

Executive Summary

The international community has reached a tipping point in southern Afghanistan. The anticipated major spring offensive by the Taliban against international forces requires an urgent reassessment of the international community's counter-insurgency strategy.

Options for a peaceful settlement of the current conflict in southern Afghanistan are within its grasp, but the international community has yet to reach out to the Afghan people. The military are doing an admirable job in a very hostile environment, but the political, development and counter-narcotics efforts of the international community are not having the necessary positive impact. In some instances those policies are acting to further inflame the insurgency.

What is required is a very frank reassessment of the realities of the current insurgency dynamic, the declining credibility of the international community and an acknowledgment of the legitimate grievances of the Afghan people.

The current insurgency consists of two different types of insurgency: one driven by political and religious concerns, another by economic incentives and legitimate grievances. The latter insurgency – a 'grassroots' movement largely fed by social protest, unemployment and different grievances the people hold against the government and the international community – is significantly larger than the former group. It lacks the political purpose and fundamentalist nature of its counterpart. Structural unemployment, despair and extreme poverty provide an ideal recruiting ground for this insurgency.

The practice of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan has so far predominantly focused on military instruments to fight against the insurgency. By doing this, it has wrongfully left out all the non-military elements that form part of counter-insurgency theory: for example humanitarian aid, economic development, establishing health care and developing the educational system. Five years after the international community committed to stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan, these instruments have been insufficiently funded and implemented. Instead, what Afghans in the south see in their daily lives from the international community are mere negative policy instruments. They see military bombing campaigns, where bombs do not distinguish between innocent civilians and insurgents. The policy of poppy crop eradication reinforces poverty and fuels both anger towards the government and the international community, while it also provides the insurgency with an easy recruitment base.

If properly applied, the non-military elements of classic counter-insurgency practice would immediately improve security and create more support for the Karzai government. This report recommends the full matrix of proper counter-insurgency tactics be utilized as a coordinated Emergency Stabilization Process to provide the necessary support for a successful military effort. However, the international community has to realize that it is a matter of urgency. There is no time to waste as the window of opportunity is closing fast. We are losing friends and making many enemies if we do not change course soon.