

## Arguing Afghanistan: what the detractors of NATO's mission get wrong

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, Afghanistan has become less stable and less secure. There were more than 2,000 civilian casualties in 2008 – more than in any other year since the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, and an increase by 40% in comparison to 2007. Coalition forces suffered 294 casualties in 2008, also the highest number so far. This is a direct consequence of a rise in Taliban and insurgent activity, mostly in eastern and southern Afghanistan.

Some allies reacted by increasing their troop levels. Germany, for instance, incrementally stepped up its troop level from 1,200 (2001) to 4,500 (2009), while President Obama, shortly after assuming office, ordered an additional 17,000 U.S. soldiers (plus 4,000 soldiers to train Afghan security forces) to be deployed in Afghanistan. Currently, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan consists of almost 60,000 soldiers from 42 countries, with the U.S., Great Britain and Germany providing most of the troops.

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At the same time, debate about the mission and the most promising strategy continues within and outside NATO, which has been in command of ISAF since 2003. The relationship between civil and military means, the appropriate handling of the Afghan government, the role of neighboring Pakistan, and the precise definition of the mission's goal are the most prominent issues of contention. Beyond these strategic and tactical questions, the general consensus in support of the Afghanistan mission is eroding. In many NATO countries, fundamental doubts are gaining popularity: Why, after all, are our soldiers fighting in such a remote country? Is this mission in our national interest? Isn't the militarization of such a conflict a counterproductive, self-defeating strategy? Are there any chances of sustainable success in Afghanistan? And what, by the way, does "success" even mean in a country where democratic stabilization seems illusory? Wouldn't it be more prudent to withdraw now instead of accepting years of casualties and costs in vain?

These concerns are to be taken very seriously. But they do not accurately reflect the situation on the ground, and the critics of engagement do not have the superior arguments. As a careful analysis of the most popular reservations about NATO's commitment demonstrates, the reasons that propelled the West to intervene in Afghanistan remain sound and incontrovertible – today even more so than in 2001.

## 2. Reservations about NATO's mission in Afghanistan

### *"NATO's mission is violating international law."*

Some detractors of NATO's mission use this legalistic claim to veil their politically motivated opposition. It is, however, not a valid argument. ISAF was initiated directly by the UN Security Council: Resolution 1386 of December 20, 2001,

authorizes ISAF to secure the area of Kabul so that the Afghan government and UN personnel can do their jobs efficiently and unharmed. This UN resolution empowers ISAF "to take all necessary measures to fulfill its mandate." The regional limitation of the mandate was later extended. NATO countries acted on the basis of this resolution. The German Bundestag, for instance, agreed on a German Bundeswehr mandate within ISAF two days after the UN resolution had been passed.

Ultimately, all these resolutions and mandated operations – including the U.S.-led multinational Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) aimed at fighting terrorism – are rooted in the United Nations Charter. The Charter allows two exceptions to the prohibition of armed force: the mandated enforcement of UN Security Council decisions (Art. 42) and the individual and collective right to self-defense against armed attack (Art. 51). Both are cited by the most important Afghanistan resolutions of the UN Security Council after September 11, 2001, most notably resolutions 1368, 1373, and 1386. States have the right of self-defense against foreign terrorist attacks just as they have the right of self-defense against "classical-conventional" attacks from other states – at least if another state is supporting such terrorist attacks. This interpretation is supported by several long-standing UN resolutions such as the Friendly-Relations Declaration (1970) and the Definition of Aggression (1974). That the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan supported international terrorism was recognized repeatedly, for instance in UN Security Council resolution 1333 in the year 2000.

Thus, the UN Security Council legitimizes the American engagement in Afghanistan as self-defense. As an expression of collective self-defense, it also legitimizes the participation of NATO partners. As national jurisdiction has established, such self-defense is not limited to

the geographical territory of NATO states (see, for example, the AWACS decision of the German Supreme Court in 1994). Hence, NATO's Afghanistan mission has not only been legitimized by member states' legislatures, it is also in accordance with national and international law.

