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After Combat, the Perils of Partnership: NATO and Afghanistan beyond 2014

by Sten Rynning¹

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Introduction

NATO is set to terminate its combat mission in Afghanistan and establish Afghan security leadership by the end of 2014 – a process which the Alliance defined as “irreversible” at its Chicago summit on 20-21 May 2012. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will thus complete its mission after thirteen years, and become history. However, NATO is not just packing up and going home. In 2010 the Alliance launched its proposal for an *Enduring Partnership* with Afghanistan, and in Chicago it declared: “Afghanistan will not stand alone.” Afghanistan can count on NATO’s “enduring commitment” to the country, and NATO will now prepare “a new training, advising and assistance mission” that can begin in January 2015.²

To the lay observer this may seem straightforward: after combat comes partnership. It could appear that NATO is gearing up for a substantial partnership. After all, the partnership comes with the label “enduring”, and partnership is clearly a key element in making transition possible.

A substantial and ambitious *Enduring Partnership* is unlikely, however. People who have high hopes for NATO’s post-2014 role in Afghanistan are thus cautioned by this paper to revise their expectations downwards. There are many good reasons for this. NATO nations are weary after a decade of war. They wish to help, but also to avoid commitments they cannot get out of: this is why they labelled the partnership “enduring”, and not “strategic” – which would have implied an even greater commitment. Today they face a balancing act. They must demonstrate political commitment but provide no guarantee, just as they must establish a new training mission but preferably at no risk. All this is hard to do in Afghanistan.

NATO’s post-combat Afghan partnership may turn out to be modest, but it will still be significant. This is because the Afghan stabilization puzzle has many pieces, and NATO can help put it together. NATO will not be alone in providing training and security assistance on the ground post-2014, investing money in Afghan forces, or maintaining a political dialogue with the government. As the section on policy options makes clear, it is important that NATO in this wider context consider ways to sharpen its partnership policy and public messaging. With new thinking, NATO could still make a considerable contribution to Afghanistan’s long-term stabilization.



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NATO Defense College
Research Division
Via Giorgio Pelosi, 1
00143 Rome – Italy
web site: www.ndc.nato.int
e-mail: research@ndc.nato.int

Imprimerie Deltamedia Group
Via Portuense 1555, 00148 Rome, Italy
www.deltamediaigroup.it

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¹ Professor Sten Rynning, Head of the Center for War Studies at the University of Southern Denmark, was a Visiting Researcher at the NATO Defense College in Rome from February through July 2012. The author would like to thank the people who agreed to be interviewed for this Research Paper for their insights, as well as Karl-Heinz Kamp, Heidi Reisinger and David M. Pursley for their thorough and constructive comments. The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

² For “irreversible transition”, *Chicago Summit Declaration*, 20 May 2012, paragraph 5. For “not stand alone”, *Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan*, 21 May 2012, paragraph 1; for “enduring commitment”, paragraph 12; and for “new mission,” paragraph 13.



The Road to Partnership

To understand the tentative nature of current partnership policy, it is useful to look at the context of its development over the past years. We shall see that it finds a strong and coherent basis in Alliance policy, but also that partnership with Afghanistan is about the future and therefore uncertain: from the vantage point of 2012 and in the context of a dynamic and difficult campaign, post-2014 relations can be seen as part of a relatively distant future.

We should first of all emphasize the difference between transition and partnership. Transition is the process that will get the allies from here to 2014: from a large and leading presence in Afghan security to full Afghan security leadership. Though transition was always the idea (no one wanted to stay permanently in Afghanistan), it really took shape as an idea in 2009 and as a policy in 2010, and its end point will be December 2014. Partnership is not transition. Partnership concerns NATO-Afghan relations after this point, from 2015 on.

Transition became topical in 2009 because President Obama decided on a “surge” in Afghanistan – not only in terms of troop numbers, but also of civilian advisors and economic assistance. NATO followed suit, and the total force of ISAF – which is NATO-led but includes partner nations such as Australia – grew to 140,000 troops. It would be impossible to sustain, everyone knew, and so the idea was to surge so as to break the Taliban’s momentum and build up the Afghan state to a level where it could stand on its own two feet.

The surge was thus tied in with transition – the effort to build up Afghan capacities once and for all. We see this in three important ways.

