

Spain's War in Afghanistan

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»» Towards the end of 2009 the Spanish government was conspicuously muted in its reaction to President Obama's new strategy for the war in Afghanistan. As Spain assumes the EU presidency the Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, has yet to convince that he is committed to winning the war in Afghanistan. To do so he must provide sufficient military and civilian resources for Spain to prevail against the Taliban in its area of operations in Badghis Province and lead a greatly enhanced European commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan during Spain's EU presidency.

After Zapatero and US President Barack Obama met last October, the White House spoke of future US-Spanish cooperation in Afghanistan and little else, while the Spanish government hardly mentioned this issue in its summary of the discussions. Following Obama's announcement of a military and civilian surge, Spain has limited time to reflect upon the level of its future commitment in Afghanistan.

In late 2009 Spain belatedly recognised a need to change its strategy in Afghanistan following an announcement by Minister for Defence, Carme Chacón, that Spain would consolidate its troops in the north-western province of Badghis, where it leads a Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT). This new strategy envisages increasing Spain's military deployment to over 1500 troops, many of whom will undertake additional combat duties. Spain is also building a new military base in Badghis for the permanent deployment of an Afghan National Army (ANA) 600-strong battalion or kandak, which will be mentored by a Spanish Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spain has been a useful but low-key contributor to the mission in Afghanistan. It has undertaken valuable civilian work; its military role has been more circumscribed.
- Spain's defence minister now makes an eloquent case for a more robust Spanish engagement to turn back the Taliban insurgency. She is not backed unequivocally by other members of the government.
- The EU presidency provides an opportunity but also challenges Spain to lead a positive European response to president Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan. Steps are needed on both the military and civilian sides, and especially in linking these two dimensions more systematically.

»»»»» To a country unaccustomed to offensive military deployments in recent times, the envisaged Spanish strategy in 2010 is bold, but necessary. It marks a belated change of tone from the relative military neglect of Badghis. Zapatero should acknowledge the urgency of the situation in Badghis instead of shirking a prioritisation of the war in Afghanistan. In doing so he should strongly back Chacón who, alone among her colleagues, has warned of the unprecedented challenges Spanish troops face and the need to properly resource their mission in order to succeed against the Taliban insurgency.

FROM PEACEKEEPING TO COUNTERINSURGENCY

In the past Spain has consistently not sought regional command in Afghanistan, refused to deploy in the south and generally preferred to concentrate on reconstruction and logistical duties rather than assuming a combat role. For most of the period between 2005 and 2009 Spain has contributed just under 800 soldiers to ISAF, playing an important logistical role in Herat Province under the Italian-led Regional Command West as well as making up part of the Italian-led Quick Reaction Force (QRF) and providing two OMLTs. Spain has been a consistent, if relatively modest, donor to the international aid effort in Afghanistan, disbursing EUR 136 million in aid from 2001 to 2005 and pledging a further EUR 150 million at the London conference in 2006 to be spent from 2006–2010. In 2008 Spain spent EUR 50 million in assistance towards Afghanistan, of which EUR 17 million was distributed through Spanish agencies, with the rest being allocated to multilateral programmes.

In 2005 Spain sought to take over one of the 'least problematic' PRTs in the north of the country, but found that the UK and Germany would not relinquish these and was therefore obliged to accept the 'last option' of leading the PRT in Badghis. As recently as last summer the Spanish Commanding Officer in Badghis, Colonel Emilio Sarabia-Griera, observed that the role of a PRT is not to take the

offensive against the insurgency but to concentrate on reconstruction. However, in a region starved of sufficient ISAF and Afghan troops, the deployment of combat troops who are given instructions not to take the fight to the Taliban has caused some resentment among other ISAF contributors. Elite combat troops such as Spain's Parachute Regiment could easily have been detached from the PRT and given separate duties while still providing protection to the PRT as required.

Now the fight has come to Spain. It remains unclear how Spain will react to the challenge. So far Chacón has struck a determined and reassuring tone: Spain will not back down in Badghis. However, it is far from certain that the recent increase in Spanish troops is sufficient to turn the tide against the Taliban, or whether the government will remain consistent in backing a more proactive strategy should Spain suffer considerably more casualties at the hands of the insurgency than the eight it has sustained to date.

