



NATO's Afghan Quagmire

NATO's mission in Afghanistan has the potential to become one of the greatest tests for the transatlantic alliance since the end of the Cold War. Following the US-led invasion of the country in 2001, NATO member states willingly provided troops and material support to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), tasked with stabilizing the country. In 2003, NATO assumed the command of ISAF forces as its first ever “out-of-area” mission outside Europe. Ever since, the security situation in Afghanistan has notably deteriorated, the opium trade has flourished, and reconstruction efforts have floundered. Indeed, by 2008, ISAF seemed to be back to fighting a hot-war with a resurgent Taliban in the vast majority of the Afghan territory.

In the meantime, NATO's ISAF mission has been beset with internal problems. Alliance solidarity has been tested by the refusal of some countries to participate in combat operations and by a variety of operational restrictions imposed by national governments. Despite incremental increases in troops and equipment each year, there continues to be a lack of combat ready troops and military capabilities, and force commanders have warned of a rapid deterioration of morale amongst the troops on the ground. This is in part due to the inability to repair military equipment in theatre (UK), and the long periods in theatre with the commensurate problems at home (US). Moreover, NATO members continue to bicker about the ultimate goals and strategy of ISAF in Afghanistan. Turning a corner on the current situation has become one of the main foreign policy priorities for the new US administration. Indeed, success or failure in Afghanistan will to some extent determine the future of NATO and the transatlantic alliance. It also presents a severe test for the leadership capacity of the United States.

This brief provides an overview of NATO's mission and strategy in Afghanistan. It explores the deep divisions within the alliance when it comes to Afghanistan and the impact they have had on ISAF's mission. What do they tell us about the cohesiveness of the transatlantic alliance and the future of NATO? Has the Afghanistan experience provided a new unity of purpose, or further divided the alliance? Finally, the brief considers the plans of the new US administration to reform the Afghanistan mission and the prospects for NATO to extract itself from its Afghan quagmire.

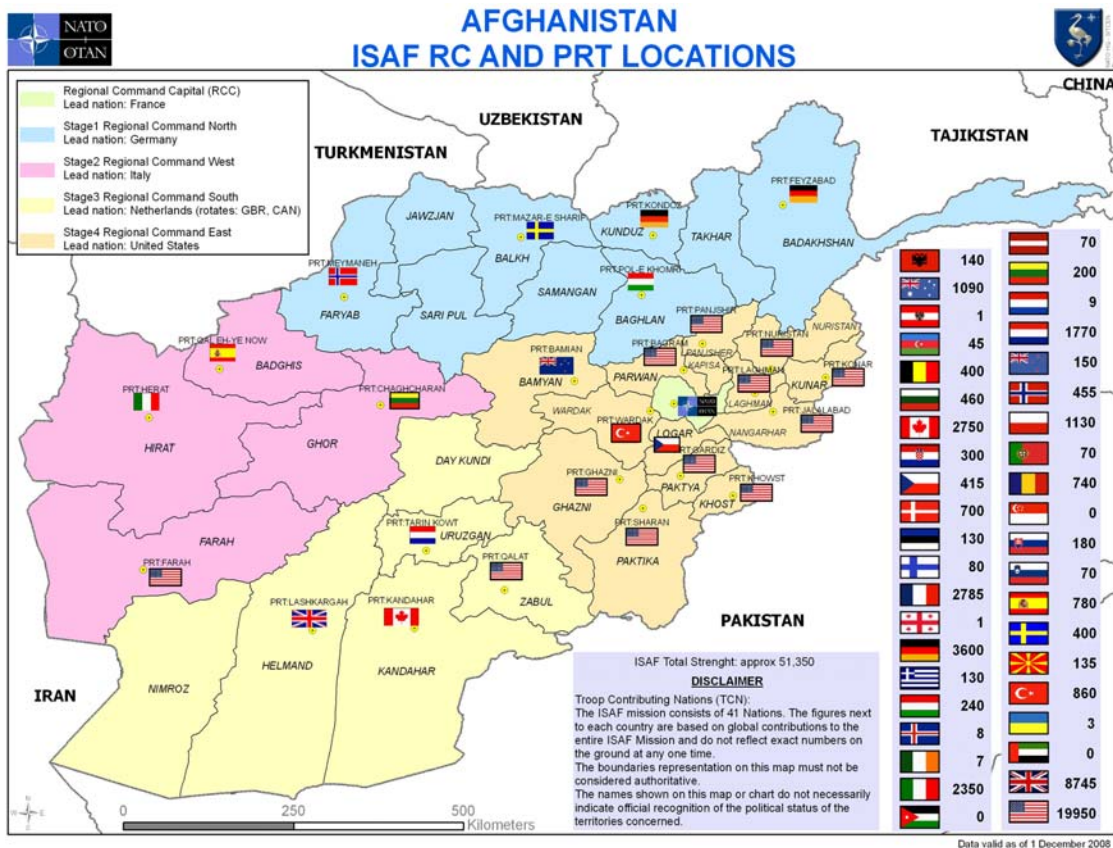
NATO's Mission in Afghanistan

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was created by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001. ISAF's role has been defined by successive UN

