



## Transcript

# Afghanistan: Turning Tactical Gains into Strategic Success

Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth MP, Secretary of State for Defence

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## **Rt Hon Bob Ainsworth:**

Over the last week, seven British soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan. One, the most senior Army officers we have lost since the Falkands. One, a young man of 18, the week before his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. One I knew personally, the others I didn't. Each one is a personal tragedy for their family, their friends, and their comrades.

176 Armed Forces personnel have died in Afghanistan since 2001. I will do everything I can to remind the public about this sacrifice and to make sure that they are not forgotten.

We must all stop and think - not only about those who have died - but those who return with life changing injuries. More lives would have been lost if it wasn't for the fantastic work medical staff do in theatre and here back home. But in this year alone over 200 have been have been wounded, around a fifth of those seriously.

This is dangerous work they do our behalf. They do it with great skill, determination and courage. I saw this first hand in Afghanistan on Armed Forces Day just last week. These are awe-inspiring young men and women everyone.

It is understandable that at a time like this people ask why are the lives of these courageous people being lost? Why are we in Afghanistan? In these difficult times, can we afford to be there?

As Defence Secretary, I have a responsibility to answer these questions.

There are compelling reasons for our engagement in Afghanistan. It goes to the heart of this country's national security. And to the core of our national interests. We have new momentum in Afghanistan in advance of the Presidential elections this year. We will need both courage - and patience - to see it through.

## **National Security**

When our troops are deployed in combat operations, the primary purpose must be to protect national security.

Our troops are in Afghanistan to keep our country safe from the threat of terrorism. It was there that the horrors of 9/11 were planned which killed almost 3,000 people including 67 British citizens. It was there that recruits were trained in the methods of terrorism. It was there that Al Qaida leaders were planning and directing further major terrorist operations which would have been aimed at the UK and others.

We acted in 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks - a clear threat to our national security. We removed that threat by removing the Taliban and the terrorist training camps. And we act now to prevent the threat returning. If we leave now the Taliban will take control and Al Qaida will return.

This is why some 9,000 British personnel from all three services are in Afghanistan. This is why they are risking their lives for us.

British troops are operating among, and fighting alongside, the Afghan people. They see first hand what is at stake. They see what local people face from the Taliban – killing, torture, mutilation, oppression. Our troops know they are a force for good.

Our challenge is to support the Afghan national government until it can tackle the threat posed by the Taliban on its own. Because for Britain to be secure, Afghanistan needs to be secure.

In 2006, as part of the coalition, British forces deployed in significantly greater numbers in southern Afghanistan. Then the Government of Afghanistan had little control over the areas outside the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. Today, 8 out of the 13 districts in the province are under Afghan control.

The focus now is:

First - to prevent a return to Taliban control that allowed terrorists to flourish and threaten our national security.

Second – to prepare the way for elections this year by confronting the insurgents, denying them the freedom to operate, isolating them, and degrading their capability.

And third - to provide the time and space for the Afghan forces to take responsibility for the security of their people, and for the Afghan government to build their civil society.

What will success will look like?

Success will be an environment in which the Afghan government is capable of providing for its people the security required to govern their country themselves, suppress violent extremism and ensure the terrorists do not return.

This means helping Afghanistan become an effective and accountable state, increasingly able to handle its security and deliver basic services to its people.

This will require promoting a political approach, encouraging reintegration and reconciliation so that insurgents renounce violence in favour of legitimate Afghan-led political processes. This needs to be done from a position of strength.

Over the coming months the focus is to prepare the way for the presidential elections which start in August.

It is crucial that these elections are credible and inclusive, providing the duly elected president with a mandate to take Afghanistan forward.

## **Momentum**

To support this process the efforts of the international community are being reinvigorated. There is palpable momentum and progress. President Obama has committed the huge resources of United States to a new surge, a surge that will provide extra security for the Presidential elections. The new US and ISAF commander General McChrystal is setting out new guidance to coalition forces to build on the progress we have already made. Other countries, including Britain, have increased deployments.

The current military operations are crucial. The centre of the insurgency is in the south in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. They are the Taliban heartland. That is why the United States is committing further to the fight.

Isolating the Taliban and holding the initiative in Helmand is an imperative. The UK led operation Panther's Claw and US led operation River Liberty are doing just that. This is hard fighting and, as we have seen, the risks are considerable. But we are making progress.

