

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Afghanistan:

Unchartered Territory

Abstract: To date, there are no definitive examples of a sizeable international coalition that has been successful nation-building while simultaneously trying to defeat a motivated and capable insurgent force. NATO has embarked on a mission that was not contemplated when the alliance was created and is without historical precedent. This essay will review the existing command structure of the NATO-led operation, unique characteristics of coalition warfare, counterinsurgency principles applicable to Afghanistan, and offer policy recommendations for the future viability of NATO. This paper asserts that increased NATO participation and assertive U.S. leadership – to merge military, political and economic efforts – are required and promise the swiftest prescription to remedy Afghanistan’s ailing situation.

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NATO in Afghanistan: Uncharted Territory

History provides many examples of successful international campaigns conducted by a variety of coalitions. Conflicts like World War I, World War II, Korea, and the first Gulf War (1991), demonstrate the potential of international collaboration in support of strategic goals.¹ However, these examples were successful against an enemy force that was primarily conventional in nature, and they terminated after the enemy was clearly defeated and international objectives were achieved. Currently in Afghanistan, the enemy – Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other insurgents – has not been defeated, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance is facing perhaps its greatest challenge. As NATO attempts to defeat the insurgency and nation build, growing cracks within the alliance – based on the differing priorities of its member states – will severely hamper its overall effectiveness.

Members of a coalition often have different reasons for participating in an international operation. The nature of their agreements predisposes the coalition's operations to being multifaceted. Often, they are beset by national caveats and restrictions and do not compare with the efficiencies resident in a singular national chain of command. To date, there are no definitive examples of a sizeable international coalition that has been successful nation-building while simultaneously trying to defeat a motivated and capable insurgent force. Realistically, NATO has embarked on a mission that was not contemplated when the alliance was created and is without historical precedent.

In order to encapsulate the salient points critical for a NATO-led coalition to be successful in Afghanistan, and the related U.S. policy options, an analysis of many factors is

¹ Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 346.

required. Additional complimentary work is essential to absorb the entirety of the challenges facing Afghanistan today. This essay will review the existing command structure of the NATO-led operation, unique characteristics of coalition warfare, counterinsurgency principles applicable to Afghanistan, and offer policy recommendations for the future viability of NATO. This paper asserts that increased NATO participation and assertive U.S. leadership – to merge military, political and economic efforts – are required and promise the swiftest prescription to remedy Afghanistan’s ailing situation.

The Mission

In October 2003, the UN Security Council authorized NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to help the government of Afghanistan to extend its authority and provide a safe and secure environment conducive to free and fair elections, the spread of the rule of law and the reconstruction of the country.² Noticeably absent from this mission statement is perhaps the greatest variable and strategy implementation challenge. Specifically, NATO must quell an insurgency led by fundamentalist Taliban, along with Al Qaeda and others, who are revolting against the current moderate democratic process and international attempts to modernize and develop the country.

The Overall Command Structure

NATO took over responsibility for ISAF in August 2003. ISAF is NATO’s first operation outside the Euro-Atlantic area, and it “is where the future of NATO will be decided.”³ The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is the Alliance’s principal decision making body. It provides overall coordination and political direction for ISAF. Based on the political guidance from the North Atlantic Council, strategic command and control of ISAF is exercised by the Allied

² NATO Website, <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan/index.html> (accessed March 15, 2009).

³ Richard E. Rupp, *NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 154.

Command for Operations, which is based at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium. An International Coordination Cell at SHAPE facilitates military coordination with non-NATO troop contributors. Under SHAPE, the Joint Force Command Brunssum in the Netherlands is responsible for staffing, deploying and sustaining the mission. Brunssum serves as the operational-level headquarters between ISAF headquarters in Kabul.

In all, it is enormous structure – which is arguably required given the scope of international effort – that is burdened with the bureaucratic inertia inherent to any organization of this size. Subsequent chains of command, internal to each military unit as well as domestic political-military protocols of each contributing nation, compound the obvious complexities. The current ISAF mission is supported by 42 countries with troop contributions totaling 61,960 troops as of March 13, 2009.⁴ NATO has assumed the responsibility to lead and coordinate this international effort.