***"NATO's mission is not in our national interest."***

Until the fall of 2001, Afghanistan was a safe haven for international terrorism. Tolerated and encouraged by the radical Islamist regime of the Taliban, al-Qaeda turned the country into the hub of international terrorism. It was training ground and central planning and command site for the attacks that hit the U.S. on September 11, 2001. Those were the gravest but not the first attacks by international terrorists against the United States. And the U.S. is not their only target: the murderous hatred of Islamist terrorists is directed against political liberalism and the Western way of life as a whole, as the bombings in London, Madrid, and Istanbul indicate – not to mention the number of thwarted plots. Therefore, no European can claim to be part of an "American" war that originally bore no relation to his or her security. All members of the liberal, Western community of values have an interest in fighting the terrorist threat. That includes eliminating terrorists and depriving them of safe areas.

The danger of international terrorism is not a fabrication of fear-mongering security obsessives. It is a very real threat emanating from the nexus of globalization and failing or failed states. Globalization, after all, is not only about economic interconnectedness or the acceleration brought about by revolutions in information and communication technology. Globalization has implications for security as well, since the permeability of borders, far-reaching access to information, and increasing worldwide interconnectedness of all parts of life also work in favor of the enemies of the liberal order. Islamist terrorists fight against

globalization – and the liberal order sustaining it – but they are also using it. In the "shrinking world" of globalization we can no longer ignore what is happening far away in, say, Afghanistan. The highly developed Western countries have a particular stake in the success of globalization; their trade-based economies depend on it. Therefore, they have a particular interest (and a particular responsibility) when it comes to containing those threats that are both directed against globalization and intensified by it.

In the long run Afghanistan will cease to provide shelter for terrorists only if it achieves sustainable political and economic progress. That is why it is not sufficient to merely "hunt terrorists in Afghanistan" or to "punish al-Qaeda for 9/11" and then withdraw. A long-term strategy in the interest of Western security must aim for the establishment of a stable political system in Afghanistan that can defend itself against terrorist or radical subversion. Therefore, nation-building and the implementation of good governance principles are not do-goodism but serve the actual security interests of NATO countries.

The individual commitments of NATO countries are also rooted in alliance solidarity. NATO is in Afghanistan because after 9/11 NATO members invoked Article V of the Washington Treaty, stating that an armed attack against one is an attack against all. Originally, Article V was conceived as a guarantee for Western Europe that the U.S. would help defend them in the case of a Soviet invasion. This secured peace and freedom in Western Europe during the Cold War. Hence, it is consequential that nowadays the Europeans – despite American hesitation – have made U.S. self-defense in Afghanistan a task for NATO proper.

Accordingly, nations such as Canada and the Netherlands (both of which can hardly be accused of promoting the militarization of inter-

national affairs) have committed to leadership roles in Afghanistan that are very difficult, dangerous, and bloody. They are doing so because they understand that the radical Islamist attacks against the U.S. are also directed against them – all NATO countries are affected: economically, politically, philosophically, and, through the NATO treaty, in a legal sense as well. The same insight holds true for all the other NATO partners whose engagement in Afghanistan fills the phrase “Alliance solidarity” with meaning. It is in the interest of European NATO members in particular that this promise of “Alliance solidarity” within NATO continues to remain concrete and credible.

Thus, NATO’s mission in Afghanistan serves the national interest(s) of the member states in at least three important ways: First, it is a crucial mission in the fight against international terrorism, which is a threat to every Western country. Second, it helps to defend and shape globalization for the benefit of all liberal states. Third, as a consequence of modern threat analysis, a successful mission in Afghanistan strengthens NATO as a whole and Alliance solidarity in particular.