First, in terms of the approach to Afghan forces in the field: to have the Afghan forces really grow and be able to deploy and manoeuvre in potentially hostile areas, and to sustain themselves in a fight, ISAF forces needed to do on-the-job training. This became “partnering” – which should not be confused with partnership. Partnering was an enhanced training concept, and it was a key facet of the campaign approach developed by General McChrystal, then Commander of ISAF, from mid-2009 onwards.³

Second, in terms of tightening the ISAF command structure: this involved a new organizational structure at headquarters, so as to tie together regional campaigns in one overall effort. It also involved the integration of regular Afghan force training into the ISAF chain of command. Up until 2009 NATO had not been able to agree to do Afghan training, but now it did – in the form of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A). This mission took over most of the Afghan training – though not all, as the U.S.-led Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) continued in parallel. The North Atlantic Council agreed to all this in mid-2009, and the

new organization became operational in the fall of 2009.

Finally, in terms of policy to ensure that the Afghan authorities actually take the security lead: in 2009 this lead was fully under ISAF control, and the challenge was to move it into Afghan hands. During 2010 the allies, together with Afghanistan and partner nations, managed to come up with a design for this “transition” process. It began in London in January 2010, with the definition of the phased, area-by-area transfer of security responsibility to the Afghans.⁴ It continued in Kabul in July, when the Afghan government formally accepted the plan and defined the end of 2014 as the transition target. At NATO’s Lisbon Summit in November 2010, the Alliance finalized its own policy on phased transition.⁵

And the process has continued. On 22 March 2011 President Karzai announced a first “tranche” of areas that would transfer to Afghan leadership; a second tranche was announced on 27 November 2011; a third tranche on 13 May 2012; and the fourth and final tranche is expected to be announced in mid-2013. This is in fact an accelerated pace of transfer, in so far as ISAF commanders originally envisioned the fourth and final transfer taking place at the end of 2014. The NAC then pushed the accelerator in early 2012, looking for a “milestone” that would signal the irreversibility of the transfer of leadership. The fourth transfer was thus forwarded to mid-2013, at which point the entire country will be under an Afghan security lead. ISAF must thus focus its final 18 months on consolidating this lead, and by December 2014 it will have completed its mission.

Partnership is a follow-on to transition, and it has slowly but surely moved on to the agenda. At the 2010 Lisbon Summit, NATO and Afghanistan provided a first outline of their announced *Enduring Partnership*.⁶ They reaffirmed “their long-term partnership” and indicated what kind of pledges they would bring into the post-2014 partnership. For Afghanistan, this involved proper governance and regional cooperation. For NATO, there were two overarching issues – one practical and one political:

- the practical dimension, related to NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A), involved “sustained practical support to Afghan security institutions”;
- the political dimension concerned the collective NATO-Afghan commitment to strengthened “consultation on issues of strategic concern”.

This was the overarching framework, and it is critically important to note both the practical and the political dimensions of NATO’s commitment to an “enduring” partnership. At Lisbon NATO did not commit in any particular shape or form beyond this, but that too was not important:⁷ the details could be spelled out later. What mattered was the commitment to a broad partnership with both a military and a political dimension.

³ COMISAF’s *Initial Assessment*, 30 August 2009, pages 1-3. COMISAF subsequently issued a “partnering directive” in line with this.

⁴ *London Declaration*, 28 January 2010, paragraphs 3-4 and 11.

⁵ *Declaration of the Heads of State and Government of the Nations contributing to the UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan*, 20 November 2010.

⁶ *Declaration by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on an Enduring Partnership signed at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, Portugal*, 10 November 2010.

⁷ The possible areas of cooperation mentioned in the Lisbon text are: (a) sustained political dialogue, (b) money for Afghan forces and training, (c) a NATO liaison in country, (d) a continuation of NTM-A in a reconfigured format, and (e) an individual partnership program of assistance, training and exchanges.



The View from Chicago

The parties took a next step in the partnership process at NATO's May 2012 Chicago Summit. This brought clarity to some issues, but certainly not all.

