



An ISAF patrol providing counter-rocket overwatch in the Bagrami district, east of Kabul.

## THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE: THE ORIGINS OF A STABILIZATION FORCE

by Dr. Sean M. Maloney

*In the minds of many in Afghanistan there's not much difference between the [Operation ENDURING FREEDOM] coalition and ISAF. We're the ones who made it possible for the Afghan people to eschew the role of the gun.*

Richard Armitage,  
United States Deputy Secretary of State, June 2002

**T**he decision by the Chrétien Government to commit the Canadian Army to serve with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan for one year is troubling. Outside of the main cities, Afghanistan is what might be described as a post-Apocalyptic environment in the wake of what amounts to a twenty-five year 'civil war'. That conflict featured massive Soviet interference, and ended with Islamic fundamentalist rule characterized by Pol Pot-like social engineering policies. ISAF is one expression of Western concern for Afghanistan's future, but the specifics of its *modus operandi* have been overshadowed by simplistic assertions that it is a UN-mandated peacekeeping force and, by implication, that Canadian involvement is an extension of Canada's altruistic peacekeeping mythology.<sup>1</sup>

It is undeniable that the people of Afghanistan deserve a better life than that provided by sheer anarchy, Soviet-led totalitarianism or Taliban fundamentalism. How exactly they choose to go about achieving that remains open to discussion. It is, however, also undeniable that without the intervention of American-led Operation "Enduring Freedom" forces, and the

successful take down of the Al Qaeda–Taliban alliance, that state of affairs would not be realized. Canada played a salient and effective role in Operation "Enduring Freedom," but withdrew its ground forces when they could not be sustained after six months. The destruction of Al Qaeda facilities and support in Afghanistan contributed to protecting North America from further attack, and this alone justified Canadian participation. Risking Canadian lives in pursuit of that aim is easily understood. But, asking Canadians to risk their lives so that Afghanistan can be stabilized and rebuilt is not as clear cut, especially when the question of who benefits from all that effort is addressed. What, exactly, was ISAF created to do, both ostensibly and actually? How did it evolve? And what of the future?<sup>2</sup>

### ISAF: THE DIPLOMACY

**W**e are all too familiar with Al Qaeda's use of airliners as manned cruise missiles against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. The American response to these terrorist attacks materialized by 7 October with the introduction into Afghanistan of the CIA's Special Operations Group (SOG), elements of US Special Operations Command (and US Air Force air support for both organizations) to prosecute what is now called the "Warlord Strategy." The early days of Operation "Enduring Freedom" revolved around backing

Dr. Sean Maloney teaches in the War Studies Programme at Royal Military College. He is the author of numerous books, and has recently returned from a research trip to Afghanistan where he accompanied both ISAF and "Enduring Freedom" forces on operations.



locally-led armies which opposed Taliban rule, particularly the Northern Alliance (NA). Some Taliban-affiliated or allied forces were also co-opted, bought off, or were merely opportunistic and changed sides. The express purpose of this strategy was to destroy Al Qaeda's bases, which were protected and supported by the repressive Taliban government. This first phase of the "Enduring Freedom" campaign was in full swing throughout October 2001. At the same time, parallel diplomatic efforts were underway to develop the means of replacing the Taliban government with one not infected with a near-medieval variant of Islamic fundamentalism, and which would not tolerate the use of its territory by international terrorists<sup>3</sup>.

The diplomatic track pursued by the United States included the re-activation of the long-dormant 2+5 Group<sup>4</sup>. During the mid-1990s, there had been a series of abortive American diplomatic efforts to broker ceasefires between the Afghan factions vying for power. In 1996-1997, the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Robin Raphel, was instrumental in efforts to convince adjacent countries not to supply weapons to the factions. She also proposed that there be a "cease-fire; a neutral security force; demilitarization of Kabul; agreement on an interim government arrangement and planning for a permanent form of government." The inability of the factions to compromise scuttled this plan, and ultimately the Taliban took over the country.<sup>5</sup>

The 2+5 Group included the United States, Russia, and Afghanistan's neighbours Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Working in conjunction with the UN Secretary General, the objective was to establish broad-based international support for any emergent non-Taliban government

in Afghanistan. Ambassador James Dobbins, representing the United States, worked on this problem with the UN's Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Bramimi.<sup>6</sup>

It was clear to members of the Group that some form of international security architecture would be needed in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Brahimi presented his report to the UN Security Council on 13 November 2001. There were, in his view, three options: an all-Afghan force, a multi-lateral force, or a peacekeeping force. Brahimi dismissed the peacekeeping force option, since "the terrain and the situation does not lend itself to a classical peacekeeping operation where there is no peace to keep." The all-Afghan option would be "difficult to achieve...when we really need to have law and order and peace and security" in Kabul to protect the Interim Government.<sup>7</sup>