Security Council resolutions, most recently UNSC 1776 of September 2007. According to the resolution, NATO is tasked with carrying out the following missions:

- To disarm militias;
- To reform the justice system;
- To train the national police force and army;
- To provide security for elections;
- To combat the narcotics industry

Initially, this mandate was limited to the capital city of Kabul. Once NATO took over the command of ISAF, however, ISAF expanded the area of operations in four stages. In the first stage (2003-2004), NATO forces established a regional command in Northern Afghanistan under German leadership. In the second stage (2005), NATO placed Western Afghanistan under Italian command. In stages three and four (2006), NATO established regional commands in the South, led by British, Canadian and Dutch forces, and in the East, led by American forces. By January 2009, there were some 55,000 troops from 44 nations under NATO command deployed across the entire country. The largest troop contingents come from the US (23,000), the UK (8,900), Germany (3,400), France (2,800) and Canada (2,800).



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As of today, ISAF's track record has been mixed. The last five years have seen a steady erosion of the security situation in Afghanistan. While coalition forces suffered only 58 military fatalities in 2004, this figure increased steadily to 191 in 2006 and 294 in 2008.¹ Taliban attacks have multiplied, especially in the southern and eastern parts of the country. This deterioration happened despite the gradual increase of coalition troops in Afghanistan over this period.

As a result of the deteriorating situation, NATO troops deployed in the less stable regions of the country have increasingly been called upon to conduct combat operations, rather than stabilization and reconstruction missions. In this, they have been supported by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), a separate US-led mission in Afghanistan. In the meantime, calls for more troops and equipment by NATO troop commanders operating in the more dangerous southern and eastern parts of the country have been mostly refuted. Indeed, many NATO countries remain reluctant to get engaged in full-scale combat operations. As a consequence, there have been recurring debates about burden-sharing and alliance solidarity.

Reconstruction efforts have been similarly hampered. ISAF relies on so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to rebuild much of the country. These are mixed civilian and military units tasked with undertaking infrastructure projects, extend the authority of the central government into the countryside and provide security. There are currently some 26 PRTs in Afghanistan, run by different ISAF countries. While generally seen as beneficial, the quality of services provided varies considerably from one country to the next. Moreover, ISAF-sponsored reconstruction is largely disconnected from other efforts and most PRTs have failed to engage a meaningful way with civilian relief organizations.²

The security and reconstruction problems are reinforcing. Due to the instability of the security situation and the fragmentation of the relief effort, reconstruction has been slow to take off outside of the urban centers. As US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently noted, "Afghanistan doesn't just need more boots on the ground. It needs more trucks, teachers, judges . . . foreign investment, alternative crops, sound governance, and the rule of law."³ For the time being, NATO seems to lack a general concept of how to provide either of these to the country. Into this vacuum have stepped elements of the Taliban who have taken some pragmatic decisions to provide education for girls, in areas without education, for example, in order to garner support from the local population.

Similarly, NATO training of Afghan police and army units has at best been a qualified success. Training the Afghan National Police (ANP) has proven to be difficult, due to the low-pay and limited oversight over the force by the central government. A German training program failed to garner enough able recruits and was replaced by a larger European police training mission (EUPOL) in 2007. However, public trust in the ANP remains low, and under-equipped police forces are a frequent target of Taliban attacks, as well as getting penetrated by Taliban operatives. Training of the Afghan National Army (ANA) has been somewhat more successful. In January 2009, ANA consisted of some

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80,000 troops, with many experts agreeing that it would need to grow to 150,000-200,000 in order for it to be able to secure Afghanistan on its own.⁴ As a result, for the time being, ANA remains much dependent on NATO support and unable to act as a stand-alone force. Efforts to build up a working western-style justice system, similarly, remain very much in their infancy.

Finally, NATO efforts to stem the growth of the narcotics industry have failed. Indeed, according to some reports, Afghanistan supplied up to 90% of the world opium in 2007.⁵ With few alternative crops and parts of the Afghan government reportedly involved in opium-growing, NATO has been at loss on how to approach the issue. While some NATO members have supported a tough policy line that would see NATO troops working with Afghan authorities in destroying crops and narcotics labs, others have argued that this would lead to a further deterioration of support for NATO in the countryside, and that an effective counter-narcotics policy would have to wait. In October 2008, NATO allies agreed to authorize ISAF forces to destroy drug labs and facilities that are being used to finance Taliban rebels. For the time being, the long-term prospects of that mission remain uncertain.

