in theatre), articulating the practical impossibilities of

130 Interview Messenger.

131 Interview Messenger.

132 This approach builds on the British experiences in Malaya where development had fostered to winning the 'hearts and minds' of the local population. See: Paul Dixon 'The British Approach to Counterinsurgency: From Malaya and Northern Ireland to Iraq and Afghanistan' in: Idem (ed.), *The British Approach to Counterinsurgency: From Malaya and Northern Ireland to Iraq and Afghanistan* (Basingstoke and New York 2012) 1-48, 30. Originally, the ink spot philosophy is based on the 'touche huile'. For more on the foundation of counter-insurgency thought see: Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (London and New York, 2012).

133 Interviews Messenger and Etherington.

134 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*:232

delivering results given the constraints provided by the Cabinet Office.<sup>135</sup> It called for an adjustment of either the aim of the mission or the constraints given to it.<sup>136</sup>

Despite their advice, Cabinet Office ordered the production of a joint plan within the original provided constraints. Consequently, Messenger and Etherington produced a Joint United Kingdom Plan for Helmand (JUKPH) which was sent to London by mid December 2005. It did meet the overall strategic aim and tried to be as realistic as possible.<sup>137</sup> After the report was received at the Cabinet Office it was allegedly substantially rewritten before it was sent off to the Reid Group. As such, it remains unclear whether the final report as delivered to the Ministers was in fact the product as produced by Etherington and Messenger or Cabinet Office.<sup>138</sup>

Once the plan was conveyed, it had a rather limited impact on the planning of the respective departments with regards to their activities. Various respondents have indicated there had been no strategic ownership of the JUKPH in Whitehall.<sup>139</sup> All involved departments selected their own 'piece of the pie'. There seemed a reported reluctance to work together primarily founded in a desire to maintain a position of institutional primacy.<sup>140</sup> Thus, the impression had arisen amongst those involved that the plan just needed to be delivered in London but not necessarily implemented in Helmand.<sup>141</sup> In other words, the prerequisite for comprehensiveness needed to be satisfied, but appeared to be symbolic.

In addition, those who were to implement the plan and deliver the results, 16 Brigade and the civilian staff, had their own operational preferences and acted accordingly.<sup>142</sup> The commander of 16 Brigade, Brigadier Butler, and his planning staff, had developed their own concept of operations. The joint plan had not informed their planning and notably not even the planning of their higher headquarters, the permanent joint headquarters, which had in fact delivered the earlier mentioned preliminary operations team.<sup>143</sup>

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135 Both military and civilian planners identified various problems with the comprehensive approach. Etherington identified four flaws in the concept: (1) a lack of strategic expertise at the centre, (2) a competing culture between the three departments of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Department for International Development (DFID) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD), (3) a lack of overarching authority able to take a holistic overview, recognize deficiencies and correct them and, (4) a problematic civil/military relationship, further aggravated by a lack of government as oversight and incentives to work jointly. Etherington's views are shared by Gordon Messenger who signaled - amongst other factors - the lack of international ownership of the 'non- military effort' in coalition operations, and the difference in time horizons between departments, the scale of military effort and planning capability versus the capability of the civilian sector, and a lack of understanding of the concept of the comprehensive approach. Mark Etherington quoted and interviewed in: Rodwell, 'Between Idea and the Reality', 14; Gordon Messenger quoted and interviewed by Tom Rodwell, in: *Idem*.

136 Grandia Mantas, 'Shafer Revisited'.

137 Interviews Messenger and Etherington.

138 Williams, 'Empire Lite Revisited', 73.

139 Interviews Rachman, Etherington, Messenger.

140 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*; Soria, 'Flawed Comprehensiveness'; Interviews Cavanagh, Tebbit, Foster.

