

Britain in the World: Lessons from Afghanistan

Written by Jim Murphy

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Britain in the World: Lessons from Afghanistan

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/03/11/britain-in-the-world-lessons-from-afghanistan/>

JIM MURPHY, MAR 11 2011

This is a transformative moment. The uprising in North Africa and the Middle East and the awe-inspiring civilian surge that we have watched in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have fractured orthodoxies and permanently recast assumptions on which policy has been based for many years.

The UK needs a proactive, strong defence policy to protect our interests and values. In today's world the prosperity, security, liberty and civil liberties of those at home cannot be separated from events beyond our borders. The era of a global recession and the global threat of terrorism prove that to any residual doubters. A belief that you have responsibility beyond your borders is not, as some would have it, ideological, but, as we have seen over the last few days, a necessary response to the world in which we live.

That essential internationalism demands of us a new defence posture. As we begin to undertake that work an important first step is to understand the consequences and learn the lessons from the conflict in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan remains, in my view, a vital operation in the interests of national security. But let's be clear – the argument is not for war, it is the case against what is unacceptable in the world.

Almost ten years in, however, it is not enough to explain why we were justified to go to war in the first place. We have to be clear about how we are getting out. We support conditions-based withdrawal by 2015. Our aim is not to build Hampshire in Helmand, but it is in part to ensure that Helmand does not come to Hampshire. It is to develop domestic security, infrastructure and local self-governance to a point that coalition withdrawal does not precipitate a collapse but rather a continuation of that progress, making certain that the circumstances that led us to go in can never again occur.

But there is no military solution to a political problem. We must foster political will by better understanding and engaging the insurgents. To use the term 'The Taliban' in the singular suggests a homogeneity that is not reflective of the reality. We cannot devise a single strategy but rather we need a single overarching objective, which is, alongside the effort against insurgents, an assault on the conditions that give rise to support for them.

There are, I believe, five areas central to achieving this. First is the legitimacy of the Government. Legitimacy can only be gained once the government abides by the laws it sets and expects of its population. Second is fear and the rule of law. To enforce both security and justice we need to build the capacity of the Afghan National Police. Third is understanding and overcoming grievance. Insurgency depends on a sense of grievance to survive. Grievance has its roots predominantly in social and economic failure, so to rid Afghanistan of those conditions would be to rid the Taliban of the fuel for its popular narrative. The fourth issue is the poppy trade. We must disrupt it by securing the areas in which opium cultivation is highest and through supporting legal agriculture.

The fifth key issue is a political process. We are now at the point where there should be a review of the political strategy every part as deep as the Obama led ISAF review of military strategy. The process must be Afghan-led, yes, but at this stage it needs the international community to lead in helping the Afghans arrive at their strategy. In getting

Britain in the World: Lessons from Afghanistan

Written by Jim Murphy

there we need to maintain military efforts alongside the parallel processes of reintegration and reconciliation.

But the internal political track won't succeed in isolation of regional political engagement. All the regional powers have a strong interest in realising an Afghanistan that no longer exports drugs, extremism or refugees. We need a UN-led agreement, which recognises the differing interests of countries in the region, in which each agrees to protect Afghanistan's sovereign integrity and support the reconciliation process.

For our future policy, we must also understand the consequences and lessons of Afghanistan. I worry that Afghanistan, combined with the legacy of Iraq, creates a permanently unpopular concept. There is rightly a lot of talk about states in an Arc of Instability ranging from West Africa to Central and Southeast Asia, but there is a State missing from that analysis which is also a danger: the State of Ambivalence. Even though they are entirely different conflicts, UK public opinion has been rightly tested by Iraq and Afghanistan, but as events in North Africa and the Middle East have shown we cannot afford to duck out of global events.

The principal danger of the State of Ambivalence is that in those states where the risk of conflict is highest its drivers would be able to proceed unabated. In the State of Ambivalence we would still believe in core global values, we just may not so readily stand up for them. It is vital that we continue to make the case publicly and effectively for our duty to act on the responsibilities which we have beyond our borders.

The second threat of the State of Ambivalence is that marginalisation becomes not just a strategic risk for the UK but a reality. We have unique global leverage through our roles in the EU, the United Nations Security Council, the Commonwealth and the G20. With globalisation diffusing power among many different international actors it is vital that we maximise our potential for influence or it could diminish.

Another consequence to confront may be US Westwards Gaze and Fatigue at perceived European inaction. With pressures on US Budgets, historic domestic policy reforms and declining relative US military strength there will likely be less US appetite for large-scale overseas military operations.

The combination of these consequences makes me worry that if Kosovo occurred after our combat role in Afghanistan has ended we may intervene militarily less quickly, less effectively and with more people than ever saying not at all.

Turning to the lessons, the first is that when we invade another nation we immediately take ownership of the problems without necessarily being in possession of all the solutions. We own the poverty, the instability, the sectarian tensions as well as the contemporary and established grievances. The post conflict peace plan must be a core part of the pre conflict battle plan.

Recent events have shown that in future stability will be based as much on the extent to which we support systems which empower people and enable them to participate in the global free flow of ideas and to be part of civil society as it will bilateral government agreements.

Another lesson is the continuing need to adapt military hardware and planning. The UK Government's Defence Review raises serious questions about whether we have the ability to do this.

Two further lessons concern multilateralism and Europe. The question of where the UK and the EU sit on the spectrum between binding international multilateralism and ad-hoc military and diplomatic coalitions remains just as pressing.

The final lesson is on Defence Diplomacy. This is not new and it isn't just for abroad either. It should start at home. I don't want to let the anger about Iraq trump the shame of Rwanda. That means: making clear the intentions behind military actions as well as countering our enemies' propaganda – for domestic and international audiences; fostering serious debate in the Muslim world, at home with the diaspora and abroad; and breaking down the barriers between the military, political and civilian worlds.

Britain in the World: Lessons from Afghanistan

Written by Jim Murphy

The world is changing spectacularly and rapidly. We don't know where current events will end and indeed many will debate how and why they started. The fact is no-one has conclusive answers. But we must start a debate, at home and abroad, about Britain's role in helping to shape world events and trends.

Jim Murphy MP is Shadow Secretary of State for Defence (UK)