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The NATO Mission in Afghanistan: Transitioning to Afghan Control

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NATO's Lisbon Summit Declaration in December 2010 reiterated that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission is NATO's "key priority" and confirmed the goal of transitioning full security responsibility across all of Afghanistan to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. While progress is being made and the momentum of the Taliban and other extremists has been checked following the surge of US and other NATO forces, much remains to be done to provide the necessary capabilities and create the conditions that will allow the Afghan government to effectively provide security for its people.

From 13-15 July 2011, the NATO Defense College hosted a high-level conference to analyze and discuss the broad challenges of transitioning security responsibility and develop recommendations regarding NATO operations in Afghanistan between now and the end of 2014. Participants ranging from generals and flag officers at the highest levels to civilian ambassadors and academic experts attended.¹

This paper does not purport to be a complete summary of the discussion but instead recaps the group's most important observations and presents insights from the expert practitioners and scholars who participated in this conference. It is intended to inform future discussions between policymakers and the public, and help NATO, the international community, and Afghans continue working toward a viable, sustainable transition.

¹ The event was held in accordance with the Chatham House Rule and, as such, participants' comments are not attributed. This report reflects the group's views based on notes taken by the Rapporteur, Ms. Marisa Porges, and other moderators throughout the conference. The views expressed herein do not represent those of NATO, any of its agencies, or any other member governments.



Summary of Key Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Partners must set the stage now.** The success of the ISAF mission will require the transition of control and security responsibility to the Government of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Between now and then, NATO, the International Community and the Afghan government must successfully cooperate to (1) build up Afghan capacity to carry out security and governance responsibilities and (2) garner political and public support to help Afghanistan sustain that capacity following the 2014 transition.
- **Next spring's NATO Summit in Chicago should focus on sustained commitment** even as major combat forces draw down over time. Reiterating strategic commitment to a successful transition will be key to garnering the continuing support of donor nations worldwide. Even after the transition of control and security responsibility is completed, external support such as military training and enablers, government expertise, and development aid will be required for a period of several years.
- **Sufficient resources must be provided to enable a "deep" transition.** Though troop levels and financial commitments will decline, any definition of "success" must include the post-transition period. The transition will not succeed if there is the perception that Afghanistan will be abandoned by NATO and the International Community in 2014, as happened after the Soviet withdrawal. It must be viewed and resourced as part of a long term process and not an independent end point.
- **A compelling strategic narrative is critical.** NATO and Coalition capitals must do much more to gain domestic public awareness of, and support for, planning and carrying out the post 2014 "deep transition." A shared strategic narrative should explain, persuade and emphasize how a successful transition and a stable Afghan state will benefit the international community and is worth continued effort.

Discussion of Major Topics

The Comprehensive Approach: Integrating Civilian and Military Development

If defined as the physical presence and interaction of a wide range of multinational military personnel, civilian government officials, international organizations, humanitarian actors, and private sector corporations, a Comprehensive Approach is being actively applied in Afghanistan. In addition to troop contributions from 48 nations, there are seventeen nations providing development aid. More than 800 multinational and foreign private sector firms are operating in Afghanistan today, providing Foreign Direct Investment of approximately \$2 billion (US dollars) per year.

In terms of comprehensive planning and full integration in execution, ISAF plays by far the leading role. For the most part, civilian agencies and organizations plan and work independently, albeit towards congruent goals. However, some humanitarian actors believe they should not be merely impartial, but neutral, and therefore do not wish to overtly cooperate with Afghan, NATO and International Organizations.

Compounding the problem is the fact that even within individual national contingents there is no true Comprehensive Approach. Virtually every nation with a sizable presence in Afghanistan has separate military and civilian chains of command, and many have multiple civilian chains of command. Civil-Military cooperation and integration is most effective at the tactical level but becomes less effective at higher echelons.