The situation on the ground was confused. Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance on 13 November. Two days later, British special operations forces arrived at Bagram air base north of Kabul in blacked out C-130s. Local NA forces threatened to shoot down the aircraft, and contained the British troops in an armed stand-off. The Royal Marine Special Boat Service (SBS) and Special Air Service (SAS) were apparently deployed to Bagram as an advance

party to secure the base so that members of 2nd Battalion, The Parachute Regiment and 45 Commando, Royal Marines could fly in. Their mission, according to Prime Minister Tony Blair, involved supporting operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, protecting humanitarian aid and stabilizing operations in Kabul. The Northern Alliance leadership, which included Yunus Qanooni, was "humiliated" and incensed by this move, and claimed that it was not properly coordinated with NA efforts. The SBS were permitted to move in and secure the British embassy after some negotiation. The NA leadership were apparently upset at British Defence Minister Geoffrey Hoon's language which, read one way, indicated British forces were to be deployed to prevent NA forces from sacking Kabul and murdering its inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

On 18 November, UN representatives led by Brahimi arrived in Kabul to convince Afghan leaders to participate in talks about the country's future. NA leaders wanted the conference held in Kabul, but a variety of means were used to convince them to travel to Bonn, Germany.<sup>9</sup>

The Afghan players in the Bonn drama represented diverse interests. They included three émigré groups: the Rome Group, the Cyprus Group, and the Peshawar Group. The Rome Group was the repository of support for the deposed monarchy, while the others had Iranian and Pakistani sponsorship or support. The fourth group was the so-called United Front (UF). The UF was, in fact, completely dominated by the Northern Alliance leadership, but technically represented the anti-Taliban groups fighting north of Kabul, around Herat, Kandahar and Mazar i Sharif. (In fact, the UF ceased to exist as an entity after the Bonn Agreement was signed.)

The concept of an international security force for Afghanistan was further developed during negotiations between these groups when they met in Bonn in late November 2001. The objective of the Bonn conference was to reach a consensus on a transitional administration once the Taliban were removed, and, clearly, a security architecture was part of that. Brahimi's spokesman implied to observers that the members of the 2+5 Group were influential in getting the Afghan groups to the table in Germany and were responsible for facilitating the presentation of Brahimi's five point plan in the Security Council.<sup>10</sup> In other words, this was not a purely UN-initiated event.

The public 'spin' given to the entire Bonn process was that the international community was "not forming a government for the people of Afghanistan. The Afghans are forming a government for Afghanistan." If there was any failure in Bonn, the UN spokesman stated, "the leaders who came to the table in Bonn would have to shoulder [the] responsibility." Media questioning alluded to the possibility that the United Front was not in favour of an international force with a UN mandate, but a UN spokesman asserted that it "seems the most appropriate," but noted that the Afghans could "choose the structure of the force and its composition."<sup>11</sup>

What emerged during the first two days of talks was that the international community – in this case represented by the UN – was not going to become engaged in Afghanistan without certain conditions. This was subtly stated. In effect, the UN SRSF spokesman suggested that "without peace there will be no development, without peace there will be no investment, so the two are linked." Peace, in this case, was defined as the presence of an international force, even though in another breath five minutes later the UN representative stated that "The UN has made no conditions, we don't intend to impose any conditions on the Afghans. They know what the UN has to offer and what the international community has to offer. It's their choice."<sup>12</sup>

One idea bandied about in Bonn was that the international force could be made up solely of Muslim nations. Javier Solana had, in fact, been canvassing Muslim nations for contributors, but there were none who wanted to move until there was a UN Security Council resolution.<sup>13</sup>

It was a moot point for now, since the United Front representatives went public with their dissatisfaction over the international force concepts. Yunus Qanooni, the head of the UF delegation, baldly stated that "we prefer that security is looked after with Afghan forces themselves. A force composed of different ethnic groups and different parties and still we insist on that but so far there has been no detailed discussion of a peacekeeping force. ... We don't feel the need for an outside peacekeeping force." Furthermore, the UF representative implied that he wanted a force to prevent outside interference: "Pakistan has not only been interfering by also aggressing Afghanistan through the creation of the Taliban. ... We believe this is a very good opportunity for Pakistan to review its strategy towards Afghanistan."<sup>14</sup>

There was growing frustration about the inability of the delegations to sort out the international force issue. Something changed by 29 November, probably because of pressure brought to bear by the 2+5 Group. Qanooni then announced that "Our official position is that once there is a transitional

mechanism for Afghanistan established, and if that evolves, due to reasons that require or necessitate the presence of international peacekeeping force, then we will go with that. We will not oppose that." Qanooni also said that the composition of the nationality of the force didn't matter, though he believed that "the people of Afghanistan will prefer it if the [force] comes from Islamic countries." The UF representative distinguished between two types of missions and who should carry them out: he thought that Afghan forces should handle "peace enforcement" while the international force should handle "peacekeeping." It was clear that Qanooni thought that the "peace enforcement" force should police Afghanistan, while the "peacekeeping" force should "control the borders of Afghanistan in order to make sure it is not violated by neighbouring countries." Read Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> The Rome and the Cyprus group concurred, but thought that any international force should move into Kabul to provide security for the Interim Government before expanding further.<sup>16</sup>

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These views clearly related to the relative coercive power that the predominant Northern Alliance forces held in Kabul vis-à-vis the smaller and more distant military forces of the other UF members. In Afghanistan, as it is after any regime collapse, force is a prerequisite for political activity, therefore elements from other areas of the country included in an Interim Government either had to bring their own military forces to Kabul or find some substitute so they could protect themselves and influence political events on the ground. But, clearly, the NA held all the cards in Kabul, and for the time being didn't want to let go.<sup>17</sup>



Sleeve patch worn by troops assigned to ISAF.

