



NATO IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract:

This article surveys the way in which NATO moved from resisting to accepting involvement in operations beyond Europe in circumstances in which its success or failure could be seen as a test that would determine the alliance's future utility. It argues that the outcome will inevitably affect the way that NATO is used by the allies in the future as well as challenging relations among them with burden sharing and casualty differential issues. In spite of the transformational nature of the commitment taken on by NATO in Afghanistan, the conclusion of the article is that the United States, Canada and the European allies will continue to see the transatlantic alliance as a critical element of their future security strategies, and will share both the burdens of achieving an acceptable outcome in Afghanistan and the blame for a failure to do so.

Keywords:

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), Counter-insurgency, Counter-terrorism, National Caveats, US Strategy.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza la manera como la OTAN pasó de resistirse a la implicación en operaciones más allá de Europa a verse envuelta en circunstancias tales que podrían considerarse como pruebas de fuego para determinar la utilidad de la organización en el futuro. Se sostiene que el resultado de la intervención en Afganistán afectará inevitablemente la manera como la OTAN es utilizada por sus aliados en el futuro así como el desafío que se presenta en las relaciones entre ellos por el reparto de cargas y la división inducida por las bajas en combate. A pesar del carácter transnacional del compromiso asumido por la OTAN en Afganistán, la conclusión del artículo es que los EEUU, Canadá y los aliados europeos seguirán viendo la relación transatlántica como un elemento de importancia crítica para sus futuras estrategias de seguridad, y compartirán tanto los costes de lograr un resultado satisfactorio como las culpas por un hipotético fracaso.

Palabras clave:

Fuerza de Asistencia para la Seguridad Internacional (ISAF), Operación Libertad Duradera (OEF), Equipos de Reconstrucción Provincial (PRT), contrainsurgencia, contraterrorismo, reservas nacionales, estrategia de los EEUU.

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1. Introduction

NATO's invocation of Article 5 and allied offers of assistance immediately following the al Qaeda attacks on the United States met a lukewarm response in the Bush administration, where skepticism about NATO and allies was rampant in the new administration's Pentagon. When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld proclaimed in September 2001, "The mission determines the coalition. And the coalition must not be permitted to determine the mission," the message to the NATO allies was loud and clear: thanks, but no thanks.

NATO did provide some early assistance to the United States, such as sending NATO Airborne Warning and Control (AWACS) aircraft to patrol US airspace while similar American systems were supporting operations against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Despite inviting a select group of individual allies to contribute forces to operations in Afghanistan, NATO as an organization was largely left aside, owing to the Bush administration's belief that alliance involvement would only complicate decision-making and slow the pace of operations.

It was not long before the United States, recognizing the scope of the task of pacifying Afghanistan, sought additional help from the international community. The Bush administration did not initially call on NATO, but asked the United Nations to authorize NATO allies to help man and manage the operation.

Within two months of initiating military operations, the United States and its allies, including Afghan anti-Taliban elements known as the "United Front" or Northern Alliance, had broken the Taliban's control over most of the country. On December 5, the "Bonn Agreement Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions," brokered by the United Nations, established the central role of the United Nations and the US-led coalition in the reconstruction of the country (alongside Hamid Karzai's interim Afghan government). The Bonn meeting of various Afghan factions had designated Karzai, from the ethnic Pashtun majority, to take on the interim role. This agreement was confirmed by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1386 on December 20th, which also called for the establishment of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to "assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment." The UK accepted initial responsibility for command of the operation, which was originally intended to rotate among troop-contributing nations.

When the ISAF was established, US and allied military operations against residual Taliban and al Qaeda elements continued as a coalition of the willing under the auspices of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which had been created by the United States in October 2001 following the 9/11 attacks as the umbrella under which Afghanistan operations and other aspects of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) were conducted. Thus, the OEF coalition in Afghanistan and ISAF forces initially operated under parallel but separate command structures.

After a six-month period, the United Kingdom handed over command of the ISAF to Turkey and, at the end of 2002, it was commanded jointly by Germany and the Netherlands with support from NATO. During 2002, the Karzai government advocated an expanded role for the ISAF, which they hoped would help extend the authority of the fledgling central government to the provinces. This proposal was opposed by some domestic Afghan elements and the United States. The United Front feared the erosion of Afghanistan's sovereignty and



the marginalization of its own forces, while the US was concerned that the move might constrain its own combat operations.² Furthermore, European allies were reluctant to engage more fully in the struggle.

In 2003, however, as the United States began military operations intended to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, the Bush administration began to see a larger NATO role in Afghanistan as potentially relieving some pressure on US forces, which were increasingly occupied with the new and demanding operation in Iraq. Moreover, Germany and Canada saw a more prominent NATO role as politically facilitating their participation in Afghan operations, and alliance officials in Brussels leaned toward NATO taking on more responsibility.

2. NATO Assumes Command of the ISAF

Despite determined French and German opposition to US Iraq policy and related divisions cutting across the entire alliance, consensus was reached at NATO to take command of the ISAF; the decision to do so was confirmed in Brussels on April 16, 2003.³ In historical perspective, this was a stunning event. Not only were the allies divided over Iraq, but, just four years earlier, the Europeans had resisted any suggestion in NATO's 1999 strategic concept that the alliance could be used to mount military operations beyond Europe. With very little debate or dissent, the allies agreed to take on a demanding military mission on soil far from Europe, for which the military forces of many allied countries were ill-prepared. The mission would become a litmus test for the ability of the alliance to be an effective contributor to contemporary security challenges.

NATO formally assumed command of the ISAF in August 2003. UNSCR 1510 (October 13, 2003) subsequently confirmed the ISAF mandate to operate outside of Kabul, using joint military-civilian Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to bring both security and reconstruction projects to other parts of the country. As Afghanistan moved toward presidential elections scheduled for October 2004, the need to broaden NATO's operations to help ensure security for the vote became more evident. NATO allies pledged in June 2004 to increase the NATO presence from 6,500 to around 10,000 by the time of the election. When the allies met at the summit in Istanbul in June 2004, it seemed an open question whether or not the forces would be provided. In the end, allies made up the shortfall and helped ensure a relatively peaceful election process. In December 2004, NATO ministers meeting in Brussels agreed to continue the process of expanding NATO's role in Afghanistan by deploying PRTs to the country's western provinces, yet no allies pledged additional troops for the effort.

Based on the UN mandate, the allies developed a plan to work through progressive stages in Afghanistan with goal of ultimately providing security and reconstruction programs across the entire country. The first stage, carried out in 2003-2004 by French and German troops, was to secure the more stable, northern regions. Stage two began in May 2005, when Spanish and Italian forces moved into western Afghanistan. Establishment of ISAF command

² Saikal, Amin: "Afghanistan's transition: ISAF's stabilization role?", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3 (June 2006), p. 528.

³ For an excellent examination on a constantly-updated basis of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, refer to Morelli, Vincent and Belkin, Paul: "NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance", *Congressional Research Service*, RL33627 (July 2009). Updated versions of this and other CRS reports can be found on-line, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33627.pdf>.



in the more volatile Southern and Eastern regions began on July 31, 2006 with the initiation of stage 3 and continued with the final stage 4 on October 5th of the same year. Some forces from the separate, US-led OEF remained for counter-terror operations but, by the end of 2006, the ISAF was responsible for providing security for all of Afghanistan. As of June 2009, there were 61,130 ISAF troops in the country from 42 contributing nations and 89,500 soldiers in the Afghan National Army.

