

March 31, 2008

## What Lies Beneath: The Future of NATO through the ISAF Prism

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Few would have thought in 1990 that NATO had a bright future. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the demise of the Warsaw Pact had pundits and academics alike predicting NATO's demise. But instead of withering away, NATO has spent the last 18 years redefining itself and taking on new missions. It has expanded into Central and Eastern Europe, ensuring the spread of democracy and stability; helped to end conflict in the former Yugoslavia; and provided relief for the victims of natural disasters in Pakistan and on America's Gulf coast. Today the Alliance is on the front line of the struggle against global terrorism with a full on campaign against al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan.

However, despite its long list of achievements, NATO continues to experience strategic drift, with deep divisions inside the Alliance on future roles and missions. The Alliance's summit this month in Bucharest was intended to get at the heart of such debates (in addition to adding three new members). But NATO's current mission in Afghanistan, which currently is suffering from a lack of both resources and political will, now threatens to cast a dark shadow over the summit's agenda. With the U.S. in election mode and a new president due in January 2009, postponing NATO reforms may not be all bad. Understandably, the allies are cautious about major initiatives in light of their current operations. At the same time, France's revelation that it wants to explore re-joining the military committee also poses a number of questions that many believe will be best answered by giving Paris (and the Alliance) a bit more time to develop their thinking on what this means. That said, NATO is facing a long list of pressing challenges, many of which demand immediate attention.

Assuming that the Bucharest Summit focuses on securing additional troop commitments in Afghanistan and adding new members, 2009 will become an important year for the Alliance. It will mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO and, if the allies commit themselves to building consensus on the Alliance's future agenda and addressing the Alliance's current list of challenges, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit could provide the basis for a bright future. This article will review the challenges facing the Alliance in Afghanistan and highlight how such challenges are symptomatic of larger strategic issues; and outline what will need to be done in advance of Bucharest and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary to prepare the Alliance for 21<sup>st</sup> century missions.

### *Afghanistan as a Symptom, Not the Cause*

As several high-level reports in early 2008 have highlighted, NATO's mission in Afghanistan has been plagued by a long list of missteps, tactical and strategic disagreements, troop caveats, poor coordination, and a lack of resources for reconstruction to name just a few. But the troubles the Alliance has encountered in Afghanistan are not specific to the ISAF mission. They reflect very real changes in the global security environment, issues that to date NATO has failed to address. As such, the Alliance is facing two simultaneous challenges. First, it must make a number of mid-course corrections to set its mission in Afghanistan back on track. Second, NATO will need to move ahead with much-needed reforms in order to stay relevant after its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. The following section will review three core factors that are placing a strain on NATO's mission in Afghanistan and the Alliance more broadly.

## *Strategic Ambiguity*

The overriding problem with NATO's involvement in Afghanistan is that the Allies have never truly agreed upon the nature of the mission. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) does have a mandate. It is charged with "assisting the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) with the maintenance of security throughout the country."<sup>1</sup> This should consequently enable the GOA and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to operate across the country. But the mandate is so vague that it allows NATO allies to interpret it in a number of different ways. Certain members feel that the primary objective was, and remains, reconstruction and development and have sold the mission to their publics as a 'peace-keeping' operation. Consequently, such countries are loath to send their troops into the more volatile south. Other members, while believing that reconstruction and development are essential to long-term security and stability in Afghanistan, believe that kinetic operations, particularly in the south and east of Afghanistan, are essential to support development objectives. These countries support new schools and roads but believe that infrastructure alone can not move the country towards greater long-term stability.

This fundamental divide about the mission's purpose and overarching goals has now reached the point where one can effectively speak of a two-tier alliance. Some allies do the fighting, while others build schools. This is a simplified argument of course, but it hits at the heart of the matter. It might be difficult for Berlin or Paris to garner domestic support for a greater role in the south of Afghanistan, especially in light of declining public support for the mission, but it has not been easy for Ottawa or The Hague either. NATO is based upon

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the idea of solidarity and the reluctance of some major allies to get more involved is seriously damaging the future of the Alliance, not to mention the success of the mission in Afghanistan. The lack of consensus amongst the allies on specific goals and tactics has meant that many allies have been (a) reluctant to contribute fighting troops and equipment and (b) have failed to standardize a 'NATO approach' to the country, instead utilising different combinations of military power and development in an entirely uncoordinated manner.

In the short term, and in advance of Bucharest, the NATO Alliance will need to work towards consensus on the mission's purpose. It is expected that the strategy reviews that were launched in both Europe and the United States in recent months will produce a document that clearly articulates the mission's aims and how NATO fits into what some have dubbed the three D's (defense, development, and diplomacy). In doing so, the Alliance will have countered one of its members' most common complaints: NATO's lack of a roadmap. With a roadmap in hand, the hope is that NATO members will find it easier to explain to their sceptical publics why the mission matters and thereby increase or at the very minimum maintain their commitments on the ground.