A decade into the enterprise, it has become clear that the number of actors and the variety of competing agendas makes an optimum Comprehensive Approach unlikely. Nevertheless, basic agreement on the most important priorities, common action on the part of the most significant players, and commitment to integrating structures at the most senior levels can result in clear progress. In the past, differences in national outlook, goals and objectives made cooperation difficult. As we enter the transition phase, there is broad agreement on where NATO is going



and how to get there. This should make a Comprehensive Approach, viewed broadly, more successful than formerly.

Benchmarks for Transition to Afghan Security Control

While much remains to be done, progress in developing Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is going well, especially in the army. Total ANSF today exceeds 300,000. Average unit efficiency has improved over two years from 30% to 90%. ANSF response to the June 2011 attack on the Inter Continental hotel in Kabul is a clear indication of increased capability. With almost no assistance from NATO (one helicopter), the hotel was cleared in only four hours with only twelve deaths—including all eleven attackers. This compares favorably with the similar attack on Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace hotel in India, where nine attackers killed more than one-hundred people during a siege that lasted almost three days.

Long term funding to continue developing and sustaining ANSF capability is a critical issue. Approximately \$4 billion to \$6 billion annually are needed for the next 5 to 7 years. NATO members and other Coalition countries do not currently appear to be budgeting for this requirement. As one discussant noted, "We have to fund ANSF over an extended time and that is not being planned for now." NATO and national capitals should more candidly discuss this possibility, acknowledging both member nations' competing domestic priorities and the costs of not following through with NATO's plans in Afghanistan.

A key element of the concept for transition is that it will be a conditions-based process that progresses from the bottom-up, starting at the district level and progressing to provinces. Specific benchmarks will trigger transfer of control and responsibility of districts and provinces in a measured way between now and the end of 2014. Important aspects to consider include ANSF ability to carry out additional security tasks with decreasing ISAF assistance and whether security at the local level is sufficient for the population to go about their normal daily routine. It is likely that local security solutions will become pro-

gressively more important over time, but the potential for "warlordism" should be carefully monitored.

Security transition will take the form of "thinning out" ISAF forces rather than a sudden withdrawal of troops. As security transition proceeds, higher echelon headquarters will remain in place but have fewer subordinate units and troops assigned to them. In a gradual and methodical manner, NATO/Coalition headquarters will be given responsibility over increasingly larger geographic space with fewer ISAF troops, while increasingly capable ANSF units assume control.

Improvements in security need to be accompanied and reinforced by good governance and economic development. In addition to ANSF being able to carry out their responsibility for population security and law enforcement, they must be accountable to the people they are serving. District and provincial governmental structures must be inclusive and accountable enough for the Afghan population to accept them. Furthermore, the population must have access to basic social services and adequate rule of law to foster sustainable economic growth. Identifying and assessing metrics for good governance is problematic but vital. They need not conform to western models. But they must be "Afghan good enough".

ANSF Expansion/Partnering: Building Afghan Police and Army Capacity

During the period in which US troop levels in Afghanistan will be reduced by 33,000, the ANSF will grow by 70,000. Afghan Security Forces have increased by 66% since November 2009 and are on track to meet the goal of 305,000 by this fall. The agreed target for November 2012 is 352,000. The Afghan National Army (ANA) has improved considerably in both quality and quantity. Individual weapons qualification rates, for example, have improved from less than 30% two years ago to approximately 95% today. In comparison, the Afghan National Police (ANP) have improved more slowly and still face significant challenges. However, Commander's Unit Assessment Tool ratings for both the ANA and the ANP show continu-



ing and significant improvement.

ANSF units routinely operate in partnership with ISAF units, a mutually beneficial arrangement. Afghan soldiers and police learn from watching and working alongside ISAF troops. ISAF units benefit from cultural and local knowledge provided by their Afghan counterparts. In the past year, for example, the number of ANA kandaks rated as effective has almost doubled while ANP districts and precincts rated as effective almost tripled.

Operational partnering has proven extremely successful. A similar partnering approach should be applied to the garrison to bring faster improvements in areas such as maintenance of equipment and sustainment of barracks and other infrastructure.

