

'In real terms, NATO is

Relationship
NATO
By Julian Borger

It's been more than seven years since NATO forces invaded Afghanistan. Yet there's no end in sight for the conflict - and vast tracts of the country remain no-go areas for foreign troops

MOST days, weather permitting, a couple of US Black Hawk helicopters take off from Bagram air base and do the rounds of NATO bases in Afghanistan's eastern provinces. They serve as taxis, couriers and delivery vans and hop from one fortified lily pad to the next, crossing mountain ranges and dusty mudbrick towns over which the alliance and the government it supports have little, if any, control.

The helicopter traffic provides an umbilical connection between the provincial outposts of the NATO-led force in this part of the country - the French in Kapisa province, the Poles in Ghazni and the vast US-run hub at Bagram airbase, north of Kabul. This is the Afghanistan that most senior officers, diplomats and visiting journalists get to see - brave soldiers and well-run, well-meaning development projects.

But it is in the vast tracts of land in between these outposts where the country's future is being determined each day, and where the outcome in the struggle between chaos and order, backwardness and development has yet to be resolved.

Right now there's a stalemate between NATO and its Afghan government allies on one side, and the Taliban and associated Pashtun militias on the other. In real terms, that means NATO is losing. After more than seven years, security is diminishing, death tolls are rising, and the popularity of the Kabul government is evaporating, while back on the home front, particularly in Europe, some troop contributors are already groping their way to the exit.

Time, meanwhile, is on the Taliban's side, and there are clear signs that they are now mustering in their winter havens, across the border in Pakistan, in readiness for a fearsome offensive this summer, when Afghanistan's presidential elections are due. It will be a critical test of will, not only in Afghanistan, but in the US and Europe too.

The critical choices are also being made now. This weekend President Barack Obama will be making a final decision on the shape of US strategy. He has already decided to send

another 17,000 troops into the fray, to add to the 30,000 already there, but he must make up his mind on how many more forces to commit.

Britain and the other Europeans have tried hard to lobby Washington with their own views in the last few weeks, but now they have to wait for pronouncements from Washington, and hope for a workable strategy that will eventually pave the way home for their forces.

But that is not going to happen any time soon: the sheer size of Bagram air base testifies to that. In the past few years, the base has grown into a sizeable town, sustaining itself behind its 20km (13-mile) fortified perimeter like a city state of old. There is a Burger King and Dairy Queen, a huge tented gym, to be found on the high road, Disney Boulevard (named after a US serviceman killed here, not the cartoon king). Most of the accommodation is in containers, but multi-storey concrete flats are rising in the heart of town - a reflection of long-term resolve. Transport planes, helicopters and jet fighters

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thunder in and out day and night, constantly replenishing the 18,000 population.

Bagram is just 80km (50 miles) from Kabul, but most coalition troops and foreign workers fly between the two in huge military transport planes that barely take off before it is time to land again. That tells you all you need to know about the state of security in Afghanistan, more than seven years into the war.

On arrival at Bagram, fresh troops enter a dingy waiting room, decorated with a picture of three silhouetted American soldiers and this message: "This is a tribute to all who have fallen during Operation Enduring Freedom. Live a life worthy of their sacrifices." On one long afternoon recently, there were dozens of soldiers dozing on their kit bags and staring at two large television screens - one showing college basketball, the other *The Graduate*.

The toilets are crumbling under the pressure of the unceasing turnover of troops. They are scrawled with the usual impressionistic drawings of male genitalia, comments about the sexual orientation of the infantry or the navy, and some more political observations. "Osama Bin Laden. Bush Bin Fuckup", says one.

Here there is general consensus that the Bush years marked an extraordinary lost opportunity in Afghanistan. No sooner had the Taliban been ousted when the US diverted its attention to Iraq. Both the US and Europe short-changed Afghanistan on development funds in the four relatively peaceful years that followed. Now the country is still one of the five poorest on earth, and though development work is going on, it now - particularly in the south and east - has to be carried out under fire.

It is an expensive way of doing things, and an erratic one, dependent on the policies of the foreign military taskforce in residence, which tend to run their provinces like independent

fiefdoms, with completely different approaches to the central and provincial government, and to the insurgency.

Most of the NATO nations here have "caveats" on the use of the force, limiting the conditions in which they can be deployed. The Germans in the north, to cite the most ridiculous example, will not patrol at night and resist going anywhere without an ambulance, which precludes foot patrols.

But whatever the national colours flying above each provincial "forward operating base", the food is always the same: American. That's because it's provided by KBR (Kellogg, Brown & Root), a former subsidiary of Dick Cheney's old mega-firm, Halliburton. In every base it puts on a staggering buffet spread for the troops, of which most hotels would be proud. There is a choice of half a dozen desserts including ice

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cream at every meal, and every last scrap of food is imported. No wonder it costs so much to keep the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the field - an estimated \$2,000 per soldier per day. It is an enormous logistical effort just to keep it treading water.