Fighting Different Wars?

While NATO's Afghanistan mission hangs in the balance, NATO allies have been divided on a number of important issues that affect their ability to make progress on the ground. Many of these indicate a fundamental disagreement over strategy, as well as differences in national capabilities and military traditions. Hindered by its low international credibility and focusing much of its attention on Iraq, the Bush administration was unable to unite NATO countries around a common strategy in Afghanistan. Whether or not the Obama administration will be able to succeed where the previous one has failed will depend much on its ability to enforce NATO unity on a number of contentious issues that have for long divided the alliance. Amongst the most important of these issues are the following:

- 1) National Caveats: NATO's mission in Afghanistan has been frequently hindered by wide-ranging caveats that national government have placed on the use of their forces. These caveats can extend to a range of issues, from prohibiting their troops to participate in combat operations, to placing restriction on the radius of their operations, or disallowing them to fly or patrol after darkness (e.g. Germany). Many of these restrictions limit the usability and compatibility of forces. Most contentious has been the refusal of some countries to dispatch their forces to the southern provinces (e.g. Germany, Italy, Spain) in order to support combat operations by Canadian, Dutch or British forces, who have seen high casualty rates. This has resulted in a real test of alliance solidarity and reduced the effectiveness of ISAF troops.⁶ Moreover, overcoming national caveats has proven difficult. Some are anchored in the legal tradition of participating countries, while others are the product of the domestic political position. Overall, they represent one of the fundamental shortcomings of a "war by committee".

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- 2) **Raising Troops:** US and NATO officials have constantly warned that troop levels in Afghanistan remain insufficient, and have pressured NATO member states to increase their troop commitments.⁷ While there has been an incremental increase in troop levels over the years, and more pledges have been made in late 2008, NATO commanders have continued to call for additional 10,000-15,000 troops, especially for the training of Afghan security forces.⁸ Several factors have impeded the ability of NATO to raise additional troops. One of them was the unpopularity of the Bush administration, which made extra military commitments electorally difficult. Another is that the capabilities of NATO allies, especially when it comes to the provision of combat troops, are already stretched to the limit. Moreover, there has been an erosion of public support for ISAF. Most importantly, perhaps, is a growing concern that additional troops will not be able to fix the problem, and on the contrary, might add fuel to the flames of the Taliban resistance. Without any agreement on this last point, further progress will prove to be difficult.
- 3) **Unity of Command:** Ever since 2005, the US has been pressing its NATO allies to merge ISAF and OEF under one single command structure. As there is no longer a clear division between ISAF and OEF operations, this would make sense from a tactical point of view. However, NATO members, led by France, Germany and Britain, have so far resisted US pressure, for somewhat different reasons. Britain and Germany were anxious to preserve the character of ISAF as a “stabilization” mission, with Germany especially keen to avoid being pulled into counter-insurgency duties through the “back-door”. France on the other hand objected to the larger political ramifications that might see NATO being reduced to a “tool-box” of US policy. While some practical solutions have been found under which ISAF and OEF can support each other in case of an emergency, it is unlikely that US calls for a common command structure will be heeded any time soon. NATO allies simply remain too divided on the goals and means of ISAF and too mistrustful of the US to allow the establishment of a joint structure.
- 4) **Rules of Engagement:** Another problem that permeates most of the above issues is a general disagreement amongst NATO allies about how ISAF should go about achieving its objectives. While many European allies argue that ISAF should concentrate on reconstruction and stabilization and use force primarily in a defensive way, the US along with some others are keen to turn ISAF into more of a counter-insurgency mission that has the robust capabilities needed to pursue Taliban rebels and act offensively. On the side of some European NATO members, turning ISAF into a fully fledged counter-insurgency unit would be a mistake. They argue that reconstruction has to come first, and that ISAF’s mission has to be about winning the “hearts and minds” of the Afghan people. According to them, the kind of large collateral damage that tends to be the side effect of OEF missions would undermine the credibility of ISAF and play into the hands of the Taliban – who are keen to portray the NATO coalition as having imperial designs on Afghanistan. The counterargument made by the US is that reconstruction will not be possible without

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security, and that allied reliance on airpower – frequently leading to collateral damage – could be reduced if there were more boots on the ground. Either way, the lack of consensus over whether security or reconstruction should be ISAF’s primary goal leaves a dangerous policy vacuum – one that the Taliban have been quick to exploit.

In the absence of a clear agreement on any of these issues, it has often seemed as if the allies have been fighting different wars in Afghanistan, depending on their specific interpretation of the situation on the ground. Needless to say, unless some unity of purpose is restored to ISAF, there is little chance that NATO will succeed in the long-run. Moreover, the problem of NATO allies failing to unite around a common goal is indicative of the kind of difficulties the transatlantic allies will face in their attempt to transform NATO into a “global” military alliance. In other words, if NATO fails to overcome these problems in Afghanistan, the fragile post-Cold War consensus about the role of the alliance as an international policeman will be once more put to the test.