Once there was broad agreement for an interim administration the UN representatives submitted a draft text to the groups. It included the need to deploy an international force as early as possible, but with the understanding that security responsibilities rested with the Afghans themselves until the Afghan interim and transitional governments could build up an army and a police force. The document did not mention force size, mandate or timing – just the need to secure Kabul and be prepared to expand throughout the country as necessary.<sup>18</sup>

By 5 December, the participating groups in Bonn formally requested that the UN authorize a force.<sup>19</sup> Annex I, entitled “International Security Force,” of the *Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions* states that the Afghans understand that security in the country is their responsibility and that they will “do all in their means to ensure such security for all United Nations and other personnel of international governmental and non-governmental organizations deployed in Afghanistan.” To do so, the Afghan groups requested international assistance in the establishment of new security and armed forces. Since this would take time, a request would be made to deploy a UN-mandated force which would “assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and its surrounding areas. Such a force could, as appropriate, be progressively expanded to other urban centres and other areas.” Furthermore, the participants in the UN talks “pledge to withdraw all military units from Kabul and other urban areas in which the UN-mandated force is deployed.”<sup>20</sup> And therein lay the seed of future problems.

### ISAF: THE REALITY

On 6 December 2001, the day after the Bonn Agreement was signed, Kandahar was taken by pro-American forces and the Taliban regime collapsed. This was an unexpected development. Indeed, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) designated the autumn operations involving special forces and

their local allies as a “shaping campaign”, which they projected would continue into the New Year. Only then would large-scale conventional forces be brought in to continue the fight. CENTCOM was now faced with a greatly accelerated timetable, and had to find a way to fill the power void that was developing in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

The UN Security Council rapidly passed Resolution 1383(2001) which essentially endorsed the Bonn Agreement.<sup>22</sup> One week later, after a force generation conference at CENTCOM, the United Kingdom formally offered the UN Security Council to act as lead nation for the International Security Assistance Force, and this offer was accepted on 20 December. Resolution 1386(2001) in effect re-stated the Bonn Agreement’s ISAF annex. It re-iterated that security in Afghanistan was an Afghan responsibility and ISAF was there to assist them.<sup>23</sup> Britain was asked to turn over command “no later than 30 April 2002.”

Concurrent with this announcement, a preliminary planning conference was held at the British Ministry of Defence for possible troop contributing nations.<sup>24</sup> Major General John McColl (British Army) was designated force commander, and he departed for Bagram air base with a twelve-man recon party on 15 December.<sup>25</sup>

Problems between ISAF and Northern Alliance forces arose immediately. The Defence Minister-designate, Mohammed Fahim, (who replaced Ahmad Shah Massoud as leader of the NA after his 9 September assassination by Al Qaeda) and the Interior Minister-designate, Farouq Qanooni, refused to meet with General McColl. This refusal to meet may in part have been because of the badly coordinated entry of British forces into Bagram in November, as well as the perception within the NA that the British were projecting an attitude of “we’re in charge here” when they really had no substantial forces on the ground. It took the intervention of American Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to get Fahim even to talk to McColl in a meeting brokered by the American special envoy to Afghanistan, James Dobbins.<sup>26</sup>

There were several points of disagreement, but the most salient was ISAF’s size. Fahim, now the Defence Minister of the interim administration (who also controlled approximately 27,000 NA troops stationed in Kabul), did not like the proposed 8,000-man force. Negotiations cut this down to 5,000 to 6,000, but the NA representative thought 1,000 would have been acceptable.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, the NA leadership did not really want an international force that could potentially coerce their own forces in Kabul.

Some American policymakers were also interested in keeping ISAF small, ostensibly because of logistics and air movement considerations. The reality was that the Bush administration (Rumsfeld in particular) was

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Street scene in Kabul: the author and a Canadian sergeant with local Afghan forces.

Author's collection



The main road from Kabul to the Khyber Pass runs between ISAF's Kabul Multinational Brigade Headquarters (right) and the training facility run by the US Army for the Afghan National Army (left).

The MTA listed a number of probable tasks, as opposed to specific and fixed tasks:

- Conduct protective patrolling;
- Assist the Interim Administration in developing future security structures;
- Assist the Interim Administration in reconstruction; and
- Identify and arrange training and assistance tasks for future Afghan security forces.<sup>30</sup>

Note the vague language. Also note that there is nothing there referring to peacekeeping or peace enforcement. The tasks as established in the MTA relate to assisting the Interim Government in achieving stability in Kabul by means of creating

a security force. There is no mention of armed humanitarian assistance, nor is there any mention of expanding ISAF to other urban centres in Afghanistan. There was no mention of withdrawing NA forces from Kabul, let alone a detailed time line for such action. In other words, the MTA was not in congruence with the Bonn Agreement.