The Poles have been running Ghazni province for the last four months and so far have not lost a man. They also claim not to have killed any civilians which, for a rough province like Ghazni, with several "contacts" with the enemy each week, is a good record. The commander of the Polish taskforce is an energetic colonel called Rajmund Andrzejczak, who seems to have taken on board the emerging new orthodoxy on counter-insurgency.

"For me the critical thing is to be non-kinetic", he says, employing NATO-speak for not shooting. "After a couple of operations, we realised the less aggressive we were, the more effective we were. I recommend not so many troops knocking down doors every night, but instead to sit down and drink

mostly with roadside and suicide bombs. The rest were killed by ISAF.

The difference is that while the Taliban are actually trying to kill civilians, ISAF appears to be killing almost as many by accident - some in special forces raids, but 64 percent as a result of air strikes. Some of those strikes are assassination attempts against "high-value" insurgent leaders, but others are in support of troops on the ground engaged in battle. That is relatively uncontroversial when ground forces find themselves outnumbered or surrounded and are trying to save their own lives.

More troubling is the practice of calling in a strike on an Afghan qala (the high-walled mud-brick houses that look like mini-forts and are the norm here), from where western forces suspect they are taking fire but are reluctant to storm for fear of suffering casualties. Every time a qala is demolished from above, and families inevitably perish, more recruits are driven towards the Taliban.

bunch of Warsaw Pact headbangers, who would use their artillery and Soviet-model Hind gunships on everything that moved. So he is now pleasantly surprised. He says his province is more peaceful under the lighter-touch Poles than the more aggressive Americans before them.

"Security for us is like oxygen. Without it nothing can breathe, nothing can happen. And the Poles really have brought security," Osmani says when we first meet. Shortly after, however, something happens to threaten this fragile harmony. On 27 February, Polish troops were called to a house in a village called Dhi Khodaidad, a few miles south-west of Ghazni city, where they were told there was a Taliban cell recruiting locals.

What happened next is the subject of furious debate. The Poles say they were called in by the Afghan police, and did not open fire, using only a flash grenade on what looked like an ordinary building. The local press say the Poles stormed a mosque guns blazing, damaging the building and destroying the holy Quran. Riots followed soon in Ghazni city, threatening to undo all the Poles' careful "hearts and minds" work.

"People were saying that the Poles had improved security here, but now with this problem with the mosque they are beginning to wonder and ask what the Poles are really trying to do here", says Mirwais Pashtun, the director of a local radio station.

The polls in Afghanistan still show strong majority support for the presence of foreign troops, but there are signs that the welcome is wearing thin in the absence of results. In a poll published by a consortium of humanitarian agencies this week, nearly two thirds said that the security situation in their area was getting worse. And there is increasing distress at night raids on homes and civilian casualties from air strikes.

No one is more aware of the thin ice on which NATO stands than Andrzejczak, who has to spend two solid days in talks with local leaders to get his side of the story across after the incident in Dhi Kohdaidad, and reassure them of the Poles' respect for local culture.

The emergency PR campaign was treated as a major counter-insurgency operation, which, of course, it was.

"It's a war of perception", the colonel says. "The mosque could be a critical [tipping] point, and we have to win this battle." COURTESY THE GUARDIAN

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tea, discuss what the people need, and bring them closer to the coalition."

The reference to knocking down doors at night is clear to anyone who has spent more than a couple of days here. It is a dig at US special forces, who have a reputation for raiding Afghan houses in the middle of the night, on the basis of intelligence that can be accurate or inaccurate, causing a disproportionate number of civilian casualties.

"The special forces are playing a damaging and negative role. They operate outside the chain of command, going in and doing raids without any coordination," a senior western aid official tells me. Nothing is eroding support for foreign forces faster. A UN report last month said the number of civilian casualties in 2008 was up 40 percent on the previous year at 2,118. A little more than half were killed by the Taliban and other insurgents,

"We are fighting a lot of people we don't have to be fighting", the Western aid official says.

Andrzejczak is adamant he does not use such tactics: "Sometimes, if we are not sure who is in a house, we just cancel the operation, even knowing some of the targets will leave the area. You cannot kill all the terrorists in six months, but you can create good relations with the locals. The biggest power here is not the Taliban, it's the people of Ghazni. They are the power we should fight for."

Everyone subscribes to this view of counter-insurgency in theory, but the Americans, and to some extent the British, are less likely to walk away from an engagement, and more likely to call in an air strike.

Ghazni's governor, Mohamed Osmani Osmani, is pleased with the Poles. When Osmani first heard they were coming, he had feared a