The immediately apparent feature of the Chicago declaration on partnership is that it is long on foreground and fairly short on substance as far as the post-2014 arrangement is concerned. The parties acknowledge this in so far as they give considerable attention in the Summit declaration to the current security transition effort, and end with the observation that something more substantial must now be done: they “will *now* deepen their consultations towards shaping the Enduring Partnership”.⁸

Transition has thus taken its toll. The going has been tough in Afghanistan, where the insurgency remains embedded and seriously challenging. And it has been tough inside NATO, where the distribution of transition dividends – troop withdrawals – has threatened to undermine the mantra “in together, out together”. Some nations have wanted to leave early – Canada, the Netherlands, and France come to mind – and Alliance cohesion has been at stake.

Nevertheless, in Chicago NATO and Afghanistan declared that the effort to define partnership will now begin in earnest. The declaration emphasizes two issues on which the parties are in agreement:⁹

- *the training mission*: to mark the end of transition they emphasize that NATO will make the shift “from a combat mission to a new training, advising, and assistance mission, which will be of a different nature to the current ISAF mission”. The mission will certainly change in character and size, though the label NTM-A might remain;

- *funding for Afghan forces*: the parties define target figures for the development of Afghan security forces and money for their development, and NATO commits to playing its part in funding and sustaining them, though under overall Afghan leadership and within a twelve-year horizon.

If we look more closely at the Chicago figures on funding, we shall see how NATO is shaping its partnership commitment – not only in monetary terms, but also with regard to the wider political context.

First of all, in Chicago NATO and its ISAF partners took note of the goal of drawing down Afghan national security forces (ANSF) to 228,500 from a 2012 peak of 352,000 – which in budgetary terms amounts to a decline from \$6.6 billion to \$4.1 billion annually – and they committed to supporting this process. The United States is by far the largest contributor and channels its funds through its Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), most of which goes to pay for Afghan salaries. NATO as a whole runs a parallel Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund, to which third parties may contribute –

the most recent contributor being Japan – and which helps cover costs of army equipment, service and training. The international mechanism for funding the Afghan police is the UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOFTA). In Chicago “NATO Allies and ISAF partners” promised to continue their investments post-2014 and thus “play their part in the financial sustainment of the ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces]”.¹⁰

Secondly, NATO's financial effort will run for a decade (2015-2024) and will progressively decline. The aim is that the Afghan government can assume “no later than 2024” the “full financial responsibility for its own security forces”.¹¹ NATO allies and partners are willing to invest for some time, but not indefinitely.

Third and finally, NATO hopes to see other countries invest increasingly in Afghan capacities. It explicitly places its Trust Fund effort in a wider context: specifically, at a grand summit on Afghanistan that took place in Bonn in December 2011, the international community defined the period 2015-24 as a “transformation decade” for Afghanistan and promised to support it.¹²

The sum total of this is that, while Chicago was not a pledging conference, it concerned money and notably the ambition to distribute the burden of investing in Afghan capacities to a larger number of countries. This effort is already under way. In the run-up to Chicago leading allies along with some partners formed a so-called Coalition of Committed Contributors (aka the C-3 Initiative), to mobilize the international community: the aim is to have it contribute approximately \$1.6 billion, with the United States providing \$2 billion and Afghanistan \$500 million. Background information indicates that international commitments (some made public, some not) by the time of the Chicago Summit had reached a level of around \$1 billion in annual commitment for 2015-2017. This is a good beginning, but more money and sustained investment are needed. The next stop for this effort is a donors' conference in Tokyo in July 2012, where rich countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and China will require persuasion to change their policies of limited investment.

Besides the money issue, a number of “known unknowns” mark the Chicago declaration. First there is the future NATO “training, advising, and assisting” mission. It is mentioned in the Chicago declaration, but there is not much information besides the statement that it will be different from ISAF. We know it will happen, but not in what shape or size.

Then there is the issue of strengthened “consultation on issues of strategic concern” – which is how it was phrased in Lisbon in 2010. There is nothing in the Chicago declaration on this issue. In Lisbon the parties outlined a two-legged partnership, comprising a military leg and a political consultation leg. In Chicago it is presented as one-legged, having only a military leg. Quite clearly, NATO will now

⁸Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan, 21 May 2012, paragraph 10 (emphasis added).

⁹These are drawn from the sections Beyond 2014 and Sustaining the ANSF, respectively.