The operation was organized around five conceptual phases, the first two of which have been completed with the enactment of stage four. They are (I) assessment and preparation (in Kabul), (II) geographic expansion through Afghanistan, (III) stabilization, (IV) transition to domestically provided security, and (V) redeployment of ISAF troops.

3. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)

The Provincial Reconstruction Teams have been the main organizational instrument for the ISAF's contributions to the stabilization and development of Afghanistan. The alliance's comprehensive approach to the ISAF mission has brought together "civilian-military units of varying sizes, designed to extend the authority of the central government into the countryside, provide security, and undertake projects to boost the Afghan economy."⁴ As of July 2009, there were 26 PRTs under ISAF jurisdiction with various lead countries, some taking over from teams formerly controlled by the United States, including those in Kandahar (Canada), Lashkar Gah (Britain), and Tarin Kowt (The Netherlands).

As late as 2009, there was still no established model for PRTs, some were civilian controlled, others military-run, but all were attempting to fulfill the goals of the UN mandate. Most US PRTs were composed of 50-100 military personnel, civilian government officials (both American and Afghan), and many had staff to train Afghan security forces. The Turkish-run PRT in Wardak Province provided health care, education, police training and agricultural development. According to the 2009 NATO/ISAF Afghanistan report, PRTs had engaged in such activities as coordinating agricultural development in the poppy reliant Helmand province (Britain), renovating the Kahla Dam irrigation system near Kandahar (Canada), and strengthening government institutions providing rule of law (judiciary, police, local administration) across the country.⁵

Despite some successes, the PRT program has come under criticism for a variety of reasons, many stemming from the disconnected and non-standardized nature of the operations. One expert observed that PRTs seemed to be largely a localized form of support, leaving large swathes of territory unprotected and unaided.⁶ Germany has been criticized for its operation of PRTs due to the politically-imposed caveats that prevent both civilians and military PRT elements from operating beyond the borders of their PRTs. Some Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) have complained that PRTs tread on their feet, bringing heavy firepower and inexperienced operatives to bear on situations in which they (the NGOs) have specific experience and skills.⁷ Their claims suggested that the civilian-military nature of PRTs had blurred the lines between combatants and aid workers, and thus

⁴ Morelli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

⁵ "Afghanistan Report 2009", *North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Public Diplomacy Division*, Brussels, Belgium (2009), pp. 18, 35, 36.

⁶ Cordesman, Anthony: "Sanctum FATA", *The National Interest*, no. 101 (May-June 2009), p. 31.

⁷ Saikal, *op. cit.*, p. 532.



endangered independent NGO staff, whose supposed neutrality was thus compromised, consequently exposing them to increased risk of kidnap and death.⁸

In spite of these criticisms, the PRT concept responded to the accurate perception that the war in Afghanistan could not be won without the kind of reconstruction and development that the PRTs were intended to produce. The provision of stability in Afghanistan requires a “comprehensive approach,”⁹ one that provides a degree of security for the development of Afghan infrastructure, economy, educational opportunities, public health programs and a modern legal system. The main shortcomings seem to have been the low number of teams and lack of security, both of which have prevented the program from achieving its goals on a national scale. In addition, the fact that the PRTs were designed and operated on a nation-by-nation basis stood in the way of any consistent NATO or ISAF design for the country-wide operation.

4. Operation Enduring Freedom and the ISAF

From its inception with UNSCR 1386, the ISAF existed in parallel with but separate from the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) that had successfully ousted the Taliban from power and continued to pursue al Qaeda and Taliban elements. In 2009, the OEF continued as a counter-insurgency combat operation with approximately 38,500 troops under US command, while the ISAF was expressly mandated by the United Nations to provide security and development for Afghanistan. With completion of stage four of ISAF, in which NATO assumed responsibility for providing security for the entire country, the line separating the objectives of the two operations became increasingly blurred, as the necessity of combating a growing Taliban/al Qaeda insurgency forced ISAF troops into more combat roles.

Some way of consolidating the commands seemed logical from early on. However, the idea met with mixed emotions on both sides of the Atlantic. Some experts claimed that initial US rejection of proposals to integrate the operations was based on its desire to retain autonomous control over its forces in the region.¹⁰ One of these experts, Amin Saikal, has claimed it was an extension of American aversion to UN supervision that kept the ISAF and OEF separate. European resistance, Saikal said, resulted from some NATO contributors not wanting to see their troops redirected into harm's way in the unstable south of the country.¹¹ In addition, Markus Kaim reported that the public perception in Germany was “...that

⁸ Dziedic, Michael J. and Seidl, Colonel Michael K.: “Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Military Relations with International and Nongovernmental Organizations in Afghanistan”, United States Institute of Peace, *Special Report* 147 (September 2005), p. 2.

⁹ The lessons of NATO operations in the Balkans and then in Afghanistan have led the alliance to recognize formally that military interventions on their own are insufficient to “win the peace.” NATO has also acknowledged that, as an organization, it does not have the mandate or the in-house resources to provide everything that is required to deal with a defeated or failed state. At the 4 April 2009 Strasbourg/Kehl Summit, allied leaders in their “Declaration on Alliance Security”, noted: “We aim to strengthen our cooperation with other international actors, including the United Nations, European Union, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and African Union, in order to improve our ability to deliver a comprehensive approach to meeting these new challenges, combining civilian and military capabilities more effectively. In our operations today in Afghanistan and the Western Balkans, our armed forces are working alongside many other nations and organisations.” PRTs and cooperation with other international organizations are the core of NATO’s comprehensive approach to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

¹⁰ See, for example, Sperling, James and Webber, Mark: “NATO: from Kosovo to Kabul”, *International Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 3 (May 2009), p. 509, and Saikal, *op. cit.*, p. 532.

¹¹ Saikal, *op. cit.*, p. 532.



Enduring Freedom is the ‘bad’ American part of the Afghanistan mission, bombing villages and killing innocent civilians, whereas the ISAF is the ‘good’ one, focusing on state building and reconstruction...”¹²

Nevertheless, ISAF stage four requirements and the intensification of the Afghan insurgency finally forced a partial consolidation of the OEF and ISAF commands. The separate commands led to differences in both strategy and tactics, compromising attempts to produce an Afghanistan-wide approach to dealing with the insurgents and the accompanying need for development of governmental and civilian systems and infrastructure. When ISAF operations were expanded to include all of Afghanistan, 10,000 American troops were rebadged and transferred to NATO command. Additionally, all American troops, regardless of their mission affiliation, began to operate under the command of US Forces Afghanistan, which was double-hatted with command of ISAF—as of August 2009 occupied by General Stanley A. McChrystal. General McChrystal reported both to NATO’s SACEUR (ISAF chain of command) in Brussels and the US Central Command (US national chain of command) in Tampa, Florida. In August 2009, the North Atlantic Council approved creation of a subordinate ISAF command, also led by an American general, in charge of day-to-day combat operations.