Major challenges include inability of recruits to read and count. Reflective of the general population, 86% of enlistees are completely illiterate and innumerate. Efforts to address this problem include the addition of primary education classes during basic training to help bring recruits up to a first grade level. Attrition is also high, but improving through better personnel policies that manage unit operations tempo, leave, reset, and training cycles.

However, the biggest threat to long-term success of the ANSF is funding. The force level requirement of 352,000 was derived from a study that assessed what was needed to protect the population and provide a moderate level of security, but did not consider what the Afghan government could afford on its own over the next decade. Without significant external funding for quite some time, the ANSF cannot be sustained. There was wide agreement among conference participants that the greatest threat to successful completion of the ISAF mission would be a shortage of funding for maintaining the ANSF, civilian government capacity building programs, and economic development at current levels: if the budget in these areas remains sufficient, ISAF troops could drawdown as planned without a collapse of stability.

Anti-Corruption: Bolstering Legitimacy and Good Governance

Afghan culture is not inherently corrupt, but 30 years of war and massive international assistance have fueled corruption by weakening governance and pouring in billions of dollars with insufficient accountability. NATO cannot fix corruption in Afghanistan. As one participant noted, “no outside force has ever solved a country’s corruption problem.”

Nonetheless, NATO needs to continue its efforts to aggressively address the corruption problem, as it fundamentally undermines transition plans. Anti-corruption efforts cannot be seen as independent of the security problem. Low-level corruption – e.g., local police officers’ demanding bribes – feeds the Taliban’s anti-government narrative.

NATO’s anti-corruption objectives, however, should be limited, per the current focus on addressing the behavior of NATO forces and the international community, including contracting violations and monies coming from donor nations. The potential impact on the broader ISAF mission needs to be balanced with the realities of Afghanistan and that “working on locals is a mission for locals”, an objective of longer-term institution building. The ISAF partnering and training mission led by NTM-A can play a vital role in the anti-corruption effort through anti-corruption modules in training programs and through continued mentoring of leaders at all levels.

Besides the challenge of complexity of the Afghanistan environment, an unintended consequence of anti-corruption efforts is an apparent disconnect between what NATO is doing and what is being described publicly. This gap between perception and reality creates a strategic vulnerability, as “it sounds like we’re trying to fix their system completely” – an impossible task that sets NATO up for failure. Public rhetoric regarding NATO and U.S. anti-corruption efforts should be refined to make it clear that the international community is not attempting to address corruption at all levels, in all of Afghanistan.



One approach for framing the anti-corruption efforts regarding contracting efforts would be to “insist on reasonable performance at a reasonable price.” This could be combined with three overarching principles to tie anti-corruption to the broader mission: (1) Stop actions that directly help the Taliban (and other extremist groups); (2) Stop actions that drive the population toward the Taliban; (3) Stop actions that undermine ISAF and Afghan government legitimacy by making them look incompetent or unreliable. In sum, the guiding principal for NATO’s anti-corruption efforts should be to focus on corruption that “presents a fatal threat to the ISAF mission or the viability of the Afghan state” (i.e., not “low level” corruption).

Strategic Communications: Winning in the War of Ideas

The wording used to announce a US withdrawal in 2014 undermined a great deal of the public narrative and the communications strategy that NATO had been employing for several years. To mitigate this problem, key messages need to emphasize that the year 2014 is just one point in a continuous long-term transition process, not the end of our effort. Closer synchronization of themes and messages in capitals is essential here, as well as an appreciation of how messages intended for domestic audiences may resonate with others.

Next spring’s NATO Summit should focus on the Afghan perception that NATO may simply walk away from Afghanistan over the next two and one-half years, and on addressing the funding shortfalls discussed above. The Lisbon Summit of November 2010 played a pivotal, strategic role in shifting the international community’s focus in Afghanistan beyond 2011. The forthcoming summit could have a similar impact, adjusting commonly held misperceptions of NATO’s timeline for efforts in Afghanistan and establishing the political will to support transition efforts – both for near-term efforts to begin the transition of security control and for the post-2014 “deep transition.”

