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ISAF Operation in Afghanistan and the Future of NATO – Time for Change

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Two challenges for NATO

It is often stated that the mission in Afghanistan cannot be won using only military means. It can surely be lost, however, due to a failure of military performance by NATO and due to unrealistic operation goals.

The Alliance currently faces two major challenges. The first has to do with the reluctance of some of the Allies to commit troops to counter-insurgency tasks. Without a major change in the Afghan policies of Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Greece, NATO will face a series of 'blackmail crises', when countries engaged in the south and east of the country threaten to withdraw their forces unless they are replaced or given additional support. It seems certain that NATO is going to manage successfully its first blackmail crisis, caused by Canada's justifiable demand for an additional 1,000 troops for Kandahar (it appears that support has been offered by the United States, France and Poland). However, the ability to placate the displeased Allies on an *ad hoc* basis is limited, and a more fundamental change of policy is necessary.

The second challenge involves defining, in realistic terms, the goals of the military involvement in Afghanistan and what the instruments are for measuring progress. Most probably, the final 'success' in Afghanistan will include neither the complete defeat of the insurgency and those terrorist groups aligned with it, nor the establishment of a well-functioning, self-sustained state. For many countries currently contributing troops to ISAF, the accepted outcome would probably involve the creation (within a reasonable timeframe) of a relatively stable security environment, making it possible to withdraw their contingents without the threat of an imminent collapse of the Afghan government or the takeover of a large part of the country by the Taliban. Accordingly, a blueprint for the assumption of responsibility for the security of the country by the Afghan security forces has to be drawn up. Delaying the initiation of this process until *after* the insurgency is defeated would mean, in practice, committing ISAF to Afghanistan indefinitely.

Preventing the rift within the Alliance

For NATO, the most important struggle is currently being fought on the home front, in Europe and Canada. The United States is determined to stay in Afghanistan, and it can rely on a number of partners who are prepared for a long-term presence of their forces there, but some Allies contemplate exit scenarios more or less openly. The 'Afghan fatigue' affects especially the ISAF countries heavily involved in the operations in the south and the east, who complain about the unfair distribution of the burden. Canada is about to decide on the future of its deployment, with a consensus developing in the Parliament that the country should relinquish its combat tasks in Kandahar province after 2011. In the wake of such a decision, a number of other ISAF members would be tempted to consider the same move and could set timetables for phasing out their military presence in Afghanistan, especially when the casualties start mounting.

If the situation is not changed, in the next two or three years some of the ISAF's most active participants might again use the threat of a *de facto* withdrawal from the operation, although such a move would likely be drafted in the face-saving language of a plan to shift to a 'civilian presence' in Afghanistan. If not persuaded to reverse their decision by offers of reinforcements, the governments of those countries would have no choice but to carry out the process of withdrawal.

Such withdrawal(s) would probably not result in the breakdown of the ISAF mission, but its credibility, and the credibility of NATO as such would be seriously undermined. The void left by the pullout of major contingents (e.g. Canadian or Dutch) would need to be filled by the United States, as other remaining ISAF members are able to increase the number of their troops only modestly. Those who stay could also face a difficult situation at home, with opposition parties and public opinion demanding an explanation on the decision to stay in Afghanistan while other Allies are departing from the theater.

The main casualty of such a scenario would not be Afghanistan, but the North Atlantic Alliance itself. Historically, after a certain course of action was adopted, the Allies always put heavy emphasis on solidarity and unity. The ISAF operation is the first one in which different political perspectives on the conduct of the mission and the tasks of the national contingents have been exposed to such an extent. As a consequence, the withdrawal of one or more countries cannot be presented as a routine rotation or realignment of forces, but would be widely regarded as a vote of no-confidence on the prospects of success of ISAF, and also on the whole concept of the Alliance as an out-of-European-area security provider.