While the ISAF was making the transition to a more active combat capacity, the OEF continued to conduct its own, separate operations against high value targets and other militant concentrations. NATO and US planning began to reflect the realization that withdrawing from areas after completion of combat operations was resulting in the reestablishment of Taliban influence. As a result, the operational strategy for the NATO forces country was changed to “clear, hold and build.”¹³ Instead of clearing territory of Taliban and promptly leaving, NATO troops began to hold newly-won territory and develop indigenous security forces and services in the hopes of fostering a more persistent stability. However, there still were insufficient forces and inadequate (corrupt, compromised or incompetent) government infrastructure to implement the concept successfully on a wide-scale basis.

5. The Pakistan Complication

Beginning in 2007, violence caused by the Taliban and al Qaeda insurgencies escalated with significant increases in ISAF and US casualties. The expansion of Taliban capabilities was in no small measure due to the fact that the insurgents had established their base of operations and support facilities across the border in Pakistan. The insurgent leadership, having been dislodged from Afghanistan by persistent NATO and coalition action, began operating from safe havens nearby, in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchi region. The traditional Taliban under Mullah Muhammad Omar, along with two other Taliban groups with links to Al-Qaeda operated from these territories. In addition, Pakistani Jihadist elements under the separate leaderships of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani operated from the FATA. The latter established the so-called “Islamic Emirate of Waziristan”

¹² Kaim, Markus: “Germany, Afghanistan, and the future of NATO”, *International Journal*, vol. 63, no. 3 (Summer 2008), p. 613.

¹³ O’Hanlon, Michael: “Toward Reconciliation in Afghanistan”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2 (April 2009), p. 142.



with several thousand fighters, and claimed responsibility for a number of suicide bombings in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Dealing with this challenge was complicated by the fact that the government of Pakistan, for a wide variety of reasons, until the second half of 2009, was unwilling or unable to take on the Taliban and other extremist elements that had solidified their base along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. In addition, reports suggested that elements of the Pakistani government (especially the Inter-Services Intelligence organization) were complicit in the operation of cross-border insurgent groups.

The border, demarcated by the British mandated Durban line of 1893 is effectively non-existent for those living nearby. From a security standpoint, this makes it very difficult for NATO soldiers to keep track of who is coming in and out of the country. General David Richards, former commander of ISAF Afghanistan, describes the porous nature of the border in stark terms, "Up to 200,000 people cross that border on any given day, dressed all the same. It's not easy to distinguish the Taliban from perfectly law-abiding people."¹⁵

Despite their reluctance to pursue the Taliban presence in their border frontiers, the Pakistani military has engaged in combat in the FATA against foreign fighters and takes part in dialogues both with the ISAF and the Afghan National Army through the Tripartite Joint Intelligence Operations Center (T-JIOC), which aims to coordinate military action on the border between the three forces. Further cooperation is exhibited through the opening of the Khyber Pass Border Coordination Center and the construction of two more in Lawara and Nawa Pass. Control of these passes is particularly vital to NATO efforts in the country because a vast majority of their supplies come from or over Pakistani territory. As much as 60% of NATO's supplies come through the Khyber Pass, where violence shot up 45% from 2007 to 2008.¹⁶

There is now widespread agreement that stability can never be secured in Afghanistan until Pakistan controls its border and resolves its own problems with the Taliban/al-Qaeda insurgency. The resignation of President Pervez Musharraf in 2008 and the restoration of civilian rule to the country were followed by rapid deterioration of the economy, and despite the new government's pledge to combat growing insurgency and terrorism in the country, pro-Taliban militancy grew bolder, notably in the north-western city of Peshawar. But the departure of Musharraf led to improved relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the program of "peace jirga" meetings between prominent tribal elders from both countries began anew.

The Obama Administration made it clear in its early months that it would deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan as key parts of the same problem. In 2009, the Government of Pakistan took a more active and effective approach to dealing with Taliban and extremist elements in the regions adjacent to Afghanistan. The Pakistan military mounted a major operation in the fall of 2009 seeking to take control of Taliban and al Qaeda strongholds in Waziristan from which the insurgent leaders mounted operations and sought refuge from US and ISAF forces on the other side of the border. The operation, for which Pakistan authorities claimed major successes, led almost immediately in an upsurge in attacks against Pakistani civilian and governmental targets. It remains clear that close cooperation among all players—

¹⁴ Cordesman, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁵ Kiley, Sam: "Interview: Lieut. General David Richards", *From Afghanistan: The Other War, Frontline World*, PBS, 10 April 2007.

¹⁶ Cordesman, *op. cit.*, p. 32.



the United States, NATO ISAF, Afghan authorities and Pakistani officials—will be required to reduce the threat of radical extremists in both countries, and that sustaining domestic support in Pakistan for its role in the conflict will be a challenge to the government in Karachi.

6. The Mission: A Self-Governing Secure Afghanistan

The NATO allies agree that “NATO’s main role in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance.”¹⁷ When the NATO leaders celebrated the alliance’s 60th anniversary at Strasbourg (France) and Kehl (Germany) in April 2009, they issued a Summit Declaration on Afghanistan elaborating on the mission and its rationale, declaring:

In Afghanistan we are helping build security for the Afghan people, protecting our citizens and defending the values of freedom, democracy and human rights. Our common security is closely tied to the stability and security of Afghanistan and the region: an area of the world from where extremists planned attacks against civilian populations and democratic governments and continue to plot today. Through our UN-mandated mission, supported by our International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) partners, and working closely with the Afghan government, we remain committed for the long-run to supporting a democratic Afghanistan that does not become, once more, a base for terror attacks or a haven for violent extremism that destabilises the region and threatens the entire International Community.¹⁸

The task of establishing a legitimate, competent, centralized government presents a unique challenge to the international community, because Afghanistan has a long history of decentralized rule and has frequently looked much like a failed state, in which no one power possessed a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Rule of law and provision of security was administered informally on an ad-hoc basis across the country, with little or no standardization, training, or even literate officials. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 set the goal of establishing governmental legitimacy and consolidating central control following the defeat of the Taliban, but widespread corruption and the perception of weakness in the face of the Taliban’s continued insurgency cast doubts about the ability of the government to sustain itself. In fact, the Bonn Agreement itself, while seeking to strengthen the government in Kabul, led to an international approach that may have worked against the stated objective. Pursuant to the accord, NATO nations and international organizations focused many of their efforts locally and regionally without a clear national strategy and also without necessarily strengthening the influence of the central government over distant and historically autonomous regions and population centers.

A new Afghan constitution was ratified in January of 2004, establishing a strong presidency counterbalanced by a legislature, confirming equal rights for men and women, and laying a framework of Sunni Islamic law for the judiciary.¹⁹ The head of the interim

¹⁷The goal is found in numerous locations on the NATO website. See, for example http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_8189.htm, accessed 12 November 2009.

¹⁸ “Summit Declaration on Afghanistan”, *North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), North Atlantic Council, Strasbourg/Kehl* (4 April 2009).

