

Empowering Afghanistan: The elements of a “civilian surge”

SDA evening debate

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Empowering Afghanistan: The elements of a “civilian surge”

As NATO troops start to pull out of the ISAF mission, the focus of attention will be on what happens next and how prepared the Afghan army and police are to take charge of security. The NATO training mission that has been in place since 2009 has planned for an independent Afghan security force by 2014, but can this target be maintained with fewer NATO boots on the ground? Beyond the Afghan army and police, are the country’s civil institutions ready for greater responsibility? How much are civil society actors becoming empowered to take charge and what programmes are currently in place? Has cooperation between NATO, civilian government actors and NGOs now begun to prove satisfactory, and could a “civilian surge” combat the poor governance and corruption that are said to still be undermining the country’s stabilisation efforts?

Speakers and Moderators

Speakers



Simon Gass

Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, NATO

Thomas Ruttig

Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysis Network (AAN)



David Turr

Head of Division for Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives
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Shada Islam

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Introduction

Three years before NATO is due to end its combat mission in Afghanistan and hand over prime responsibility for security to the Kabul government, debate is intensifying on what needs to be done on the civilian side to ensure the transition to Afghan control does not end in disaster.

The transition is due to start in the coming weeks as the 150,000 strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) hands over control in seven relatively peaceful provinces selected by President Hamid Karzai. Alongside the military transition, international donors are stepping up efforts to ensure the Afghan authorities are ready to run the country by the end of 2014.

A “civilian surge” has seen an influx of consultants, contractors, police trainers, judicial advisors and diplomats pour into Afghanistan to prepare for the handover, but despite some signs of hope, huge doubts remain about the effectiveness of the multitude of programmes given that the country remains blighted with violence, ethnic tensions, rampant corruption and poverty.

The SDA evening debate brought together NATO top civilian envoy in Kabul **Simon Gass**, senior officials from the European Union's External Action Service and a leading European expert on Afghan politics and society. The result was a sobering assessment of the problems facing Afghanistan in the run-up and aftermath of 2014.

“One thing I am sure of is that it's not going to be pretty,” said Gass. “It's not going to leave Afghanistan as a modern liberal democracy, because that is just not what Afghanistan is.”

Military pressure and talking to the Taliban

Speakers expressed doubts about the capacity of the Afghan authorities to take charge and there were differences over the extent civil society can positively influence the transition.

“We have grounds for concern about the basis of the transition, namely the handover to the Afghan government,” said **David Turr**, Head of the Afghan and Pakistan division at the EU's new Foreign Service. “We need reassurance that this administration wants the same things that we want ... there's a lack of confidence in the sustainability of the system.”

While there was a general agreement on the need for some sort of outreach to those elements within the Taliban who were willing to negotiate, speakers recognized that, so far, those diplomatic feelers had yielded few tangible results. The debate also raised differences over whether intensified military pressure on the insurgents would bring them to the negotiating table.

“What we should not expect from the Taliban is that after the surge, during the ongoing kill-and-capture strategy, they will come out and say 'OK we will surrender, we want peace now',” said **Thomas Ruttig**, Co-Director of the Afghanistan Analysis Network.

“Despite all the killings of mid-level commanders, the Taliban are still there and the number of their attacks as well their geographical scope are going up. I really don't see that we can frighten them into looking for a political solution.”

Alison Weston, Acting Head of Conduct of Operations at the EEAS' Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability, gave her views from the perspective of the EU's train-

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ing mission for the Afghan police. Despite progress, she underlined the difficulties not only of training police in a society with such a low educational level, but also the lack of a coherent structure in which to integrate trained officers.

“It’s important to have relatively modest expectations. We’re not using Switzerland or Western European countries as our model of what sustainable policing arrangements in Afghanistan should look like in the next five to ten years,” she said. “We have to have realistic expectations of what we can expect to achieve.”

The need for realism

Kicking off the debate, Gass said that after two months in the job he recognized the need for a realistic appraisal of the likely state of Afghanistan by the 2014 deadline for ending NATO’s combat mission.

“By the time we leave, Afghanistan will still be the fifth poorest nation in the world. It will still be a country with huge ethnic tensions. It will still be a country with a great deal of corruption. It will still be a country surrounded by neighbours who seek to exercise influence there. It will therefore still be a very fragile state,” he acknowledged.