It is becoming obvious that the rift over Afghanistan makes NATO increasingly irrelevant to the United States and other countries heavily engaged in ISAF. The Allies who refuse to change their positions on the caveats limiting the tasks or areas of operation of their contingents should realize the significance of ISAF for the future of the Alliance. If the main lesson from Afghanistan is that some Allies cannot be relied upon in a crisis situation, there will be no return to 'business as usual' in NATO. In that case, the role of the organization as a forum of transatlantic cooperation and an instrument of crisis management will be greatly diminished.

How to press the skeptics to change their policy?

'Naming and shaming' of those countries reluctant to contribute more to ISAF has brought some improvements, with several countries pledging to increase their contingents in Afghanistan or to lift certain caveats. However, the main problem is the refusal of a number of major Allies – Germany, Spain, Italy, France and Greece—to adjust their policy on Afghan deployment to the realities on the ground. These Allies insist that the tasks they conduct in the areas less affected by the insurgency are as important as the counter-insurgency operations in the south and east of the country. For example, in responding to the criticism, Germany has often pointed to the large number of troops it has stationed in Afghanistan, its heavy involvement in the reconstruction effort, and also to its casualties (as of February 2008, 23 German soldiers have died in Afghanistan). As Germany and a handful of other countries would have it, the participation in counter-insurgency is a voluntary option for ISAF contributors, whereas the core part of the mission is stabilization and support for reconstruction. Their 'opt-out' from actively fighting the insurgency is based on an artificial distinction between stabilization and warfighting. They also fail to take note of the fact that the deteriorating situations in the south and east directly affect the conditions in 'their' parts of Afghanistan.

The unwillingness of some of the NATO members to clarify the difficulties of the situation in Afghanistan to their own populations is worrisome. This approach usually originates from fundamental political divisions within these countries' societies on the use of force, NATO, or relations with the United States, and those internal predicaments have to be taken into account in pursuing efforts to influence their policies. The countries with territorial and functional caveats should be assured that they will not be asked to replace the countries currently engaged in the counter-insurgency in the south and east. Nevertheless, they are expected to demonstrate that they accept the principle of burden-sharing and the unity of ISAF's purpose, which requires, at minimum, sending some personnel to the zones of intensive fighting. Extraordinary measures, such as the clearance of reconnaissance flights of German Tornado aircraft over the south of Afghanistan, or the agreement to make several national contingents available outside their areas of operation in case of emergency, are simply not enough for those ISAF participants who are currently carrying the burden of operations in the south and east.

At the upcoming April 2008 Bucharest summit, a commitment of special forces, transport assets and training teams (OMLTs) to the Afghan army, without territorial restrictions, would signal to other partners the change of attitude of the 'skeptics' towards the Afghan deployment. The recent

reports that France is preparing to send troops to the south of the country seem to indicate that it considers the policy of separating the stabilization and counter-insurgence dimensions of ISAF as no longer feasible, from both the political as well as military points of view.

Putting an end to wishful thinking

Strategic reflection on the future of ISAF often ends up as an exercise in wishful thinking. Two strategic fallacies are especially troubling. Firstly, it is broadly claimed that Pakistan must exercise effective control over its border with Afghanistan in order to cut off the flow of fighters and material across the border. However, the prospect of the Pakistani government embarking vigorously on such a mission is remote, excluding occasional offensives by the Pakistani army in the Pashtun-populated areas. Taking into account the fragile political situation in the country, Pakistan is not in a position to devote significant resources to help fighting the Afghan insurgency. It is equally improbable that it would allow multinational forces to operate on its own territory. Therefore, one must realistically assume that the insurgents will permanently have access to the sanctuary of Pakistan, which makes the task of defeating it extremely difficult.

Another idealistic recommendation calls for a stronger engagement of the international community in Afghanistan. By and large, the situation in the country has lost its urgency, overshadowed as it is by the crises in Iraq, Sudan/Chad and Kenya. In the European context, the situation in the Balkans generates much more interest than the developments in Afghanistan, with a 2,000-plus EU rule-of-law mission authorized to deploy in Kosovo – compared to only 200 police and justice experts who are to form the EUPOL Afghanistan training mission. The European Union finances a large share of the Afghan reconstruction effort, but a massive influx of money – or interest – will not be coming. The same can be said of the United Nations, which is struggling to find resources and manpower for its peacekeeping tasks, especially in Africa.