NATO as an Alliance, and member states in capitals, should re-assert a clear argument for why a sustained

international presence in Afghanistan is important, emphasizing the pitfalls of leaving too rapidly. This effort to build resolve must also prioritize the public commitment of resources by key members of the international community. Strategic objectives for long-term transition and post-2014 plans must be directly set against the levels of money and manpower that will be available. Unless donor countries clarify – and confirm publicly – what resources they expect to commit, NATO’s strategic planning risks being unsustainable and, ultimately, unsuccessful.

As one participant suggested, “Political will is dynamic. If you show progress, political will changes.” In this view, NATO might best build credibility for transition through discrete actions that can be understood by both Afghan and international audiences. One aspect of this approach would be to widely publicize forthcoming transition developments – such as the July 2011 initial handover of security responsibility to Afghan forces in key provinces – and plainly explain how they support long-term goals for Afghanistan but require future commitment to make a lasting impact.

Regional Dynamics: the AF-PAK Approach

Conference discussants generally agreed that the prospects for a mutually advantageous strategic partnership with Pakistan are not good. While NATO and Pakistan have some convergent interests, the history of the last decade suggests that Pakistan will not or cannot eliminate insurgent sanctuaries in the Northwest Frontier Region, or take direct action against insurgent leadership figures known to be harboring inside Pakistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan will remain an important “transactional” partner: the ground logistics routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan are critical, and tacit acceptance of drone strikes in the border regions, which have seriously degraded insurgent leadership cadres, has been and will remain necessary to an effective CT campaign.

With this in mind, a more pragmatic and sharply defined end state may be needed. More narrowly defining NATO’s objectives in Afghanistan – and the region – might reduce the need for Pakistani assistance



and minimize the impact of current setbacks with U.S.-Pakistani relations. A reasonably stable government in Kabul that can control internal insurgency and secure its borders (as Iraq appears to have done, despite internal political turmoil and ethnic divisions) can succeed with or without the full cooperation of the Pakistani military. In the end, the ability of insurgent forces to operate successfully in Afghanistan is dependent on the incapacity of Afghan security and governance. If those can be improved and sustained with a smaller but still significant level of international assistance, the Counter-Insurgency campaign can succeed, without sweeping changes in Pakistani behavior.

And there are other, broader issues at stake. Pushing Pakistan too hard risks severing the relationship altogether, with unknown consequences for the struggle against terrorism and regional stability. Ever present is the prospect of open conflict between India and Pakistan, an outcome the international community will struggle to avoid at almost all costs. This balancing act will be uncomfortable and unsatisfying, but necessary to maintain the minimum level of strategic access and regional stability that NATO wants and needs.

Going forward, NATO might also profitably relook the roles of China, Iran and Russia in helping to stabilize Afghanistan. All have important interests at stake. All have long histories there. A deeper dialogue and a larger role in post-transition assistance might yield dividends in what must be an evolving international engagement in the region and in Afghanistan itself.

Post-Transition: An Enduring Presence?

A major theme identified in the conference is that the ISAF mission will fail if “transition” translates into an actual or perceived “strategic abandonment” of Afghanistan at the end of 2014. The most likely point of failure is not an insufficient number of Coalition troops, but a precipitous withdrawal of funding to support the ANSF as well as civil programs such as good governance and economic development efforts.

Nonetheless, a long-term presence of Coalition for-

ces will be needed past 2014 to provide security assistance to the ANSF and a continuing counterterrorism capability. NATO, and its member and partner capitals, should begin planning now for such a force and initiate discussions with the Afghan government regarding a long term security partnership.