¹⁹ Katzman, Kenneth: “Afghanistan: Government Formation and Performance”, *Congress Research Service, RL30508* (June 2009) (updated regularly), p. 15.



administration, Hamid Karzai, was subsequently elected with 55% of the popular vote and was then free to appoint a 27-member cabinet. The international community recognized that the fledgling government would require significant financial and organizational support. At the national level, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) focused its efforts on increasing the government's ruling capacity through developing structures such as an independent election commission, support mechanisms for the newly elected Afghan Parliament, training for civil servants, financial and logistical support for police forces, and other measures.

At the provincial level, NATO-ISAF supported various efforts to extend governance by providing security, PRT operations, and support of various initiatives such as the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), which increases dialogue between provincial authority figures and their populations. In the 2009 provincial and presidential elections, the ISAF provided logistical support to domestic security forces that were taking more significant roles in maintaining stability. Consistently positive changes in indicators such as school enrollment and economic growth were presented as encouraging signs that a sense of order was returning to many parts of the country.²⁰

The August 2009 elections came off without major terrorist attacks, although it appeared that the relatively light turnout had been induced by Taliban threats and attacks prior to the elections, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the country. President Karzai won a decisive victory over his one major opponent, former Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, but evidence of widespread voter fraud led to demands and plans for a runoff election. However, Abdullah withdrew from the election arguing that the runoff election would not be conducted fairly. As a consequence, President Karzai was returned to power, but with a large black cloud over his head. The outcome posed serious problems for the Obama Administration, which had hoped for a more legitimate and less corrupt government in Kabul in return for an increase in US forces there.

Despite some areas of success, the establishment of a self-sufficient, legitimate government is proving in many ways to be fraught with difficulty. It is widely acknowledged that President Karzai has tolerated corruption and appeased faction leaders with appointments to facilitate stability,²¹ but endemic corruption consistently stood out as a crippling factor in the extension of effective governance, and reports indicated that the government consistently failed to provide basic services to the population. Various international efforts to provide local delivery of aid through PRTs, NGOs, Special Forces and other programs often conflicted both with one another and with domestic government processes that remained unregulated and disconnected from one another. Inefficient, highly centralized ministries in Kabul were often responsible for delivery of services across the country, and while efforts were made to delegate authority to lower levels (such as Karzai's initiative *The Directorate for Local Governance*),²² results were limited.

Provision of essential services is critical for establishing the legitimacy of a central Afghan Government, but as of 2009, the government lacked even the means to collect taxes. Indeed, bookkeeping, even at the national level, is so underdeveloped that the government could not keep track of aid flows. Instead it left the task of accountancy up to individual

²⁰ "Afghanistan Report", *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO), includes updated assessments of all aspects of international assistance to Afghanistan. The 2009 report is available at http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2009_03/20090331_090331_afghanistan_report_2009.pdf.

²¹ Katzman, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²² Korski, Daniel (2008): *Afghanistan: Europe's Forgotten War*, European Council on Foreign Relations, p. 24.



donors, who had varying recordkeeping methods that further complicated information sharing.²³ There was little sub-national governmental organization in the provinces and lower level courts had not been established. According to a US RAND think-tank study, the coalition's support of the Northern Alliance in the overthrow of the Taliban ultimately led to a weakening of central authority in favor of traditional, regional warlords²⁴ and the sort of decentralized rule that has been a recurring theme throughout the country's history.

According to the former Interior Minister of Afghanistan Ali A. Jalali, writing in 2007, "The structural legitimacy of the current Afghan government suffers from a lack of capacity, particularly at the sub-national level, where the vacuum is filled by insurgents, militia commanders, [and] local gangs, all of whom undermine human security, local governance, democratic values and the delivery of basic services."²⁵ The weakness of the government, he claimed, has caused a crisis of confidence and the erosion of its legitimacy. Apparently the fundamentals had not changed by 2009 when the Congressional Research Service observed that "The Karzai government's own problems are apparent: discontented warlords, endemic corruption, a vigorous drug trade, the Taliban, and a rudimentary economy and infrastructure. In the view of former NATO General and now Ambassador to Afghanistan, Carl Eikenberry, 'The enemy we face is not particularly strong, but the institutions of the Afghan state remain relatively weak.'"²⁶ This loss of confidence translated into a tangible hemorrhage of territory, and in recent years, the Taliban has regained "influence and control in what now amounts to nearly half of Afghanistan."²⁷

Rule of law and an operational justice system, often considered keystones to the establishment of a legitimate regime, were still woefully underdeveloped and, according to a World Bank assessment, the Afghan system was still one of the worst in the world.²⁸ Reports indicated that warlord control over regions had dramatically disrupted attempts by the central government to appoint judges and establish authority, and allegations of serious corruption were lodged against both the attorney general's office and the Supreme Court in Kabul. In 2006, an Asia Foundation report concluded that only 16% of Afghan legal disputes were being brought to official courts and the vast majority was decided in traditional settings outside the authority of the state.²⁹ Furthermore, reports from early 2007 claimed that Taliban courts had returned in some provincial areas, where they were viewed as more efficacious than the corrupt, official ones.³⁰

Corruption and incompetence in the newly reconstituted police force proved disastrous for its credibility. An International Institute for Strategic Studies report asserted in 2007 that "The Afghan National Police (ANP) has been a source of insecurity for communities across the country, rather than a solution to it."³¹ The report charged that informal bribe earnings for police in the country ranged between \$200 and \$30,000 per month, and that besides failing to prosecute in instances of murder and torture, the police themselves engaged in crimes, such as

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ Jones, Seth G.: *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study--Volume 4, RAND Counterinsurgency Study*, Arlington, RAND Corporation (2008), p. 80.

²⁵ Jalali, Ali A.: "Afghanistan: regaining momentum", *Parameters*, vol. 37, no. 4 (Winter 2007), p. 8.

²⁶ Morelli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁷ Cordesman, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁸ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁹ Hodes, Cyrus and Sedra, Mark (2007): *The Search for Security in Post-Taliban Afghanistan*, Abingdon, Routledge, for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, p. 79.

³⁰ Rubin, Barnett R.: "Saving Afghanistan," *International Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 1 (January/February 2007), p. 60.

³¹ Hodes *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



bank-robberies and kidnappings for ransom.³² Reforms were slow moving, and despite efforts by EUPOL and the United States to raise standards, it was concluded in July 2007 that only 40% of the ANP was adequately equipped.³³ The bulk of police salaries were paid out of the internationally funded Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, which as of 2008 was still severely underfunded.