***“Military means will not lead to peace in Afghanistan.”***

Many critics predict a military and political defeat for the Alliance in Afghanistan. They usually point to Afghanistan’s history as the “graveyard of empires”: British colonial forces as well as the Soviet army, despite their significant technological and financial superiority, were defeated by the dogged resistance of Afghan fighters and the difficult terrain. As the historian’s joke goes, the only foreign invader ever to succeed in Afghanistan was Alexander the Great, who entered the country in the fourth century before Christ from the south west and exited the very same year to the north east. The lesson: only a quick withdrawal can save NATO from the quagmire of a vain war with many casualties.

There is an important truth to these historical premonitions. As the U.S. has experienced in Vietnam and the first few years in Iraq, military superiority in numbers, training and equipment does not guarantee success. However, the critics miss an important difference between NATO’s mission in Afghanistan today and all these historical examples: NATO is a liberator that seeks to enable Afghans to lead a self-determined life in a self-sustaining community rather than a colonial conqueror. Crucially, Afghans view NATO as exactly that. Polling by the Asia Foundation and American, German, and British TV stations (ABC, ARD, BBC) indicates that in the northern part of the country, 72% of Afghans have a positive view of NATO. In the south east, where the Taliban – thanks to the support from radical groups beyond the Pakistani border – are gaining in strength, the number is still at 45% (in 2006 it was at a remarkable 83%). The decrease in approval of NATO is due to the more frequent clashes between Taliban and security forces which disrupt or even destroy daily life. One thing unites Afghans from all parts of the country: only 4% would like to be ruled by the Taliban again.

As long as the Afghan military and police forces are still in development, only NATO can guarantee freedom from Taliban rule. This is why Afghan president Hamid Karzai keeps calling not only for more efforts in educating and creating Afghan forces but also for higher NATO troop levels. True enough, only the improvement of Afghanistan’s infrastructure, the professionalization of Afghan security forces and economic development will create long-term stability. This comprehensive approach has been NATO strategy for quite some time now. But it is also true that civil support and the development of Afghan state structures cannot succeed if they are not happening in a secure environment. Therefore, military force remains indispensable. In turn, it must be complemented by civil measures, efforts at nation-building, and the diplomatic involvement of Afghanistan’s neighbors.

Military means alone cannot pacify Afghanistan, but without military means, peace will remain elusive as well.

***“The democratization of Afghanistan is illusory.”***

Self-styled “realists” criticize NATO members – and especially the U.S. – for pursuing the naïve and dangerous goal of turning the backward country of Afghanistan into a full-fledged (“Westminster”) democracy. In their view, centuries of tribal culture make an efficient central power and other democratic principles impossible to enforce. If at all, democratic development was a very slow internal process that could not be sped up very much by outside intervention. Instead of wasting the lives of NATO soldiers and the money of NATO taxpayers, these critics claim the West should settle for an Afghan government that subdues terrorism but does not fulfill any further liberal requirements.

Such advice is given with an attitude of prudence and experience, while in fact it is rather stupid and short-sighted. First of all, it ignores the history of Afghanistan. Founded in 1747, the country has suffered from tribal warfare, but it has also experienced a number of strong rulers such as Dost Muhammad, who repelled the British in 1842 and stayed in power for more than twenty years. Another example is King Muhammad Zahir Shah, under whose leadership from 1933 to 1973 Afghanistan made remarkable economic progress – and had a written, democratic constitution which, among other achievements, guaranteed women’s suffrage. It was as late as 1978 that the dark, modern phase of Afghanistan began with a Marxist coup, the subsequent Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989 and the tyranny of the Taliban from 1994 to 2001. Democracy is not alien to Afghanistan but is part of its tribal tradition: tribal councils depend on the approval of the community. Thus, a federal democracy, with governors not appointed by the president

but determined in local elections, would build on Afghanistan’s political tradition.

The “realists” also fail to recognize that international politics in the 21st century has to operate under different conditions than during the Cold War. In the age of East-West confrontation it might have made good strategic sense for the West to support despots and dictators as long as they were adamantly anti-communist. But as the example of the Taliban illustrates, this logic no longer applies – to the contrary, in the long run it seems to produce the bitterest enemies of the West. Afghanistan will continuously fight and resist international terrorism only if the people become stakeholders in the political and economic development of their country. Therefore, Afghanistan needs democratic structures.