Additionally, Afghanistan's regional neighbours, who would be expected to provide assistance in the process of reconstruction and stabilization, are either weak (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) or preoccupied with using Afghanistan as a theater for their confrontations with other states. For example, Iran is showing off its 'spoiler potential' to the United States, whereas India is trying to increase its own influence in Pakistan's backyard. None of these countries treats the situation in Afghanistan as serious enough to cause them to put aside their own political agendas and cooperate, as a coherent group, in the process of stabilization.

How can NATO achieve success in Afghanistan?

With an insurgency striking from secure bases abroad, a divided NATO, and little prospect for an increase in attention or assistance from the international community, what are the chances of NATO succeeding in Afghanistan?

Recognizing the limits of the multinational military involvement in Afghanistan can be the starting point. In military terms, we should define 'success' as a situation in which the insurgency is capable of only limited strikes, mainly in the southern and eastern parts of the country, and in which it is not able to launch successful operations against strategically important targets, such as the main cities and communication routes. Public support for the insurgency cannot be allowed to grow, which will require a strengthening of the ability of the Afghan state to provide basic services to the population.

Similarly, there is no point in judging the success of ISAF deployment from the 'war on drugs' perspective. No military-enforced silver bullet can cut significantly the production of narcotics in the country without causing major damage to the overall conduct of the operation (especially in the case of the proposed aerial eradication of poppy fields in the south). The well-publicized arrests of major figures controlling the production and trafficking of narcotics can serve as proof that the Afghan government is determined to fight the problem, but this should be the task of their law-enforcement institutions, not ISAF.

Achieving even a modestly defined 'success' in Afghanistan requires continued determination on the part of NATO. There is no other strategy, save abandoning the country to a return to full-scale civil war. The violence levels have to go down, and the instruments of the Afghan state must achieve maturity and a basic level of self-sustainability. This process takes time and cannot be run by artificial, early deadlines for withdrawing troops. On the other hand, ISAF participants, especially those worried about length of deployment or casualties, need to be convinced that the operation is moving in the right direction.

Therefore, NATO urgently needs a new approach to the problem of Afghan participation in the process of stabilizing Afghanistan. Without some pressure from ISAF, the Afghan government will be very reluctant to move towards increased self-sufficiency in the security domain. A set of benchmarks must be developed to assess the ability of local structures to take over responsibility for the security of every Afghan province. Subsequently, a timeline for transferring security duties for the most stable provinces must be drafted, as well as one for the process of gradually reducing the footprint of ISAF there. In order to reassure the local population that they will not lose the reconstruction-related benefits of ISAF's presence, assurances must be offered that the development assistance would be kept at stable levels after the handover. The plan should specifically include details on how the activities of the PRTs in those provinces would be taken over by other international or local actors.

A rolling process of transferring responsibility would make it possible to focus the military efforts of ISAF on the crucial provinces, providing the required manpower and capabilities to substantially weaken the insurgency. This would create space for the Afghan government to exert its authority in those regions where its presence is now weak. ISAF members who had completed their tasks in the stable regions would be expected to contribute troops to other parts of the country, albeit in different numbers and with different functions than before. To persuade them to move to other locations, it should be made clear that the 'surge' in the ISAF presence would be temporary, as the Afghan institutions would eventually take on the burden of fighting the insurgency in all provinces.

The Afghan authorities need to assume full responsibility for the security of the whole territory, regardless of the continuous presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil. NATO's eventual role in Afghanistan could consist of training and mentoring the Afghan National Army. The combat force, which would support the ANA in crisis situations and conduct operations against al-Qaeda targets, should consist mainly of US forces, similar to the current configuration of Operation Enduring Freedom. It can be assumed that the United States would be interested in maintaining such a long-term presence in Afghanistan, both to prevent the re-emergence of a Taliban-run state and to counter Al-Qaeda activities in the region. Such a 'garrison' function would be akin to the activities of France in Africa and to those of US troops in the Gulf region.