These problems continued virtually unabated into 2009. NATO's annual assessment reported that "The capacity of the Afghan Government at the national, provincial and district levels remains limited and suffers from corruption. Continuing insecurity, criminality and, in places, the influence of the narcotics trade further impede efforts to improve good governance."³⁴

In the United States, the new Obama Administration immediately placed a high priority on improving training of the Afghan police and sent an additional 4,000 troops to Afghanistan to strengthen the training program. The United States hoped that the injection of additional trainers would make a difference in combating corruption. The unscrupulous nature of the current force was pervasive: ranking positions on police forces and judiciary frequently went to the highest bidder and, as one provincial police official observed, "This is the reason no one accepts the rule of law..., because the government is not going by the rule of law."³⁵ According to interviews with American and Afghan sources, "The list of schemes that undermine law enforcement is long and bewildering...: police officials who steal truckloads of gasoline; judges and prosecutors who make decisions based on bribes; high-ranking government officials who reap payoffs from hashish and chromite smuggling; and midlevel security and political jobs that are sold, sometimes for more than \$50,000, money the buyers then recoup through still more bribes and theft."³⁶

The irony in all this is that the Taliban reportedly are reaping large financial benefits from the illicit narcotics trade—a line of business they suppressed when in power. For many Afghans, growing poppy for that trade has become their main way of life as well as the main source of revenue for the Taliban. NATO has summarized the issue in the following terms:

There is a recognised nexus between the narcotics trade and the insurgency. Each year, the insurgency benefits from an estimated 100 million - 200 million USD from the narcotics trade. Experience on the ground demonstrates that opium production and insurgent violence are correlated geographically and opium remains a major source of revenue for both the insurgency and organized crime. The drugs trade also fuels corruption and undermines the rule of law. It jeopardises the prospects of long-term economic growth and impacts on the nation's health, as drug addiction is an ever-increasing problem in Afghanistan.³⁷

Since the Taliban was removed from power, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has increased to supply 93% of the world's opium. Part of the answer to the drug problem has been destroying poppy fields and disrupting production and transportation of opium to the international market. US, ISAF and Afghan forces cooperate in such destruction and interdiction activities. However, these approaches do not present a long-term solution to the

³² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁴ "Afghanistan Report 2009", *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁵ Opper, Richard A., Jr.: "Corruption Undercuts Hopes for Afghan Police", *The New York Times*, 8 April 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/09/world/asia/09ghazni.html>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "Afghanistan Report 2009", *op. cit.*, p. 28.



problem, in part because so much of the Afghan economy depends on the revenue from the trade. The Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in his 2009 assessment of the situation, suggested that “Progress depends on more than reducing the amount of opium hectareage : it depends on improving security, integrity, economic growth, and governance.” He continued, “We must concentrate on winning long-term campaigns, not just short-term battles.”³⁸ If US, NATO and Afghan government forces simply destroy crops without providing alternative sources of income for the farmers support for the Taliban will grow and the long-term battle will be lost.

Until the judicial and police systems move away from the culture of corruption, central government control in Afghanistan will be difficult to establish and maintain, and the Taliban will be seen by some Afghans as providing a more reliable form of justice and security. Given the fact that the legal and governmental system has traditionally depended on this illicit lubrication, establishing effective rule of law in Afghanistan could therefore be a decades-long process.

7. The Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF)

A critical key to the security component of Afghanistan’s future is the development of domestic security forces capable of defending the political system from its enemies. This also has proven to be a daunting task, even though slow progress apparently is being made. According to NATO, in 2008 “The ANSF grew in strength and capability and Afghan forces assumed responsibility for security in the Kabul area for the first time.”³⁹

In its *Counterinsurgency Study*, the US RAND think tank underscores the fundamental necessity of developing an indigenous security force to combat the Taliban and other fighters. It focuses in particular on the so-called “Fallacy of External Actors” that pervades popular thinking regarding counter-insurgency strategy, which overemphasizes the role of foreign, direct military power while downplaying the importance of local forces. This ignores many realities, such as the long time frame of many insurgencies (averaging greater than ten years), the intimate knowledge domestic forces have of their cultures and geography, and frequently negative public opinion held towards foreign troops on the ground.⁴⁰ The study assesses the essential characteristics of an effective indigenous security force (which is committed to a long term counter-insurgency struggle) as high initiative, good intelligence, high integration, good leadership, competent, loyal soldiers, and adaptability.⁴¹ Most of these characteristics are still sorely lacking in the Afghan National Security Forces.

Responsibility for training the Afghan National Army (ANA) has been primarily taken on by the United States, but includes the cooperation of French, British, Turkish and other nations’ trainers in establishing an officer corps. In the Summit Declaration on Afghanistan in April 2009 NATO leaders announced the establishment of a NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan to provide higher level training for the ANA and additionally confirmed the

³⁸ Costa, Antonio María: “Afghanistan Opium Winter Assessment Report”, *United Nations (NATO), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*(January 2009), as reported in “Afghanistan Report 2009”, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

³⁹ “Afghanistan Report 2009”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.



target for army expansion to be 134,000 troops.⁴² Newly trained units have encouragingly experienced early successes in combat operations alongside foreign forces and, in 2008, 62% were led by the ANA.⁴³ ISAF and coalition troops are deployed with ANA units through the Embedded Training Team (ETT) and Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) programs, monitoring and supporting the development of the force. By mid-March 2009, the ISAF was operating 52 OMLTs with at least 30 additional teams planned to enter service by the end of 2010.⁴⁴

NATO has also provided support for the ANA through its Equipment Support Program and the ANA Trust Fund, which the North Atlantic Council set up in 2008. Various NATO nations have donated equipment with the intention of modernizing the Soviet-era armaments of the ANA, but internal complaints persisted regarding the dismal state of the army's weaponry and, as of early 2009, contributions to the trust fund were still limited, totaling approximately 18.5 million Euros.⁴⁵

The driving rationale for General McChrystal's request for 40,000 additional troops was to provide both more trainers and a better security environment in which Afghan national forces could be trained up more rapidly. Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, after his report and recommendations had been leaked to the press, McChrystal summarized his assessment of what need to be done, including prominently training Afghan security forces to take over responsibility for their country's safety:

- Gain the initiative by reversing the perceived momentum possessed by the insurgents.
- Seek rapid growth of Afghan national security forces – the army and the police.
- Improve their effectiveness and ours through closer partnering, which involves planning, living and operating together and taking advantage of each other's strengths as we go forward. Within ISAF, we will put more emphasis on every part of that, by integrating our headquarters, physically co-locating our units, and sharing ownership of the problem.
- Address shortfalls in the capacity of governance and the ability of the Afghan government to provide rule of law.
- Tackle the issue of predatory corruption by some officials or by warlords who are not in an official position but who seem to have the ability, sometimes sanctioned by existing conditions, to do that.
- Focus our resources and prioritise in those areas where the population is most threatened. We do not have enough forces to do everything everywhere at once, so this has to be prioritised and phased over time.⁴⁶

⁴² "Summit Declaration on Afghanistan", *op. cit.*

⁴³ "Afghanistan Report 2009", *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁶ McChrystal, Stanley A.: "Special Address - General Stanley McChrystal, Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Commander, US Forces Afghanistan", speech to the *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, London, (1 October 2009), at <http://www.iiss.org/recent-key-addresses/general-stanley-mcchrystal-address>.



Despite some successes, the ANA has been criticized for its crippling dependence on foreign military assistance, in the form of embedded NATO/Coalition troops, air-support and funding,⁴⁷ and for its high attrition rate.⁴⁸ That said, developments, such as the creation of the Afghan National Army Air Corps (ANAAC), spearheaded by the United States, gave the ANA greater independence. In 2008, they flew 90% of ANA air support missions.⁴⁹

The development of self-sufficient Afghan military forces is a long-term project, but is one that perhaps has made more progress than the development of the judicial and legal system. This is not surprising, given the fact that the US and ISAF military forces in Afghanistan have been able to provide the resources to help mold an Afghan military with its own standards and internal relationships that perhaps will rise above those seen in Afghan civilian society. The development of Afghan security forces could, in this sense, provide part of the foundation around which a modern civil society can grow, as well as strengthen the country's ability to provide for its own security.