In the long term and in advance of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit, NATO will have to do much more than produce a consensus document. It will need to expose itself to the dangers of starting a broader strategic debate about burden sharing and future missions. What are the long-term consequences if NATO allies remain uncomfortable with far away missions like Afghanistan? Will NATO permanently opt to scale back its out of area missions? Conversely, what are the consequences of undertaking more missions like Afghanistan in light of today's two-tiered Alliance structure? Can the Alliance afford to continue down such a path?

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<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolutions 1386 (2001), 1510 (2003), and 1623 (2005).

The only way to answer these questions is for the Alliance to task itself at its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit with the drafting of a new Strategic Concept. The current version, which was drafted in 1999 (before enlargement, September 11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London), fails to answer the larger strategic questions facing the Alliance today. Putting the Alliance through the task of rewriting the Strategic Concept will be painstakingly difficult and almost certainly create friction between those members that harbor more ambitious visions of NATO's future (global partnerships and global missions) and those that do not. Unfortunately, other than muddling through for another few years, alternatives do not exist. NATO desperately needs to bring its strategic vision in line with today's security challenges and redefine its relationships with other organizations and non-NATO members.

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### *Manpower and Equipment*

In February 2007, there were approximately 35,460 allied soldiers in Afghanistan. Exactly one year later that number stands at 43,250. The largest contingent consists of 15,000 U.S. troops. The other large contributors are Britain (7,800), Germany (3,210), Canada (2,500), the Netherlands (2200), and Italy (2880). The remaining troops are provided by an additional thirty-one countries with smaller contingents including 1,515 French soldiers (soon to increase by 1,000 more), 675 from Turkey and 740 from Spain. The current troop levels may seem like a large number, but in reality they are quite low.

Achieving the current troop levels has been an arduous process that has essentially had NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, running hot in hand from capital to capital. Back in 2004 there was only one international soldier per 25km. While there are more troops on the ground today, there are still insufficient forces to achieve the

levels of security required for reconstruction and development. British General David Richards, who commanded ISAF IX, claims that his lack of a reserve brigade meant the very real possibility that he could have been outmanoeuvred by the Taliban, had Taliban commanders not chosen to take on NATO in a decisive battle (which ultimately played to the Alliance's strengths).<sup>2</sup> But imagine the time, energy, and lives that could have been saved if more troops had been committed sooner. There is no escaping the fact that if one applies low levels of economic assistance and military forces to a reconstruction operation in a post-conflict society, the results will be low levels of security, slow economic growth, and a lack of public confidence in the ability of the GOA/NATO to deliver.

There are several causes for the low levels of NATO troops in country. Chief contributors such as the U.S.

and UK are overstretched, particularly in Iraq, although in recent months they have increased their military manpower in Afghanistan. The more fundamental problem is that the unresolved issue as to the exact nature of the mission, coupled with a failure to understand the gravity of the security situation in Afghanistan, means many larger allies have not deployed adequate numbers of troops and equipment.

In addition, many allies, often the smaller ones, simply lack the expeditionary capabilities that the mission requires especially strategic and tactical lift. Eighteen years after the end of the Cold War, a troubling number of Alliance members still struggle to transition their forces from a defensive to an offensive posture. Declining defense budgets and increasing scepticism on the part of European publics on the utility of military force have made this process extremely slow going and had a direct impact on the ability of the Alliance to respond to

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with General David Richards, RUSI Journal April 2007, Vol 152, No 2.

**Table 1: Comparison of Peak International Troop Deployment Strength**

Location	Peak Number of International Troops	International Troops per km	International Troops per person
Kosovo	40,000	1 per 0.3km	1 per 50
Bosnia	60,000	1 per 0.85km	1 per 66
East Timor	9,000	1 per 1.6km	1 per 111
Iraq	155,000	1 per 2.8km	1 per 161
Somalia	40,000	1 per 16km	1 per 200
Liberia	11,000 2200 (MEF)	1 per 8km	1 per 265
Sierra Leone	18,000	1 per 4km	1 per 300
Haiti	20,000	1 per 1.5km	1 per 375
Afghanistan	20,000 (OEF) 6,000 (ISAF)	1 per 25km	1 per 1,115

Source: M. Bhatia, K. Lanigan and P. Wilkinson, "Minimal Investments, Minimal Results: The Failure of Security Policy in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, June 2004.

today's security challenges. That said, some of the smaller NATO member states, such as Denmark and Estonia, have found innovative ways to address capability shortfalls and have made important contributions to ongoing missions.