However, the British diplomat listed five areas where the international community could work in the years ahead to improve the situation during the transition:

- Building civilian support for the transition by supporting economic development, improving levels of governance and strengthening the rule of law;
- Establishing a framework for assistance post-2014

to show the Afghans that the international community is not walking away;

- A diplomatic surge to support a political process aimed at ending the insurgency by talks with elements of the Taliban, and with the involvement of Pakistan;
- Training of Afghan security forces with goal of a 350,000-strong corps ready to play their role by 2012;
- Maintaining military pressure on the Taliban to persuade them to end the insurgency and join the political process.

Tirr’s introduction focused on the EU’s role in supporting Afghan development. He complained of a lack of coordination among various international strategies to support Afghanistan.

“By the time we leave, Afghanistan will still be the fifth poorest nation in the world. It will still be a country with huge ethnic tensions [...] with a great deal of corruption [...] surrounded by neighbours who seek to exercise influence there.”

“We’ve suffered from strategy overload,” he said. “Our biggest task is to try and find common ground between all these strategies and still maintain certain coherence in our programmes.”

He worried too about the continued Taliban treatment of development workers, stating that the lack of security was severely hampering development efforts. He questioned the current plan of building security district-by-district saying that was allowing the insurgents to simply switch their attention from one place to another.

“An acceptable level of security is a must and without it we just won’t have enough boots on the ground to do the job,” he insisted.

A wider problem, Tirr suggested, is the lack of confi-

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dence in the Afghan political system. That goes beyond concerns about positions taken by President Karzai, notably regarding the international presence, to raise fundamental questions about the nature of Afghanistan's public institutions. Among the issues provoking concern, TIRR pointed to the government's use of the Supreme Court to quash parliamentary election results; resistance to international efforts to clear up corruption relating to the Kabul Bank; and recent efforts to silence critical media.

“Without a responsible administration and institutions which can outlive the current political generation I wonder whether we are going to have a sustainable transition,” TIRR asked, suggesting that the international community should make greater use of leverage through the aid which accounts for 40 percent of the Afghan state budget.

What role for civil society?

Ruttig agreed that the efficiency and legitimacy of the Afghan government needed to be questioned, but criticised that the focus on attempting to reach out to the Taliban was neglecting civil society, which, he argued need to play an important role in counteracting many of the problems bedeviling Afghanistan.

“We are usually actually only talking to the people who have the weapons,” he said. “Civil society is not taken seriously by our governments. It has been marginalized and dis-empowered ... We need to invest in civil society and help them to become that voice in Afghanistan” which could counter the further strengthening of Islamist forces in case of any negotiated return of the Taliban.

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“Without a responsible administration and institutions which can outlive the current political generation, I wonder whether we are going to have a sustainable transition”

He said current policy concentrated on the Karzai government which includes warlords and Islamists, and on trying to reach out to the Taliban, marginalising civil society organisations that supported a more open, democratic and inclusive society.

Ruttig appealed for the creation of mechanisms that would strengthen civil society groups and ensure their survival after 2014. He said civil society groups should be invited to play a wide role in the run-up to, during and after the international conference on Afghanistan to be held in Bonn in December.

Ruttig's emphasis on civil society provoked much comment. Gass said his door was always open to civil society groups and said NATO saw them as essential for Afghanistan's future. However such groups needed to spend more time reaching out to the Afghan people rather than speaking to international interlocutors, he said, suggesting that some groups were out of touch with the everyday concerns of ordinary Afghans faced with unemployment and penury of basic services.

Comments from the floor also cast doubt on the role that civil society can play in Afghanistan. **Timm Rentrop**, from the European Commission, accused the panel of naivety, suggesting that seeking to impose “Western ideas” such as parliaments and the rule of law were a “recipe for disaster.” **Harri Tiido**, Estonia's Non-Resident Ambassador to Afghanistan also cautioned against overdoing the role of civil society, contending that “Afghans are thinking along ethnic and tribal lines, they do not think in national terms” and NGOs have little influence.

Ruttig refuted such ideas. Referring to his 10 years ex-

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perience of working in the country, he said Westerners should not underestimate Afghans' political awareness and aspirations. He compared sentiment in Afghanistan with that in the Arab world.

He said much of civil society was based in the rural areas and was very active and effective in dealing with local problems. “People understand very well. They have been politicized the hard way in Afghanistan, and there's a lot of self-organisation and we don't need to go there and create things. We just need to find their doors and see whether they are still open for us.” In civil society, there is not such a deep rural/urban divide as often assumed.