Certainly this was not McColl's fault. In practical terms, he was up against people who outgunned his small force. He was also hampered by the fact that the UN representatives in the Bonn Agreement process had already told the Interim Government that they could determine the size of the force and what it would do.

Media observers picked up on these discrepancies immediately, and there was speculation that elements in the Interim Administration were concerned that an expanded and more robust ISAF might interfere with the heroin trade, which provided a significant source of funds for those elements.<sup>31</sup> The media also noted that the MTA did not address the withdrawal of forces from the city. In terms of numbers, the parties agreed that 1,000 ISAF personnel would conduct joint patrols with Interim Administration forces, and 3,000 would provide support. The force's size was restricted to 4,500.<sup>32</sup> What exactly could ISAF accomplish with 1,000 men in a city of some four million people containing over 30,000 anti-Taliban fighters from different factions fresh from the kill? That was the question confronting McColl and his men, not those who put them in that position, namely Brahimi, Fischer, Blair, Rumsfeld, Fahim and Qanooni.

During this period, ISAF conducted joint patrols (when they could) with Afghan forces, made contacts with regional police leaders in the city, and assessed Kabul International Airport for future use. The level of damage to the city was significant, and British soldiers expressed doubts about what could be reasonably accomplished in 90 days.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it took until 18 February 2002 to achieve full operational capability for ISAF, once the other 18 nations joined in and signed the MOU.<sup>34</sup>

reluctant to become involved in what it saw as a nation-building exercise, in part because this would increase the American 'footprint' in Afghanistan. An increased footprint meant that there would be more American forces and resources for an enemy to attack, which in turn would generate the need to deploy even more forces to protect them, which would produce even more targets, and so on. That is what happened to the Soviets during their war, and the Americans were determined to avoid that. Coupled with this was a significant amount of scepticism in the Pentagon about becoming involved in a nation building exercise which might resemble Haiti, Bosnia or Kosovo. By spreading out the task in ISAF, it reduced the American 'footprint' and brought other players into the Afghanistan stabilization effort.<sup>28</sup>

Another issue was the Military Technical Agreement (MTA), which was a formalized understanding between the stabilization force and local forces regarding roles and missions, expectations, size of the forces, rules of engagement and other aspects of an international force's presence in a region. After nearly two weeks of intense negotiations, an MTA was signed on 4 January 2002 by McColl and Qanooni (representing the Interim Administration of Afghanistan as opposed to the NA).

The MTA's salient points included the understanding that "the Mission of the ISAF is to assist it in the maintenance of the security in the area of responsibility", which included an area from Bagram to Kabul and its environs. The Interim Administration was obligated to provide ISAF with threat information, and it was to cooperate with international organizations that were part of the reconstruction effort. Most important, all military units based in Kabul were required to return to barracks; they could not deploy unless ISAF had been informed by the Interim Administration, and they were not permitted to conduct offensive action within the area of operations. ISAF was permitted to defend itself as it saw fit, and was to have unimpeded movement in every dimension.<sup>29</sup>

## PASSING THE HOT POTATO?

By 19 March 2002, Headquarters 16 Air Assault Brigade, the British formation headquarters commanding the ISAF units in Kabul, handed over to a German brigade headquarters. Even though a British infantry battalion remained as part of ISAF, it appeared to some that Britain was incrementally withdrawing from the ISAF commitment, which produced public criticism in London.<sup>35</sup> In time, 45 Commando, Royal Marines was deployed to Afghanistan, but this unit served with Operation “Enduring Freedom”, not ISAF. The 45 Commando deployment may have been undertaken to avoid criticism that Britain was pulling out of Afghanistan altogether.<sup>36</sup>

The search for another nation to take over the ISAF lead was already in play. At the same time, however, UN representative Brahimi reported that Interim Administration president Hamid Karzai was keen to expand ISAF operations to the other major cities in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> Obviously, this ran counter to his Defence Minister’s vision of Afghan security, and he still had some 27,000 NA troops in Kabul. Karzai had none, save a possible 1000 ISAF bayonets. Unwilling or unable to accept the political realities of Afghanistan, criticism upon criticism by lobby groups and assorted NGOs was piled on the international community, with increasing demands that ISAF be expanded, that the Afghan National Army (ANA) suddenly appear on the streets to support Karzai, and that the “warlords” be disarmed by some combination of both.<sup>38</sup>

ISAF expansion and Afghan National Army training were problematic solutions in early to mid-2002. There were competing and shifting views on ISAF expansion. Some American elements, particularly the Department of Defense and CENTCOM, did not want ISAF expansion beyond Kabul. “Enduring Freedom” forces, it was believed, could do the job just as well, and reduce the problems of coordinating a European-led military force with an American-led force operating in a complex environment. Others within the State Department were willing to entertain expansion. Karzai favoured expansion, but most local and regional Afghan commanders did not. Neither Britain nor Turkey supported it, but some European countries, such as Germany, wavered from time to time on accepting expansion. Of course, somebody would have to pay for it and convince others to join any ISAF expansion, but there were few who were interested.

