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NATO goes into Marjah

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NATO launched a major offensive today against the Taliban stronghold of Marjah in central Helmand. The strategy is interesting and unique for a few reasons. First, the attack was widely publicised in an attempt to get civilians out of the way to avoid casualties, but also in the hopes that the inhabitants of Marjah would side with the NATO forces and inform on the Taliban. Second, this is the first NATO assault where Afghan government forces – military, civilian, and police – will be following immediately in the wake the NATO operation. NATO forces will also remain in situ, but the Afghans are supposedly going to be starting with development and governance as soon as the dust follows. This is good in theory, but it remains to be seen how effective this has been. There are supposedly 1,000 Afghan police following on NATO's heels. If these are 1,000 honest and well trained police then Marjah will certainly be better off. If these are a bunch of poorly trained, corrupt and belligerent police – problems endemic in the Afghan police force – I am not sure their presence will do much good. Ultimately Marjah will be a test case for the wider NATO and Obama strategy in Afghanistan. The question is, why should the Taliban stay and fight in Marjah when they can melt away and move to other parts of the country not saturated with international forces? Hopefully the new strategy works, but I have my doubts given that international forces will never be present enough in all parts of the country to shut down the Taliban. Therefore, in addition to offensive operations the Government of Afghanistan needs to establish parameters outlining how to involve some Taliban in the government, while the international community needs to be much more effective at training and equipping Afghan police and military forces.

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