

# British Sangin pull-out evidences deepening crisis of US Afghan intervention

By Harvey Thompson  
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Defence Secretary Liam Fox announced July 7 that British troops in the Sangin area of Afghanistan's southern Helmand province are to be replaced by US forces. The redeployment is no less politically significant than the British pull-out from Basra in 2007 during the occupation of Iraq. It was made necessary because the army has not been able to stabilise the area.

UK forces have suffered their heaviest losses in Sangin, with 100 of the total 313 British troop fatalities taking place in the area since the 2001 US-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan. The last of these was killed the day after Fox's announcement.

Helmand has become one of the most dangerous places for foreign troops in Afghanistan. The town of Sangin and its surrounding area have proven particularly deadly, witnessing some of the fiercest fighting for the British military since World War II. Whereas a tenth of the UK deployment is garrisoned there, it has taken a third of the total fatalities.

It is understood the redeployment was discussed with the US President Barack Obama, when he and Prime Minister David Cameron held a bilateral meeting in Toronto on the margins of the G20 summit. Around 1,000 British troops, including 40 Commando Royal Marines, are expected to leave the area and be redeployed to central Helmand by the end of the year. Last month, Britain handed over command in Helmand province to Major General Richard Mills of the US Marine Corps as he assumed control of all NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) troops in the province on 1 June.

The fact that the pull-out from Sangin is widely understood as a retreat has necessitated repeated official statements to the contrary.

Portraying the move in a positive light, Fox told Members of Parliament (MPs) that, "UK forces have made huge progress in the face of great adversity" in Sangin, but that the move would enable Britain to provide "more manpower and greater focus" in Helmand's busy central belt, leaving the north and south to the US.

"The result will be a coherent and equitable division of the main populated areas of Helmand between three brigade-sized forces, with the US in the north and the south, and the UK-led Task Force Helmand, alongside our outstanding Danish and Estonian allies, in the central population belt", he told the House of Commons.

An additional 300 logistics and security troops—from the Theatre Reserve Battalion stationed in Cyprus—would be sent to Helmand to help with the redeployment, he said, before reiterating that a "stable" Afghanistan was "vital to national security".

Speaking in the Commons before Fox, Conservative MP and former British army officer Patrick Mercer said the handover was a routine move: "Any suggestion that British forces are being beaten out of Sangin or returning with their tails between their legs is not just disingenuous, it's actually disgusting", he said.

Colonel Stuart Tootal, who commanded the first UK battle group of 1,200 soldiers sent into Sangin in 2006, said the number of deaths that had taken place in Sangin meant there was a lot of "emotion" attached to the area: "It makes no sense from a logistic and command point of view to keep a British battle group away from its main brigade when it's now an American area, and there are American troops to take over from them. This reflects good practical military sense and we shouldn't allow emotion or misinterpretation to be put above that".

A more honest appraisal was made by the ex-head of the army, Sir Richard Dannatt, now an adviser to Cameron. He told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, "The intention when we went into southern Afghanistan was to try to get the country on its feet economically. We all know it didn't turn out that way. We spread our small resources thinly, and that inevitably made the small number of British soldiers like flies in a honey pot, and we got into this cycle of fighting".

Expressing the nervousness in the military over the scale of public opposition to the Afghan war, as well as resentment from the bereaved families and loved ones of dead soldiers, he continued, "We have got to make sure that

the general public in this country understand why we are in Afghanistan, what we are doing, and that the cost—while very, very tough for the families who lose loved ones—is worth the price we are paying”.

Dannatt forecast an increase in British fatalities, saying, “I don’t want to see the figures get to 400 but realistically they probably will”.

Sounding a sceptical note, the BBC Defence correspondent, Jonathan Beale, said, “British commanders say they have made real progress in Sangin over the past four years. But one cannot escape the fact it’s still a long way from being called a success.... The British would surely have preferred to have handed over responsibility to the Americans with clearer evidence their job is almost done”.

The explanations provided by the military for the increased difficulties and death toll faced by British forces in the area have included troops too thinly and deployed in “platoon houses” in local areas, difficult terrain giving easy bomb-planting for insurgents and good cover for snipers, a complicated mix of tribal politics and the fact that Northern Helmand district is at the heart of the opium-growing industry.

But the central reason for the defeat and withdrawal of British forces from Sangin is the same one besetting the US-led occupation of Afghanistan as a whole—the increasingly active support for the anti-occupation insurgency amongst the wider population.

The British failure to suppress opposition has heightened tensions with the US Army. The *Guardian* noted that British military commanders “had hoped the US would reinforce British soldiers and marines there, because they did not want it to appear as though they were leaving when the situation got too difficult having been saved by the Americans. Similar criticism rankled when Britain pulled troops from Basra in 2007”.

A more revealing piece in the same newspaper, on the eve of the announcement of the Sangin pull-out, drew explicit parallels between the situation in Iraq 2007 and Afghanistan 2010, while pointing out an essential difference—the inability of the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai to take military control.

It stated, “The British military deeply resented suggestions at that time, attributed anonymously to Iraqi and US officials, that the Americans were obliged to take over in Basra because the British had failed. In fact it was the Iraqi army, in an operation known as the Charge of the White Knights, that finally cleared the Iran-backed Shia Mahdi army and other militias out of Basra in March 2008, with American back-up.

“The operation, ordered by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki marked a turning point for the Iraqi government’s

ability to take responsibility for its own national security.

“But no similar, large-scale handover to Afghan national army and police forces in southern Afghanistan is yet possible. And whatever the Americans may privately say about the British contribution, they are likely to encounter similar problems in Sangin, including an ongoing blizzard of improvised explosive devices”.

The implications of this worsening situation for the US were noted by *The Economist* of June 24, in the aftermath of General Stanley McChrystal’s removal as commander by President Obama: “But presidential decisiveness cannot conceal a deeper truth”, it stated. “America and its allies are losing in Afghanistan”.

It continued, “In June Afghanistan surpassed Vietnam to become, by some measures, the longest campaign in America’s history. More than 1,000 of its men and women have been killed and almost 6,000 injured. Yet the Taliban are rampant, assassinating tribal leaders and intimidating their people. A survey in 120 districts racked by insurgency, a third of Afghanistan’s total, found little popular support for Mr Karzai. Over a third of their inhabitants backed the insurgents.

“Since November, when Mr Obama promised 30,000 more of his country’s soldiers to the campaign, little has gone right.... Too few Afghans and Pakistanis have thrown in their lot with the West, because too many think America has no stomach for the fight”.

The *Economist* predicted, “The Afghan war may yet end in an ignominious retreat”.

In the short term, the opposite is the case. The US is planning to escalate the bloodbath under General David Petraeus, with new rules of engagement allowing a more unrestricted use of air strikes and artillery bombardments that will claim the lives of thousands of civilians. But this will not avert the possibility of Afghanistan becoming as significant a defeat for the US as Vietnam was before it.

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