	Albania	140		Finland	110		Lithuania	200		Spain	780
	Australia	1090		France	2780		Luxemburg	9		Sweden	265
	Austria	1		Georgia	1		Netherlands	1770		The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*	170
	Azerbaijan	90		Germany	3640		New Zealand	150		Turkey	690
	Belgium	405		Greece	140		Norway	490		Ukraine	10
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2		Hungary	370		Poland	1590		United Arab Emirates	25
	Bulgaria	470		Iceland	8		Portugal	30		United Kingdom	8300
	Canada	2830		Ireland	7		Romania	900		United States	29820
	Croatia	530		Italy	2350		Singapore	20			
	Czech Republic	580		Jordan	4		Slovakia	120			
	Denmark	700		Latvia	160		Slovenia	70			
	Estonia	140									
										Total (rounded)	61960

* Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

⁴ NATO ISAF, http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/isaf_placemat.pdf (accessed March 25, 2009).

The origins of NATO, like many other military alliances, are found “in the perils, fears, and mistrust of the times.”⁵ Established in 1949, the alliance was created to provide for the mutual security of its partners and deter – or defeat if necessary – the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The original members found this agreement vital to their nation’s interests because the catastrophic experiences of World War II were especially horrific and real. The leaders and populations of each member country implicitly comprehended that preventing and swiftly defeating a legitimate threat to its national sovereignty was paramount.

Under Article V of the NATO treaty, the core commitment of NATO members is to treat an attack upon one as an attack upon all. In the absence of an across border attack, some argue that it may be difficult for NATO to address threats that are primarily routed in ethnic hostility.⁶ Will NATO member countries have the political will and resources to support operations in Afghanistan to protect its members from the possibility of another attack reminiscent of 9/11? Or will it lack the perseverance and commitment required to eliminate the vacuum of governance that set the conditions for Al Qaeda – or other terrorist organizations – to exist and flourish?

Today, NATO’s mission in Afghanistan is seen as a test of the allies’ military capabilities and their political will to undertake and sustain a complex mission. According to a recent Congressional Research Service (CRS) report for Congress, since September 11, 2001, “the allies have sought to create a “new” NATO, able to go beyond the European theater to combat new threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).”⁷ NATO is seeking to operate beyond its historical geographic boundaries and integrate the

⁵ Richard E. Rupp, *NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 39.

⁶ Kenneth W. Thompson, *NATO and the Changing World Order: An Appraisal by Scholars and Policymakers* (Lanham, MD: United Press of America, 1996), 183.

⁷ Vincent Morelli, “NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance,” Congressional Research Service, October 23, 2008, 2.

support of non-member partner states that wish to assist in achieving an agreed mission. This change in overall mission reflects a NATO consensus that the principal dangers to allied security lie distant from the original treaty's intent and require new political tools and military capabilities to combat them.

As the world becomes more complex, new preoccupations – beyond the traditional military threats – will influence the priorities of NATO and its members. The emergence of an increasingly “...integrated global economy driven by information age technology will do more to shape the world into the next century than any other force.”⁸ The totality of relations – political, economic, social and cultural as well as military – among nations must be taken into account and provide tangible solidarity to further unify the alliance. Even though security concerns will remain the primary motive for cooperation, economics will likely have a far greater impact on the world balance than at any other time in the past. “The triumph of capitalism in the world today – one of the truly distinctive features of the modern age – has bred unprecedented interdependence and prosperity.”⁹ NATO must clearly define what is vital and how it expects members to support future missions in order for the alliance to remain relevant.

ISAF Command Structure

NATO's leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) reflects the current and varying priorities of its membership, which compounds an already difficult situation.