Training an ANA and then expanding it throughout the country was also a contentious issue. Creating a professional army is no easy feat and it certainly was not going to happen overnight. ISAF efforts were too slow, and there were



Sleeve patch worn by members of ISAF's Kabul Multinational Brigade.

not enough resources to do the job effectively. France, Britain and the United States took control of ANA formation in May 2002. By June, France was training the first ANA battalion. But, training and equipping a force that could act as an agent of the Interim Government could not be done in the time available; it was going to be difficult to have it ready for the successor Transitional Government in 2002. There was, however, a possibility that a Kabul Corps might be ready by late 2003, and some reasoned that ISAF could then be withdrawn.<sup>39</sup>

The obvious obstacles to building and expanding the ANA were the groups controlling the existing military forces occupying Kabul and the other urban areas. To what extent would the ANA

be a competitive force? What legitimacy would it have among those who had just finished fighting the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda? To what extent were local commanders and governors willing to share regional power with a force of outsiders controlled by Kabul? There were no answers to these questions in early 2002.

While these debates were raging, the United States, not the UN, emerged in the forefront of the search for a lead nation for ISAF. Turkey had been “sounded out” in February by the British and the Americans. Ankara was initially enthusiastic, but concerns about the vague mandate and, more importantly, the financial cost caused some hesitation. Vice President Richard Cheney was dispatched to Ankara with an offer of \$228 million to offset the costs of a Turkish ISAF deployment. The Turks also wanted the British contingent to leave behind its communications capability and also wanted more American airlift to move their forces in. Then internal Turkish debate started over ISAF expansion and the decision to commit was progressively delayed.<sup>40</sup>

It is highly likely this delay was a tactic used to extract more concessions from the United States in areas quite unrelated to Afghanistan. Turkey was still recovering from the most serious economic crisis since the Second World War, and was still embroiled in the Cyprus dispute, an issue on which American Secretary of State Colin Powell was pressuring Ankara. On 2 April 2002, Turkey finally signalled that it would take over ISAF, but there were conditions. The Turkish government insisted that the UN renew the ISAF mandate first, that ISAF remain limited to Kabul with no expansion, and that ANA training continue as an alternative to expansion without cutting into ISAF financial resources.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, American policymakers like Richard Armitage noted that “Our biggest problem so far has been sustaining ISAF in its present role. One of our big diplomatic challenges the last few months, which we were successful at, was finding

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someone to take over the lead from the British in ISAF. And when the Turks agreed to take it over, they expressed extreme reluctance to take on missions outside of Kabul.” As Paul Wolfowitz put it in public testimony, “The Turks wouldn’t come in without the big dog around. Our biggest problem to date has been that even the countries that started out there, like the UK, can’t sustain

those commitments for logistical or other reasons. And there’s not a huge number of people signing up to volunteer.”<sup>42</sup>

Turkey’s ISAF tenure started on 20 June 2002 under the command of Major General Hilmi Akyn Zorlu. His concept of ISAF operations was a reiteration of the MTA: 1) assisting in the development of future security structures; 2) assisting in Afghanistan’s reconstruction; and 3) assisting in the training of future Afghan security forces.<sup>43</sup> The ISAF area of operations was effectively reduced to a sector that was patrolled by ISAF’s Kabul Multinational Brigade (corresponding to the city of Kabul) and an unpatrolled segment which included the area north to Bagram airfield.<sup>44</sup>

ISAF conducted joint patrols, it was involved in low-level humanitarian efforts, and it provided security for the emergency *Loya Jirga* (a traditional Afghan meeting of regional leaders). Then, Vice President Hadji Abdul Qadir was assassinated, which highlighted flaws in the protective measures taken for the Transitional Government’s leadership. President Karzai asked ISAF to assist in the investigation. General Zorlu was frustrated by the lack of security coordination displayed in Kabul, but was in no position to do anything about it. With regards to ANA training, most activities were conducted by the United States, Britain and France outside of the ISAF framework, though Zorlu assisted with ISAF resources when possible.<sup>45</sup>

An assassination attempt on 5 September against Karzai in Kandahar, followed by a car bombing which killed thirty people in Kabul, amplified the security problems in Afghanistan. ISAF was not structured or equipped to provide comprehensive counter-terrorist and close protection assistance to the Transitional Government, which remained dependant on Northern Alliance forces and a nascent secret police. The ANA was still in training and would be in no position to contribute for some months. Karzai therefore asked for American special operations forces assigned to Operation “Enduring Freedom” to handle his personal security.<sup>46</sup>

Well towards the end of 2002, therefore, ISAF was not significantly involved in ANA training. It was unable to assist the Karzai government in handling terrorist threats to the leadership. It was not equipped, nor did it have a mandate, for large scale humanitarian aid operations. It could not operate outside of Kabul. It could patrol alongside NA forces and the Kabul police, and it could conduct local and small-scale relief tasks in its area of operations. If ISAF was to be effective in

its mandate and expand its operations, Major General Zorlu indicated that it would need “stronger units, with tanks, with armoured units, and with attack helicopters. ... Providing such a force would be up to the countries backing ISAF, with the likely chief donor being the United States.”<sup>47</sup> When Turkey announced that it did not want to renew its tenure as ISAF lead nation, the search was on for a replacement.

