

## The NATO Mission in Afghanistan Post-2014: The Transformation Decade

NATO Defense College Conference

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Heads of State and Government of nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) gathered at NATO's Chicago Summit in May 2012 and renewed their firm commitment to a sovereign, secure and democratic Afghanistan. Consistent with the strategy agreed upon at NATO's Lisbon Summit in November 2010, they reiterated that ISAF's mission will be concluded by the end of 2014. But thereafter Afghanistan will not stand alone: they reaffirmed that a close partnership will continue beyond the end of the transition period in what is being hailed as the Transformation Decade.

From 13-15 June 2012, the NATO Defense College hosted a high-level conference of expert practitioners and scholars to gain insights on the key issues shaping the Transformation Decade and the challenges of building and sustaining an enduring partnership between NATO and the government of Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Conference attendees discussed and analyzed the NATO Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan, the NATO mission post-2014, international community financial assistance, regional dynamics affecting Afghanistan, and the prospects for political stability and reconciliation in the post-2014 environment.

This paper captures the group's most salient points and is intended



Conference Report

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<sup>1</sup> This 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 from the Rapporteur, LTC David Pursley. The views expressed herein do not represent those of NATO, any of its agencies, or any other member governments.



to inform future discussions between policy makers and the public regarding the level of ambition required to help strengthen Afghanistan's sovereignty and keep it on a path towards self-reliance in security, improved governance, and social and economic development.

### Summary of Key Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Progress in Afghanistan is possible and can be affordable**, even in an economic downturn. The Taliban face major challenges in defeating the government of Afghanistan – unless NATO and the international community leave prematurely or fail to provide the proper resources. There are, however, no clear plans as yet for either the civil or military side of Transition, no funding profiles, and no clear sources of the required funds. These plans and funding requirements need to be communicated more effectively by political leadership at NATO and in capitals to maintain momentum and sustain financial support.
- **Political and economic transition in Afghanistan in 2014 is as important as security transition**. NATO and its partners can support the election process by working to identify, report, and when necessary position resources and forces to promote legitimate and representative elections. A stable political transition to a successor regime in Afghanistan will be crucial to any successful outcome for NATO.
- **The end of the ISAF mission is not the end of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan**. The withdrawal of major combat forces by the end of 2014 will signal a change of mission for NATO, most likely to a scaled down NATO Training Mission focused at the national level. This effort could focus on national logistics, intelligence, police and leader training, with a modest support structure for administration, force protection, etc. A NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) with staff should remain to support and facilitate a Comprehensive Approach. A parallel effort, led by civilian representatives from international

organizations such as the UN, EU, World Bank and others will be needed to support ongoing ministerial capacity building programs. An enduring US-led coalition focused on Counter Terror (CT) operations will remain in Afghanistan, operating outside of the Alliance structure.

- **Comprehensive reconciliation is unlikely** with so many disparate insurgent groups operating under the rubric of the Taliban or as largely independent groups. The Quetta Shura and the leaders of the Haqqani network are unlikely to renounce their longstanding political and ideological goals in return for a power sharing arrangement. Elements within the Pakistani military will in all probability continue to support insurgent groups as strategic insurance and depth in Pakistan's longstanding confrontation with India.
- **The U.S. commitment will likely shape the NATO and civil aid commitment**. Continued political, economic and military support for Afghanistan by the U.S., though clearly at reduced levels, will be necessary to create any realistic hope of proportional contributions from other NATO member and partner nations. A perceived U.S. disengagement or drawdown to only notional levels of support will lead to parallel actions by Alliance members and partners.

### Discussion of Major Topics

#### **The NATO Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan**

The last two NATO Summits, Lisbon in November 2010 and Chicago in May 2012, helped create a climate for meaningful plans and agreements between nations contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission and the government of Afghanistan. Both summits expressed political commitment to the transition period and set the stage for the post-2014 period. Political resolve was expressed in a broad, non-binding general framework



signed by over 50 Heads of State and Government. The summits agreed that by mid-2013 all parts of Afghanistan will have begun transition to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) as the lead for security nation-wide, marking an important milestone in the Lisbon roadmap for ISAF to gradually and responsibly draw down its forces to complete its mission by 31 December 2014. Importantly, NATO and its partners set forth a broad ten year timeline for continued engagement in Afghanistan, signaling a long-term commitment. This sent a significant message for the people of Afghanistan, its neighbors, and the armed opposition that Afghanistan will not be abandoned by the international community.