¹⁰Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan, paragraph 16.

¹¹Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan, paragraph 18.

¹²Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan, paragraph 16. See also *Conference Conclusions*, The International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, 5 December 2011, paragraph 5.



have to define not only the future of this military leg, but also what the political wing of the Alliance can and should do in Afghanistan post-2014.

The one-legged approach is hardly coincidental, but a consequence of the troubles the allies are having in moving forward with the Lisbon agenda – sketchy as it was. It is to these troubles we now turn. The challenges in moving forward with the full partnership as foreseen in Lisbon are considerable, as we shall see, and there is reason to expect backtracking in this regard. Chicago is the first real sign of this.

Into the Zone of Discomfort

NATO's zone of discomfort is defined by military issues, political issues, and then by the issue of tying it all together in one partnership package. We shall look at these three issues in turn.

The military issue concerns the new mission to “train, advise, and assist.” This may seem easy to do. Combat is over (that was ISAF), and NATO can move into Afghanistan post-2014 and do a “classroom mission” whereby NATO trainers are located on base in Kabul to run class instructions and basic exercises.¹³ In reality, it will be far from easy, and the fact of the matter is that NATO training is likely to involve a degree of combat.

First, consider the extent of the new mission. To be effective, Afghan forces must be trained not just in the capital of Kabul but also in major hubs throughout the regions or provinces. After all, Afghan forces must be present and operate throughout the country. Ideally, therefore, NATO would send trainers to, say, five or six locations next to Afghanistan's major cities. With geographical distribution comes the need for elaborate back-up support. Who is going to rescue the personnel in Herat, Kunduz or Kandahar if things go wrong and insurgents attack or threaten the base where NATO personnel are located? It is inconceivable that NATO would simply appeal for Afghan help. NATO must have medivac capacities (lifting out sick or wounded personnel), and also a strategically located rapid reaction rescue force that can move in quickly if the house is on fire (for example, if a base is about to be overrun).

In short, organizing support for deployed personnel will be tricky because it will invariably involve the capacity to shoot. NATO will thus continue to require rules of engagement, and NATO publics will have to be re-educated: agreed, the combat phase is over, but there could still be combat.

Consider next the organization of the Afghan forces. This has come a long way: ten years ago there was nothing, and now there is a fairly capable Afghan force. Yet this is basically a large infantry force. It is weak in terms of intelligence, force deployment capacity, and combat support – for which it essentially relies on ISAF. This dependency cannot be done away with before 2015. The question is therefore whether ISAF should simply pull out the plug and leave Afghans on their own in the field, or whether the term “assistance” in the partnership implies some kind of support – whether close

air support, the provision of intelligence, or the transportation of troops around the country. In all this NATO would be supporting combat and maybe even be involved in it, albeit in the name of “assistance.”

The political issue concerns the extent and visibility of political relations. Again, as for military issues, the case may seem easy to solve: provide the Afghans with regular consultations, and then let them get on with it. After all, we are partners and we can talk. However, at this level of political relations, and especially in the context of a kind of civil war, the provision of privileged access and attention comes with a sub-heading: namely, that of security guarantees. And if there is one thing that NATO is keen to avoid post-2014, it is the idea that it will act as a guarantor of Afghanistan's regime.

NATO has been here before – in the difficult situation where it needs to balance special attention with watered-down security guarantees. In the case of Georgia it failed to strike the right balance. Georgia felt emboldened by NATO's political signals, and the path was opened to war with Russia in August 2008. A proposal by NATO of something like a NATO-Afghanistan Council modelled on the NATO-Russia Council would be the maximum offer in terms of political visibility, but from the point of view of the NAC it would be exactly the wrong signal to send in terms of security guarantees.¹⁴

The fallback option is NATO's partnership program. This is NATO's off-the-shelf toolbox for partner nations: they can gain access to NATO training courses, participate in exercises, and be advised on how to bring their forces up to standard so that they may one day cooperate with NATO forces in real operations. However, it is not an easy fallback option. There is no standard package to offer partners: everything has to be tailored to the individual country. What Afghanistan might be looking for here is not clear. The country does not possess the institutions and administrative skill to fully exploit NATO's toolbox, though institution-building is part of what NATO labels “building integrity”. This is not what the political level in Afghanistan is chiefly looking for, though. The Afghans want high-level political visibility and relations; NATO wants to offer more regular contacts at staff level.