Enter the Americans once again. As early as 19 September 2002, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher praised the British and Turkish contributions to ISAF, and claimed that both nations did “a superb job of maintaining the stable and secure environment that has largely prevailed in Kabul.” He also implied that the United States was favourably reviewing the ISAF expansion matter, but emphasized that “Enduring Freedom” was already “actively working to resolve disputes between armed Afghan leaders.”<sup>48</sup>

Re-enter the Germans. Back in March 2002, Germany had committed itself to assisting with the professionalization and training of the Afghan police, a mission quite separate from ISAF’s joint patrolling mission. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, in a May 2002 visit, reiterated Germany’s commitment to Afghanistan, while Karzai tried to get him to commit to taking over the ISAF lead. German interest was not entirely altruistic: the largest Afghan population in Europe – over 90,000 – resided in Germany. Some of them were involved in narcotics trafficking, and there was an Al Qaeda presence as well.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, having police and military personnel on the ground in Afghanistan facilitated cooperative information gathering.

In the autumn of 2002, German Defence Minister Peter Struck expressed the view that NATO ought to take over command of ISAF, arguing that this move would resolve logistical and communications problems and also allow for continuity of command after the Turkish tenure. From the outset there was interest in Alliance circles in the idea of NATO rotating the lead nation in ISAF every six months.<sup>50</sup> One argument made for establishing a NATO ‘Afghanistan Force’ (AFOR) was that 12 NATO nations already provided nearly 95 percent of the ISAF troops. Some even considered the possibility that “Enduring Freedom” and ISAF could eventually be merged into a NATO AFOR.<sup>51</sup>

At this same time, Germany agreed to take over the ISAF mission lead from the Turks. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that NATO still had made no decision about its involvement, the Headquarters of the German/Netherlands Corps – a non-NATO headquarters which nonetheless benefited from years of NATO interoperability<sup>52</sup> – was deployed to Kabul to run the mission.

ISAF’s mission was then “clarified” by the German/Netherlands Corps. ISAF was to “assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and surrounding areas, in order to allow the Afghan Transitional Administration and UN authorities to function, [and to] liaise with political, social and religious leaders to ensure that religious, ethnic and cultural sensitivities in Afghanistan are appropriately respected within ISAF operations.” The Military Technical Agreement’s “probable tasks” thus became “illustrative tasks,” and the caveat “ISAF may, within means and capabilities” was inserted before the usual

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“assist in the development of future security structures.”<sup>53</sup> Again, ISAF was to do all of this with 4,500 personnel, of which only between 1,000 and 1,500 were in combat arms units.

In February 2003, the Canadian government decided to contribute to ISAF, and floated the possibility of accepting the mission lead. It was soon recognized, however, that the Canadian Forces simply did not have all the necessary resources the lead nation was expected to provide so, to avoid a repeat of the 1996 Operation “Assurance” fiasco in Zaïre, Canada pressed NATO with some vigour to take over the ISAF mission. NATO agreed to this in May 2003.

## CONCLUSION

What are we to make of the evolution of ISAF? It is evident that the idea of an international security force for Kabul was a means of gaining diplomatic ‘buy in’ by the non-United Front Afghan émigré groups, with the ultimate goal of establishing a multi-ethnic representational government. It was also a means of engaging the United Nations and its associated reconstruction aid mechanisms. The reality was that the NA emerged as the true power broker, in part because of its control over Kabul and its ability to coerce, and, in the case of ISAF, its inability to shape any alternative form of power. These realities were placed in stark relief with the initial deployment of the British-led ISAF and the problems of negotiating a proper Military Technical Agreement. At the time, ISAF was needed by the Americans to provide a non-American dominated salient into the city and its political processes, and to keep open an alternative so that Operation “Enduring Freedom” could be

reduced and ISAF expanded some time in the future as a means of reducing the American “footprint.”

Most of ISAF’s tasks, ironically, have been taken over by “Enduring Freedom” forces, particularly the Afghan National Army training and the Karzai security functions. This has left ISAF with what amounts to a “presence mission” – the provision of low-level stability in certain parts of Kabul and the execution of discrete humanitarian aid tasks. It is a mistake to call ISAF a peacekeeping mission.

In mid-2003, Northern Alliance troops in the thousands still occupy Kabul, while Operation “Enduring Freedom” forces, with some Afghan National Army units, continue to conduct counterinsurgency operations around the country. ISAF expansion remains in limbo for the time being as the Americans push the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept to supplement “Enduring Freedom” security efforts. The PRT’s are essentially groupings of NGO aid agencies and governmental development aid coordinated with American civil affairs reconstruction efforts. Operation “Enduring Freedom” forces plus the PRTs provide an alternative to ISAF expansion, and this combination would appear to solve the thorny issue of too much Western control or influence in the provinces.

How ISAF’s mission will mutate in the future will depend on which direction American policy takes with regard to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and the extent to which provincial authorities agree to go along with it, not the deliberations of the central government in Kabul.