141 Interview Etherington.

142 Interview Rachman.

143 Interview chief plans PJHQ and Tootal.

The civilian element believed they could initiate and implement their activities on their own terms as well and had reportedly not employed the plan either. The Department for International Aid especially had been annoyed by the assumption they were to derive their tasks and respective activities from the plan.<sup>144</sup>

In the last days of December and the beginning of January 2006, Cabinet discussions were ongoing to approve the deployment, but both Prime Minister Blair and Secretary of Defence Reid were finding it difficult to bring things to a decision-point - partly because Treasury Ministers had insisted on the condition of Canadian and Dutch commitment. Both Blair and Reid appeared wary of bringing things to a decision. As such, the upcoming international conference in London was used as a forcing device to precipitate a decision.<sup>145</sup>

## 7.9 The Foreign Policy Action: The Deployment of Forces

With the international conference on Afghanistan in January 2006, *Afghanistan Compact*,<sup>146</sup> on the horizon Blair seemed to be determined to force matters to a conclusion. As the host of the conference, he wanted to commit first in order to encourage other countries to follow his example. Neither he nor the Foreign Office wanted to be in a position of hosting a conference that was meant to chart the way forward, while not being able to say with clarity what the British role would be. As a result, after the delays of previous months, things were brought to a head pretty quickly. Consequently, the decision<sup>147</sup> was pressed through the Reid Group and subsequently through the Cabinet in a matter of days.<sup>148</sup>

In the early days of January 2006, the Secretary of Defence chaired a Cabinet meeting which was convened to vote about the mission to Helmand. A non-binding vote was held to decide if the deployment was to be supported. Several senior Ministers attended, amongst whom Des Browne, the Chief Secretary of the Treasury [later on Secretary of State for Defence]. Allegedly, Reid ran the Cabinet meeting imperiously in which not much room for

144 Interview DfID official.

145 Interview and email correspondence with Cavanagh (04.11.2013).

146 The aim of the conference was ensure international assistance for Afghanistan and link it to Afghanistan's national government planning for a period of five years. For more information about the conference see: United Nations Security Council, 'Security Council Unanimously Endorses Five-Year 'Afghanistan Compact' (version 15.02.2006) <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8641.doc.htm>

147 The decision to deploy British forces has been criticised by the House of Commons Defence committee in 2011. According to their judgement: 'the deployment could not have been deferred or delayed until the end of the fighting season in 2006, senior military advisers should have nonetheless have raised serious concerns about the unpredictable nature of the conflict on which they were embarking. This briefing should have drawn clear attention to the need for force levels to be sufficiently robust to cope with an unpredictable conflict. We believe that such concerns as were raised by the armed forces were inadequate at best, and that they were not raised, as they should have been, to the very highest levels of government'. *Operations in Afghanistan, Fourth Report of Session 2010-12* 1, 6.

148 Interview Cavanagh and Rodwell.

debate had been offered. The Chief Secretary of the Treasury, Browne, asked Reid whether he believed they knew enough about Helmand to be able to deploy their troops. The Secretary of State for Defence had waved away the consideration and asked Des Browne if he was to vote against the mission. Browne decided to abstain.<sup>149</sup>

Finally, on the 26th of January 2006, just before the conference was to commence, Secretary of State John Reid announced British forces would deploy a taskforce of 3150 troops to Helmand for three years. The key Ministers seemed to believe in the clarity of the overall decision, it reinforced their sense that the military were happy with it and the military were reinforced by their sense that the politicians had made up their minds leaving them with no alternative then but to get on with it. All others in government (departments) either joined the consensus or kept quiet. Some alternatives, however, were presented, like a delayed deployment, a smaller force, or a more comprehensive intelligence picture. Nevertheless, these seemed all to be treated as problems to be handled rather than constraints considered on their merits, indicating the gathering momentum.<sup>150</sup>

The official objective of the mission of the British forces to the South was to conduct security and stabilisation operations within Helmand and the wider Regional Command South, jointly with Afghan partners, other Government Departments and multinational partners. The intention was to support the Government of Afghanistan in improving governance and development. The initial objective in 2006 was to establish a central 'lozenge of security' around Lashkar Gah, Gereshk and Camp Bastion and then expand their presence as conditions permitted. Furthermore, British forces were to gather intelligence and gain a cultural understanding of the environment and, by developing a 'local envelope' of security, they would be able to help create the right environment for governance, build Afghan capacity, and, create capacity for economic growth.<sup>151</sup>

The objective of the mission illustrated, as described by Jack Fairweather in his book *War of Choice*, the political thinking and desire for 'a simple deployment, occupation and withdrawal', 'perfectly reflected the type of war the British military wanted to fight, but not the one they were going to get'.<sup>152</sup> Blair's enthusiasm for the use of the military was questioned about a week after the Secretary of State for Defence had announced the decision to deploy British forces to Helmand. Until then, Blair had engaged his armed forces in five different conflicts around the world.<sup>153</sup> Some of his political opponents felt his enthusiasm

149 Fairweather, *War of Choice*, 235.

150 Cavanagh, 'Ministerial decision-making', 52.

151 UK Parliament, 'Operations in Helmand 2006' (version 17.07.2011) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmdfence/554/55405.htm#note31>

152 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 235.

