

Centre for Land Warfare Studies

Report on the talk on THE AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE AND WAR EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN 9 September 2013

General

Maj Gen Stuart Smith, Commander 1st Division Australian Army gave a talk on “The Australian Strategic Perspective and War Experience in Afghanistan” at Taber Hall, Manekshaw Centre, New Delhi, on 9 September 2013. The talk was attended by faculty from CLAWS and members of the armed forces.

Opening Remarks: Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch, SM, VSM (Retd), Director, CLAWS

India and Australia have traditionally very friendly ties encompassing a host of positive factors. Defence cooperation has increased in recent years including the Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation 2006 and the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation issued by Prime Ministers Dr Manmohan Singh and Mr Kevin Rudd in 2009. The Australian Defence Minister visited India for a defence dialogue. Adherence to democratic principles is shared by both countries.

Maj Gen Stuart Smith, Commander 1st Division Australian Army

The above average contribution of the Indian armed forces to United Nations missions has not gone unnoticed in Australia. Based on experiences, there are five observations regarding operations in Afghanistan and lessons that can be learnt from them. The first observation is that strategic objectives should also guide military objectives. In Afghanistan, these included the ensuring of the provision that Afghanistan is no longer a safe haven for terrorists. Australia stands firmly by its alliance commitments to the US. The Australian military worked closely with Australian ambassadors and aid agencies in the region. The Coalition Headquarters had operational control over some task forces and their requests for Australian forces to operate outside Uruzgan province were closely scrutinised. The Strategic Headquarters in Australia was kept fully apprised of the ground situation and the conduct of operations.

Regarding the second observation of force preparation, the individual training component included situational briefing, weapons training, explosives awareness training and cultural intelligence training. Collective training emphasised components of comprehensive and adaptive warfare training and followed the learning loop system. There was a deliberate decomposition based on the lessons learnt which incorporated psychological debriefs and assessments, especially for preparing troops to take to garrison life once more after active service.

The third observation was related to the countering of unconventional threats. Seven Australian soldiers have been killed by the Afghan troops that they trained, and this issue of insider attacks erodes trust of each party with the effects being felt throughout all Coalition members. Counter measures include cultural training,

understanding systems of threat, key leadership engagement and protective clothing and equipment. A cultural compatibility study was carried out to solve problems and to gauge different attitudes between different cultures.

Management of public affairs was the fourth observation. This included the embedded journalist programme for both TV and newspaper journalists, the delivery of strategic operational messages to the media to support the campaign and the appointment of an officer as the Public Affairs Officer to look after information dissemination to the media after an operational incident.

The fifth observation highlighted the coalition approach. There is need to understand the military, social and cultural differences influencing the campaign as well as the need for investment in coalition relationships. There should be placement of embedded officers in Coalition Headquarters' chain of command, regular liaison work with key coalition counterparts with air and maritime components along with regional engagement focussing on linking ambassadors, embassies and envoys to support Australian interests in the region.

Coalition interests change from time to time and therefore need to be seen. Australia cooperated early in Uruzgan with the Dutch who left in 2010 and were replaced by the Americans. Now Australia is in the lead joined by Slovakia and Singapore.

Interactive Discussion

What are the views prevailing in Afghanistan as the US pulls out?

An Afghan provincial businessman stated that there are three reasons the future holds hope even after the ISAF departure. There is great confidence in the ability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to protect the people, which is justified. The divide between the urban and rural communities has decreased and education has taken off with the next generation attending school. However the optimism will last only if the international community continues to support the next round of elections and general investment and follows a long term approach.

Australia supports the US stance on Syria. What will be the Australian forces' role, will they participate in the campaign?

There is media speculation about the involvement of the Australian Defence Forces in Syria but it is not confirmed. Strategic objectives should be specified which would then be followed.

In 1962, Australia unambiguously supported India's stand in the war, so why Indian areas in the map shown are depicted as Chinese?

The reason is not known, but Australia is supportive of the Indian forces in protection of their borders and in the counterinsurgency operations carried out by them in India.

What is the capability and capacity building of ANSF as it stands today? Can it withstand the Taliban after the withdrawal? Can it be that effective after continuously sustaining a high casualty rate?

In 2008, the Afghan Fourth Brigade could not go beyond platoon level operations and could not operate alongside the police. It was able to conduct brigade level operations and operate with the police in 2012. The capability has increased and

continues to improve on a monthly basis. The ANSF can deal with the local Taliban and with the Taliban resurgence. However all government resources should support it and political dialogue should continue as part of the solution to defeat the insurgency. It should be supported by the international community. ANSF has the capacity to regenerate and is resilient. Support of niche combat training, resources and training by the international community can help decrease casualties.