If Spain wishes to turn the tide against the insurgency, it will have to abandon any illusion of undertaking a peacekeeping mission or even of reconstruction. There is no point in having a reconstruction mission if Spain does not hold territory on which to build. As one senior Spanish officer has observed, the return of the Taliban to Badghis has 'completely changed' how Spain needs to approach its mission. The US is unlikely to deploy sufficient troops to Badghis in 2010 – most reinforcements will be sent to the south and east of the country. Badghis is Spain's fight. It is now up to the Spanish government to provide the necessary resources to prevail there.

BADGHIS: 'HOLD' BEFORE 'BUILD'

Spain's reluctant assumption of command of the PRT in Badghis has not prevented the delivery of much-needed assistance there. Until 2009 Spain had 230 soldiers in addition to just under 20 civilian experts from the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development

(AECID) deployed to the PRT in Badghis. These were later joined by one diplomat from the Spanish foreign ministry. The PRT has concentrated its activities on developing basic infrastructure through the construction of roads, improving the region's water supply, renovating the airport and building hospitals, clinics and schools, resulting in a significant decrease in infant mortality and greatly improved access to education. In 2009 Spain announced plans to develop a teacher training centre and an institute for rural development.

However, during the initial years of the Spanish presence in Badghis, few resources or programmes

were put in place to improve governance and strengthen local capacity, which constituted just over 6 per cent of Spanish assistance to Badghis for 2007. Although Spanish development officials view capacity building as a second phase of the PRT's activities in the province, weak

and corrupt governance remain a source of considerable local grievance.

Despite this paucity of governance projects in Badghis, the benefits of the Spanish presence are obvious. The work of the PRT has won the admiration of other ISAF contributors and should not be understated. Spain has also been praised for its commitment to contracting local businesses for reconstruction projects, helping small enterprises through the TRAGSA programme and building a strong relationship with BRAC, a respected Bangladeshi NGO that is working with AECID to improve local health structures. However, the deteriorating security situation threatens to undermine these successes. Spanish troops are now battling for control of the PRT-constructed road linking Qala-e-Naw with the neighbouring province of Herat, currently unsafe for use by civilians.

Most Spanish aid has been spent in the relatively secure areas around Qala-e-Naw, where a minority of the population is concentrated. AECID has been increasingly unable to undertake projects in the dangerous 'red zone' which makes up more than half the province. The lack of security and unchanged, almost non-existent, infrastructure in these areas means that claims by the Spanish government to have provided health care for the entire province must be viewed with some scepticism. There is also an institutional reluctance among Spanish development officials to put in place an 'integrated approach' to stabilisation projects in these areas, allowing the military to supervise and implement projects where their civilian counterparts are unable to do so due to the high threat level. If Spain is to truly wage 'war amongst the people' as instructed by ISAF Commander, General Stanley McChrystal, it will have to find an efficient civil-military working model to provide relief within areas most affected by the insurgency.

GETTING WORSE BEFORE IT GETS BETTER

The challenges that Spain faces in stabilising Badghis Province are daunting. It is one of Afghanistan's poorest regions: in 2007 life expectancy was estimated at 45 years and over 75 per cent of the 500,000 population had never been to school. Over two-thirds of the province is difficult to access due to its mountainous terrain and poor infrastructure. The systematic settlement of Pashtun tribesmen in the region in the past has resulted in a legacy of strained relations with the Tajik majority. Abuses perpetrated under the Taliban regime and in the immediate aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2001 have fed conflict in the region, and seen the polarisation of support for the government and the insurgency along ethnic lines.

The absence of Spanish and other ISAF troops from much of the province has allowed the Taliban to quickly re-take control of the predominantly Pashtun districts. The lack of any per-

Zapatero's response to the Obama Strategy on Afghanistan will define Spain's future credibility as a NATO partner

»»»»» manent ANA presence in Badghis exacerbated the ISAF vacuum. 300 of the 600 Afghan National Police (ANP) were based in the provincial capital of Qala-e-Naw, leaving only 40–50 badly-trained police officers for the remaining districts, many of which have a greater population than Qala-e-Naw's 70,000 inhabitants and pose a far greater insurgent threat to the stability of the province.

Spain and ISAF have an obvious diplomatic incentive to work with Pakistan in trying to reverse recent insurgent gains in Badghis. Many Afghan intelligence officers are convinced that Pakistan is supporting the Taliban in Badghis. In an interview with the Jamestown Foundation, a former Deputy Minister for the Interior, Lt. Gen. Hadi Khalid alleged that Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) view a Taliban victory as critical to its plans of resisting a Tajik, Dari speaking ascendancy in Afghanistan.