Future Prospects and Policy Implications

The election of Barak Obama as President of the United States has had a large impact on the underlying dynamics of the transatlantic relationship. With a new and more conciliatory face in the White House, there is renewed pressure on America’s European allies to make a greater contribution in Afghanistan, and to contribute and support a common strategy for the country’s future. Much will depend on NATO’s April 2009 summit, when the new US administration will have a chance to rally greater support from its European allies. However, President Obama’s move to make Afghanistan the first foreign policy priority of his administration might easily backfire.

Upon taking the oath of office, Obama has promised to move swiftly and decisively on the issue of Afghanistan. His campaign promise of dispatching two additional combat brigades to the country (7,000 troops) has quickly been augmented to a total of 30,000 additional troops by the end of 2009. This seems a clear indication that the current US administration seeks to replicate the success of “the surge”; widely regarded as instrumental in dismantling the Iraqi insurgency. The appointment of Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan provides a further indication to the direction of the Afghanistan policy of the new administration. Holbrooke has been critical about the close bonds of the Bush administration with President Karzai of Afghanistan, which is increasingly seen as tainted by corruption, unable to unite the country, and being confined to Kabul. Holbrooke has also warned that the international community should not allow Afghanistan to turn into a “narco-state”.⁹ Finally, there are some signs that the new administration will strike a conciliatory tone with its NATO allies, asking primarily for additional support in the area of reconstruction and civilian assistance.

The dispatch of some 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan – almost doubling the number of US forces under ISAF on the ground – seems a clear indication that the US is looking for a military solution to the Taliban insurgency, and a change in the tone of the campaign soon. Quite possibly, the administration will also take a more distant position

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toward the current Afghan government and seek to win additional support amongst tribal leaders – just as the Bush administration had previously done in Iraq. Finally, the administration is likely to adopt a tougher stance on the production and trade of opium. Overall, this might turn out to be a high-risk strategy. A more aggressive policy is likely to lead to a short-term rise in casualties – both military and civilian – while an increase in troop numbers might further flame the fires of the Taliban. With public support for the war dropping rapidly, some NATO allies might find it difficult to support a high casualty policy for a longer period of time. If losses mount without any perceivable improvement in conditions, much of the initial goodwill for the new US administration might evaporate and the pressure to withdraw will grow. Some allies, including the British and Canadians, are already considering a staged withdrawal from 2009/10 onwards. Should the situation worsen, this might quickly turn into a deluge.

The dangers are real and the potential damage to NATO's credibility is large. Contrary to expectations, the Afghan experience has failed to force a new consensus on NATO countries. Rather, it has once more shown the deep fissures amongst the transatlantic allies. Many of these divisions run deep and are unlikely to be healed in the short-term, even with a softer tone coming from the White House. The potential that NATO allies will rally behind a more aggressive US policy in Afghanistan and take on a greater part of the military burden seems low. As a result, the post-Cold war idea of NATO as a global policeman is in grave jeopardy. If US plans for a military surge succeed, America once more will claim the laurels; if they fail, NATO will be in for some of the blame. In either case, it seems difficult to see the transatlantic alliance emerging strengthened and more unified from the Afghan quagmire. Indeed, in the most likely scenario, Afghanistan will further discredit the idea of a "war by committee" and reinforce the US tendency to regard NATO as a somewhat dysfunctional "tool-box".

¹ For information on coalition casualties, see: <http://icasualties.org/oef/>, accessed March 10, 2009

² Some US officials have complained that European-led PRTs have been to hesitant to engage the Afghan population, or provided little supervision on how funds are managed. Some Europeans, on the other hand, have argued that more responsibility needs to be given to the Afghan government, and that the US concept that relies purely on US material and labor for reconstruction projects is doomed to fail.

³ Statement of Defense Secretary Robert Gates before the House Armed Services Committee, September 10, 2008

⁴ In the first years after the invasion, US plans focused on building up a small force of around 35,000 and had ousted many experienced soldiers due to their presumed loyalty to warlords.

⁵ Dexter Filkins, "Taliban fill NATO's Big Gap in Afghan South", The New York Times, January 22, 2009

⁶ At one point NATO SACEUR General Jones directly called for the deployment of German troops to the south, a request that was directly refused by the German government.

⁷ Especially in the US, some have pointed towards the success of the "surge" of US troops in Iraq and have argued that a considerable increase in troop levels is needed.

⁸ Despite pledges for new troops by several countries at the NATO Bucharest summit in April 2008, ISAF commander McKiernan has called for an additional 10,000-15,000 troops.

⁹ Helene Cooper, "Fearing another Quagmire in Afghanistan", The New York Times, January 24, 2009