8. Implications for NATO

The ISAF mission has become NATO's most ambitious and demanding task in its history. The Cold War required large armies and defense budgets, but never brought alliance forces into a combat environment. Afghanistan has become a groundbreaking experience for the alliance, both because it requires "kinetic" active combat and counter-insurgency operations and because it is so far from the alliance's base in Europe. Questions remain as to whether the mission will transform the alliance into a global intervention instrument or, on the other hand, will threaten the future viability of the institution.

At least initially, assumption of the ISAF mission appeared to be a vote of confidence in unity and cooperation on both sides of the Atlantic. The Bush administration had been forced to acknowledge that it needed help from allies and the alliance to deal with the demands of two conflicts: one in Iraq, which was given highest priority, and the other in Afghanistan, which had begun as the immediate reaction to the 9/11 attacks. The fact that the allies fell in behind the ISAF mission at a time when the alliance was so profoundly divided over Iraq suggested that the alliance could survive its most heated disagreements.

9. The Issue of US Priorities

By 2008, it was clear that the combination of ISAF and OEF operations had not been sufficient to turn the tide against the Taliban or to capture Osama bin Laden. Subsequent paragraphs examine the shortcomings of ISAF that are deeply rooted in Europe. However, it seems appropriate to start with a brief acknowledgment that the US decision to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power led to such a demanding commitment there that the goals in Afghanistan became a secondary priority. In 2007, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, said pointedly: "In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must." In May 2009, Mullen reversed field, and declared that Afghanistan was

⁴⁷ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Hodes *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁴⁹ "Afghanistan Report 2009", *op. cit.*, p. 15.



the US military's "main effort" – a priority that would guide troop assignments, equipment purchases and deployments, and allocation of other resources.⁵⁰

The United States did not dedicate the military manpower needed to establish and maintain control against the Taliban. It did not devote sufficient civilian capabilities and financial resources to help the government in Kabul establish itself around the country. However, the specific problems and history associated with Afghanistan suggest that even with a devoted and persistent effort, the United States might not have been able to achieve its objectives there. Regardless, it is clear that US objectives in Afghanistan would have been better served by a more serious commitment.

None of the European allies portrayed the deficient US commitment as a rationale for the shortcomings of their own contributions. And, it could be further argued that the more the United States does, the less the Europeans will feel their efforts to be essential. Nevertheless, if leadership by example has any value, the fact is that the United States constructed a very poor model for the Europeans to emulate.

10. Weak Allied Public Support

European involvement in ISAF combat operations has never enjoyed widespread support among the domestic populations of the contributing nations. According to the German Marshall Fund's 2008 Transatlantic Trends public opinion survey, support for deploying their troops in combat operations gains majority support only in the United Kingdom (64% favor) and France (52% favor). In Germany, 62% oppose using their troops to conduct operations against the Taliban. The overall results in the 12 European countries polled found an average of only 43% in support of troops being used for combat operations. When asked if they favored deploying troops to provide security for reconstruction, train Afghan soldiers and police, or combat narcotics production, all European countries polled produced strong majorities in support. Respondents in the United States showed strong majority support for the use of American troops in combat and non-combat operations.⁵¹ In Canada, a country that has been on the front lines in combat operations, support for its role in ISAF eroded in 2008-09, with its mission set to expire in 2011.⁵²

The aversion to combat in Afghanistan did not necessarily reflect public loss of confidence in NATO. In spite of strong European disapproval of the Bush administration and its policies, public opinion of NATO's importance to their country's security remarkably remained relatively strong in 2008. An average of around 60% of European respondents in the 2008 Transatlantic Trends polling agreed that NATO was "still essential" to their country's security, a number almost identical to the percentage of Americans who thought the alliance still essential to US security. However, there certainly was the chance that Afghanistan could undermine this support in the long run. As one Norwegian defense official, Espen Barth-Eide,

⁵⁰ Tyson, Ann Scott: "Afghan Effort is Mullen's Top Focus", *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2009, p. 1.

⁵¹ German Marshall Fund of the United States *et al.*: "Transatlantic Trends 2008 Topline Data", *Transatlantic Trends, The German Marshall Fund of the United States* (October 2008), at http://www.gmfus.org/trends/doc/2008_english_top.pdf.

⁵² Morelli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.



observed “NATO appears to our publics to be an organization that takes our sons to send them to Afghanistan.”⁵³

The reluctance of NATO members to provide forces to the ISAF underlines the limited enthusiasm for its mission. Despite touting the achievement that all NATO members and several partners provide forces to the ISAF, many give only token contributions, and some are withdrawing. The difficulty that European members of NATO had in 2006 finding 2,200 troops to replace departing soldiers demonstrated the failure of the allies to shoulder the burden that NATO accepted in taking command of the ISAF. Despite the UN’s authorization “to take all necessary measures to fulfill its mandate,” many NATO European allies have been either unable or unwilling to commit forces to the Afghanistan conflict. With the advent of the Obama Administration in Washington, hopes were raised that Obama’s popularity in Europe would increase European support for ISAF. That phenomenon, however, was not immediately apparent.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, preparing to leave for meetings with his counterparts in June 2009, nonetheless took an upbeat approach, telling a US Senate committee that the United States was not alone in Afghanistan and that more than forty allies deploy a total of 32,000 troops there. Gates avoided criticizing those that avoid combat missions, but specifically commended Canada, Denmark, the UK and Australia, all of which have put their troops in harm’s way and have taken heavy casualties.⁵⁴ In the past, Gates had taken the allies to task for the limits on their contributions, but apparently the United States decided that public praise for allied efforts would be more effective than public criticism of their shortcomings.

Public opinion against sending forces to participate in combat operations in Afghanistan certainly posed serious challenges for most European governments. However, the bottom line is that some responded by trying to lead their publics toward a rationale for participation while others simply accepted that they did not have the public or parliamentary support to make serious sacrifices. The future success or failure of ISAF will likely depend on the will and ability of European governments to sustain public and parliamentary tolerance, if not support, of the effort.

11. National Caveats, Casualty Differentials and Burden-Sharing

Ambiguity in the UN mandate for the ISAF and the level of decision-making discretion given to NATO allies has led to a wide variety of approaches to how individual nations deploy and use PRTs and other programs and what limits govern the troops they commit to the ISAF. National caveats, placed by many nations on their forces in Afghanistan, have exacerbated tensions within the alliance. They also have reduced the flexibility of commanders to allocate forces in the country, while nationwide reconstruction programs, undertaken by various allies, have met with mixed effectiveness and occasional charges of inefficiency and redundancy. One NATO general is quoted as saying “Opponents and national caveats have polluted ISAF’s command-and-control system...If politicians don’t trust their military commanders,

⁵³ “Have combat experience, will travel”, *The Economist*, 26 March 2009, at http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13376058.

