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NATO and the Afghan Insurgency: Looking ahead to Bucharest

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Key Points

- Afghanistan represents the most important and challenging mission in the Alliance's 59-year history. There have been signs of progress over the past year, but significant challenges remain.
- The anti-government insurgency has shown few signs of abating. Violence has risen 27 percent in the last year, including an upsurge in militant activity in the central and western provinces.
- Allies must fill the remaining ten percent of the Combined Joint Statement of Requirements for NATO-ISAF through the provision of key "enablers" and at least 2,500 additional troops.
- Allies must redouble their efforts to recruit, train, and fund the Afghan National Army. Allies should extend the deployments for NATO Operational and Mentoring Liaison Teams and ensure that at least 72 of them are operational by this time next year.
- The NATO-EU Capability Group should establish a sub-committee to ensure police trainers deployed to Afghanistan share common training standards and pursue complementary objectives.
- NATO's military efforts must be part of a broader political strategy that gives direction to reconstruction as well as military action. Allies should make fuller use of NATO training and exercise programs and broaden political consultations within the North Atlantic Council to ensure closer civil-military cooperation.
- NATO should consider what role its Partnership mechanism could play in facilitating regional stability in southwest Asia.



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Introduction

NATO's upcoming summit in Bucharest this April comes at a particularly challenging moment in the Alliance's history. In Afghanistan, NATO forces face a resurgent Taliban in the south, widespread corruption across the country, and steady growth in the illicit narcotics industry. Closer to home, the Alliance must contend with the prospect of renewed violence in the Balkans and an increasingly strained relationship with Russia over missile defense, Kosovo, Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), and NATO's open door policy to the East. Broader "theological" issues are also at stake, with critics on both sides of the Atlantic calling attention to NATO's lack of political cohesion, outmoded strategic concept, and poor coordination with other institutional actors, including the European Union and United Nations.¹

NATO's greatest and most important challenge remains Afghanistan. In BASIC's 2007 baseline study of the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), we noted that success in Afghanistan would be measured in "fewer civilian casualties, a decrease in the areas in which the Taliban operate, and further progress of the reconstruction missions which form the backbone of the ISAF mandate."² By these standards, the past year has not been a success. Civilian casualties have increased by 30 percent, the Taliban have infiltrated into Afghanistan's central and western provinces, and the reconstruction teams have suffered from a fractured organizational structure. This study, which builds on our 2007 assessment, provides a qualitative analysis of the current state and sources of the Taliban-led insurgency. Limited in its scope to the activities of NATO-ISAF, the paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations to guide NATO allies and partner countries in their efforts to establish security, train Afghan national forces, and improve civil-military cooperation.

NATO in Afghanistan: Progress to date

Despite the raft of bad news stories and independent reports warning of imminent failure,³ NATO forces and the international community have achieved measurable progress in a number of areas. Today, there are close to six million students in Afghanistan, roughly half the school-age population. Better functioning institutions and improved economic growth have raised living standards and facilitated the return of more than four million refugees. A majority of Afghans now have access to basic health care, and there have been notable improvements in the banking and telecommunications sectors. The number of trained Afghan soldiers has grown from 35,000 to 50,000 over the past year, with the Afghan security forces playing an increasingly prominent role in combat operations.⁴ For a country that has just emerged from 30 years of war, as NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer underscored in his recent remarks at the Brookings Institution, the results are indeed striking.⁵

At the same time, these historic accomplishments risk being overshadowed by the many challenges that confront NATO and its Afghan partners. Opium production has risen steadily, particularly in the turbulent Helmand province, and the Taliban and al-Qaeda continue to benefit from external sanctuary along the Afghan-Pakistani frontier. Weak governance and widespread corruption have fuelled the insurgency and allowed the Taliban to compete with the Afghan government for the loyalties of the local population. Without a comprehensive strategy that integrates the disparate security, reconstruction, and governance activities of the international community, Afghanistan will likely slide into chaos and once again become a safe-haven for the Taliban and "terrorist groups of global reach."⁶

NATO-ISAF: By the numbers

NATO assumed command of the U.N.-mandated International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in the fall of 2003. Since that time, NATO has expanded the mission in stages to cover the north, west, south, and east of Afghanistan. Small civil-military units, known as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), have provided the template for ISAF's expansion and have facilitated the integration of NATO's mission with the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). ISAF's key objectives include assisting the Afghan government in extending its authority throughout the country, conducting security and stability operations, and mentoring and supporting the Afghan National Army (ANA).⁷ The U.S.-led OEF remains stationed in the east of Afghanistan, focusing on counterterrorism operations against remaining Taliban and al-Qaeda targets.