## NOTES

1. See Sean M. Maloney, *Canada and UN Peacekeeping: Cold War by Other Means 1945-1970* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2002) Chapter 1 for a discussion of Canadian peacekeeping mythology and its effects.
2. This study should be seen as provisional since it is based mostly on publicly available sources and is written so close in time to describe what are extremely complex diplomatic manoeuvres. There are, however, no other studies of ISAF and its formulation, or of Canada’s decision-making process which produced the commitment to it in 2003. As with all attempts to reconstruct decision-making processes, it will hopefully serve as a base for others to build on as better information enters the public domain.
3. See Robin Moore’s superb *The Hunt for Bin Laden: Task Force Dagger* (New York: Random House, 2003) for the best description so far of the Special Forces war in Afghanistan. A good primer on CIA SOG can also be found in “Amerikas Schattenkrieger,” *Der Spiegel* 10/2003 pp. 100-114. See also Bob Woodward, *Bush At War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002). The product deployed by ‘Team Woodward’ should be read with some scepticism: see Christopher Hitchens, “Aural History,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 2003, pp. 95-103.
4. The terminology can be somewhat confusing: the 2+5 Group is sometimes referred to as the “6+2” Group in the media and in some UN correspondence. In effect, it consists of interested parties in the Afghanistan problem, no matter how many there are.
5. Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 164-166.
6. Discussion with Ambassador James Dobbins, 21 May 2003.
7. UN Information Centre Bonn (26 November 01) “Press Briefing by Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman for the SRSG For Afghanistan.”
8. British Parliament, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs Minutes of Evidence, 22 January 2002, “Examination of Witness Mr. Paul Bergne, OBE”; Alan Philips et al., “British Halt Army Move Into Kabul,” *The Daily Telegraph* 19 November 2001; Adam Sherwin and Michael Evans, “British Screw Up Left Troops Near Disaster in Kabul,” *The Times* (London) 29 August 2002; <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>> “UK Troops Prepare Ground,” 16 November 2001.
9. <<http://www.islamonline.net>> (18 November 01) “UN Steps Up Afghan Initiative, US Presses Northern Alliance.”
10. UN Information Centre Bonn (25 November 01) “Press Briefing by Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman for the SRSG For Afghanistan”; UN Information Centre Bonn (26 November 01) “Press Briefing by Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman for the SRSG For Afghanistan.”
11. UN Information Centre Bonn (26 November 01) “Press Briefing by Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman for the SRSG For Afghanistan.”
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. UN Information Centre Bonn (28 Nov 01) “Press Briefing by Yunus Qanooni, Head of the United Front Delegation.”
15. UN Information Centre Bonn (29 Nov 01) “Press Briefing by Yunus Qanooni, Head of the United Front Delegation.”
16. UN Information Centre Bonn (29 Nov 01) “Press Briefing by Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat, Head of the Rome Group Delegation”; UN Information Centre Bonn (30 Nov 01) “Press Briefing by Houmayoun Jareer, head of the Cyprus Group Delegation.”
17. Confidential interviews; Discussion with Ambassador Jim Dobbins, 21 May 2003.
18. UN Information Centre Bonn (2 Dec 01) “Press Briefing by Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman for the SRSG For Afghanistan.”