Afghanistan will not and cannot become a “Westminster democracy” anytime soon. Moreover, no NATO country defines the mission’s goal as such. NATO’s detractors use this phrase as a straw man, caricaturing the allegedly overzealous and naïve ambitions of NATO. In fact, NATO’s “mere” goal is to create a functioning state that can defend itself against its enemies and that gives its people – in accordance with their traditions – a stake and a say in the matters of state. The first beginnings are encouraging, for instance with regard to the development of rule of law or voter turnout.

The assumption that democracy was somewhat of a luxury item, always subordinated to the more essential achievements of security and order, is wrong. That may be true in some historic or regional cases, but it does not pertain to Afghanistan. Here, democratic reform, the stability of the country and the security of the West are indivisibly linked. It is simply impossible to create security and stability first and then, almost as an afterthought, start establishing democratic structures. Both need to happen simultaneously,

because without an obvious investment by the Afghan people in the political and economic development of their country, Western assistance forces will not be able to succeed the motley coalition of the disenfranchised, the criminal, and the ideologues.

Thus, the democratization of Afghanistan is not illusory; the illusion is rather to pacify Afghanistan without democratizing it.

***“NATO’s mission is open-ended and has achieved few successes.”***

Many early supporters of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan have grown more skeptical by now: NATO countries committed themselves with high ambitions about enhancing their own security and that of their allies, while at the same time helping the Afghan people to achieve freedom and a better future – a case of doing well by doing good. But after eight years, the balance sheet is sobering. Have we really made measurable progress towards an attainable goal or are we following a wrong strategy that will chain us to a costly, frustrating and bloody mission of indeterminate length?

NATO has pronounced a clear goal: Afghanistan must be enabled to defend itself against threats from within and without – especially against a renewed infiltration by international terrorism. To do so, Afghanistan needs to establish stable and (at least in principle) democratic state structures. As of now, the country still needs external support for that. But as soon as this goal is achieved, NATO partners can withdraw at least the overwhelming majority of their troops. That is NATO’s exit strategy, which should better be called its victory strategy.

This goal is as ambitious as it is necessary, but it is not naïve. In achieving this goal, NATO follows a comprehensive approach: the interplay of secu-

urity and development creates, in close cooperation with the Afghan partners themselves, the foundation for a stable, peaceful, and prospering Afghanistan. The security part of that strategy is the responsibility of NATO soldiers. They protect the Afghan people from those extremists who terrorize the country and seek to re-establish their radical Islamist regime. This fight might not live up to the definition of “war” in international law, but for all practical purposes it is exactly that: a war waged by NATO allies to defend their own security and to ensure freedom for the Afghan people. It would be honest and an important backing for the soldiers on duty actually to speak of “war” with regard to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. Importantly, Afghan military and police forces, who are held in high regard by the Afghan people, are increasingly assuming responsibility in this war, but they are not yet large enough and capable enough to secure their nation without Western support.

The second component of NATO strategy, development, is not the primary responsibility of the soldiers, though they create the preconditions for sustained development aid. The successes of development in Afghanistan since 2001 are indisputable: more than 13,000 kilometers of roads have been (re-)built, more than three million people have gained access to drinking water in the countryside alone, and four million people have gained access to electricity. More than six million children have started school, more than a third of them girls (who were banished from education under the Taliban). More than 50,000 people are studying at the 19 universities in the country, while more than 10,000 are learning about engineering and mechanics at professional schools. The national economy has been growing, on average, by double digits each year, per capita income has more than doubled. Until 2006 alone, about \$1.5 billion of direct investment arrived in Afghanistan – with even more investments

planned until 2010. Progress in Afghanistan, especially in comparison with the years of Taliban rule, is tangible. The country is not there yet, but it is on the right course.