Since our previous assessment, ISAF force levels have swelled from 33,460 to 43,250. Significant troop increases have come from Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom. There are currently 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams under ISAF command, led by the United States and 12 other NATO and Coalition partners. NATO's Allied Command Operations (ACO), based at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium, exercises strategic command and control over the mission, with ISAF's composite headquarters located in the capital city of Kabul. In addition to its composite headquarters, ISAF is composed of an Air Task Force (ATF) and five Regional Command Centers charged with coordinating the civil-military efforts of the PRT's. General Dan K. McNeill, former Commanding General of the U.S. Army's force generation command, currently serves as ISAF Commander.

Taliban Redux?

When ISAF completed the final stage of its expansion in October 2006, many European forces were ill-prepared for the challenges that followed. In contrast to the relatively peaceful north, Afghanistan's southern and eastern provinces are mired in a protracted insurgency. Violence in these areas has risen steadily since 2001, with recent evidence suggesting that insurgent activities have spread to include parts of central and western Afghanistan.⁸ European forces, which originally conceived of their ISAF mandate as one of stabilization and reconstruction, are now embroiled in pitched battles with the Taliban in the insurgency-plagued south. This has created new and potentially debilitating divisions among NATO members, with some nations shouldering a disproportionate share of the military burden.

The anti-government insurgency in the south has shown few signs of abating. While the Taliban and al-Qaeda have proved unsuccessful in conventional, "set-piece" combat against NATO and U.S. forces, they have resorted to terrorist-type tactics with remarkable efficiency. According to recent reports, violence in Afghanistan has risen 27 percent in the past year, including sharp increases in the number of suicide bombings and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks.⁹ Civilian deaths are also on the rise, as the Taliban have shifted their attention to "softer" targets in and around the capital city.¹⁰ Recent trends, including a spate of suicide attacks in Kandahar province in February, suggest that security conditions will continue to deteriorate in 2008.¹¹

Sources of the Insurgency

The insurgency, which includes the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Hezb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, criminal organizations, and a range of sub-tribal groups,¹² draws its strength from a number of sources. Poor governance, and the myriad of challenges that flow from it, represents the primary obstacle for NATO-ISAF in its efforts to stabilize the country. Corruption in Afghanistan is rife, particularly among district police officers and low-paid government officials, and the country still wants for an effective and integrated judicial system. Afghan national security forces have performed admirably in combined operations with ISAF. But they remain too few in number to adequately secure villages and rural communities. As the National Directorate for Security, Afghanistan's intelligence service, concludes in a recent assessment: "When villagers and rural communities seek protection from the police, either it arrives late or arrives in a wrong way."¹³ Poor governance has opened the way for the Taliban and other insurgent groups to compete with the Karzai government for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. With recent estimates suggesting that the rule of the Karzai government extends to only 30 percent of the country, the Taliban has enjoyed ample space to establish parallel structures of governance.¹⁴ This process of "alternative state-building," as Dr. Seth Jones highlighted in his recent testimony to the Canadian Senate, has undermined the efforts of the central government to establish law and order, open access to justice, and deliver basic services to the population.¹⁵

The runaway narco-economy and access to sanctuary in the semi-autonomous tribal regions of Pakistan have also fueled the Afghan insurgency. Counternarcotics efforts to date have enjoyed a checkered history. In areas of relative security, opium production has declined sharply. Last year saw 12 northern and central provinces remain poppy-free, and estimates for 2008 show opium production stabilizing, albeit at record levels.¹⁶ The drug trade still accounts for approximately 50 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product, and Afghanistan remains the world's leading source of opium and heroin.¹⁷ Disagreements between the United States and its allies over eradication methods, with the United States advocating aerial spraying, have stymied efforts to build a comprehensive counternarcotics strategy.¹⁸ Until a more balanced and sequenced approach is agreed, the Taliban will continue to reap upwards of 40 percent of the proceeds from Afghanistan's drug trade to finance arms purchases and other insurgent-related activities.¹⁹

External sanctuary and alleged financial support from Pakistan have further complicated efforts to blunt the spread of the insurgency. Largely ungovernable and populated by an extensive network of allied tribes and sub-tribal groups, the 2,400-km Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier has served as a critical safe haven for the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other extremists. Studies of insurgency indicate that such forms of external support pose significant challenges for counterinsurgency forces in their efforts to impose security and capture the intentions of the local population. In an effort to staunch the flow of insurgent activity across the border, President Bush's top national security advisors recently proposed an expansion of CIA and military authority to conduct "far more aggressive covert operations in the tribal areas of Pakistan."²⁰ Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was quick to rebuff these overtures, citing public opposition to foreign forces and the inhospitable terrain of the tribal regions.²¹ Musharraf's recent defeat in the polls, which saw an outpouring of support for the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) over the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) and rival Islamist factions, may further constrain NATO and U.S.-led coalition forces in their efforts to control cross-border activity.