153 Iraq (1998 and 2003); Kosovo (1999); Sierra Leone (2000) and Afghanistan (2001). BBC, Announcement for the documentary 'Blair, the Inside Story' (version 22.02.2007), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/6361771.stm>

to employ the Royal Prerogative<sup>154</sup> which enabled him, amongst other things, to deploy the military needed to be limited. Hence, on the 6th of February 2006, just some days after the Secretary of State for Defence had announced the deployment of British forces to Helmand, David Cameron – leader of the Conservative party - spoke to Parliament to pledge consultation with Members of Parliament whenever armed forces were to be deployed. The leader of the Conservative party proposed the setting up of a democracy task force that would examine the Premier’s power to deploy military troops and whether or not these kinds of decisions should be subject to some form of parliamentary confirmation hearing.<sup>155</sup> In fact, a comparable procedure like that exercised in the Netherlands when it comes to the use force.

David Cameron’s proposal reflected both a growing political and popular mood in the United Kingdom, a reluctance towards military undertakings. Even though the service men and women themselves were genuinely supported by the majority of the populace, the use of military missions was questioned more and more. The aftermath of Iraq left many people wondering about the legitimacy and purpose of the interventions.<sup>156</sup>

Consequently, the purpose of the deployment to Helmand needed to be communicated in a convincing manner. This had not occurred, leaving some military to publicly speak up about, amongst other things, the dangers of the mission. A senior officer of the advance party [who was interviewed by the media just some days after Reid had announced the deployment of forces to the South of Afghanistan] commented: ‘British troops being sent to lawless Helmand province in Southern Afghanistan will “stir up a hornets’ nest” and provide “plenty more targets” for insurgents’.<sup>157</sup> Moreover, other senior military officials expressed their concerns about the vagueness of the British mission and its accompanying difficulties of establishing stability in the troubled region.<sup>158</sup>

Expressing one’s views to the media – particularly about the political context and objectives – is by itself not the task of a military person. However, some showed sympathy for this development since [according to a senior government official<sup>159</sup>] part of the problem nowadays for politicians is to formulate a single message and having a military person

154 The Royal Prerogative are a series of powers officially held by the Queen that have been passed to the government of the day. They enable decisions to be taken without the backing of, or consultation with, Parliament. This form of power has been criticised for its ‘democratic deficit’.

155 George Jones, ‘Cameron seeks to limit Blair’s use of Royal Prerogative’, *The Telegraph*, 06.02.2006 (version 06.02.2006) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1509778/Cameron-seeks-to-limit-Blairs-use-of-Royal-Prerogative.html> (last accessed 22.11.2013)

156 See: Kings College London, ‘Public Perceptions of the Armed Forces Research Program’, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/research/kcmhr/publicperceptions.aspx>.

157 Toby Harnden, ‘British troops will be targets in Afghanistan’, *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2006 (version 29.01.2006). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1509071/British-troops-will-be-targets-in-Afghanistan.html> (last accessed 22.11.2013).

158 Toby Harnden, ‘British troops will be targets in Afghanistan’, *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2006.

159 Interview anonymous government official.

communicating the purpose of a military mission to the public seemed in itself not a bad thing to do.

The links between the media and the military were originally encouraged by the Blair government, which co-opted respected and authoritative military figures in order to build press support for interventions in Iraq and the Balkans in the late 1990s. Thus the government's principal military adviser became in addition one of the principal sources of military opinion for the press.<sup>160</sup>

Not all agreed that military actors needed to assume a public role, certainly not engaging themselves in the public debate. In fact, the army was accused of being too closely linked to, and making use of, the media. Their supposed close ties are viewed as having caused problems for Whitehall since it had the potential to run a powerful and efficient communications operation not necessarily in line with the chosen political direction<sup>161</sup>, in this case questioning the purpose and feasibility of the mission.