After withdrawal, there is the possibility of the Taliban coming to power. What would be the situation thereafter? What do you visualise as a possible political and military role for India?

The military resurgence by the Taliban can be dealt with by the ANSF. A continued investment in training and advice by the ISAF is likely to continue which can help in resisting the resurgence but dialogue and resource investment is more important. If India is able to participate as part of the international support then it is always good.

Pakistan is providing sanctuaries to insurgents. Is there any mechanism to keep Pakistan in check? Will the drone operations continue?

There should be a dialogue with the Pakistani military for maintaining security on the borders.

Strategic objectives flow from political objectives. Is it possible for the US to attain objectives in Syria without military intervention as in Afghanistan, where the task is already unfinished? Will Syria be made into another Afghanistan?

India has demonstrated through history that objectives can be achieved without using violence. There is a healthy scepticism about the objectives in Syria. There is a need for engagement in Syria and for a clear guidance for soldiers from the government and they should also advise the latter on how the objectives can be met. There is concern on the nature of humanitarian disasters and a certain degree of weapons being used. The situation is very complex inside Syria at the moment. The military should seek clarity before any action is taken.

What is the contribution of the Air Force to the conduct of the Australian military in Afghanistan?

The Air Force has contributed transports, maritime patrol aircraft and UAVs. Complex air operations have been managed. The conduct of UAVs has been synchronised with other components for joint battle operations.

Can political progress be achieved in Afghanistan while the Taliban are still armed? What will be the Pakistani role in the dialogue between Afghan government and the Taliban? Are there any particular areas where Coalition efforts have not succeeded?

There are several insurgent groups with different political objectives. The door should be kept open regardless of disarmament. The international community and Pakistan should contribute to this in whatever way the Afghan government asks.

There have been talks with the Afghan tribal elders and the lesson learnt is that the human terrain needs to be studied hard before the conduct of any operation. Religious leaders have been engaged in order to know their perspective and what they found offensive in conduct.

What is the post-drawdown role of the US in the Asia-Pacific region?

The US has requested training facilities in northern Australia. The aim is to improve interoperability of the two armies and to carry out humanitarian operations whenever required in these areas and in Papua New Guinea.

In 2008, China criticised the Quadrilateral initiative. There is a change in leadership in China creating tensions on multiple fronts. How can China be engaged in operational levels by Australia?

The aim of engagement is to break down barriers and prevent misunderstanding. There are stronger military to military exercises with China and there is engagement on multilateral levels also. There are different kinds of activities being carried out along with China on the military level and to establish a framework on the political level.

Concluding Remarks: Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch, SM, VSM (Retd), Director, CLAWS

The capacity of the ANSF to hold on exists and they will be able to take on the Taliban. However, the promised financial and other support to the security forces must continue. The Afghan Taliban is not the ISI's or Pakistan's plaything and will not be pushed around. The Durand Line has become Pakistan's Achilles heel. If the Taliban become strong in Afghanistan they would become detrimental to Pakistan as they will be able to increase their foothold in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

Vote of Thanks: Maj Gen AB Shivane, VSM, ADG, PP, Indian Army

Strategic and defence cooperation between India and Australia has been facilitated and deepened by the two agreements of the Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation 2006 and the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation issued by Prime Ministers Dr Manmohan Singh and Mr Kevin Rudd in 2009. The bilateral relation was elevated to a strategic partnership. Since then, India and Australia have extended over 50 high-level visits. Leaders now meet annually. The White Paper on 'Australia in the Asian Century' released by Prime Minister Ms Julia Gillard in October 2012 is a perceptive document which acknowledges the shifting of the global centre of gravity to Asia-Pacific and provides a roadmap for building defence cooperation.

During the recent visit of the Indian Defence Minister to Australia on June 4 and 5, 2013 a slew of defence cooperation initiatives were undertaken to further strengthen this strategic partnership. These range from stepped up military exchanges and regular defence dialogues to maritime security and a joint naval combat exercise in 2015. Both the defence ministers agreed to the need of promoting exchanges between the defence establishments and the armed forces of both sides, including the regular conduct of the Defence Policy Dialogue, Armed Forces Staff Talks and professional military exchanges.

The recent visit by the Indian Chief of Army Staff, General Bikram Singh to Australia and the visit by Gen Smith is part of this deepening relationship. It is important for us to understand the transition in Afghanistan and the emerging security situation in

Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The incisive inputs of Gen Smith about the on ground situation in Afghanistan provide clear perspective on the way things are likely to unfold. At a time when drawdown of ISAF from Afghanistan is being chalked out, these inputs are really valuable.