To be sure, Alliance transformation will take time, but the lack of sufficient manpower and enablers has been a problem since the Alliance took over the ISAF command in 2003. But it has not only meant slow progress in terms of reconstruction and security. Insufficient troop numbers also create a vicious, paradoxical circle whereby NATO uses airpower against insurgents to compensate for a lack of boots on the ground. This inevitably increases the likelihood of innocent civilians being caught in the crossfire. European electorates then express their outrage, prompting various capitols to further limit troop deployments – the lack of which was a primary cause of the civilian casualties in the first place.

In the lead up to Bucharest, the focus must rest on an almost impossible task: securing greater troop commitments in Afghanistan. The best way for the Alliance to do so is to continue to make the case (rightly) that the security of the people of Afghanistan is tied directly to that of NATO member states. While many Europeans feel as far

away from Afghanistan as they do from China, the truth is that a failure in Afghanistan would have grave consequences for places like Berlin, Paris, or Madrid. Such consequences could range from refugee flows (40,000 Iraqi refugees have made their way to Europe in recent years) to increased terrorist activity stemming from terrorist training camps in Afghanistan to greater regional instability. In Bucharest, France is expected to contribute approximately 1,000 troops to work in the south or east of the country. Additional troops might be forthcoming from one or two of the Eastern European NATO allies.

In advance of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit, NATO will need to revisit its past capability initiatives to get at the heart of its continuing capability shortfalls. To be sure, important progress was made at the Riga Summit in 2006 when the Alliance committed itself to purchasing a handful of C-17s. While this was a critical first step, NATO members will need to do much more – through pooling, niche capabilities, or multinational procurement, for example – to acquire the capabilities it needs for tomorrow's missions. A rotary wing lift capacity would be a useful addition. In the meantime the Alliance could also work toward matching money from more established allies with equipment in many of the Eastern European countries that if

upgraded and serviced, could be put into operational use.

Because some national governments will never find the will or possess the ability to secure adequate funding, NATO must keep its focus on setting up a common operations fund. Some of the initial obstacles to this concept have already been removed but the Alliance still operates under the catchphrase of “costs lie where they fall.” This means that states that do assume the political risk and agree to send troops are also saddled with the costs for that deployment. As a result, NATO member states have every incentive *not* to volunteer for missions – exactly the opposite of what one might expect in a defensive alliance.

Finally, the Alliance should use its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit to revisit one of its premier capability initiatives: the NATO Response Force. To date, the NRF has been used twice – once in response to the earthquake in Pakistan in the fall of 2005 and once in response to Hurricane Katrina in the United States. Several NATO members are uncomfortable using the NRF for disaster relief operations and, therefore, urge the Alliance to use this capability strictly for traditional military missions. Yet most members also oppose using the NRF in Afghanistan. NATO must work to resolve the current NRF debate. Should the NRF, for example, be considered and used as a force of last-resort or as a readily available and rapidly deployable force that responds to crisis situations proactively? Should NATO identify a specific geographic scope for the NRF? Is the NRF at risk of suffering from atrophy if it is not used within a decade? It is vital that NATO agree at the highest levels and with the utmost clarity on how to use this force. An inability to do so could severely weaken this capability well before it is ever used to its full potential.

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## *Regional and International Assistance*

NATO might be tasked with assisting Kabul with the provision of security across the country, but this is only one small part of the larger puzzle. For the overall project to succeed, much more international assistance is required both in terms of development assistance and the civilian presence on the ground. Several international organizations are on the ground but many of them, like the United Nation’s assistance mission to Afghanistan, are woefully understaffed and under resourced. Initially, foreign governments and international organizations concluded that a small footprint would be best, but that has proven false. Contrary to the international community’s original assumptions, Afghans are accepting and welcoming of the international presence. While they do want international troops to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible, they understand better than most Westerners that a premature withdrawal would have negative consequences for

Afghanistan’s future. Afghans actually see the small number of troops and civilians as a lack of commitment by the international community, which hinders the community’s ability to affect change. The small number of civilians in the UN framework and the poor coordination between the UN, the EU mission, and NATO PRTs has also hampered the international community’s ability to deliver on the broad development and reconstruction agenda, which further undermines the faith Afghans have in the GoA and the presence of the international community.

To illustrate how current aid and civilian contributions have not come close to matching the scale of the tasks at hand, it is useful to compare Kosovo to Afghanistan. In the first four years after major fighting concluded in Kosovo, the province received \$1.8 billion in international aid for a population of just under 2 million. In the four years since the ousting of the Taliban from power in

2001, Afghanistan was pledged \$15 billion but only received some \$4.7 billion. The population of Afghanistan is 29 million. Therefore, whereas the people of Kosovo received some \$900 per head, Kabul has received \$162 per head. Kosovo, located in Europe with a legacy of development in an industrialised country, was not nearly as decrepit as Afghanistan. Two hundred years as a buffer state between the Russian Empire and the British Empire, followed by occupation and conflict under Soviet control from 1979 to 1988, then a civil war, followed by Taliban rule and finally the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 has left Afghanistan in ruins. The level of international funding has never been enough and more recent contributions (i.e. U.S., Canada) while helpful, still do not adequately match the development challenges in Afghanistan.

