



# The Neglected

■ By James Kitfield

**KABUL, Afghanistan**—Even from the air, the other-worldly mountains of the Hindu Kush evoke something essential and timeless about Afghanistan. Jagged peaks tower more than 14,000 feet above the Kabul basin, ringing the capital and stretching northeast to the horizon and the gateway to the Himalayas. That range is breached by only a handful of high passes and tunnels, strategic arteries linking



**A pickup truck carrying Taliban fighters cruises through Musa Qala in Helmand province in November. The Taliban held the area for nine months in 2007.**

# Front

Kabul to an interior of remote river valleys and mountain redoubts. This is country to get lost in, not control.

Travelers approaching from the air also begin to glimpse another essential fact about Afghanistan: This central Asian nation is landlocked and is surrounded by some of the world's most meddlesome neighbors.

On a recent winter's afternoon, U.S. Gen. John Craddock, NATO's top commander, was set to arrive in Kabul, with other senior officials and a few journalists, to assess the Western al-

## **As 3,200 additional U.S. marines head to Afghanistan, signs indicate that the resurgent Taliban has fought NATO to a draw.**

liance's epic counterinsurgency and nation-building operation in Afghanistan. A slight man with close-cropped gray hair and an intense gaze softened only somewhat by glasses, Craddock was pensive during the plane's descent into the original front in President Bush's "global war on terror."

"You know, some of our Provincial Reconstruction Teams are located in areas so remote that I'm told not much has changed there in the last 500 years," said Craddock, speaking in the back of an Air Force 737 jet outfitted with advanced satellite communications. "There's one team in particular I want to visit, but we have a problem with a lack of attack helicopters. You can't even fly in there without close air support."

As the supreme allied commander, Europe, since last summer, Craddock has visited Afghanistan numerous times to take the pulse of NATO's first operation involving sustained ground combat—and the most complicated venture in the alliance's history.

"There's a tribal dynamic to Afghanistan that is simply foreign to our Western culture, and we need

to understand it better, because when you layer it on top of issues of ethnicity and religion, they combine to form a very complex environment," Craddock said. "As you work through that tribal culture, for instance, you find that even in the same tribe some people will support the Taliban and others will sympathize with the Afghan government. So this is a very loosely organized insurgency that has shown an ability to regenerate field commanders, and it has a top-level *shurra* [leadership council] that resides outside the country."

Indeed, as many experts have noted, the fact that the Taliban's top leadership and organizers have a sanctuary across the border in Pakistan is perhaps the most complicating factor of the Afghan insurgency. "As long as the tribal areas around Waziristan remain a safe haven for Taliban extremists and insurgents, every time we put them under duress they will take sanctuary there to regroup and reset, and then they will come back at us. That is a problem," Craddock conceded. "Whenever insurgents enjoy sanctuary, it's very difficult to box them in to the point where they realize the fight is over and they need to come into the political process. From time immemorial,



**The fledgling Afghan army retook Musa Qala in December with support from NATO forces.**

GETTY IMAGES/AP/ICPL, CHRIS HARGREAVES/ALOMMO

that's how insurgencies have eventually been defeated—not by the military but by bringing them into the political process over time and making them irrelevant.”

### Strategic Stalemate

After investing more than six years and \$120 billion in Afghanistan, the United States and its allies have at best fought the Taliban to a violent draw. In fact, a growing number of experts fear that the Western alliance has so underestimated the challenges here that the country is in grave danger of collapse. Just in the past week, for instance, no less than three independent reports warned of dire consequences if negative trends in Afghanistan continue unabated.

“Make no mistake, NATO is not winning in Afghanistan,” reported the Atlantic Council of the United States, which characterized the operation's status as a “strategic stalemate.” The council, chaired by retired Gen. James Jones, Craddock's predecessor as NATO commander, called for “urgent action” to overhaul the alliance's strategy. “Afghanistan remains a failing state,” the council declared. “It could become a failed state.”

The recent reports on Afghanistan cite a host of familiar woes: a resurgent Taliban that continues to make gains in parts of the country and enjoys sanctuary in Pakistan; a weak and openly corrupt Afghan government that has been slow to reform and to extend its control outside Kabul; a disjointed international relief and reconstruction effort that lacks high-profile leadership; a burgeoning opium trade that finances warlords, criminals, and insurgents; and a fractious and bifurcated U.S. and NATO military operation hobbled by insufficient troops and equipment, and frequent opt-outs (called “caveats”) that tear at alliance cohesion by limiting the flexibility of many European units to go into combat.

