The Importance of Staying the Course in Afghanistan

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Germany, like other NATO allies, will soon need to decide whether or not to extend its mission in Afghanistan. Given the level of debate on this issue well in advance of the fall decision, it is likely that many members of the German Parliament will push to bring German forces back home. Any signs of retreat or fatigue, however, could have serious implications for the people of Afghanistan, the Alliance's unity of effort, and NATO's future.

When NATO assumed command of the ISAF in Afghanistan in August 2003, it represented a watershed in Alliance history – the first mission outside the Euro-Atlantic Area. ISAF was given a peace-enforcement mandate by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The ISAF mission aims to assist the elected Afghan government in maintaining security, expanding the authority of the government, and providing an environment conducive to reconstruction, democratic governance, and rule of law. To meet these goals, NATO is undertaking a wide variety of tasks, ranging from the training of Afghan security forces to supporting anti-narcotics efforts to high-intensity combat. The efforts mirror two sets of strategic challenges in Afghanistan: one in the relatively stable north and west of the country and another in the often violent south and east, where NATO forces are involved in intense and fierce fighting against the Taliban and taking casualties fairly regularly.

The NATO operation in Afghanistan is in itself a remarkable achievement. Given the distance from Brussels, complexity, and operational environment, ISAF would have been an unimaginable mission just ten years ago.

Many observers believe the ISAF mission marks the birth of a "global NATO" that is willing and able to face 21st century threats. Others, however, are increasingly skeptical about the operation's long-term sustainability. SACEUR General James Jones called for an additional 2,000 troops in September 2006. The deafening silence that followed raised questions about whether NATO had the political will and adequate capabilities to succeed. With some countries spending as little as 1.4 percent of GDP on defense – despite NATO's target of at least 2 percent – Europe's progress in creating forces prepared for expeditionary operations has been slow. Only a small percentage of Europe's roughly 2 million troops are deployable. Estimates range from 3 to 5 percent, and this does not account for parliamentary or constitutional restrictions on their actual use.

Those European troops that are deployable are often tasked with peacekeeping or stabilization missions because they are simply not equipped and trained for high-intensity combat. In other cases, the decision not to send troops (or additional troops) into combat in southern Afghanistan is rooted more in politics than preparedness. Some European political elites assume their publics will rally behind benign and safe humanitarian deployments but will not tolerate soldiers coming home in body bags. Others place their troops under strict national caveats on the rules of engagement or

geographical mobility, limiting their utility for fast-paced combat operations where allies have to come together on short notice to face an adaptive adversary. As a result, only a small number of NATO countries have both the capabilities and the political will to undertake and sustain high intensity combat operations.

Another potential setback on NATO's ability to succeed in Afghanistan is the undercurrent of resentment among European leaders. Many Europeans believe that the United States abandoned Afghanistan to pursue the unpopular Iraq war, leaving European governments and forces to deal with a dangerous security situation the Iraq War in part created. These critics doubt that Afghanistan would be witnessing a fierce Taliban resurgence if the United States had maintained its focus and troop presence over the last six years.

Getting Afghanistan Right

Despite the mounting skepticism about the Alliance's ability to succeed in Afghanistan, failure is simply not an option. In the months and years ahead, NATO allies will need to make a number of mid-course corrections both on the ground and within their capitals. In the short term, NATO will need to commit the troops and capabilities needed to ensure success. In the long term, assuming NATO is going to undertake more missions like
Afghanistan, the Alliance will need to continue developing and acquiring expeditionary capabilities, including strategic lift and air-to-air refueling. In addition, it will need to improve coordination and unity of effort on the ground, including with organizations handling the civilian side of reconstruction. Finally, NATO will have to get the balance between security and development just right.

Security and Development in Tandem

Political and military leaders increasingly agree on the interdependent relationship between security and development. As British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently stated, "Without progress – in democracy and in prosperity – security is at risk. Without security, progress falters."

To ensure that security and development efforts would proceed in tandem, the international community – first Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), then ISAF – adopted a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) model for Afghanistan. PRTs usually consist of a small operating base from which a group of specialists work to perform reconstruction projects or provide security for others involved in aid work. Today, over 20 PRTs are led by NATO allies, making up the bulk of NATO's stabilization efforts. Because the Alliance has not been able to standardize the PRT concept, each PRT differs from the next. They all, however, combine military and civilian staffs and aim to extend the authority of the Afghan central government, promote security, and facilitate reconstruction operations. While many PRTs have been beneficial, they also have blurred the roles and responsibilities among military and civilian players, which is confusing both for allies and the local populations.