Neither set of issues – military or political – is easy to solve on its own. This brings us to the final challenge of tying these issues into one package. One may be tempted to ask why there needs to be one package. Why not deal with the issues one by one and keep it all fairly manageable?

The push for an integrated package comes first of all from Lisbon, where NATO committed to an “enduring” partnership with both dimensions – political and military. The Afghans are not about to give up on this idea because they will be in need of all the assistance they can get post-2014, and an ambitious partnership package is better than dispersed aid programs. Moreover, the United States has entered into a bilateral agreement with Afghanistan (the 1 May 2012 *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement*) which is comprehensively focused on politics, security, and economics. It makes sense from an American perspective if NATO follows through on its Lisbon

¹³ As phrased by a NATO official interviewed by the author, 10 May 2012.

¹⁴ The United States has already granted Afghanistan the status of major non-NATO ally. What is in question is NATO's collective willingness to provide a security guarantee.



agenda and matches the U.S.-Afghan agreement, less ambitiously but nevertheless coherently, and this is the American position inside NATO headquarters.

There are a number of problems in Afghanistan that defy easy categorization, and which could be more readily managed within an overarching partnership framework. One such issue is the demobilization of the Afghan forces, because the plan is to cut them by more than 100,000 troops within a few years. Where will these trained people go, and to what use will they put their fighting skills? These are relevant questions, but there is as yet no demobilization and reintegration program to handle the drawdown. NATO may not have to be in control of such a program but it could support it, and this would be easier within a broad framework than in a piecemeal setting of compartmentalized policies.

The reluctance to commit to one overall package comes from many NATO allies, though. They are war-weary; most are hard hit by the financial crisis, and are preparing drastic defense budget cuts; and all seem focused on turning the page which marks an end to the Afghan war. Hence the repeated references in Chicago to the “irreversibility” of the 2014 transition deadline. For most allies it is simply easier to imagine a future relationship with Afghanistan if it is chopped up into compartmentalized issues. Deadlines are easier to impose, and appeals to compensate military for political means or vice versa are easier to resist.

In sum, three issues mark NATO’s zone of discomfort:

- militarily, NATO can go for a classroom mission that will not do much good on the ground. To really assist, NATO must be prepared to move into the regions and, in exceptional circumstances, into the field. To do so, NATO must accept the continued likelihood of a degree of combat;
- politically, NATO can go for a staff-level partnership based on standard policy tools, but this will fall far short of Afghan expectations and will likely engender a political backlash. To really placate the Afghans, NATO must be prepared to engage them in a structured and meaningful political-strategic dialogue;
- in terms of the full and “enduring” partnership, NATO can integrate pol-mil issues in one single package and thus fulfill the Lisbon promise and align with the United States. It is not what most NATO allies are looking for, however, and they need to come up with a formula for “one partnership, several partnership pillars”.

Forward to a Modest Partnership

This section will analyse some of the trends that make a modest partnership the most likely future for NATO and Afghanistan. Since the thinking of the allies is most advanced in terms of the military mission, this is where we shall begin.

Military authorities in NATO are already weighing in on allied deliberations.¹⁵ The North Atlantic Council has tasked military planning only since Chicago, but the informal political-military

dialogue began earlier. What is clear at this early stage is that the military institution has a clear preference for a “robust” mission. This should come as no surprise. The institution represents the views of the people who must actually go into the field and run the physical risks. They will want to know that they can be rescued if in trouble. In addition, as professionals they demand the resources that will make mission success more likely. It all amounts to one compelling argument in favor of robustness.

To square this, NATO decision-makers will likely end up favoring a small and centrally located training mission over a widely distributed one. It could well end up being a Kabul-only mission. Moreover, NATO is likely to adopt very strict rules of engagement for the use of strategic reserves and other support forces. There will thus likely be no agreement to provide Afghan forces with combat support or “assistance” in the field. The probable scenario is that NATO will not write off this possibility, because it would not look good politically to deny beleaguered Afghan troops any form of military assistance. Instead, NATO will likely define a narrow rescue option in extremis and subject to case-by-case decision-making and national caveats. Combat assistance will not be NATO’s future task. The exception could prove to be a degree of intelligence-sharing that can be handled out of the public view but in line with a framework agreement.