A final source of the insurgency's strength derives from insufficient troop levels in Afghanistan and the attendant policy disagreements over burdensharing and counterinsurgency strategy within the NATO alliance. ISAF's current troop levels, which stand at approximately 30 percent of American force levels in Iraq, limit the ability of commanders on the ground to "hold" areas after they have been "cleared" of the Taliban. A visible security force presence, as we highlighted in our 2007 assessment, remains critical for securing contested areas and establishing government authority across the country. National restrictions on where and how forces can be deployed, known as caveats, have hobbled the NATO force in this regard and have provoked some allies, notably the United States, to warn of NATO devolving into a "two-tier alliance of those who are willing to fight and those who are not."²² In an effort to coax additional troop contributions, the United States agreed in January to a one-time, seven-month deployment of 3,200 Marines. Thus far, NATO nations have failed to match the U.S. increase, and many continue to restrict the deployment of their forces to the relatively peaceful north.

ISAF has also suffered from internal disputes among NATO members over how best to wage the counterinsurgency campaign. U.S. officials, drawing on their experience in Iraq, have criticized NATO forces for an overreliance on heavy weaponry in Afghanistan's more restive south.²³ Artillery and airstrikes, they argue, increase the risk of civilian casualties and may indirectly contribute to rising levels of violence. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in January, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates echoed these concerns, noting that "most European forces, NATO forces, are not trained in counterinsurgency; they were trained for the Fulda Gap."²⁴ Gates urged comparison with the U.S. counterinsurgency operation in eastern Afghanistan, which has successfully integrated security measures with political outreach and reconstruction to reduce the frequency and scope of militant attacks.²⁵ Continued sparring with European forces over counterinsurgency tactics, despite the valuable contributions of the Canadians, British, Dutch, Danes, Romanians, and Estonians in Afghanistan's south, has reignited debate within the Pentagon on developing a counterinsurgency force independent of NATO. Should this idea come to fruition, as Andrew Grotto forewarns, the United States may lose interest in sacrificing operational effectiveness to secure the support of its European NATO allies.²⁶

The Way Ahead

NATO's upcoming summit in Bucharest offers an opportunity to redress some of the more obvious deficiencies of the Alliance's engagement in Afghanistan. The way ahead will involve a two-pronged approach that seeks to better integrate civil-military capabilities and strengthen in-country ownership of the security, development, and reconstruction process.

On a tactical level, allies should fill the remaining ten percent of the Combined Joint Statement of Requirements (CJSOR) for ISAF through the provision of key "enablers," including unmanned aerial vehicles and medium-lift helicopters, and at least three maneuver battalions. Poland and France should make good on their promises to send additional troops, thereby allowing U.S. forces in the east to assist the 2,500 Canadian troops deployed in southern Kandahar province. Caveats remain a sensitive issue for the Alliance. While reducing or eliminating caveats would significantly improve the operational flexibility of the NATO force, fragile coalition governments, constitutional restrictions, and waning public support impose certain constraints. Mindful of these realities, NATO Heads of State and Government should seek to reduce national caveats where possible and, at a minimum, ensure that ISAF commanders on the ground have full knowledge of any and all restrictions on national troop contingents.²⁷

Long-term success on the security front will require ambitious targets and additional support for standing up the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Police (ANP). NATO forces cannot remain in Afghanistan indefinitely, nor will the Afghan people countenance a sustained presence of foreign troops on their territory. Building on its current mandate, NATO-ISAF should redouble its efforts to recruit, train, and fund the ANA. NATO Operational and Mentoring Liaison Teams (OMLTs), which comprise small teams of 12 to 19 personnel embedded within Afghan units, represent an area of potential growth. NATO should extend from 6 to 12 months the duration of deployment for OMLTs and ensure that at least 72 of these teams are fully operational by this time next year. NATO members that are unable to contribute additional combat troops to Afghanistan should take the lead in supplying the necessary personnel to achieve these targets.

