A crucial test for the West's Afghan strategy

FRANK HARVEY

National Post
March 11, 2010

Canadians concerned about the future of Afghanistan should monitor the military operations and reconstruction efforts underway in Marjah and surrounding villages of the Nad Ali District of Helmand province. The area has been portrayed by NATO officials as a key command centre for insurgency and opium operations in Southern Afghanistan.

Describing the Marjah battle as the Taliban's last stand is excessively optimistic, but it is not unreasonable to argue that this is NATO's and Washington's best hope for achieving an important tipping point toward the irreversible momentum leaders have been trying but failing to reach in Afghanistan. Given the July 2011 timeline issued by President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Stephen Harper, this operation is arguably one of the last chances to prove to the public and skeptical politicians that solutions to the complex Afghanistan puzzle actually exist.

During a visit to Kandahar and Kabul in January, I received several briefings from senior military and civilian leaders on the overall mission and the central military, political and development objectives tied to the new population-centric counter-insurgency strategy. The trip helped to crystallize my own impressions of the enormous human sacrifice, military risks, logistical challenges and financial investments required to rebuild key pieces of a failed state ravaged by years of civil war and plagued by an ongoing insurgency. Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Teams outside Kandahar city, and the forward operating base around the village of Deh-e-Bagh, are serving as templates for operations and reconstruction efforts unfolding in Helmand province today.

The Marjah operation is essentially the largest and arguably most significant application of General Stanley McChrystal's revised Afghanistan strategy. The goals are straightforward but immensely difficult to achieve -- clear Taliban and other insurgents from cities, towns and larger population centres, maintain control over these areas by providing a robust security infrastructure relying primarily on Afghan National Army, paramilitary and police units, and build Afghan capacity to govern these areas while investing in relevant development projects.

Skeptics are right to ask why this particular operation is any more likely than so many others to matter. Understanding the differences between the new and old approaches is essential to appreciating how important the success of this operation is to the larger Afghan mission.

First, the offensive is one of the largest military campaigns since the onset of hostilities in 2001 and is supported by 15,000 American, British and Afghan troops backed by other coalition partners. Unlike previous fights, this one has a significant Afghan face with a majority of the 5,000 troops moving into Marjah consisting of Afghan National Army and other paramilitary, police and security elements. Second, the objective today is not to kill insurgents. That discredited strategy is appropriately described as "mowing the grass" -- it looks good for a while but you have to cut the lawn again before long. The new approach shifts the focus to protecting civilians, securing the population and maintaining control with a significant Afghan security presence.

Third, the goal today is not to achieve a rapid military victory. The civilian-friendly, casualty-averse strategy will compel NATO and Afghan troops to accept additional risks on the battlefield. Military leaders are being asked to adopt different, far more challenging rules of engagement -- firing at insurgents only under conditions of clear threat, relying less on air strikes, suspending the use of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System pending an investigation of the deaths of 12 civilians in the first few days of fighting, etc.

Paradoxically, declaring your intention to protect civilians raises expectations, so each of the 15 civilian casualties killed in Marjah in thefirst week of operations will have a significantl y larger impact on public opinion and related perceptions of failure -- press coverage throughout the first two weeks of the operation illustrates the point.

McChrystal apologized to Afghan leaders and repeated his concerns about civilian deaths during recent Congressional hearings on Afghanistan -- "inadvertent killing or injuring [of] civilians undermines their trust and confidence in our mission. We will redouble our efforts to regain that trust." But redoubling efforts to protect civilians requires constant adjustments to NATO's rules of engagement, not only in Marjah but for similar offensives under Canadian command planned for spring.

The decision to provide advanced warnings about the Marjah operation was designed to give Afghan civilians sufficient time to leave, or to prepare for the invasion if they decided to stay. Officials were also hoping insurgents would leave, and some did. But early warnings carry additional risks --insurgents were given the time to prepare their defences while hiding hundreds of additional improvised explosive devices throughout the area, both to keep Afghans from leaving and to make it more difficult for advancing coalition troops. The search for IEDs continues today. In an asymmetric war dominated by a much larger invading force with an aversion to civilian casualties, the logical response for insurgents is to make the battle as dirty as possible, as quickly as possible, by using civilians as human shields. Canadian troops will face the same challenges when conducting their military offensives in the spring.

Fourth, perhaps the most relevant difference is the clear commitment to post-conflict reconstruction, beginning with what General McChrystal describes as a "government in a box," essentially a government-in-waiting ready to set up when insurgents are cleared. Now that major military operations are winding down, this piece of the puzzle will require a massive influx of Afghans committed to rebuilding governance structures and working with aid organizations to co-ordinate development projects. The goal here is to improve the quality of life for Afghans by providing them with a sense of responsibility for their own future. Efforts are being reinforced with what appears to be a stronger commitment to post-conflict governance and reconstruction. But these promises have been made before, and failures to accomplish these same goals in the past have produced a deeply-rooted cynicism among Afghans that will be very difficult to overcome, unless the successes are obvious.

During my brief time in Afghanistan it was very clear to me that everyone was on the same page, genuinely committed to the theory underpinning the new counter-insurgency strategy. And there are good reasons for the consensus -- the approach makes sense when compared with every other alternative. In light of past mistakes and failed projects, this plan is about all we have left.

Marjah is the crucial test. If the strategy works, the case will go a long way toward convincing Afghans they have a credible and far more appealing alternative to the Taliban. Measurable successes in Marjah and in Kandahar in spring could also help to persuade the Canadian public and officials in Ottawa that some crucial parts of Canada's operations should continue beyond 2011.

On the other hand, if the operation in Marjah does not live up to the very high and rising expectations, despite the effort and sacrifice, the failure will have a profoundly unsettling effect on Washington's willingness to sustain the surge beyond 2011. It is one thing to fail because the strategy you adopted was wrong (adjustments can be made), but quite another to invest so much in what everyone honestly believes is the right strategy and still fall short of success.

Frank Harvey, professor at Dalhousie University and senior research fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. He is the author of The Homeland Security Dilemma: Fear, Failure and the Future of American Insecurity.