And yet, many problems remain. While the majority of Afghan provinces are relatively at peace, the Taliban are resurging – mainly in the south east. The training of Afghan police forces is developing much too slowly – mainly because of the lack of political will of many NATO countries and the EU in particular. Large parts of the Afghan government, even within the inner circle around President Karzai, are corrupt and incompetent. And poppy cultivation and drug-related crime structures continue to undermine the stability of the state.

None of these problems is to be taken lightly. Still, none of these issues is so fundamental that it cannot be contained by a more dedicated implementation of the comprehensive approach, the strengthening of the military and civil commitment of NATO allies and their partners. The increase of U.S. troops, the financial promises of the Den Haag conference and the re-formulated Afghanistan strategy of the NATO summit in April this year all point in the right direction.

Even with the right strategy, the goal in Afghanistan will not be reached overnight. Nobody can say how long the West will need to stay committed. The Netherlands and Canada have announced the withdrawal of their troops for 2010 and 2011, respectively. It is reasonable to expect, however, that NATO as a whole has to stay for another ten, maybe twenty years – albeit in ever decreasing numbers as Afghan forces assume more and more responsibility for the safety and stability of their country. Until then, NATO will continue to stay committed in order to fulfill an honorable task that is serving the Allies' security interests.

### 3. Conclusion

The skepticism in most NATO countries towards the Afghanistan mission is understandable. Most NATO countries have not been hit by a major foreign terrorist attack and yet they have been engaged for more than seven years in a campaign of the utmost complexity on “the far side of the world”. NATO's commitment is justified and necessary, but the reasoning remains abstract: in Europe especially, few citizens feel actually threatened by international terrorism, and the idea of Alliance solidarity rests on a strategic logic that is easily accessible to security experts only.

Ironically, this is a good thing. It is a good thing that most NATO countries did not have to endure a terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11 or the London tube bombings. It is also a good thing that most citizens of NATO countries, particularly in Europe, do not have to fret and strategize about the credibility of NATO and its security guarantee – which is the best sign of the effectiveness of that guarantee. Still, these good things are not the result of luck or wishful thinking, but of a responsible and diligent security policy, which in a democracy requires at least the acquiescence—if not the enthusiastic support—of the citizenry. This, then, is the irony: the current security and happiness of NATO allies threatens to undermine the foundations of this very security and happiness.

In Europe in particular, the temptation of an unfortunate isolationism is growing. Many citizens take their privileged and secure way of life for granted and regard, of all things, the bedrock of this way of life as the greatest threat to it: everywhere in Europe people argue that their governments should withdraw from Afghanistan because this was a war of the U.S. and everyone in support of the U.S. would become a target of international terrorism because of it. The pacifist calls for military withdrawal, and the vague urg-

ings for “dialogue” with Islamist terrorists are the political expression of an illusion – the illusion that freedom and peace are independent from considerations of power and ideology and come at little or no cost. Those who give in to this isolationist temptation do not want peace; they merely want to be left in peace.

The international politics of the 21st century and the consequences of globalization for economics and security do not allow for such convenient isolationism. Doing nothing is not an option, because those who do not act are affected as well. The horrid results of a premature NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan are blatantly clear: at once, the Taliban would brutally force themselves back into power, supported by ruthlessly calculating warlords. The advances that have been made in economic progress, political liberalization, and respecting human rights would be shattered immediately. Islamist terrorism would regain a base for its deadly operations, and this “victory”

would embolden terrorist worldwide. The destabilizing effects of such a development for the region, especially the nuclear power Pakistan, are as unpredictable as they are worrisome.

That is why all NATO states have to face the challenge of international terrorism; they all must actively protect their own security, the security of their allies, and their common liberal order. This was the conviction that led the West, mandated by the UN, to the mission in Afghanistan in 2001. The Allies have not always pursued this mission with the necessary commitment and an adequate strategy – but they have learned from experience. Therefore all governments and publics of NATO states have to muster the patience and the energy to continue the military and civil assistance to Afghanistan with even greater resolve. The Afghan people expect that from us, and we should expect that from ourselves. A stable, peaceful, and prospering Afghanistan need not remain a Utopia.