

## The litmus test - NATO in Afghanistan

The greatest challenge facing NATO is its mission in Afghanistan, NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Jones said, testifying before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 2006. This assertion was repeated by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in the run-up to the April 2008 Bucharest summit. US Ambassador to NATO Victoria Nuland wrote in *The Washington Post* on 1 February 2008 that "The alliance that never fired a shot in the Cold War is learning on the job."

NATO is engaged in military combat operations for the first time in its history, and in a country far from the Cold War European theater envisaged back in 1949. The alliance is also committed to assisting Afghan authorities in providing security and stability, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance in a country that has been shattered by war since the invasion of the then-Soviet Union in 1979.

For the first and, until now, only time, NATO's Article 5, or collective defense provision, was invoked on 12 September 2001, a day after the al-Qaida attacks on the US. Although NATO was conceived as a Cold War anti-Soviet alliance focused on Europe, the Prague Summit of 2002 signaled member-states' increasing recognition of a changing security environment and the need for NATO to adopt a more flexible operational and geographic "out of area" profile.

NATO has since provided logistical support to the African Union Mission in Darfur, Sudan and worked in a humanitarian role after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake. Until July 2006, its role in Afghanistan was mainly focused on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), a civilian-military development and security collaboration undertaken by US-led coalition forces prior to NATO's arrival and expansion from Kabul. The security and development challenges facing the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), donors and the Afghan government remain daunting, even in the relatively-stable central and northern regions.

However, NATO could fail in Afghanistan. The Taliban is regrouping. Afghan President Hamid Karzai narrowly escaped a Taliban assassination attempt on 27 April. In another attack earlier this year, for which the Taliban also claimed responsibility, a number of foreigners were killed in the five-star Serena Hotel in Kabul. Militants have gained in strength as the Pakistani government shies away from a direct confrontation with them in their cross-border strongholds in Pakistani tribal regions.

Yet, a much-touted 2007 spring offensive by the Taliban never materialized. It remains to be seen if a 2008 assault will take place.

## **1.1 Failed state future**

NATO is operating in Afghanistan in tandem with the separate US-led, 13,000 soldier Operation Enduring Freedom, a combat mission targeting al-Qaida remnants and the Taliban. As of December 2007, the ISAF had an estimated 41,700 troops from 39 countries, with NATO members providing the core of the Force. The US has approximately 15,000 troops in the ISAF.

Jones returned to the Senate Committee in January 2008 and, along with influential foreign policy expert Thomas Pickering, outlined that the prospect of NATO and Kabul losing significant parts of Afghanistan has moved "from the improbable to the possible." (PDF, 704 KB) They warn that Afghanistan could revert to "failed state" status.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates belittled the counterinsurgency capabilities of NATO allies on the ground, adding to internal rifts already simmering due to German, French and Italian reluctance to aid US, UK, Canadian, Dutch and Danish troops in the fight against the Taliban. Canada has dropped not-so-subtle hints that it will reconsider its frontline deployment unless other allies put their shoulders to the wheel.

The row over troop deployment overshadowed hot-button issues such as Kosovo's independence and NATO enlargement at the Bucharest summit, illustrating the importance of the Afghan mission to the alliance's future. Only France has pledged additional troops, and these, if deployed, will merely facilitate the transfer of US troops from relatively-stable zones to the combat theater. Meanwhile, an extra 3000 Iraq-hardened US Marines are headed to combat zones in eastern Afghanistan.

## **1.2 Grinding poverty and rife corruption**

Military and security challenges are demanding, but overcoming reconstruction and governance hurdles might be just as difficult. In January 2006, the Afghanistan Compact (PDF, 342 KB) set security, development and reconstruction targets to be reached by 2011. Afghanistan ranks 173 out of 178 countries in the UN development indicators and its Millennium Development Goal indicators are below the majority of sub-Saharan African countries.

The Afghan government has committed itself to creating a professional and ethnically balanced Afghan National Army (ANA) of 80,000 men by 2010. The ANA is about 70,000 strong at present and is deemed one of Afghanistan's reconstruction success stories. NATO is supporting the ANA with Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLTs). However, as of late 2007, over 2000 non-state armed groups comprising over 125,000 members were active across Afghanistan according to the official UN-Afghan government disarmament program. However not all of these are a direct threat to NATO forces or the ANA. Meanwhile, warlords, their affiliates and clients predominate in the Afghan police.

While gross domestic product (GDP) growth has been around 15 percent each year since 2001, this is from an extremely low base. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Afghanistan's average per capita income is the lowest in the world, and half of all Afghan children

die before the age of five. Corruption is rife and is exacerbated by weak administration. In reconstruction, bidding and procurement processes are sidestepped. Government revenue is just 5.45 percent of the GDP, the least of any country with data, according to the International Monetary Fund. Tax collectors seek bribes instead of taxes and often have links to warlord/militia groups.

Meanwhile, opium cultivation has soared. Afghanistan now supplies around 93 percent of the world's crop and is the source for most of Europe's heroin. Cultivation is heavy in southern and eastern areas where the Taliban insurgency is active. This helps fund the militia and provides impoverished farmers with a more lucrative revenue source than any immediate alternative.