Despite the public outcries of military officials in the media, the prospect of a deployment of British forces to South Afghanistan had not instigated a heated public debate as one would expect after the trouble the military [and politicians] had gotten themselves into after Iraq. In fact, the failures of Iraq seemed to be the unifying rationale for the mission to Helmand.<sup>162</sup> As such, the nation bought into yet another deployment of their military forces.<sup>163</sup>

## 7.10 Conclusions

The context in which the decision to assume a leading role in NATO's expansion to the South and subsequently the deployment of British forces was taken, showcased a fusion of international momentum for Afghanistan. It embodied the inevitability of NATO's Stage III operations, a political will to step up, and a military desire to facilitate a mission that was largely seen as a 'good war'. The Prime Minister's clear guidance on a prominent role for the United Kingdom in NATO's expansion to South Afghanistan and military alliance politics, were instrumental, especially as they occurred against the backdrop of disappointing results in Iraq.

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160 Waal, *Depending on the Right People*, 23.

161 *Ibid.*

162 Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 233.

163 Supposedly, the reduction of British involvement in Iraq and reiterated claims by politicians across the ideological spectrum (using terminology such as the 'good war') supporting the need to stay the course in Afghanistan is the most probable explanation provided for this surprising trend. See: Douglas Kirner and Graham Wilson, 'Assessing British Support for the War in Afghanistan', 5 October 2010, <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/10/assessing-british-support-for-the-war-in-afghanistan> (last accessed 10 June 2013).

The decision path that emerged soon after the Prime Minister voiced his preferences and the informal international military working groups, was directed to the deployment of British military forces to South Afghanistan. Indeed, the eminence of certain actors in the decision-making process was put forward in this case. Notably, Prime Minister Blair and some of his trustees such as the Secretary for Defence Reid played a major role within the political arena. Within the military establishment, the Director of operations at the Ministry of Defence, General Fry, had acquired himself a prominent role. In fact, he had been the main instigator of the trilateral military initiative and continued to be a great force throughout the decision-making process.

Despite the strong lead of the Prime Minister and his trustees, there was an absence of a meaningful strategic focus. This particularly surfaced when studying the decision that had to be made on the selection of the province and the force levels. Moreover, the planning process remained fractured, primarily because various levels within various departments had no direct desire to cooperate and sought ways out.

To conclude, it seems that the senior civil and military decision-makers did not concern themselves, or maybe did not even recognise the need, to identify strategic questions that needed to be addressed and answered before military forces were to deploy. The majority of the senior civil and military decision-makers acted in the belief that this deployment was inevitable and in their enthusiasm neglected to question the mantra of ‘a logical thing to do’. As commented on illustratively by secretary of Defence Des Browne: ‘We all had the best of intentions. We were part of a greater plan that everybody bought into’.<sup>164</sup>

When contrasting these findings with the propositions as put forward in chapter two, several issues come to light. For one, the inputs into the decision-making process on the use of military means for the stabilisation of Afghanistan were initially very much instigated by political guidance (proposition I) as Prime Minister Blair went ahead and not only offered the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps to assume command over ISAF but moreover, envisaged a more robust role for British forces within NATO’s expansion to South Afghanistan.

The decision-making dynamics that consequently advanced indeed revealed a process of interpretation in which the senior civil and military decision-makers perceived and deduced constraints and pressures imposed on them by the domestic and international environment (proposition II). Within this process, it seemed that particularly the domestic constraints in terms of force packages and time lines (related to the on-going deployment in Iraq) impacted the formulation of a common definition of the task at hand. The external pressures mainly manifested themselves in the role the United Kingdom was seen to play with regard to NATO’s expansion to South Afghanistan.

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164 Interview Browne.

As witnessed, no clear strategy, articulating the purpose of the military mission (proposition III) to Helmand was put forward. Instead, the head of the military team that was tasked to design a military plan and the head of the civilian team who was assigned to draft a civilian plan, happened to be old acquaintances and on the basis of their shared history, decided to join hands. Their effort was hardly appreciated at the strategic level back in London. Once the UK Roadmap for Helmand reached the capital, no ownership was taken and the various government departments approached to deployment to Helmand as they saw fit.