19. UN Information Centre Bonn (5 Dec 01) "Closing Session of the UN Talks on Afghanistan by Mr. Lakdar Brahimi."
20. UN Information Centre Bonn (5 Dec 01) "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Bonn, 5 December 2001." Note also that the Annex stated that it would be useful if the international force assisted with the rehabilitation of destroyed infrastructure in whatever area it was operating in.
21. Confidential interview. Note that the planned large scale conventional forces were substantial and exceeded the size and capabilities of the airmobile brigade eventually deployed to Kandahar and Bagram in Spring 2002.
22. Horst Rutsch, "Afghanistan: On the Road to Recovery," *United Nations Chronicle* 2002 Issue 1. pp. 7-12.
23. United Nations Security Council (20 Dec 01) "Resolution 1386(2001): Security Council Authorizes International Security Force for Afghanistan: Welcomes United Kingdom's Offer to Initial Lead Nation"; Confidential interview.
24. <<http://www.operations.mod.uk/fingal/>> "International Security Assistance Force (Operation FINGAL): The establishment of the force"; <[http://www.operations.mod.uk.veritas/summary\\_oct-dec01.htm](http://www.operations.mod.uk.veritas/summary_oct-dec01.htm)>, "Operation VERITAS: Summary Reports October 2001 to December 2001."
25. <[http://www.janes.com/security/international\\_security/news/jmb/jmb011217\\_1\\_n.shtml](http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jmb/jmb011217_1_n.shtml)>, (17 Dec 01), Charles Heyman, "British General Paves Way for International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan."
26. Peter Foster and Michael Smith, "Alliance Snubs British General," *Daily Telegraph* 18 December 2001. See also discussion with Ambassador James Dobbins, 21 May 2003.
27. <<http://www.cnn.com>> (19 Dec 2001), "Disputes Delay Afghan Peacekeepers."
28. There is some mention of these concerns in Woodward's *Bush At War* see pp. 124, 241. On the American footprint issue, see <<http://defenselink.mil>>, "Testimony as Delivered to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: The Situation in Afghanistan, by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, June 26 2002." See also discussion with Ambassador James Dobbins, 21 May 2003; Confidential interviews.
29. (31 Dec 01) "Military Technical Agreement Between the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Interim Administration of Afghanistan (Interim Administration')." *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Michael Smith, "Afghans Stall On Deal as Troops Arrive," *Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 2001.
32. Peter Forster and Michael Smith, "Kabul Deal Leaves Peace Force Crippled," *Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 2002.
33. Charles Moore, "Britain's Troops Get Cracking to Rebuild War-Weary Nation," *Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 2002. This article is actually part of a diary kept by Moore during his week in Kabul.
34. House of Commons, "Statement by the Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon, to the House of Commons, Westminster, Monday 18 March 2002: Deployment of UK Forces in Afghanistan."
35. *Ibid*; Michael Smith, "British Troops Must Stay Longer in Kabul," *Daily Telegraph* 25 March 2002; <<http://news.mod.uk>>, "Speeches and Statements: International Security Assistance Force for Kabul."
36. The 45 Commando deployment produced a significant opposition and media backlash against the Blair government after the commander on the ground implied that there was nobody left to hunt down and no reason to be in Afghanistan with Op ENDURING FREEDOM, this in response to criticism directed at him for not being competent and criticism directed at the government for 'over hyping' the deployment for political purposes. To follow this debate see <<http://news.bbc.co>> for the following articles: (16 April 02) "Brigadier in Military Hot Seat"; (17 May 02) "Ministers Accused of Afghan 'Spin'"; (19 May 02) "Hoon Defends Royal Marines' Chief"; (20 May 02) "Lane and the Wild Goose Chase"; (20 May 02) "Marines Chief Role Defended"; (20 Jun 02) "UK Troops to Leave Afghanistan"; (20 Jun 02) "Hoon Attacks 'Armchair Critics'"; <<http://www.rfel.org>> (19 Mar 02) Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: Britain Expands Military Role with Fresh Combat Troops."
37. Horst Rutsch, "Afghanistan: On the Road to Recovery," *United Nations Chronicle* 2002 Issue 1. pp. 7-12.
38. A sampling of these arguments includes: <<http://www.fpi.org>>, Jim Lobe, "Afghanistan Quagmire"; <[www.hsph.harvard.edu](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu)> "HPCR Central Asia Discussion Summary, Issue 6 v.1"; <[www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org)>, "Securing Afghanistan: The Need for More International Action"; <[www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)>, "Afghanistan: US Should Act on Expanding Security"; <[www.dfi-intl.com](http://www.dfi-intl.com)>, Josh Pollack, "Afghanistan's Missing Peace." <<http://www.ndu.edu/inss>>, Stephanie Lanz, "Rebuilding Afghanistan's Armed Force: Issues, Obstacles, and Insights from Recent Training Experiences, May 23, 2002"; see also Ali A. Jalali, "Rebuilding Afghanistan's National Army," *Parameters*, Autumn 2002, pp. 72-85.
39. <<http://usinfo.state.gov>>, (20 Mar 02), "US to Help Turkey Pay for Peacekeeping in Kabul"; <<http://www.eurasianet.org>>, (10 Apr 02), John Gorvett, "Turkey Warily Prepares to Take Over Afghan Peacekeeping Mission"; Amberin Zaman, "Turks Urged to take Control of Peace Force," *Daily Telegraph*, 20 March 2002.
40. <<http://www.rfel.org>>, (2 Apr 02), Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Afghanistan: Turkey Sending Delegation to Kabul Ahead of Possible ISAF Takeover"; <<http://www.globapolicy.org>>, Saban Kardas, "Dilemmas of Peace Building: Reflections on Turkey's Drive for ISAF Command," *Turkish Daily*, 19 April 2002; See also <<http://news.bbc.co>>, (29 Apr 02), "Turkey to Lead Afghan Peacekeepers."
41. <<http://defenselink.mil>>, "Testimony as Delivered to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: The Situation in Afghanistan, by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, June 26 2002."
42. <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>>, (22 Nov 02), Hilmi Akin Zorlu, "Special Policy Forum Report: Turkey Has Been Successful as the Leader of The International Force in Afghanistan."
43. Briefing provided to the author, Kabul, March 2003.
44. UN Security Council (12 Aug 02) Document S/2002/040, "Monthly Report on the Operations of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan."
45. <<http://www.gvnews.net>>, Jon Gorvett, (9 Sep 02), "Anxious Days for Turkish Afghanistan Command"; <<http://news.bbc.co>>, (5 Sep 02), "Attack Exposes Karzai's Weakness."
46. <<http://www.gvnews.net>>, Jon Gorvett, (9 Sep 02), "Anxious Days for Turkish Afghanistan Command."
47. <<http://usembassy.state.gov>>, (19 Sep 02), "US Looking for ISAF Leader to Succeed Turkey."
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49. "Afghanistan: Still Too Out of Area for NATO?" *NATO Notes*, Vol. 4 Number 10, 19 December 2002.
50. Briefing provided to the author, March 2003, "Politico-Military Aspects of ISAF."
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*



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Combat Control Room of HMCS *Victoria*, the first of the Canadian Navy's new submarines.