### **1.3 Five years - an optimistic forecast**

With the ISAF committed to assisting Afghanistan in creating a stable and secure environment, the entrenched nature of the insurgency and apparent cross-border strategic depth in Pakistan means that NATO will have to defeat an entrenched enemy if it is to realize its mission.

While President Pervez Musharraf was a somewhat ambivalent ally in the war on terror, mixing attacks on and arrests of militants with conciliation, he is now an isolated lame duck. Since the parliamentary elections in February 2008, the Pakistan People's Party-led government has extended an olive branch to Pakistani Taliban elements, including the alleged mastermind behind the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, Baitullah Mehsud. The tribal militia leader was fingered by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan as responsible for 8 out of 10 terror attacks in Afghanistan since 2006, including the one on the Serena Hotel in Kabul.

Added to the dynamic developments and security challenges in southern and eastern Afghanistan, predictions that NATO may need at least five years to fulfil its mission appear optimistic. The alliance is making very slow increases in force levels. According to Anthony Cordesman of the Washington DC-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, senior NATO officers have said at least three battalions are needed in the short term. In private they indicate it will require much larger reinforcements unless all NATO countries lift their caveats and restrictions.

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### **1.4 INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kabul

The United Nations Mission in Afghanistan's function is to promote peace and stability in the country. It does so by leading efforts of the international community in conjunction with the Afghan government in rebuilding the country and strengthening the foundations of peace and constitutional democracy. The website provides information on UNAMA's mission and projects as well as news and background documents.

NATO in Afghanistan, by NATO, Brussels, Belgium

This website provides an overview of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan. This includes the leadership of the UN-mandated International Assistance Force (ISAF); a senior civilian representative, responsible for advancing the political-military aspects of the alliance's commitment to the country; and a long-term program of cooperation between NATO and Afghanistan, concentrating on defense and security sector reform.

ISAF's strategic vision, by NATO, Brussels, Belgium

This press release includes the Declaration by the Heads of State and Government of the Nations contributing to the UN-mandated NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, issued at the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest.

Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001-2007) (PDF, 1.4 MB), by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kabul

This study presents the main findings of UNAMA's comprehensive inquiry into the phenomenon of suicide attacks in Afghanistan. It contextualizes suicide attacks in Afghanistan against their occurrence in other theaters, identifying the ways in which they differ from attacks elsewhere. The study details available information about the backgrounds of the attackers and the sources of support they enjoy in Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. The report describes the human cost borne by its largely civilian victims and identifies several policy implications as well as mitigating strategies.

## **1.5 GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Afghanistan: A plan to turn the tide? by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, US

This website provides links to the testimonies of Assistant Secretary, South and Central Asian Affairs Richard A Boucher; Assistant Secretary, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs David T Johnson; Former Commander, European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe General James L Jones; former Under Secretary for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering; and former US Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke.

## **1.6 RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA**

Media Conference Call: The NATO summit: Afghanistan and enlargement (Audio), by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), London, UK

This CFR conference call brings together James M Goldgeier, senior fellow for Transatlantic Relations at CFR, and Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, adjunct senior fellow for Alliance Relations, CFR, to discuss the Bucharest NATO Summit. They look at the NATO mission in Afghanistan and at NATO expansion.

Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Kabul

The AREU is an independent research organization that aims to strengthen the analytical capacity in

Afghanistan and facilitate reflection and debate. The website provides access to research publications as well as "The A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance."

Saving Afghanistan, Foreign Affairs, by the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR), London, UK  
In his essay in the January/February 2007 issue of Foreign Affairs, Barnett Rubin argues that Afghanistan is at risk of collapsing into chaos. He points out that if the US wants to save the international effort in Afghanistan, it must increase its commitment to the area and rethink its strategy - especially its approach to Pakistan, which continues to give sanctuary to insurgents on its tribal frontier.

Afghanistan: UN Special Representative addresses priorities (Video), by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, US

This video features a presentation of Ambassador Kai Eide, the new UN special representative in Afghanistan and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, at Carnegie on 28 April 2008. He outlines that progress in Afghanistan requires more focused coordination by the international community and increased civilian/military cooperation to meet political goals. Eide further discusses how other nations can work together to address the ongoing threats to stability in Afghanistan.

## **1.7 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (Acbar)

The Afghanistan Umbrella Organization represents members of the national and international humanitarian and reconstruction and development NGO community in Afghanistan. ACBAR was formed in 1988 in response to the need for NGOs to coordinate their activities in order to maximize their efficiency and resources. The website provides bulletins, publications, a directory of organizations in Afghanistan and a jobs board.

## **1.8 MEDIA**

The NATO emerging in Afghanistan, by *The Washington Post*, US

This 1 February 2008 article by Victoria Nuland, US ambassador to NATO, argues that the next three-to-five years will be crucial for Afghanistan and NATO. It points out that the Afghanistan mission is an investment in collective security and the catalyst for the 21st-century transformation of NATO.