Conference participants, however, expressed caution about what these non-binding summits and other major venues, such as donor conferences, may actually produce. The summit process provides political direction and a planning basis going forward but does not obligate forces, funding, or mandate specific actions that the government of Afghanistan must perform. Conditions-based operational scenarios may give way to arbitrary force reductions and funding cuts, while funding pledges go unrealized. Domestic priorities, electoral cycles, time and resources become the new conditions-based criteria that influence NATO's level of ambition. Action must match commitments. In this regard nations will struggle to justify continued support to Afghanistan as other domestic, financial and security issues compete for priority. It remains to be seen how much political leadership will be demonstrated to continue the new NATO mission in Afghanistan and how much funding will be provided during the continuing economic crisis. The U.S. Administration's viewpoint on Afghanistan could also change after the elections in November. And much uncertainty remains for U.S. funding of the war effort if proposed budget cuts hit the U.S. military in the beginning of 2013. Sequestration, for example, could lead to multi-year caps on Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), which represents the Pentagon's war budget. The U.S. Congress will need a strong push by the Admin-

istration, based on a narrative that clearly identifies the purpose of funding requirements for Afghanistan and an honest assessment of the risks if not received. If Congress continues to fund the mission in Afghanistan, most nations will continue to support NATO's evolving presence as well. Ultimately, to add reality to the Transformation Decade, short-term annual budgetary needs alignment with long-term commitment and strategy in the region.

### ***Regional Dynamics Affecting Afghanistan***

Afghanistan's neighbors share a common interest in regional stability, if only to prevent unintended confrontation which could escalate dangerously. Counter-narcotics, preventing the spread of Islamic extremism, avoiding tribal and ethnic conflict and expanded trade and commerce are also common interests. As western influence recedes after 2014, regional actors may play a correspondingly important role.

This role may sometimes be negative. Afghanistan's near neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, will try to exert more influence as western presence declines. The neighbors to the north may leverage their influence to control access and distribution of goods in and out of Afghanistan. China primarily has economic interests in Afghanistan and may well wait to see how the security situation unfolds. India also has economic interests but its geopolitical concerns and competition with Pakistan are likely to take precedence.

In the near-term, each neighbor will exercise caution in an opportunistic hedging strategy that gambles on Afghanistan's security while awaiting the withdrawal of the majority of western forces and the outcome of the 2014 Afghan presidential elections. Those willing to assume risk may outmaneuver others.

Afghanistan will remain underdeveloped and few external investments will be profitable. The Silk Road Initiative, and investment in mining and extraction of natural resources, will not realize much revenue for Afghanistan until the year 2020 at least. In the



meantime, the security situation and political progress will dictate the prospects for prosperity as the core realities of the region collide in the crossroads of Afghanistan.

For Pakistan, India remains the strategic adversary. As India has become more influential in Afghanistan, Pakistan has become more regressive. Pakistan will likely continue its double game of cooperating with the U.S. while supporting the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network. Pakistan is not likely to change course without further shocks to its system. For its part, India has gained influence in Afghanistan by playing a weak hand well, maximizing business contacts and increasing foreign aid. Many Afghans are responding more favorably to Indian cooperation than to Pakistani interference. Increased cooperation between the U.S. and India may also influence Pakistan's strategic calculus in Afghanistan.

Iran's interests in Afghanistan are longstanding and center on removal of the large western military presence on its border; support and protection of Afghanistan's Hazara Shia minorities; counter-narcotics; favourable trade relations; and regional stability. As a powerful neighbour, Iran will remain an important player in the political calculations of any governing regime in Kabul, but will not dominate Afghan foreign policy, perhaps playing a balancing role as Afghan leaders attempt to modulate their relationships with so many strong neighbors.

Russia's core goal is to strengthen its position around its periphery. Russia continues to expand its economic contacts in Central and South Asia and influences the lines of communication for economic gain. Russia also influences access to the distribution networks and basing for political capital and leverage over the U.S. Russia, like Iran, has an interest in curbing the flow of narcotics inside its borders.

China does not want ISAF to leave prematurely, but is reluctant to make security or aid commitments and remains concerned about a long-term U.S. presence. China's main influence in Afghanistan is economic,

with a \$3 billion controlling stake in the Aynak copper field and recent investments in oil production and refining. China provides the largest potential direct investment in Afghanistan. China and Afghanistan recently signed a strategic partnership agreement to fight against terrorism and increase intelligence sharing. A modest \$23 million grant for unspecified projects accompanied the new partnership. China's major worry is the prospect of a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan lending sanctuary to the separatist group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, led by ethnic Uighurs, who seek a breakaway homeland in Xinjiang. China would like to see an orderly transfer of power short of a Taliban takeover and will then support a "step by step" process *after* the withdrawal of Western troops.