Progress in Afghanistan “is under serious threat from resurgent violence, weakening international resolve, mounting regional challenges, and a growing lack of confidence on the part of the Afghan people about the future direction of their country,” concluded the bipartisan Afghanistan Study Group, created by the Center for the Study of the Presidency, a non-partisan think tank that was also instrumental in forming last year's Iraq Study Group. The United States and the international community lack sufficient troops, resources, and a clear strategy, the center's report concluded, to “fill the power vacuum outside Kabul and to counter the combined challenges of reconstituted Taliban and Qaeda forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a runaway opium economy, and the stark poverty faced by most Afghans.”

Kori Schake served on the National Security Council staff in President Bush's first term and now teaches international security at the U.S. Military Academy. She fears that the increasingly contentious public argument between Defense Secretary Robert Gates and NATO allies over troop levels and counterinsurgency tactics could indicate that the alliance is beginning to fracture under the considerable strain of operations in Afghanistan.

“I look at Afghanistan today with real foreboding because NATO lacks a common view of the threat and the level of force needed to counter it, and if you had an incident involving the loss of significant troops I worry that the European countries might beat a hasty retreat out of Afghanistan,” said Schake, speaking at a recent symposium. “What signal would that send to the rebels of Darfur, or Somalia, or Kosovo? The lesson they would likely take away is that the Western alliance of the world's wealthiest nations is no longer committed to shaping the international order. If the West can't make Afghanistan work,” Schake said, “I despair that we would ever have the political solidarity to act together again.”

### ■ Kabul Troubles

■ **Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan** make it very difficult for NATO forces and the Afghan army to win permanent victories.

■ Large majorities of the Afghan people still support President Hamid Karzai, but **his government is weak** and unable to control much of the country.

■ Many NATO members **refuse to supply more troops and continue to put constraints** on where and when their soldiers can fight.

### Terrorism's Long Reach

On the way to the headquarters of NATO's International Security Assistance Force, in a guarded compound next to President Hamid Karzai's palace complex, Craddock's small convoy of armored cars weaves through streets choked with every conveyance one can imagine. Young boys push carts loaded with firewood, beat-up cars jockey for advantage with bicycles and carriages drawn by horses and donkeys, and everyone rushes as if on a blind dare into the city's chaotic traffic circles. The sidewalks are crowded with men in flowing, long-sleeved shirts cinched at the waist over loose-fitting trousers, many of them wrapped in rough shawls and blankets against the bitter January cold. Women peer

out of traditional head-to-toe *chadris* through latticed slits.

In many ways the snarled traffic and boisterous crowds bespeak Kabul's relative prosperity and normalcy. Insurgent attacks are relatively uncommon here. The thousands of Westerners who have poured into the country as part of the international relief and reconstruction effort talk of finding good deals on oriental rugs and semiprecious stones in the crowded markets and shops of “Chicken Street.” Bars and restaurants throughout the city serve alcohol and cater to foreigners.

Although it admittedly started from an economic ground zero after the Taliban's fall in 2001, Afghanistan's gross domestic product is likely to grow at a robust 13 percent in 2008, according to the World Bank. That partly explains why large majorities of Afghans still support the Karzai government and the international presence, despite all their shortcomings. In a recent ABC/BBC poll, 67 percent of Afghans said they supported the NATO presence; only 13 percent expressed a favorable view of the Taliban.

Though jovial and inured to the free-for-all traffic, the experienced British soldiers who steer the general's convoy through Kabul are wary. In recent incidents, they said, Taliban suicide bombers have tried to ram cars into NATO convoys from side streets. By the time Craddock and his entourage arrive at ISAF headquarters, a steady snowfall has begun, although it does little to obscure the thick layer of smog that clings to the city like dust, or to lessen the acrid smell from thousands of dung fires.

Even before Craddock's group was settled for the night, a noise outside began as a rattle in the diaphragm and then blos-

somed into a bone-jarring percussion. Those who had ever been in a war zone realized that they were in one again and understood even before the rumbling echo subsided that the first reports to pour in would be exaggerated and unreliable. Throughout the night of January 14 and over the next few days, however, as officials at ISAF pieced together the attack on the five-star Serena Hotel, the news was in some ways worse than imagined.