A continuing robust presence might be more effective and provide a stronger contribution to regional stability but is unlikely for political and economic reasons. Therefore, options should be considered that embrace limited joint basing, a meaningful advisory effort, limited logistical support, counterterrorism capabilities, and coordination for “over-the-horizon” support. Options should also provide capability for limited security to Provincial Reconstruction Teams and/or civilian-led governance and economic development activities. Conceptually, two options might be:

- Small: 5,000 to 10,000 troops. Military costs would be about \$15 billion USD per year. This should be paired with economic assistance of around \$3 billion year. This option could support an advisory effort focused at the ministry and corps level and continuing PRT and governance and reconstruction support down to the provincial level.
- Medium: 20,000 troops. Military costs would be \$20-25 billion USD per year. This should be paired with economic aid of \$3-5 billion (USD) annually. This option could support an advisory effort focused at the ministry, corps and brigade level and continuing PRT and governance and reconstruction support down to the provincial and selected focus district level.

It is important to note that a continuing advisory effort implies certain capabilities that must remain as long as ISAF soldiers are present; these include Quick Reaction Forces, Command and Control, Counter Terrorism, medical evacuation and treatment, Tactical Air Support and administration and logistics. Policymakers and strategists should understand clearly that, while the “Deep Transition” offers very substantial cost savings, the absolute financial commitment will remain significant.



Conclusion

Succeeding in Afghanistan is a vital interest for the Alliance and its partner nations. Afghanistan is not just another broken state, but was the source of the largest terrorist attack ever to occur directly against the American homeland – the first time in the history of NATO that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty was invoked. Failure poses serious risks for the credibility and cohesion of the Alliance, demeaning the sacrifice of the thousands of NATO and coalition troops who were killed or wounded, and rendering worthless the hundreds of billions already spent. A collapse could also allow Afghanistan to once again become a sanctuary for Al Qaeda and its affiliates, threatening regional and international stability with potentially catastrophic results. The rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda was enabled by the West's disengagement following the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s. A similar disengagement today could produce similar conditions and results.

The broad outlines of the way ahead in Afghanistan are known and generally accepted across the Alliance. Responsibility for security will transition, district by district and province by province, from ISAF to the ANSF in a measured and deliberative way between now and 2014. By the end of 2014, major combat units will have largely withdrawn, to be replaced by military and civilian advisors and the support functions needed to support them. Thereafter, a successful outcome – defined as a minimally stable national government able to secure the population and perform basic local and national governance functions (as the Afghan government did before 1980) – will depend on Afghan will and Afghan capacity, enabled for the near to mid-term by sustained international financial support and assistance.

This road will not be an easy one. Corruption, the occasional sensational suicide attack, instability in neighboring Pakistan, and wavering domestic support in capitals will undoubtedly continue. Progress may be measured in fits and starts, and may not always be apparent or encouraging. Here, the aftermath in Iraq provides a useful comparison.

Nevertheless, progress in the past decade has been real and tangible. NATO-caused civilian casualties have declined 20 percent during 2010 even though ISAF force levels increased by 53 percent. This is contrasted by UN estimates that more than 80% of civilian casualties are caused by the insurgents - much of it as a result of intentional targeting. The ANSF are increasingly respected, a majority of Afghans polled (59%) believe that "conditions are improving" and even the Afghan government has shown signs of progress – for example, improving its collected revenues in 2010 by 22% from the previous years. More than 40% of Afghans, including nearly all adults, have and use cell phones, up from less than 5% in 2001. Today, 85% of the Afghan population has access to basic health care, compared to 9% in 2002, while 79% rate security as "good" or "fair". More than 50% of reported violence occurs in only three of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, affecting only about 5-7% of the population.

NATO's effort in Afghanistan has gone far to set conditions for a successful transition by the end of 2014. The investment in blood and treasure has been enormous, but spent in pursuit of objectives that matter greatly to the Alliance and the international community. Whether the enterprise can be brought to a successful conclusion will depend in large measure on a sustained commitment, by Afghans and by the leaders and publics of NATO member states and Coalition partners. Here is perhaps the real center of gravity as we press towards 2014 and beyond.



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