An even more inconvenient truth is the near total lack of UN leadership in Afghanistan. This is partly NATO's fault. From the start, the Alliance defined security very broadly, and as such, ISAF now encompasses substantial reconstruction and development tasks, in addition to its military campaigns. This has led the public to believe that NATO is responsible for rebuilding Afghanistan and it has meant that UNAMA has not played a major role in country. But this is no excuse for the UN's lack of leadership. There is one organization that is best suited to undertake substantial reconstruction and development work and that is the UN. NATO can certainly help to provide "hard" security in Afghanistan and this may include some quick impact projects, but NATO is not equipped for long-term development tasks – something that the NATO Secretary General readily admits. Nonetheless, successive UN secretary generals have stood by and watched Afghanistan fall into further chaos. Now, as the situation seems to worsen, it seems less and less likely that the UN will assume a greater leadership role.

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Now that the UN has appointed Kai Eide as the special representative, NATO and the UN can get down to business in organizing and coordinating the civilian efforts in Afghanistan. The Alliance is eager for a greater UN role, leading many to conclude that Eide has the opportunity to make substantial progress. However, Eide will need the support of his own organization and the UN Secretary General, neither of which appear to view Afghanistan as a top priority. Therefore, the Bucharest Summit will reveal a good deal about the future of the NATO-UN relationship in Afghanistan and beyond depending on how much Ban Ki Moon chooses to engage with the Alliance.

NATO also must establish stronger working relationships with other regional and international organizations that are on the ground in Afghanistan.

Given the central importance of the EU-led police training mission in Afghanistan, stronger EU-NATO relations are a good place to start. To date, the two organizations have found ad hoc ways to work together on the ground. But the relationship back in Brussels is plagued by a number of political difficulties. Nonetheless, if NATO is to remain viable as a security institution and the EU is to grow as an international entity capable of making positive contributions to international peace and security, then the two organizations – which share many of the same members – must iron out their differences and find ways to cooperate and share information.

Before the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit, the Alliance needs to look beyond its mission in Afghanistan and strengthen its partnerships with other countries and other organizations in a more general fashion. For example, NATO must establish a memorandum of understanding with the UN, given that NATO always works with the UN. The Alliance cannot compete with the UN and it does not want to. The UN Secretary General should make it a priority to

strengthen the UN-NATO relationship and deepen the dialogue and interaction between the two organizations. Afghanistan and future operations will only benefit from such progress.

Global NATO does not mean global allies, but an improved partnership scheme would bring tangible benefits to existing missions. Countries such as Australia, Japan and South Korea have both expressed an interest in closer relations with NATO and they are contributing to NATO efforts in Afghanistan. However, these countries have made it clear that they are not seeking membership. But they should have mechanisms with which they can plug into the Alliance.

### *What Lies Beneath*

These problems with the ISAF mission in Afghanistan are not stand-alone issues, unrelated to how NATO sees itself and its own internal battles. The Alliance has attempted to re-write its mission over the last nearly two decades. The 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts attempted to get the Alliance in shape to respond to the new international environment. But these changes were not substantive enough and are now outdated. At its heart, the Alliance is still very much a Cold War organization. This is problematic, as the last ten years have illustrated that the primary security

concerns that face the transatlantic area are far removed from the challenges of the Cold War. Yet the Alliance has not changed. The inability to get more troops to Afghanistan – or troops without caveats – reflects disagreement within the Alliance about its role in the world. For the United States, and allies such as Great Britain, NATO must act beyond the North Atlantic area if it is to remain a viable tool for transatlantic defence and security interests. The inability of the Alliance to agree on the exact nature of the mission can also be traced back to root differences in how the allies approach the world. Perceptions of the efficacy of force are not shared across the Alliance and this affects how NATO trains for and engages in missions. The troubles in Afghanistan cannot be seen as independent of NATO and the Alliance should learn from this. NATO will undoubtedly attempt to re-define its involvement in Afghanistan at the Bucharest summit. One should expect a communiqué that indirectly outlines a new approach to avoid failing in Afghanistan, while providing the Alliance with a way out. But this will not fix the inherent problems within the Alliance; it will only paper over the cracks. In the coming year the allies need to have an open and honest discussion about NATO, its missions and mandate, to pave the way forward towards real change at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit.

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