The key question regarding regional and western influence in Afghanistan is, "what do the Afghans want?" To be effective, international assistance will require an economic model and regulatory framework for private-public partnerships and distribution of resources through the government, as well as a strengthened judicial system to enforce contracts, resolve land and environmental resource disputes and implement regulations. All this may well challenge domestic politics built on patronage networks and local loyalties. It remains to be seen which outcome meets the aspirations of Afghan political elites most closely.

### ***Integrating Civilian and Military Assistance Post-2014***

Conference participants generally agreed that the Comprehensive Approach (CA), bringing civilian and military actors and agencies together, is a fundamental issue that NATO must address in the contemporary security environment. Managing multilateral relations and operating in complex environments must be a core competency of NATO. While execution has been and will continue to be very challenging in Afghanistan, the need for tighter coordination



among civil and military entities will take on even greater importance.

The withdrawal of ISAF and the closure of bases will have a significant impact on the freedom of movement and security of government and non-government organizations (NGOs) and civilian aid workers and their ability to provide technical assistance, especially outside Kabul. Resource owners are unlikely to give up control of their assets, but for a Comprehensive Approach to be effective, the government of Afghanistan must increasingly be the “supported element” and the external agency the “supporting element”. There will be no international clearing house to manage civil-military relations, bilateral arrangements, or regional cooperation. Afghan national plans and programs will require a push/pull system with the provinces and districts to manage resources.

A ministry or independent commission in the Afghan government will be required to chair meetings that assemble leaders from the international community so that the Afghan government can exercise its full authority and be the supported element for the Comprehensive Approach in the Transformation Decade. The NATO Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) for Afghanistan can contribute helpfully to this forum.

### ***International Financial Support to Afghan Institutions Post-2014***

The Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan reinforced NATO’s Chicago Summit by seeking long term international community support and broad pledges through 2017. While Chicago focused on security, Tokyo concentrated on development.

Afghanistan’s development progress is often downplayed, but significant strides have been made, especially in education, transportation infrastructure and public health. Afghanistan is still one of the poorest countries in the world and will not be self-sufficient during the Transformation Decade. The government

of Afghanistan will need to renew its efforts to fight corruption and make policy reforms that lead to a more transparent, accountable, and implementable financial system.

Afghanistan will need a minimum of \$3-4 billion annually, not including security costs, as a bridging fund to sustain the government. This funding needs to be shored up and tied to credible detailed plans that will win outside support as the international community enters a period of enormous economic uncertainty. As ISAF draws down, funding has less chance of materializing if the security situation deteriorates. If adequate security funding is not provided by the international community, then domestic funds will likely be used to pay those with guns first. Too little funding could lead to a repeat of the Soviet experience where the government of Afghanistan collapsed when funding evaporated.

The government of Afghanistan still lacks the capacity to channel financial assistance through its budgetary system. Public financial management in the Ministry of Finance has improved but significant reforms are needed to ensure public expenditures can be prioritized to meet the government’s goals. The Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), administered by the World Bank, has been effective at bringing donors together for common objectives.

There is over \$4 billion in the fund now and it will require \$600-800 million annually to meet recurring costs of the government and support investment projects. The government of Afghanistan will need help to absorb the shock from the spillover effect of decreased war-time funding to avoid a recession. The government requested \$120 billion for the period 2015-2024 but will come nowhere close to those numbers in aid. Existing aid programs focus on development, but employment in a subsistence economy, with nearly 80% of the workforce involved in agriculture, is paramount to gaining stability.





### **The NATO Mission in Afghanistan Post-2014**

The details for drawing down ISAF's force levels through 2014 and the scope and scale of NATO's new training, advising and assistance mission await a North Atlantic Council (NAC) Initiating Directive (NID) and assessment and recommendation from the ISAF Commander later this year. There are no public plans or funding profiles. The few details that did emerge from the Summit, such as the end of the ISAF combat mission and the future size of the ANSF will require further elaboration.

The end of the ISAF combat mission will not mean the end of all conflict. A more accurate statement is that *NATO's offensive combat operations will cease*. The withdrawal of major combat units will spell a change of mission for NATO and the end of ISAF. The U.S., perhaps leading a coalition of the willing, currently plans to continue to conduct offensive counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan post-2014. The U.S. mission in Afghanistan cannot be separated from operations and activities that may be required in Pakistan. NATO, however, will very likely focus on training, advising and assisting inside Afghanistan.

As ISAF gradually redeploys, the size and structure of the ANSF will be called into question. The preliminary model for the ANSF posits a reduction from the current peak of 352,000 Army and Police to 228,500 by 2017, at an annual cost of \$4.1 billion – although no real details have been provided to explain the reductions or funding requirements. Conference participants cautioned against taking such figures at face value. (Afghan leaders and commanders are on record in support of a larger end-strength within the \$4.1B figure). There is also concern about eliminating 125,000 military and police, although much of this reduction would come from normal attrition and reduced accessions.