⁵⁴ Pessin, Al: “Gates to Meet with Allies on Afghanistan, Wants Progress Within a Year”, *VOANews.com*, 9 June 2009, at <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2009-06/2009-06-09-voa62.cfm?CFID=264832194&CFTOKEN=30150613&jsessionid=00307cc5cba8a4a9a39e4b28425775234242>.



they should kick them out, but they should not try to run local battles from faraway capitals. It is wrong and it can kill people.”⁵⁵

In mid-2009, nearly half of all troops under ISAF command had some sort of restrictions on their operational capacities, relating to geographic deployment, mission profiles, and the use of force. According to the Congressional Research Service,

While caveats in themselves do not generally prohibit the kinds of operations NATO forces can engage in, caveats do pose difficult problems for commanders who seek maximum flexibility in utilizing troops under their command. Some governments’ troops lack the appropriate equipment to function with other NATO forces. Some nations will not permit their troops to deploy to other parts of Afghanistan. Still others prohibit their troops from participating in combat operations unless in self-defense. NATO commanders have willingly accepted troops from some 42 governments but have had to shape the conduct of the mission to fit the capabilities of and caveats on those troops.⁵⁶

These limitations, while often a reflection of the domestic political realities of the allies, have been widely criticized outside the countries with the most constraining caveats. In 2006, SACEUR James Jones, who in 2009 became President Barack Obama’s National Security Advisor, argued that “It’s not enough to simply provide forces if those forces have restrictions on them that limit them from being effective.”⁵⁷ At the 2008 Munich Security Conference, Secretary of Defense Gates issued an unequivocal condemnation of national caveats, saying “in NATO, some allies ought not to have the luxury of opting only for stability and civilian operations, thus forcing other allies to bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and the dying.”⁵⁸

The nationally-imposed limitations on Germany’s ISAF contribution have been the focus of greatest controversy. Germany’s 3,500 troops, largely confined to the relatively stable northern regional command, have been required to go to great lengths to avoid confrontations with militants and are prohibited from initiating combat operations, authorized by the German government to fire only in self-defense. Demilitarization and the legacy of World War II in the German collective conscious has, according to German foreign policy expert Markus Kaim, led to what military sociologists call “post-heroic society” which is “casualty-shy and risk averse”, needing to rationalize military involvement as a noble, humanitarian mission of state-building.⁵⁹ Politically, taking an anti-Afghanistan war stance became tremendously profitable in Germany, and left wing parties gained serious traction by advocating immediate withdrawal and painting entanglement in Afghanistan as an outgrowth of following the Bush doctrine.⁶⁰ Chancellor Merkel’s coalition government was forced to walk a fine line between placating an increasingly impatient public and destabilizing the entire NATO operation by heeding their demands. The disaffection of the German populace is

⁵⁵ Lok, Joris Janssen: “Defining Objectives: Taliban and European Politics Challenge NATO mission in Afghanistan”, *Defense Technology International*, vol. 1, no. 6 (August 2007), p. 16.

⁵⁶ Morelli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵⁷ “NATO Commander Asks Member Nations to Drop Troop Limits”, *Mideast Stars and Stripes*, 25 October 2006.

⁵⁸ Omestad, Thomas: “NATO Struggles Over Who Will Send Additional Troops to Fight in Afghanistan”, *USNews.com*, 13 February 2008, at <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/02/13/nato-struggles-over-who-will-send-additional-troops-to-fight-in-afghanistan.html>.

⁵⁹ Kaim, *op. cit.*, p. 614.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 613.



not unique, and similar trends exist in other contributing nations as well, including France and the Netherlands, and even staunch US ally Great Britain.⁶¹

One aptly-titled assessment (“Don’t Shoot, We’re German”) has made note of the fact that the debate in Germany on the role of the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan is carried on in an unreal vocabulary:

“According to the government, the situation in Afghanistan has little to do with a violent struggle or an armed conflict. In fact, the German government appears to have blacklisted the word “war.” Anybody who suggests that something like war is happening in Afghanistan risks being rebuked, especially if he or she suggests that the Bundeswehr is participating in this war as part of the NATO-led ISAF. German soldiers “are not waging war there,” says Green politician Jürgen Trittin. “They are only securing the reconstruction effort. That’s a fact.””

“...The political debate on the Afghanistan mission is based on the following military policy rationale: We Germans do not fight wars. And even if we do, they are someone else’s wars, or at least wars for a very good cause.”⁶²

The German situation in some ways illustrates the success of Western policy after World War II. Every possible political, legal, social and educational attempt was made to ensure that Germany would never again be a threat to European or international peace. The campaign was embraced by West Germany’s leaders and its educational system. Furthermore, German reunification at the end of the Cold War brought in a population that had been trained to be suspicious of the West, the United States, and NATO. For some German politicians, the limits on Germany’s role in Afghanistan may be largely a way of avoiding difficult decisions and commitments. But, for others, it is a matter of strong political beliefs concerning Germany’s role in the world.

In spite of public pressures on European governments, and increased intensity of the conflict in Afghanistan, some have taken steps to reduce the number and severity of restrictions on their ISAF forces. In 2009, the French contingent was authorized to offer emergency assistance to other NATO forces and the Italian and Spanish commanders were granted discretionary authority concerning the use of the troops under them in urgent situations.⁶³ With German national elections approaching in the second half of 2009, it was clear that any loosening of constraints on the role of German forces in Afghanistan would have to await their outcome which, in any case, might not change the political dynamics limiting Germany’s contribution.

Perhaps the greatest danger to success in Afghanistan and to the future utility of NATO is the development of a multi-tiered alliance, in which some countries assume much greater risks than others on behalf of a shared mission. In the relationship between the United States and the European allies, this concern takes the form of the traditional burden-sharing issue, in which the United States appears to carry most of the weight and becomes resentful of the less-robust European contributions. With the Obama Administration’s shift in US priorities and

⁶¹ Visser, Josh: “Deaths in Afghanistan Testing Britain’s Resolve”, *CTV News*, 19 July 2009, at http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20090716/afghan_britain_090719/20090719?hub=TopStories.

⁶² Chauvistré, Eric: “Don’t Shoot, We’re German! Obstacles to a debate on the Bundeswehr’s international missions”, *Internationale Politik* (Summer 2009), pp. 69, 77.

⁶³ Morelli *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.



resources from Iraq to Afghanistan, the gap between the North American and European contributions has grown, and the grounds for a new burden-sharing debate have expanded as well.

Moreover, there are serious differentials in the casualties suffered by alliance members as a result of their contributions. Grim reality dictates that the countries that deploy their forces on the front lines of combat with the Taliban and al Qaeda will suffer the greatest casualties. In addition to the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands face the greatest risk and take the heaviest casualties. Countries like Germany, deployed in the more stable north, take fewer risks and sustain lighter casualties. This is a form of the burden-sharing debate that cuts across the alliance at a very personal level. It is not a matter of money, but rather concerns the lives of soldiers. Should the life of a soldier from one allied country be more valuable than that of another? Of course not. But the consequences of political decisions taken by various allies have produced the appearance of such a difference, and this casualty differential could leave long-term scars on the alliance.

