

NATO and Afghanistan: Lessons Learned?

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, MAY 23 2012

In the fall of 2001, the pledge of support to the United States in the wake of 9/11 through NATO's collective defence provisions came as little to surprise to any. At the time, Afghanistan was targeted for its sponsorship and harbouring of Al Qaeda leaders and training camps, leading up to the attacks on America. Once the United States determined its retaliation would focus on Afghanistan, NATO partners prepared to deploy to fulfill their obligations under the North Atlantic Treaty, but few actually knew what the mission would entail, or for how long it would last.

During its most recent gathering, it was announced that certain NATO members were finally ending their deployments in Afghanistan after almost 11 years. Among the most notable examples is Canada, whose Prime Minister Stephen Harper has promised that all Canadian Forces support and presence will be withdrawn by 2014 for good – no discussion, no doubts. It is in the immediate wake of such announcements that onlookers are compelled to question what NATO, and its members, have learned over such a vastly challenging and large-scale mission. A few thoughts come to mind:

Firstly. Peacebuilding does not work – between 2001 and 2003, traditional military force normally used by NATO members was used to invade, dismantle the Taliban government, and to introduce a pro-NATO government to Afghanistan. Since that time, when the mission transitioned into a peacebuilding phase aimed at creating, building and protecting supposedly democratic institutions, NATO's efforts have been utter failures. The country is run by a leader whose interests are focused almost exclusively on maintaining power, and whose support for NATO presence has decreased in the last year. Violence and unrest dominate the daily lives of Afghans – not freedom and civil rights, as they were promised in 2001. It is time for western nations to accept the reality that democracy cannot be created and grown like a garden. It must come from within, after years of cultural and philosophical development.

Secondly. Military overextension – beyond the political failures of the mission is the impact on the military capabilities of NATO member states. Perhaps the most important example of decreased military power is the United States. Coupled with the illegal and ill-fated mission in Iraq, the American military has substantially decreased its preponderance of power on the international stage, thus signaling the end of the unipolar moment and fostering the elements necessary for a multipolar system to emerge in the future. Other NATO states, especially those middle or minor powers whose capabilities were not entirely impressive to begin with, will take decades to regroup and rebuild their force capabilities. Such long-term overextension also questions the domestic national security concerns of NATO states, due to their inability to defend their own borders because of this Afghan mission. For instance, Canada and Norway will have to seriously ponder whether they are able to defend or assert themselves in the race for the Arctic as both had hoped.

Thirdly. Money is not enough – one of the notable elements of Canadian Prime Minister Harper's comments about Canada's withdrawal is the promise of millions of dollars to assist in the training and equipping of Afghan security forces. Money is not the solution in this case, or any other case of failed peacebuilding. Regardless of the dollar amount pledged by NATO, the situation in Afghanistan will worsen without NATO presence and the likelihood of post-NATO civil war is high. Further, providing funds to a government that is less than transparent or accountable appears more like the puppet regime strategies employed throughout the Cold War than it does a legitimate concern for Afghanistan's democratic development.

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With these lessons in mind, one also wonders what the future holds for NATO as a security alliance. Its members are tired, logistically depleted, and frustrated with the outcomes of the Afghan mission; NATO states are still struggling with the effects of the recession and defence budgets have been seriously cut; the decline of American power is coupled with the rise of other powers that are soon going to be capable of balancing NATO power, like China and Russia; and the recent experience in the Libya mission shows a disinterest by NATO in committing to peacebuilding and “boots on the ground” troop deployment missions.

It is unknown how history will view NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, but at this point in time, it must be seen as a failure. Though the Taliban regime was overthrown, the lives of Afghan citizens are only marginally more secure and the use, or threat, of violence continues to plague daily life across the country. The hope is that NATO members have learned their lessons and return to a restrained sense of their own abilities and not plunge themselves into clandestine quagmires in the future.

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