Ruttig was backed by co-moderator **Shada Islam**, Head of the Asia Programme at the think tank *Friends of Europe*. “As someone from the region, I can say that the aspirations for democracy and plural societies are not just Western, the Arab Spring was a very powerful demonstration of that fact,” she said.

Weston, gave an outline of the EU's police training and support mission in Afghanistan. Pointing out that although, with a personnel target of 400, it is much smaller than NATO's training effort the EU mission plays an important specialised role in areas such as community policing, crime investigation, management leadership training and the interface between the police and the justice system.

She insisted however that the training effort needed to be matched by support to create effective police and government structures into which the newly trained officers can integrate.

“There is absolutely no point of training thousands of people if there is no struc-

“The people who are trained need to belong to a service that has some kind of career structure.”

ture for them to belong to. It's throwing good money after bad,” she cautioned. “The people who are trained need to belong to a service that has some kind of career structure, and that has a way of tracking the people who are being trained, making sure that they are being deployed in a way which is useful.”

Avoiding the “déluge”

The international community needs to show it remains committed to Afghanistan after 2014 to avoid what SDA Director **Giles Merritt** called a feeling of “après nous, le déluge”, speakers stressed. However at this stage they said it's not possible to say how much money the West will be able to commit to Kabul after 2014. Merritt, who co-moderated the debate with Islam, pointed out that Afghanistan would have to compete for a dwindling pot of international aid with nations emerging from this year's “Arab Spring.”

Better monitoring of aid money which is currently flowing into Afghanistan was a demand from **Kamal Dalili**, an Afghan working at the European Parliament, to prevent funding being lost through corruption and bolster trust between the Afghan people and the international community.

“People understand very well. They have been politicized the hard way in Afghanistan, and there's a lot of self-organisation and we don't need to go there and create things.”

Tirr said the EU had upgraded tracking of aid money by funnelling funding through the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme. “It's not a perfect system ... but over the past few years we've actually improved our oversight through working with these organisations, so that is certainly one way in which you can avoid misuse of funds.”

From the floor, **Edgar Buckley**, Senior Vice

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President of Thales Group, asked if the decision to set the 2014 deadline for ending NATO's combat mission had been a good thing, whether it made sure the Afghan authorities “get serious” about living up to their responsibilities or if it had simply weakened Afghan confidence in international support and given encouragement to the insurgents.

Gass replied that setting the goal was “necessary”, because without a date for ending the mission it would not have been possible to get political support for the ongoing troop surge which he says is making progress in improving security. In the long term, the NATO envoy also stated that keeping such high levels of foreign troops in the country would hinder the prospects of achieving a lasting settlement.

On the question of reconciliation with the Taliban, Gass said there were several attempts to reach out to elements within the insurgency, but he said it remained a “very misty process.”

“The fundamental problem is that at the moment there is no unequivocal Taliban signal saying 'yes we want peace',” he said. “We may not see signs of it working until suddenly it shifts.”

Niels Dahmann, Honorary Consul at the Latvian Consulate to Belgium, asked about the wider regional picture and the role of China and Pakistan.

Tirr said China could play a positive role both through investment that helps the Afghan economy and by using its influence with Pakistan to promote a regional solution.