The capacity of the Afghan National Police (ANP) lags far behind that of the ANA. The Afghan police force remains under-paid, poorly trained, and ill-equipped to contain the rising levels of crime in Afghanistan. Corruption, cited in a 2006 Asia Foundation poll as a “major concern” among Afghans,²⁸ and a lack of professionalism within the ANP have undermined the efforts of the central government to gain the trust of the local population. Pay increases to undercut the influence of bribes and additional funding for police training and mentoring programs are a crucial first step.²⁹ The EU’s ongoing police training mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL), which replaced Germany’s police reform program in June 2007, and the U.S. military-led Combined Security Transition Command in Afghanistan (CSTC-A) serve as useful frameworks for engagement. The EUPOL commander and the CSTC-A commander cooperate informally and the Afghan-led International Police Cooperation Board has improved coordination in this vital area.³⁰ Unfortunately, the lack of formal dialogue between NATO and the EU has limited the effectiveness of the police training effort. To address this issue, the NATO-EU Capability Group, which meets regularly in Brussels, should establish a sub-committee to deal specifically with the challenge of training, equipping, and financing the ANP. NATO and the EU should ensure that all police trainers deployed to Afghanistan share a common set of training standards, complement one another in their objectives, and coordinate more effectively with lead nations charged with judicial and counternarcotics reform.

The most glaring challenges in Afghanistan result from the international community’s failure to articulate a coherent strategy to guide the security and reconstruction process. Improvements in tactical areas, such as those described above, are necessary elements of a successful counterinsurgency campaign. But military force alone, without improvements in civil sector reform or regional stability, will invariably prove insufficient over the long-term. Bolstering economic growth and job opportunities, facilitating reconstruction, curbing illicit opium production, reforming the judicial sector, and strengthening the mechanisms of Afghan governance remain essential for Afghanistan’s future as a secure and functioning state. The challenge will be whether the international community can integrate the many civilian and military assets at its disposal and direct them toward a common strategy in support of the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Identifying where and how NATO could contribute to this effort should be uppermost in the minds of policymakers as they meet in Bucharest this April.

Responsibility for crafting a comprehensive strategy should rest with the United Nations and its recently appointed Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Kai Eide.³¹ The international community should convene a new conference under U.N. auspices to reaffirm its

commitment to Afghanistan, outlining a long-term political strategy to guide military activities and the reconstruction process. The strategy must include a set of realistic and attainable benchmarks to strengthen the accountability of the Afghan Government for improvements in the judicial sector, rule of law, and political outreach to moderate Taliban and Pashtun tribal leaders. Participants in the conference should also agree to endow the new U.N. Special Representative with adequate authority to coordinate and harmonize international assistance programs, conduct regional diplomacy, and advise ISAF and U.S.-led coalition commanders on the political dimensions of military action.

As a focal point for transatlantic dialogue and consultation, NATO is well-placed to contribute to this comprehensive approach. Weekly meetings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), in addition to NATO's training, exercise, and education programs, offer allies an opportunity to coordinate their civil-military activities. To maximize NATO's potential in this area, allies should commit to broader political consultations within the NAC and make fuller use of NATO's training and exercise procedures. While it lies beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the political obstacles impeding broader strategic dialogue within NATO, allies would do well to encourage France's current movement toward full reintegration into NATO's integrated military structure. Allies should also consider the role that NATO's partnership mechanism could play in facilitating regional stability in southwest Asia. Building on the success of its current network of partnerships in Europe and the Middle East, NATO should explore the possibility of a formal strategic partnership with the countries of South Asia. This would require close consultations with Russia, and may ultimately take the form of an informal dialogue, similar to NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue before it was upgraded to partnership status in 2004. Such modest steps would help to build confidence and lay the groundwork for an eventual accord among the great powers in the region.

Conclusion

Setting a new course for Afghanistan will undoubtedly prove difficult, particularly in light of domestic opposition in many NATO countries. With death tolls rising and success elusive, Afghanistan has put enormous pressure on European governments to withdraw their troops or redeploy to concentrate on less risky tasks. Leaders in NATO countries must resist this temptation and reiterate to their publics the importance of the Afghanistan mission for the safety and security of the Euro-Atlantic community. Failure would pave the way for the Taliban's return, provide al-Qaeda with safe haven, sow instability in Pakistan, and undermine the credibility of NATO as an expeditionary alliance. The international community abandoned Afghanistan once before. We must not let the temptations of political expediency allow us to do it again.

Endnotes

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