Another challenge in balancing security and development has arisen in Afghanistan's southern provinces. Before the fall of 2006, very little was done in either arena. Now, NATO troops are busy defeating insurgent forces but stabilization efforts remain stagnant. Most experts agree that both reconstruction and security must be pursued

simultaneously but there is no agreement, particularly among NATO allies, on what model to use to do so. Given their success in other parts of the country, PRTs are frequently cited as the best path forward but the current combat environment prevents civilian players from operating effectively in many areas. NATO could try to play a greater reconstruction role but a number of allies are uncomfortable with this prospect. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has developed another solution for the problems of his country's conflict-ridden south – so-called Afghan Development Zones (ADZ). The ADZs are small, secure pockets that enable development under the auspices of civilian organizations. The hope is that success will breed success – that Afghans living outside the zones will increasingly desire the same security and development for themselves. The concept has promise, but risks as well; for example, rapid relative deprivation could alienate those living outside the ADZs.

While international organizations and national governments continue to debate who is best suited to take the lead on the development side of the equation, no effort in that area will succeed unless NATO reaffirms its commitment to ISAF and shows the Afghans that it will commit the necessary capabilities and resources. In the months ahead, NATO allies will need to define ISAF's role in security sector reform and agree on how to balance reconstruction and security objectives. Germany can and should play a key role in this regard. NATO also needs to resolve the poppy eradication debate. While Afghanistan's future is tied to its ability to eliminate drug production, NATO's role in these efforts should be limited. NATO allies should, however, investigate ways other instruments and organizations can help Afghanistan with this complex, and long-term challenge. Finally, NATO should outline concrete goals and objectives for its eventual withdrawal, which may help European political elites sell the mission to their increasingly nervous publics.

If, for any reason, Germany fails to find the political will or public support to continue its mission in Afghanistan, at the very least it should push for a strong EU role on the ground. After all, all the allies agree that even a doubling of the NATO force in Afghanistan would fail to guarantee success. Again, stabilization and development efforts must be pursued in tandem, and the EU is the obvious candidate to shoulder the development tasks.

The EU has been in Afghanistan since December 2001. Brussels has provided large sums of development and judicial reform assistance, partnered with other international organizations on reconstruction projects, and agreed to send 160 police officers to assist with police training. While the EU and nation-specific contributions are laudable, they are increasingly considered insufficient. Afghans, Non-Governmental Organizations, NATO, and an array of international partners on the ground have repeatedly called for more aid, faster and expanded training, and an increase in the EU's civilian presence.

Given its current toolbox of capabilities and institutional strengths, the EU should assume a stronger leadership role in Afghanistan. Such an initiative would produce several tangible benefits. First, a stronger EU presence on the ground would bring much-needed resources to the local population. The EU has a wealth of experience in judicial reform, establishment of the rule of law, agriculture, education, and police training. Greater use of those skills, and of the EU's pool of trained civilians, would help Afghans match each stabilization victory with a reconstruction strategy.

Second, by assuming a greater coordinating role, the EU could fill one of the biggest gaps in the reconstruction effort. Coordination is a problem on multiple levels—among the hundreds of NGOs, government agencies, and international institutions operating on the ground; among EU member states; and between military and civilian actors. The EU could play a constructive role in all of these areas. By establishing a coordination mechanism simply for its own member states, the EU could significantly reduce the waste and duplication that has been well documented.

Third, the EU, which is widely perceived around the world as an honest broker, could play a much greater diplomatic role, using its good offices to convene some of the regional players for a dialogue about Afghanistan's future and border security. The United States is currently unable to assume this role, given its tattered global image, its complex and politically charged relationship with Pakistan, and its lack of diplomatic ties with Iran.

Finally, by asserting itself in Afghanistan, the EU would position itself as a major contributor to peace and stability in the Middle East. While the EU has won worldwide international respect, particularly for its development assistance programs, it is also often seen as paralyzed by internal debates over its further enlargement and the desirability of deeper economic and political integration. Member states and EU officials often trumpet the EU's soft power potential. What better way to put those words into practice than by helping to rebuild Afghanistan?

This piece includes excerpts from "Transforming NATO (…again): A Primer for the NATO Summit in Riga 2006" (CSIS Press 2006) and an article titled "The EU Can and Should Do More in Afghanistan" that appeared on www.atlantic-initiative.org.