If NATO goes small, the question is not whether a coalition operation will open up next to it but what form such a coalition will take. There is sure to be a coalition, for several reasons. The most important is that the United States intends to maintain a more important military presence in Afghanistan than it provides through NATO, as is clear from the U.S.-Afghan *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement* of 1 May 2012.¹⁶ This document contains a fairly lengthy section on long-term security arrangements which links a continued U.S. military presence to the fight against al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and also the build-up of Afghan defense capacities. The size of the planned U.S. presence will be defined in a future *Bilateral Security Agreement*; a qualified guess suggests a force of 20,000 troops,¹⁷ undertaking a variety of tasks from counter-terrorism to training and combat support for Afghan forces.

We know that the United States likes to operate with partners and allies, and we know that concern for the underlying transatlantic partnership invariably causes some allies to invest forces in U.S. operations. It may not be all allies all the time, but a number will always join in at some level. This is also the likely future in Afghanistan. Small detachments of Special Forces from select allies and partners (i.e. Australia, New Zealand) could join the U.S. counter-terrorist mission; other allied contributions might be made to the training that the United States chooses to do in the regions where NATO’s footprint does not extend; and some may join in combat support. Since this will happen outside NATO, it will be coalition-based and the nation providing the framework will be the United States.

The likely scenario is therefore that NATO goes small and is complemented by an extensive U.S.-led coalition. This scenario is also the reason why we can write off as highly unlikely the full

¹⁵ Background interviews in NATO HQ.

¹⁶ The *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement* is available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistansignedtext.pdf>.

¹⁷ *The Economist*, “The NATO summit: NATO’s risky Afghan endgame”, 26 May 2012.



collapse of a NATO training mission before it has even begun. Most NATO allies are admittedly exhausted, but the opportunity to go small while granting tacit support to a parallel coalition effort (at no cost to non-participants) will facilitate consensus.

The question is thus what will happen to political consultations on “issues of strategic concern”, and also the full package of partnership. Political consultations will inevitably match the military mission in terms of ambition, which is to say that they will not be ambitious. NATO’s clout in out-of-area theaters stems from its military presence and, as this presence diminishes, so does its clout. There will be no problem in offering Afghanistan access to a number of partnership tools: to place Afghanistan on a par with other partners such as Kyrgyzstan or Moldova is “all very standard”, as one NATO official put it.¹⁸

To placate Afghan concerns with regard to visibility and political weight, NATO could then shape a type of consultation mechanism involving its senior staff all the way up to the Secretary General – as long as this mechanism does not give the appearance of guaranteed access. The Secretary General would obviously interact with the Afghan Head of State, and his involvement would provide a ready and direct connection with the North Atlantic Council. However, by setting priorities for staff work and reducing its own engagement to occasional summits, the Council can keep issues at a fairly unexceptional level.

The challenge for NATO will not be so much in designing this consultation mechanism, which is fairly easily done, but in obtaining Afghan support. In this regard the issue of packaging becomes central. The Afghans want above all to see NATO engaged in the country. They will likely be more easily persuaded to agree to a watered-down consultation mechanism if there is a pol-mil package: a stand-alone staff consultation agreement, certainly, will not impress many in Afghanistan or in its volatile neighborhood.

For this reason alone the allies will be under pressure to make an integrated pol-mil package and the United States can be expected to push for this. If a partnership package – an *Enduring Partnership* with both a military mission and political consultations – is thus likely, it is also likely that most other allies will work for its compartmentalization. As stated above, this is first and foremost because they are generally exhausted. In addition, unlike the United States they have no political tradition of mixing military training with socio-economic development: they traditionally do one (operations), and afterwards the other (development). We also see this in NATO, which has until now started with military operations (via the Operations Division) and then moved on to partnership activities (via the Political Affairs Division) but not done the two together under one and the same mission header. If NATO has no tradition for mixing military operations and partnership, it is because the concept is alien in Europe. Finally, three European countries (Britain, France, and Germany) have entered into bilateral agreements with Afghanistan and thus show their acknowledgment that the time has come to switch from defense to diplomacy and

development.