Less than a kilometer from the military compound, four men had attacked the magnet for the international set in Kabul, described on its own website as “an oasis of luxury in a war-ravaged city.” The Serena’s restaurant and spa were favorite gathering spots for Western dignitaries, relief workers, and journalists. Norway’s foreign minister was forced to hide in the hotel basement as gunmen rampaged through the lobby.

Somehow the four men, armed with suicide vests and automatic weapons, had breached the hotel’s blast barriers, reinforced gates, and metal detectors. They evaded the armed guards and killed eight staff members and guests, wounding many others. In a chilling detail, Afghan sources said that the hotel video system caught images of the gunmen shooting wounded patrons and workers execution-style. The Taliban quickly claimed responsibility for the attack and warned that it would target other Kabul restaurants and bars that cater to foreigners. The threat badly unsettled international workers living in the city.

The attack highlighted a dramatic shift in Taliban tactics over the past year away from large-scale field operations where its fighters are no match for U.S. or NATO forces, and toward asymmetric attacks using suicide bombers and roadside explosives. In fact, the commando-like assault on the Serena Hotel suggested to some observers that Al Qaeda is spreading the terror tactics it has perfected in Iraq into the ranks of its Taliban ally.

“You know, if you judge the Taliban on its fights with ISAF, you’d have to say the past year has been a bad one for them,” said Khan M. Khadim, an Afghan journalist, speaking through an interpreter and noting the deaths of several high-profile Taliban leaders over the past year. “Yet when its field commanders are killed, the Taliban just replaces them and keeps going. So if you judge the Taliban by whether or not they have been de-

feated or run off, then this has been a good year for them. Because the *idea* of the Taliban is still very much alive. The bombing of the Serena Hotel just reminds people that [the Taliban is] still strong enough to reach into the center of Kabul. That doesn’t make them popular, but it does make them famous.”

### ■ Gen. John Craddock



AP/MURRAY BREWSTER

**“I think it was Napoleon who said it’s easier to fight against an alliance than to be part of one, and sometimes I feel that way too.”**

### ■ Hamid Karzai



GETTY IMAGES/AP/PAMIR QURESHI

**Afghanistan’s president recently rejected the United Nations’ consensus choice for Afghan aid coordinator, Paddy Ashdown.**

### The Taliban Adapts

On the night of the attack, Brig. Gen. Carlos Branco, the ISAF’s spokesman, was clearly agitated. Because of all the Western journalists in Kabul, he sensed that the Taliban was about to score another propaganda victory with its spectacular attack on the Serena. It’s a familiar irritation among ISAF and Afghan army commanders—they believe they win every tactical, head-to-head engagement with the Taliban yet often lose the information war to an unscrupulous but media-savvy foe. After NATO strikes, Branco said, Taliban foot soldiers frequently remove all traces of their weapons, clearly visible in reconnaissance video, and then claim that only “innocent civilians” were killed.

Even though 2007 was the deadliest year yet for allied troops fighting against the Afghan insurgency, Branco and other officials plausibly argue that the higher death toll was related to a surge of 8,500 NATO troops last year and to the allies’ push into areas where the Taliban had traditionally held sway. Even though the Taliban holds pockets of remote territory, Branco said that its attacks on district centers actually dropped by half in 2007.

Contrary to media reports and the conventional wisdom that the Taliban is expanding its operations in and its grip on Afghanistan, Branco said that fully 70 percent of Taliban attacks and related “security incidents” were concentrated in just 10 percent of the country (or about 40 of Afghanistan’s 400 provinces), mainly in the still-untamed southern region.

According to figures compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the number of roadside bombs in Afghanistan increased from 1,531 in 2006 to 2,223 in 2007, and incidents of “indirect

fire,” which include suicide bombings, rose from 418 to 803. The ISAF, however, views these dramatic spikes as a sign of the Taliban’s weakness, not strength. “If you look at insurgent movements historically, they normally start with terrorist attacks to gain attention and then build forces to confront the

## German Soldier



REUTERS/FABRIZIO BENSCH

**Germany recently rejected a request from U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates for more troops for Afghanistan. Germany has some 3,000 there now.**

government,” said Branco, who commanded special operations forces in the Portuguese army and served in Bosnia and Angola. Because the Taliban learned in 2007 that it cannot go head-to-head with ISAF or successfully contest ground, he said, insurgent leaders have shifted toward attacks that target civilians—and thus alienate the local population.