In the face of the casualties we are seeing, it is understandable when people ask is this too difficult. But let me tell you – this is not the message I got in Afghanistan when I visited last week. In Afghanistan, there is a sense of achievement and improvement compared with my visit in December last year. I visited Sangin where we are holding more ground, the market is bustling, people are feeling safer. I took part in a shura with the local governor and his council of the elders. He told me that the people don't want the Taliban back - that we must stay and finish the job. There is a long way to go, but we are getting there.

The insurgents are increasingly unable to meet ISAF and Afghan forces head on in the field so they are moving from conventional fighting to asymmetrical tactics and terrorism. This brings new challenges and new dangers.

In Helmand, over the last year we have seen a substantial increase in the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). These are deadly, indiscriminate weapons - the majority being killed and injured are Afghan locals. The technological complexity of the devices we are finding is increasing - as is their size and lethality. We are engaged in a war against a dangerous and highly adaptable foe whose tactics and capabilities evolve as quickly as ours. We strive to provide our troops with the support they need but the nature of the fight means we will take more casualties before we succeed.

To get the job done our forces need to get out of the forward operating bases and be visible. Every effort is being made to increase protection – such as the introduction of Mastiff and Ridgeback troop carriers, the improved armour on Viking and Jackal vehicles, and the more heavily armoured Warthog vehicles coming in 2010. With this suite of vehicles military commanders will deploy their assets according to the tactical situation on the ground. But as we develop measures to counter a threat like IEDs, so our enemies adapt - for instance by building higher yield bombs to overcome heavier armour. So let us be clear, sacrificing manoeuvre for heavy armour in every circumstance is not the answer.

We are doing everything we can to counter the IED threat at source. Our forces are finding and diffusing these bombs. But tellingly, they are also concentrating on the networks and the people building them and supplying the technology, the parts and the know-how. We are getting inside the production process – some in the military call this approach ‘getting left of the bang’. When we target the bomb makers and take out the capacity to produce, we cut the threat. Getting left of the bang will save lives - of our troops - and of the Afghans themselves.

## Force for Good

Success in counter-insurgency should be measured by how safe the public feel and how far peaceful life can be resumed. We will win based on our ability to separate the insurgents from the people. We operate to protect the people from violence and to gain their support.

Some people claim that the military just doesn’t understand this. But my experience in talking to the forces is that they do get it – right down the chain of command. That is why they make every effort to avoid civilian casualties, and see every civilian death as a tragedy. That is why they provide every support required to facilitate civilian reconstruction. That is why, though they are soldiers first, they also take the role when required of diplomats, or spokespeople, policemen or relief workers. As Lt Col Stickland of 42 Commando put it, our troops have to have the ability to “dance from a firefight to drink tea with the elders and back again at a moment’s notice.”

When I was at the Sangin forward operating base last week with 2 Rifles, the commanding officer set out what his men and women tell their families about why they are in Afghanistan: “We are here to help the Afghan people and to protect our national security”.

Our armed forces personnel are brave and highly capable men and women. They see, day-in day-out, the grinding poverty ordinary Afghans face, the disease, the lack of basic services. They see the dangers local people face. They understand clearly what is right and what is wrong. They see the difference they themselves make.

The message they get from the Afghans themselves is a consistent message, and this was repeated to me from village elders right through to the Minister of Defence.

And it is this.

If you come, you must stay.

The security we create needs to be permanent. People need to be confident that the Afghan national army and police will, over time, fulfil the role currently being undertaken by ISAF.

Let me tell you why. In some parts of the country, if a farmer accepts a helping hand from an ISAF soldier one day, he risks losing a hand to the Taliban the next. This is a simple truth for them. A brutal truth.

In the long-term, a stable and secure society is one in which security forces are able to stay in the background. But in the short-term people need to be confident that ISAF and the Afghan security forces will be there to protect them.

The goal is lasting security. This is why so much effort is being put into training the Afghan security forces. The national police force numbers over 80,000. The Afghan National Army is now nearly 90,000 strong and 2,000 more are being trained per month. I met Lieutenant Mahmoud of the ANA in Kabul last week, a young man who has been selected to attend Sandhurst. He was proud of the men he trained with and whom he would soon lead. "We have been the students", he told me. "Now we become the teachers". It will take time, but building the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces is one of the pre-requisites for success.

