

NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting to Define its Future

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ADAM GROVES, JUN 18 2008

Almost sixty years after it was first formed, NATO has changed a great deal from the organisation which once prepared to fight the Red Army in Germany's Fulda Gap. This essay will argue that the alliance is now fighting to define its future, in Afghanistan.

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO was faced with a new strategic environment which demanded a reorientation of its structure and activities. Despite Russia's concerns, this saw the organisation expand gradually—but steadily—eastwards following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet for many commentators, NATO “artfully dodged” the fundamental “what's our purpose question” (Christian Science Monitor, 2006). Since 9-11 however, the allies have aimed to address this issue by creating an institution capable of acting beyond the European theatre, combating new threats such as terrorism and rogue states. The International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is the first mission which the organisation has led outside of the North Atlantic region. It thus represents a major test of the political will and military capabilities necessary for the ‘new’ NATO.

The mission seeks to stabilise and reconstruct Afghanistan, as the alliance managed with some success in Bosnia and Kosovo. However, Afghanistan poses a more difficult task. The Taliban and Al Qaeda remain active whilst the central government is struggling to assert itself. Simultaneously, NATO must cope in a new terrain many thousands of miles from its ‘traditional’ operations along the borders of Europe. NATO's mission has been divided into 5 stages. Stage one consisted of assuming authority for ISAF in 2003; stage two saw the expansion of the mission geographically between 2004 and 2006; in stage three NATO attempted to stabilise the areas of its operations; and in stages four and five, the allies hope to gradually transfer responsibilities to Afghan troops. As part of this transition, NATO has assumed security responsibility throughout the country.

ISAF now commands some 41,700 troops in Afghanistan, hailing from 39 countries. On the face of it, this is an impressive force. Yet Generals have had difficulty in mustering the soldiers and equipment they require, as many alliance members have been unwilling to contribute troops, or have placed restrictions on those sent to the region. Restrictions have ranged from stipulating the areas where their soldiers are allowed to operate (thousands remain in the safer North and West), to limiting the tactical measures which troops can implement on the ground; for example, some soldiers are prevented from using tear gas to disperse crowds (Boot, 2006). Germany has been the subject of much criticism on this front as it has a large contingent of over 3000 troops in a relatively quiet area of northern Afghanistan. “German troops reportedly patrol only in armoured personnel carriers, and do not leave their bases at night” (Gallis, 2008: 8). Issues such as these are often highlighted (and hyped) by the Western media. Nonetheless, US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, asserted in December 2007 that another 7,500 troops are needed as well as at least 16 more helicopters. ISAF appears, then, to be facing real shortages facing.

It is evident that the allies have differing opinions as to how the conflict in Afghanistan should be approached. Germany is reluctant to have its troops engage in combat and seeks to emphasise reconstruction work. Dutch forces have become increasingly active in providing security, but also emphasise the importance of reconstruction as the primary means by which to undermine the Taliban. The forces of the United States, Britain and Canada are primarily combat orientated and have a broad mandate, although debates continue as to the optimum balance between war-fighting and reconstruction. France has emphasised the importance of training the Afghan government to solve its own problems (unlike the United States, it does not necessarily believe that this must go hand in hand with instilling

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democracy in the country) and asserts that organisations such as the UN and World Bank are best equipped to bring 'development' to the region. Meanwhile, Australia, the largest non-NATO partner operating in Afghanistan, has asserted that "the West isn't pursuing a coherent strategy" and reports itself frustrated with the entire project (International Herald Tribune, 2008). Whilst the new strategic vision outline at the April 2008 conference may go some way to easing these tensions, there are clearly underlying differences of opinion regarding how best to proceed.

What is the upshot of this situation for developments on the ground? Former supreme allied commander of NATO, General James L. Jones, asserts: "make no mistake; NATO is not winning in Afghanistan". In a recent report for the Atlantic Council he writes that "the United States and the international community have tried to win the struggle... with too few military forces and insufficient economic aid" (International Herald Tribune, 2008a). NATO's operations in Afghanistan appear to be hanging in the balance.

Having never fired a shot in anger during the Cold War, and having struggled to redefine itself in the 1990s, NATO is now facing a severe test many thousands of miles from its 'traditional' operating environment. The future of the alliance is being strained in at least two fundamental senses. First, the identity and utility of the organisation will be rendered questionable if it cannot defend its members from new threats, including international terrorism. Afghanistan is the first major challenge which NATO has faced in the post-9/11 world. Second, the credibility and integrity of the alliance will be at risk if, having invoked the mutual defence clause of Article 5, states do not provide significant support for operations. US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, has warned: "We must not—we cannot—become a two-tiered alliance of those who are willing to fight and those who are not" (International Herald Tribune, 2008). To a certain extent then, NATO has bet the alliance on Afghanistan. If the organisation fails for the first time in its history whilst seeking to address some of the most prescient threats of our time, fundamental questions will again arise as to its role and utility in world politics. The organisation is not simply fighting for global security, it is fighting to define its future.

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