“So, contrary to this impression that the Taliban are winning and expanding their operations, 2007 was actually a very bad year for them,” Branco insisted. “We disrupted their military operations, caused heavy losses to their leadership, and further separated them from popular support.”

### A Taliban Stronghold

NATO’s airbase in Kandahar, in the restive southern region of Afghanistan, is headquartered in a cavernous building with arched chambers and thick concrete walls that was once occupied by the Soviet military and later the Taliban. Today the hosts are a British Royal Air Force unit attached to the International Security Assistance Force.

The Kandahar base is ringed by mountains and surrounded by minefields laid by the Russians, who turned Afghanistan into one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. During the rainy season the mines “migrate” unpredictably with the shifting flows of mud, so that even within the base’s perimeter some off-limits areas are too dangerous to tread. According to a British officer, many of the remote villages in this region are practically medieval—isolated groups of mud houses without electricity or running water whose occupants subsist on poppy crops. Kandahar is an ideal place for contemplating arguments and counterarguments about the relative strength of the Taliban insurgency.

When a reporter asked an Afghan interpreter in Kandahar about the status of the Taliban in this region that has long been considered its stronghold, he shook his head. “The Taliban are like birds; no one knows where they come from,” he said. When pressed, the Afghan posed his own

rhetorical questions. “Who made the Taliban? The Pakistan government made the Taliban! Who supports the Pakistan government? America!”

A principle in classic counterinsurgency doctrine holds that insurgents don’t have to win; they just have to not lose. Kandahar offers ample evidence of why many experts believe that the Taliban is a long way from losing, starting with the sanctuary it enjoys just across the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Privately, senior Afghan sources say that the Taliban in southern Afghanistan is run by a well-known warlord who operates from the Pakistani city of Quetta, in nearby Baluchistan province. In fact, with the Pakistani government of President Pervez Musharraf mired in political crisis, Al Qaeda and allied Islamist insurgent groups have launched an unprecedented number of offensive actions to consolidate their control of Pakistan’s border regions and its federally administered tribal areas.

Afghanistan’s bumper poppy crop has yielded a dramatic rise in opium production, which is up more than 50 percent in the past two years and now accounts for more than 90 percent of illegal opium output worldwide. The opium trade provides a reliable funding stream for the Taliban. More than half of Afghanistan’s opium production comes from Helmand province, where the Taliban reportedly imposes a 10 percent surcharge that nets the terrorist organization an estimated \$30 million to \$40 million a year.

### Weak Central Government

A popular adage in Afghanistan holds that the problem is not that the Taliban is so strong but that the Afghan government is so weak. That relative weakness was clearly displayed in the southern region. Last year, the Taliban was able to seize and hold the district of Musa Qala in Helmand province for nine months before the Afghan army retook it in December, with the backing of ISAF forces. As part of the operation, however, Afghan army commanders created an escape route for any Taliban fighters who declined to fight, and officials enticed the Taliban commander, Mullah Abdul Salaam, to defect. He is now the government’s district chief for Musa Qala.

President Karzai seems increasingly paranoid about perceived challenges to his authority, even from Western officials. He expelled two U.N. diplomats for traveling to Musa Qala and reportedly meeting with Taliban representatives. More recently, Karzai rejected the United Nations’ consensus choice for Afghan aid coordinator, Paddy Ashdown, who had capably managed U.N. operations in Bosnia and was strongly backed by the United States. Karzai, observers say, viewed him as a threat.

According to senior NATO sources, once the Afghan army retook Musa Qala, the government lacked the police to adequately secure it or the development aid to win locals to the government’s side. NATO officials admit that they have less than 50 percent of the trainers they need to mentor Afghan police forces.

NATO’s continuing inability to field adequate forces or

■ Still on Board  
**67%**  
of Afghans support the NATO presence.

equipment to implement a classic “clear, hold, and build” counterinsurgency strategy also raises troubling questions about the alliance’s staying power in Afghanistan. After announcing the deployment of an additional 3,200 marines, for instance, Defense Secretary Gates openly criticized European allies for failing to match it. Canada has threatened to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan’s volatile south unless more reinforcements can be found, and Germany recently publicly rebuffed Gates’s letter to NATO allies forcefully pushing for more troops.