12. A Continuing Story...

The story of NATO in Afghanistan is far from over. In some ways, the European allies only now are realizing the full consequences of offering to help their American allies in their hour of need. Mistakes were made. The United States made the first one by invading Afghanistan without devoting the time, attention and resources to the task of stabilizing the defeated and failed state. Yet the European allies have also contributed to the problem by severely limiting the manpower and resources they were willing to commit to the conflict. The constraints many allies placed on the forces they did deploy made it difficult if not impossible for NATO to construct a coherent effort on the ground. The European Union, which has access to many of the non-military assets not commanded by NATO, was slow and tentative in contributing, some say because EU officials were reluctant to play second fiddle to NATO and the United States in Afghanistan.⁶⁴

Ultimately, among all the external actors in Afghanistan, the United States will have the decisive influence on success or failure. The Afghan and Pakistani people and governments will also play critical roles, frequently beyond the influence of all external actors. Yet the persistence and effectiveness of the American effort will ultimately determine whether the Western nations remain in Afghanistan long enough to help the country achieve self-sufficiency without overstaying their welcome and subsequently appearing as an enemy occupation force.

In the second half of 2009, a challenge to such an outcome emerged in the United States itself. The Obama administration's attempt to refocus American military priorities on Afghanistan, based on a calculated assessment of US interests, was challenged by shifting American public opinion. As the increased number of US troops in Afghanistan and much higher tempo of operations against Taliban targets produced growing numbers of American casualties, public opinion in the United States began to turn against continuing the war.⁶⁵ The

⁶⁴ While not officially documented, the author has heard this rationale widely rumored among European officials.

⁶⁵ Agiesta, Jennifer and Cohen, Jon: "Public Opinion in U.S. turns Against Afghan War", *The Washington Post*, 20 August 2009, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/19/AR2009081903066_pf.html.



polling results raised questions about whether the Obama administration could sustain the American presence in Afghanistan without resorting to the kind of fear-mongering that so successfully produced initial public support for the Bush administration's war against Iraq. It is obvious that, if the United States cannot sustain its role in Afghanistan, that of NATO will fail as well.

The administration was put in a particularly difficult bind by the fact that as public opinion was running away from support for the war, his military advisors were recommending a large increase in US forces devoted to the effort. The recommendation by the commander of US and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley A. McChrystal, that as many as 40,000 additional American troops would be required to avoid mission failure, presented the administration with a difficult set of choices: go against the President's political base or against the advice of his top military commanders.

In November 2009, Obama announced he had decided to order substantial increases in the US military forces in Afghanistan. In so doing, he largely followed the advice of his military commanders. In response to concerns, expressed strongly in his own party, about escalation of the conflict, Obama declared that his strategy placed a high priority on training up the Afghan National Army to be able progressively to take over responsibilities for security to allow the United States to begin withdrawing forces by the middle of 2011. He also called for NATO allies to increase their own commitments during the same time period. He still faced criticism from the right for setting a deadline by which time to begin withdrawing forces and from the left for sending more troops in the near term and not receiving sufficient support from the international community.

It is, of course, possible that the Obama administration will be able to stay the course in Afghanistan in spite of growing public opposition. This could eventually yield a successful mission in which US efforts are sustained to the point of producing a self-reliant Afghan regime but in which NATO is perceived as having played a less-than-satisfactory role. This would not necessarily result in the end of the alliance, but certainly could translate into dramatic changes in the role that the organization plays in dealing with future international security challenges. The consequences of the burden sharing and casualty differential issues could trouble transatlantic relations for decades. The fact that NATO survived the Iraq crisis suggests a degree of permanence that many observers would not have expected.

Respect for the sovereign decisions of member states has, of course, been the underlying problem with NATO's operation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. ISAF's effectiveness was handicapped by the fact that some countries were unwilling to allow their troops to operate in parts of Afghanistan and in circumstances that would put them at greater risk. It is well understood that political realities and historical experiences have determined the approaches that nations have taken to this issue. The eventual evaluation of NATO's performance in Afghanistan will undoubtedly reflect such problems, even if the long run produces a relatively successful outcome. Assessing the mission's effectiveness will become part of the process of adapting the alliance to future security challenges.

Will the NATO members continue to find NATO cooperation to their advantage, even with a difficult experience in Afghanistan? Only time will tell. However, history suggests that, in spite of their differences, the United States and Europe will try to keep their act together. And today, NATO remains an important part of the script for that routine. Dealing with the threats posed by terrorism and managing most other aspects of transatlantic relations



demand more effective transatlantic cooperation in political, economic, financial, and social as well as military aspects of the relationship. While NATO, the European allies and the European Union can all be faulted for either ineffective or insufficient contributions to the effort in Afghanistan, the United States carries part of the blame for not making Afghanistan a higher priority. There is plenty of blame to go around, and the “failures” in this effort may unite the allies as much as dividing them.

For its part, the United States does not want the Afghan problem to be “Americanized,” and the formal involvement of NATO and NATO allies in helping shape an acceptable outcome helps ensure that the conflict remains internationalized. NATO’s involvement, even as flawed as it may be, provides a critical link to international legitimacy for US policy objectives. That link runs through NATO directly to the United Nations, hopefully (from the US point of view) ensuring that the broader international community will share responsibility for ensuring that Afghanistan does not return to a failed state that offers a welcoming habitat for future terrorist operations.

As far as the European allies are concerned, most if not all governments appear to recognize that the future of Afghanistan does hold the key to the level of threat likely to be posed by international terrorism in the coming years. They also recognize that bailing out of responsibility for the outcome in Afghanistan would call into question the vitality of the security links among them and to the United States. They too want the broader international community to remain committed to a positive outcome in Afghanistan, and the NATO role provides an important link to international legitimacy and assistance for the European allies as well.

The bottom line, therefore, is that the transatlantic bargain will survive Afghanistan. The alliance has already shown its resilience during the early 21st century when decisions by the Bush administration put alliance cooperation under severe pressure.⁶⁶

The bargain will survive in part because the security of the member states cannot be ensured through national measures alone. It will survive because the member states will continue to recognize that imperfect cooperation serves their interests better than no cooperation at all. NATO will be adapted to meet new challenges. And the value foundation of the transatlantic bargain will persist, in spite of differences over specific issues and shifting patterns of member state interests.

It will survive in part because the bargain is not just NATO. In fact, recent trends suggest that there is much more creative thought and political momentum behind enhancing transatlantic cooperation rather than diminishing it. As Lawrence S. Kaplan has observed, “The transatlantic bargain still resonates in the twenty-first century.”⁶⁷ As a result, this bargain in the hearts and minds of the member states has become as close as one could imagine to being a “permanent alliance.” The outcome in Afghanistan will inform judgments by the United States and other alliance members concerning when and how to use the alliance in the future, but it will not likely lead to its end.

The bottom line, however, is that it is not just NATO’s future that is at risk in Afghanistan. The entire international community has an important stake in ensuring that

⁶⁶ See, for example, my analysis in: Sloan, Stanley R.: “How and Why Did NATO Survive Bush Doctrine”, *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) ,College Research Directorate, Rome, Italy (October 2008)*.

⁶⁷ Kaplan, Lawrence S. (2007): *NATO 1948, The Birth of the Transatlantic Alliance*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 242.



Afghanistan is not transformed once again into a launching pad for international terrorism and that the nuclear armed Government of Pakistan is not destabilized or taken over by radical extremists who share al Qaeda's terrorist goals.