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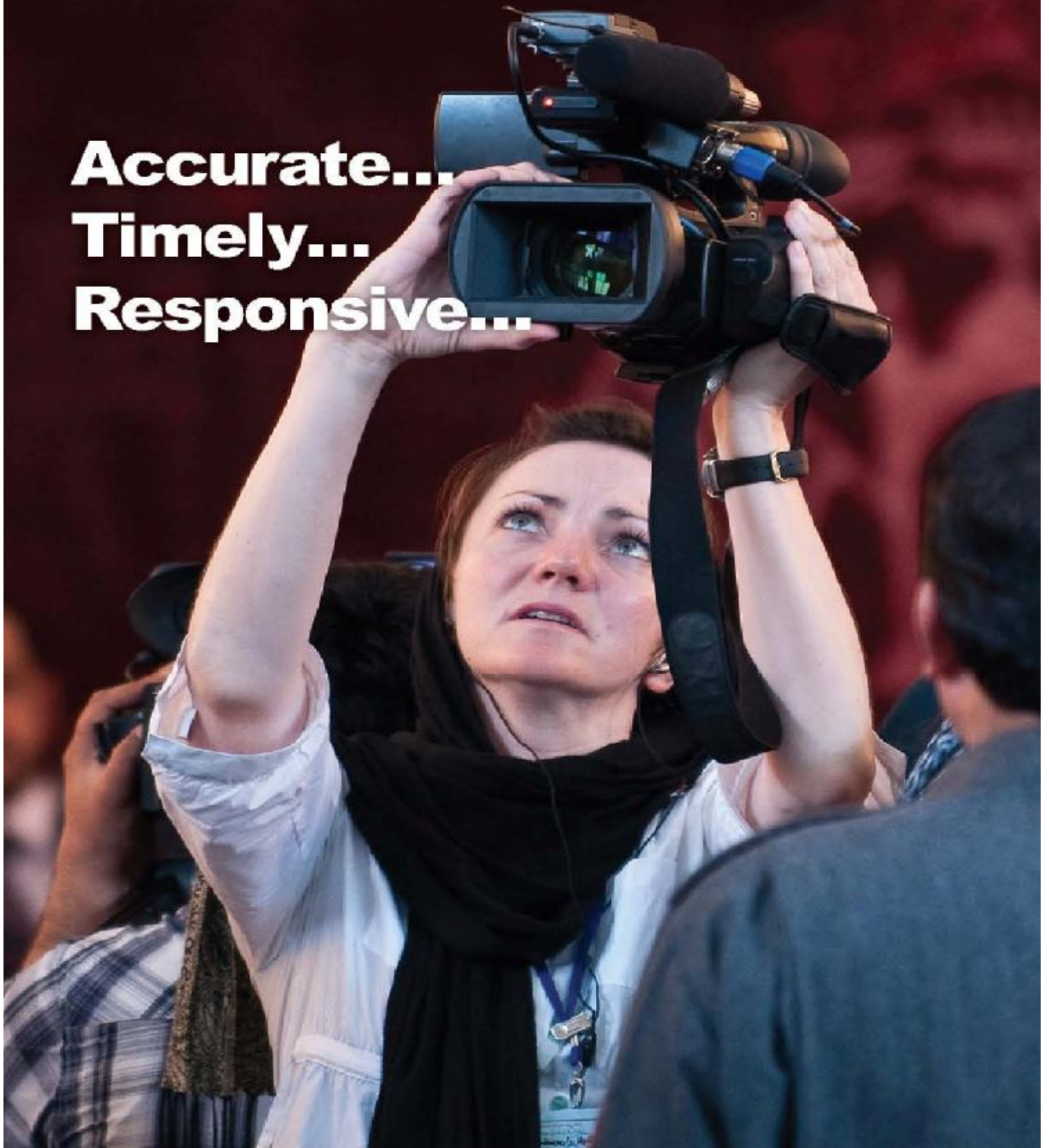
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The screenshot displays the NATO Channel website. At the top left is the NATO logo and the text "natochannel.tv". To the right are social media links for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, along with "For Broadcasters" and "About us" links. A search bar is located on the right side. The main content area features a large video player showing a fighter jet on a runway, with the title "Sigonella - Operations" and "David Heathfield Reporting". Below the video player is a description: "Sigonella - Air Operations. Sigonella airbase in Sicily is perfectly situated for the air campaign in Libya. Fighter jets from many different nations are flying regular sorties in support of Operation Unified Protector." To the right of the description are five stars and a "SHARE" button with social media icons. Below the video player is a navigation bar with tabs: "CURRENT AFFAIRS", "FEATURES", "NEWSROOM", "SPECIALS", "HISTORY", "ANDREY VIDEO BLOG", "NATO REVIEW", "NATO NATIONS", and "EN FRANÇAIS". The main content area is filled with a grid of video thumbnails, each with a title, date, duration, and star rating. The thumbnails include: "Sigonella - Air Operations" (21 April 2011, 4:40), "Arms Embargo 24/7 - Replenishment at sea" (20 April 2011, 3:31), "Trapani - Une base militaire stratégique" (18 April 2011, 2:44), "Out in The Front" (16 April 2011, 1:54), "NATO-Russia Council Meeting in Berlin" (15 April 2011, 2:57), "NATO Secretary General's Press Conference - Q&A" (15 April 2011, 10:17), "NATO Secretary General's Press Conference" (15 April 2011, 5:32), "Des avions de chasse canadiens mobilisés" (15 April 2011, 3:28), and "Fighting Terrorism Together" (15 April 2011, 6:14).



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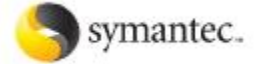
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