In short, the form the *Enduring Partnership* is likely to take post-2014 is: a small NATO training mission in Kabul, and maybe in one or two other cities; very limited “assistance” outside the training base; a consultation mechanism at senior staff level; and a partnership framework header, but with pol-mil issues stringently divided into partnership “pillars”.

Options for Change

All this is tentative. Much will happen between now and December 2014, when ISAF ends its mission and NATO prepares to start a new one – with Afghan approval and based on a UN Security Council resolution. If matters work out quite well in the meantime, then NATO’s willingness to sign on in more substantive ways will increase. On the other hand, if all goes badly this willingness could diminish to the point of disappearing.

With this caveat in mind, it is useful consider some policy options. There are three such options, with a progressive increase in terms of both effects and difficulties.

The small policy option focuses on Kabul and the role of NATO’s existing Senior Civilian Representative (SCR). The SCR is in Kabul to report to NATO’s Secretary General and, since January 2010, to help drive the process of transition. The SCR’s remit could now be enhanced to help launch and sustain NATO-Afghan partnership.

An enhanced SCR remit could do several things. It could structure the high-level dialogue between Afghanistan’s senior security staff and NATO’s leadership, by being on site, continuously providing information and serving to liaise the two parties.¹⁹ It could prevent consultations from simply following bureaucratic routine, and ensure receptiveness to ongoing political concerns. Moreover, it could become NATO’s on-site resource for balancing the relationship between the Alliance’s small training mission and the parallel coalition effort (wider in focus, but not necessarily large in numerical terms). While there will certainly be chains of command to manage the relationship, an enhanced SCR could more easily report on the socio-political context of the missions and the evolving local conditions for coordinating them. Finally, such a post could become a vehicle for the parallel political and socio-economic oversight of development projects that are about to lose their Provincial Reconstruction Team framework, but which should continue to be coordinated as far as possible.

A reinforced SCR is no panacea. It is a measure to consolidate what seems likely, namely a reduced partnership package. It could help NATO pursue this policy; it would not alter it. The upside is that it would not be politically controversial. NATO could pursue it without too much ado.

The second option is to upgrade the effort to pay for the Afghan security forces beyond 2014. NATO has a Trust Fund, and NATO nations have committed in significant ways, as we have seen.

¹⁸ Interview with the author, 10 May 2012.

¹⁹ The Afghan security staff in question would be drawn not only from the national security services, but also from the Ministries of Defense and the Interior. The dividing lines between these staffs are real, but also less developed in Afghanistan than in Western countries, and NATO should maintain a flexible engagement in this respect.



However, the new target of 228,500 Afghan forces at a cost of \$4.1 billion might easily come to be regarded as “a firm ceiling on what is likely to be required in the future”; in actual fact, “it is more like a floor”.²⁰ It is a force target developed by ISAF in Kabul, to describe what the ANSF could look like if the insurgency deflates. It might not, of course.

NATO’s current policy of tying the Trust Fund effort into the wider effort to shape a Transformation Decade for Afghanistan is the right one, as is the effort to draw in contributors with strong budgets. What NATO could do now is to reinforce this process. For one, NATO leaders must make the ANSF support a central part of their public messaging so as to prepare their publics for the argument that, even in the midst of a financial crisis, it is good security policy to pay substantially for Afghan forces. Moreover, NATO could upgrade the effort to organize this policy commitment. As mentioned, there are multiple money flows that pay for Afghan forces. NATO could reinforce the effort to bring donors together to raise awareness and money, and then also reinforce accountability. The UN Trust Fund (LOFTA) – which is mostly funded by ISAF nations in one way or another – is mired in corruption and mismanagement, and donors’ trust is eroding. NATO’s renewed effort could involve co-hosted summits, and NATO might consider appointing a special envoy to help organize a permanent donors’ coordination mechanism.²¹

The third and final option is to engage NATO in the region surrounding Afghanistan. There can be no question of making NATO the guarantor of nations in the region, or developing a heavy NATO footprint. The option is to develop NATO’s modest but significant contribution to the fostering of a community of interests in and around Afghanistan. This would be an indirect strategy of enabling regional security.