It is clear that ISAF as an organization will end on December 31, 2014. But the contours of a new NATO

mission have yet to take form. Conference attendees had a wide range of view on the means, capabilities and level of ambition for NATO post-2014. Some saw NATO heading for a modest Enduring Partnership, based on continuing financial contributions and a few hundred NATO trainers. Others saw ISAF merging with the NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A), with an end strength of perhaps 3,300. One option might be a dual-hatted four star US/NATO commander, with a three star NATO NTM-A command and a 3 star US-led CT command under him. Another option might be a NATO NTM-A under a NATO commander, with a separate US Office of Military Cooperation to support Afghan national logistics, intelligence and other functions, and a US-led SOF command to carry out the CT campaign.

A key point is the extent to which NATO can provide advisers in the field. Advisers at the tactical level (that is, below the Afghan corps level) will require force protection, medical evacuation, quick reaction forces, tactical logistics and other support that would translate into a level of resource that may not be supportable. Advisers at the national level only would require far less.

A continued NATO presence of any kind will also require Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) with the government of Afghanistan. Strategic basing arrangements would most likely consist of the major hubs at Kabul International Airport (KAIA), Kandahar Air Field (KAF), Bagram Air Base, and regional bases in the north near Mazar-e Sharif and in the west at Shin-dand Air Base near Herat. Most other NATO military bases would be closed or handed over to the ANSF.

### **Prospects for Political Stability and Reconciliation**

Conference attendees generally agreed that reconciliation – a comprehensive power-sharing, political settlement with senior insurgent leaders -- is unlikely. After a decade of war, the major insurgent organizations have been badly hurt but remain intact, with their senior leadership protected inside Pakistan and



their supporting infrastructure based safely in sanctuary there. Though unable to directly challenge either ISAF or major ANSF formations, they continue to operate in unsecured locations inside Afghanistan, carrying out occasional high profile attacks for media effect. To the extent that the insurgency has not been destroyed or defeated, its leaders may well consider that their prospects for eventual success will increase once ISAF departs. In any case they are unlikely to renounce their political goals, extremist ideology or affiliation with al-Qaeda. Reconciliation with any one insurgent group is unlikely to stop the fighting as other new opportunists, power-brokers, and warlords continue to deal in drugs, protection and other criminal activity.

Reintegration of lower level insurgent foot soldiers and commanders on the other hand is possible, and conferees noted some encouraging reports in this regard. It is clear that the insurgent agenda does not command broad appeal or popular support inside Afghanistan. If an orderly political transition can be achieved, with even modest improvements in delivery of basic government services, genuine reintegration can be realized – if accompanied by a capable Afghan security force that can contain the insurgency without preying on the population.

To break the cycle of ineffective governance and poor security, the Afghan people need to see progress in dismantling local, regional and national criminal patronage networks that are now embedded in Afghan politics. This transformation cannot be accomplished from the outside by external actors. NATO and the international community at best can only set conditions.

As much as anything, a successful outcome in Afghanistan depends on effective Afghan solutions. The first and most important of these is a political system that conforms to Afghan cultural values and norms, but delivers basic fairness and at least a modicum of basic and essential government services. Ideally this will come through a combination of reforms in the central government and the strengthening of provin-

cial and district offices. At a minimum, it requires the mix of central government and regional power to be strong enough to keep the Taliban and other insurgents from seizing major populated areas or controlling significant parts of the national territory.

### **Conclusion**

Though some 28 months remain before all NATO major combat forces withdraw, the broad potential outlines of NATO's future involvement in Afghanistan are beginning to emerge. Clearly NATO's footprint will be dramatically reduced as all major combat forces are withdrawn and Afghan security forces take the lead. But NATO and its international partners may continue to play a key and enduring role going forward. For NATO, that role will likely take the form of advise/assist and training efforts at the national and perhaps regional level, through a successor organization that may range from 500-3500 personnel accompanied by some \$4-5 billion in funding per year for the Afghan security sector. This force could operate alongside a larger US counterterrorism force.

For the international community, continuing annual financial contributions will be needed in a similar budget range, in concert with workable plans for governance and economic development, as well as significant support and mentoring for building ministerial capacity and development.

Afghanistan may also benefit from investment and various forms of support from its neighbors, who share common interests in its stability and success. However, specific contributions from neighbors are at this stage difficult to project. The future is not certain. But NATO's clearly expressed commitment to an Enduring Partnership, backed up by concrete funding proposals, suggest that the government and people of Afghanistan can succeed if accompanied by effective Afghan solutions.



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