Spain has not played a significant role in mediation efforts in the province, preferring to let local Afghan officials take the initiative. During the campaign for the presidential elections in 2009 the Afghan government launched a mediation effort to bribe local Taliban militia to observe a ceasefire in one local area in Balamurghab district. The deal received the support of the Spanish Minister for Defence who was in the country at the time, and money was alleged to have changed hands. Local Taliban commanders appeared to renege upon their commitment within hours of the agreement being announced.

As the insurgency spread during 2008 the US, Italy and Spain established a Forward Operating Base in Balamurghab (appropriately called 'Columbus' but later changed to 'Todd' in memory of a US soldier killed in the district), but attempts to secure the area fell short due to a lack of ISAF and Afghan troops and there were damaging allegations that a local company contracted by ISAF was paying Taliban commanders protection money. Spain has only played a peripheral role in the operation to retake Balamurghab, escorting occasional convoys and evacuating military and civilian casualties by air.

Badghis is a clear case of military overstretch for ISAF, and the lack of troops on the ground has resulted in a damaging dependency upon airstrikes which have occasionally resulted in the deaths of civilian non-combatants including the sons of an elected representative of the district of Gormach.

WHAT SPAIN NEEDS TO DO

Carme Chacón has candidly warned the Spanish public of the challenges Spanish troops in Afghanistan will face during 2010, calling the expanded deployment 'the most difficult and the most dangerous mission that Spanish troops have participated in during twenty years of overseas deployments'.

Chacón has also argued that a hasty withdrawal by ISAF from Afghanistan would have catastrophic consequences for the security of the region and put Spain at greater risk from a terrorist attack by Islamic extremists. Such a threat is not exaggerated – the al-Qaeda network responsible for the attacks in Madrid in 2004 could not have operated without the skills and leadership of those who had fought and trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The victory of the hard-line Taliban leadership deposed in 2001 is not an outcome Spain should be willing to tolerate, nor is it by any means inevitable. Unlike the oft quoted examples of Vietnam or Algeria, the insurgency remains deeply unpopular in much of the country. The return of the Taliban is largely a consequence of the inadequacy of the international effort to provide security and build capacity in Afghanistan. In her statements in parliament, Chacón has to her credit conceded as much and promised to redouble Spain's efforts – although it is by no means clear that she has the full support of the rest of the government.

Spain has done well to concentrate its resources in Badghis, but now needs to ensure that these are sufficient to prevent the Taliban from prevailing there. It also needs to overcome a reluctance to engage in large-scale capacity building.

To fulfil its potential in Afghanistan Spain will need to:

- ensure a major increase in Spanish troops in Badghis in order to seize the military initiative from the Taliban;
- establish a new civil-military model similar to those developed by some of Spain's NATO allies, to ensure that aid reaches areas of Badghis worst affected by the insurgency;
- engage diplomatically on Badghis' behalf by stressing the province's strategic importance to the Afghan government and Spain's ISAF allies, thereby securing additional resources for stabilisation and reconstruction activities – one diplomat for the province is not enough;
- begin a major programme of capacity building for the Badghis' local institutions, including a Spanish 'civilian surge' of technical experts to provide skills training in areas such as local governance, water management, health and setting up small businesses;
- working with the Afghan local and central government to build a coherent reconciliation plan for the province in order to address long-standing grievances and undercut the insurgency. There is an ample opportunity to do so – the current Taliban commander in Badghis is struggling to hold together an estimated 85 different militia groupings;
- announce a two-year doubling of aid to Afghanistan from 2008–2009 levels at the London international conference on Afghanistan;
- push for a greatly improved EU engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan through developing a series of well-resourced and coherent programmes aimed at realising the objectives of the EU Strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed during the Swedish Presidency. The EU Policing Mission remains woefully under-resourced. Spain should lead by example during its presidency by sending more civilian experts;

- urge the extension of EU Border Management cooperation with the Central Asian states. This is particularly relevant to Badghis, where the Taliban use the Turkmen border as a refuge and critical area from which to procure supplies.

In planning its future engagement Spain does not require yet another over-arching plan for its broad 'Af-Pak' strategy, adding to the pile of documents produced by other NATO member states. What is urgently required is an actionable civil-military plan detailing how Spain will prevail in its area of operations during 2010 and 2011. Badghis is the prize.

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