Meanwhile, the snows of the Hindu Kush will start to melt in a few months, signaling the beginning of what virtually all sides acknowledge will be a Taliban spring offensive and the opening of a critical new phase in the war. In 2009, Afghanistan will hold presidential elections, and the people will render their verdict on the West’s counterinsurgency and nation-building enterprise in their country.

In many ways the situation in Afghanistan today is reminiscent of Iraq a year ago, when—absent a surge in troops—the United States seemed poised on the edge of a military calamity. “There is broad understanding that this spring will be vital in Afghanistan, which is why we recently anted up 3,200 extra marines, knowing no other allies would do so before April,” a senior U.S. official said. “Right now, we have a tough situation where allied forces can clear an area of the Taliban, but there are not enough of our forces or Afghan police to come in behind and hold that area, and we can’t be everywhere at once. So we need a surge in troops and trainers to create confidence among the Afghan people that we remain a strong and committed partner, and to demonstrate enough success to counter the naysayers who insist we won’t succeed in Afghanistan.”

### Exit Strategy

In his defense ministry office, Gen. Mohammad Zaher Azimi, spokesman for the Afghan army, displays a large poster of legendary guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, the head of the Northern Alliance whose assassination by Qaeda agents on September 9, 2001, hinted at the catastrophe that would take place two days later in New York City and Washington, sparking the global war on terrorism. A mujahedeen like Massoud, Azimi fought against the Soviets in the 1980s and against the Taliban in the 1990s. If given the wherewithal, he insists, the Afghan security forces have the will to fight the country’s battles today.

“With the help of the international community and especially the United States, the Afghan army is gaining the support and confidence of the Afghan people,” said Azimi, who cites the Musa Qala operation as a template for the future and the first phase of an exit strategy for the alliance. The Afghan army

led the Musa Qala operation, with NATO supplying logistics, air, and command-and-control support. He also argues that for the cost of deploying one NATO soldier, the alliance could train and equip 70 to 100 Afghan soldiers.

“We also need an Afghan army that can protect our national sovereignty and balance the military power of other countries in the region because, as you know, for 30 years our neighbors have had a tradition of interfering in Afghanistan’s internal affairs,” Azimi said. “Even today they provide the Taliban with education and training centers, with recruits for suicide bombings from the madrassas, and with money and equipment. I don’t want to name specific countries, but if we had an army capable of defending our country then our neighbors would be less likely to interfere like this.”

As he waited for a break in the snowstorm that would allow his aircraft to leave Kabul, Gen. Craddock endorsed the idea that setting up viable Afghan security forces was NATO’s eventual ticket out of the country, and that doing so would require the alliance to finally meet its obligations to the Afghan army.

“In the beginning when NATO agreed to this mission, it set out a troop and equipment list based on the military tasks involved, and the alliance has yet to fill it. Now NATO needs to fill that shortfall,” Craddock said. The list of unmet needs includes maneuver battalions and reconnaissance and intelligence assets, as well as the top priority—more NATO training teams to mentor Afghan security forces.

The problem is, Craddock said, “some nations just don’t want to embed trainers with Afghan battalions. Other nations are risk-averse and don’t want to move into areas contested by enemy forces. Other nations worry that their troops aren’t able to call in close air support or medical evacuation, even though we’re trying to find innovative ways and enablers to help them do that.”

Of course, those are exactly the drawbacks of “war fighting by committee” that prompted then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to initially spurn NATO’s offer of help when the United States went into Afghanistan, although he later reversed himself. The mission in Afghanistan was gradually handed over to NATO beginning in October 2004 and ending in October 2006. Now, with the U.S. military beginning to buckle under the strain of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, going it alone is no longer an option.

“You know, I think it was Napoleon who said it’s easier to fight against an alliance than to be part of one, and sometimes I feel that way too,” Craddock said. “But what we have with NATO is the most successful security alliance in the world. We just have to find a way to make it work.”



GETTY IMAGES/AP/MARTIN BUREAU

“So, contrary to this impression that the Taliban are winning and expanding their operations, 2007 was actually a very bad year for them.”

—Brig. Gen. Carlos Branco

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