NATO’s new toolbox could be of use here – the one focused on managing so-called emerging security challenges, by which NATO understands terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber security, and energy security. NATO could pick an issue of common concern to the countries in the region, and slowly and carefully engage a dialogue on it. Such an issue could be cyber security. The purpose would not be to engender collective organizations or doctrine – which is much too ambitious. Nor would it be merely to help sustain NATO logistics throughout Central Asia as part of the redeployment, useful as this could be. The real goal would be a longer-term objective – to bring regional stakeholders (especially Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) to the understanding that security can be more than a zero sum game. If NATO manages no more than to promote this degree of regional understanding on any small security issue, it will have done well.

This option is easy to dismiss on a number of grounds. First, as one American official noted, the United States will hesitate to involve NATO in the region because political inertia could result from the complexity of Alliance decision-making. Second, Turkey too will hesitate because it already runs an “Istanbul Process” including the countries of the region, which has been very difficult to get off the ground.²² To put matters simply, Turkey does not want to see Iran or Pakistan deadlock the process because of NATO’s regional involvement. Finally, NATO’s “emerging security challenges” toolbox is underdeveloped because nations are not investing sufficiently. The promise to develop these new NATO tools is recent – it goes back to the Lisbon summit of 2010 – and NATO nations have been too busy and too short on money to really follow up.

Still, it would make eminent sense to develop a contribution – no more – to the regional security dynamics of South Asia, and one that could help underpin the wider efforts provided by both the United States and Turkey. This would also align with the developmental emphasis of the bilateral agreements which Britain, France and Germany have undertaken with Afghanistan. But it presupposes a more serious investment in NATO “transformation”, and the idea that NATO can do more than just military operations.

²⁰Ronald E. Neumann and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “NATO’s undue optimism on Afghanistan”, *Washington Post*, 18 May 2012.

²¹On the need for donor organization, see the study commissioned by the British government: Bent Lovelock and Peter Jensen, *Review of Security Sector Funding Mechanism for Afghan National Security Forces Sustainment Post-2014 – A Discussion Paper*, April 2012.

²²Turkey has taken the lead in inciting regional cooperation in “the heart of Asia”. This label was defined at the first Istanbul Conference for the countries of the region in January 2010 – just prior to the London Conference – and it was reiterated at the second Istanbul Conference in November 2011. This Istanbul Process of Regional Reassurance and Cooperation will move to Kabul for a summit in June 2012. It is essentially a method for engineering bottom-up regional change – for gaining the political reassurance that enables governments to relinquish control of social, economic, and cultural exchanges across borders. See the *Istanbul Statement on Friendship and Cooperation in “the Heart of Asia”*, January 26, 2010; *Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for A Stable and Secure Afghanistan*, 2 November 2011.



Conclusion

The *Enduring Partnership* between NATO and Afghanistan is on the drawing board. It was put on the agenda in late 2010; it was refined in May 2012; and it will now be developed in earnest.

The Chicago Summit of May 2012 clarified NATO's commitment to the funding of the future Afghan security forces, as well as to some kind of training mission. By way of omission, it highlighted the difficulties of defining this mission and also of defining the kind of political consultation mechanism that must come with partnership. While firm decisions are not likely to be taken before 2014, we can already conclude that the management of expectations will be a core task. The partnership issue contains few easy options and considerable pitfalls.

The likely scenario is a modest *Enduring Partnership* that minimizes the risk of combat and the semblance of security guarantees. To minimize the risk of combat, allies can centralize their training effort geographically and avoid operational "assistance" to Afghan forces. To minimize the semblance of security guarantees, they can establish consultations at staff level and keep the North Atlantic Council engaged only indirectly.

However, NATO can count on the continued involvement of the United States, an involvement that will likely attract a degree of support from some allies and become a coalition effort. This will become the major outside security effort post-2014. NATO should take comfort from this, and aim for the best possible *Enduring Partnership* package in support of the coalition.

Moreover, NATO can work with a number of policy options. It can upgrade its Kabul presence; it can strengthen international commitment to Afghan forces; and it can help facilitate a regional community of interests. Of course, going for greater effect also means facing greater political difficulties. Such is the nature of NATO's Afghan endgame. It highlights that the *Enduring Partnership* is a political tool whose usefulness will be as great as the attention and thought NATO Heads of State and Government devote to it.