## **The Comprehensive Approach**

Let me be clear – there is no purely military solution in Afghanistan. As the preamble to the Afghan National Development Strategy puts it: "There can be no government without an army, no army without money, no money without prosperity, and no prosperity without justice and good administration."

Good governance – at national, provincial and local level – is necessary to meet the needs of the people – and to maintain consent.

In Afghanistan, the integration of the military and civil effect is the means by which good governance is being supported.

The military create the security space, the civilian effort develops, builds and strengthens.

It is important to appreciate the scale of the task. Afghanistan has been wrecked by decades of conflict and civil war. In many places the need is to establish services and civil institutions from scratch. In a country with a literacy rate of just 23% you can imagine the challenge of organising public services or the consistent rule of law. We are building from the ground up. When you travel around Helmand, you can see it for yourself.

So as well as this being our largest overseas military operation at present, the British Embassy in Kabul is the largest in the world. The UK has contributed £740m in non-military aid since 2001, and a further £500m is planned to 2013. The DfID programme is structured to spend at least half the money through the Afghan government itself. This is right and this is necessary.

At the Civil Military Mission Helmand, one civilian worker told me that if needed they could go and build a health clinic tomorrow. But this was not the point. The Afghans themselves had to build it – with the local people involved. They had to have a stake in it so they would protect it and grow the service. They have to see the Afghan Government delivering to have faith in their future.

The Civil Military Mission Helmand is working on the ground to ensure unity of purpose and effort between the military, political, economic and social threads of all we are doing in Afghanistan.

This is the Comprehensive Approach in action. Over the past decade we have made great strides in integrating our overseas operations. Ministers have a responsibility to ensure the efforts being made in theatre are being matched here in Whitehall.

The National Security Strategy sets out clearly the advantages of the Comprehensive Approach and the need to further strengthen it. It explains why the UK has interests that are worldwide rather than just local or regional. Our domestic security cannot be separated from international security.

Our engagement in Afghanistan serves to protect our national security, but it serves our national interest as well:

Ensuring stability in the wider region, particularly in Pakistan.

And strengthening the international institutions that help provide Britain's national security.

As the Prime Minister set out in April, the entire region in which Afghanistan sits is of vital strategic importance to the United Kingdom.

Britain shares a long history with Pakistan. Many of our citizens have family and cultural ties there. Working with Pakistan to reduce the threat from the Taliban and from Al Qaida is imperative for success. That is why we are supporting closer dialogue which brings together diplomatic, military and intelligence teams. That is why we are working with Pakistan to help build their counter-terrorism capabilities. That is why I was pleased that President Zardari confirmed at the EU-Pakistan Summit last month that he considers the Taliban to be the main focus of Pakistan's military efforts.

We are encouraging and advising the Pakistani government on the adoption of a comprehensive approach to the border regions - which combines military action against militants with a plan for reconstruction, development and political reform. Britain's development programme in Pakistan is set to become our second largest worldwide. And we are concentrating money on the border areas – particularly supporting education which will help provide alternatives to extremist teaching. David Miliband is in Pakistan as I speak - discussing the latest offensive in Waziristan and the problems of the Tribal Areas.

We also share an interest with our strategic partners to ensure that NATO and the international community succeed. Afghanistan is NATO's most important operation. 42 nations are taking part in the military and civilian efforts in Afghanistan. They operate under a UN mandate. Not as occupiers - but as friends - at the invitation of the Afghan government. Success is vital – not only for NATO, but for the United Nations and the international system as a whole.

## Conclusion

But let us be under no illusion.

The situation in Afghanistan is serious....and not yet decided. The way forward is hard and dangerous. More lives will be lost and our resolve will be tested.

This is a complex situation with problems that are inter-linked and in some cases entrenched. No single or simple solution will work. Success will be achieved incrementally.

Step by step and over time, the Afghans themselves will take full responsibility for their own security – and their own governance. This will make, in due course, the international combat capability unnecessary.

This is not going to happen tomorrow, nor in few short weeks or months. If we are to succeed we will need both the courage and the patience to see it through. There is no defined end date – only an end state.

But there is a message of hope for Afghanistan. There is progress, there is momentum. In this task we rely on the professionalism, skill and dedication of our Armed Forces and the civilians who work with them.

They will not let us down. We owe them the support...and the patience...they need to get the job done.