⁸ Kenneth W. Thompson, *NATO and the Changing World Order: An Appraisal by Scholars and Policymakers* (Lanham, MD: United Press of America, 1996), 201.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The command structure of the ISAF in Afghanistan is complex. It operates under a United Nations mandate, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and supported by many non-NATO countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). ISAF has been deployed since 2001 under the authority of the UN Security Council (UNSC). “ISAF is a coalition of the willing – not a UN force properly speaking – which has a peace-enforcement mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.”¹⁰

This unique structure poses many tensions that challenge the effectiveness of the overall strategy. It also presents difficulties that do not have historical precedent when challenged with the task of defeating an insurgency in order to provide security, establish good governance, and support nation-building efforts. Although one may recall the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) where an international coalition suppressed an insurgent uprising in China, it fails to compare to current events in Afghanistan. Keeping it in context, it was an eight-nation alliance working to protect and expand their economic interests.¹¹ Furthermore, there was no intent or requirement to simultaneously nation-build. Therefore, the NATO-led ISAF is attempting to accomplish a truly unprecedented feat; however, it cannot succeed without an adjustment to U.S. policy, increased U.S. assertiveness, and firm leadership to shape expectations.

Realistic expectations should be set for the objectives of the ISAF mission. Many countries are investing considerable effort in Afghanistan to develop a self-sustaining system of governance. If their goal is to create political and administrative structures that meet western standards, then success will be less likely. However admirable in principle, governance in Afghanistan held to a western standard will require exorbitant amounts of personnel, money,

¹⁰ NATO Website, <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan/index.html> (accessed March 10, 2009).

¹¹ Jane E. Elliot, *Some Did It for Civilization; Some Did It for Their Country: A Revised View of the Boxer War* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002), 2.

perseverance and time. It significantly raises the bar for the political success of the NATO-led ISAF mission so high that failure is almost inevitable – or success is only a distant possibility. If the goal is unclear, then how will international partners know it has been achieved? Little rational debate has emerged thus far on the criteria for success or on the possible schedule for terminating the mission.

The Dynamics of Coalition Warfare

Each nation that enters into a coalition does so for its own reason. At times, their purpose is solidly unified with nearly exacting expectations of the end-state and mutual agreement on the potential shared sacrifices of both blood and treasure. However, an almost unavoidable situation develops when the perceived threat is not considered equally grave to each member of the coalition. A “we – they” phenomenon of inter-group tension, rivalry and hostility can evolve as independent sovereign states act in ways to appease their domestic mandates.¹²

All nations have an array of priorities, both foreign and domestic. The most important of these priorities are considered vital to one’s national interest. For example, defending a nation against its enemies is usually the paramount task a government confronts to assure the survival and physical security of its nation. In theory, this seems very straight forward and clear. As H. W. Brands wrote, “Put it succinctly, the test of what a nation wants is what its citizens are willing to go to war for – and perhaps die for.”¹³

¹² Harvey Starr, *Coalitions and Future War: A Dyadic Study of Cooperation and Conflict*, (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE publications, 1975), 59.

¹³ H. W. Brands, “To Die for: War and America’s National Interest,” *Current History* 98/624 (January 1999): 17.

In the aftermath of major combat operations in early 2002, the U.S. and its NATO allies pledged to “get Afghanistan right.”¹⁴ Today, in addition to the reemergence of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces, Afghanistan is plagued by fighting among the country’s warlords, significant opium and illicit drug trafficking, a growing international criminal presence, and an Afghan government that struggles to maintain control over events in beyond Kabul. This reality combined with the dynamics of coalition war fighting is putting NATO and non-NATO countries in support of the ISAF mission to the test.

Caveats Tear the Veil of Unity

The existing command structure of ISAF is the result of some Allies not wanting their forces to participate in counter-insurgency or counter-terrorist missions, which are politically sensitive domestically. This intangible and variable base of support complicates the command structure problems for NATO and ISAF commanders. As long as ISAF participants refuse to modify their positions with regard to caveats and restrictions, the command structure will continue to be strained.¹⁵

National caveats are classified for security reasons, but some have been leaked to the media, including a German restriction on “extended patrols” for German troops.¹⁶ Other nations have forbidden deployment of their troops to eastern or southern Afghanistan, where support for the Taliban and insurgent threats is highest, leaving the U.S., British, Canadian and Dutch troops have shouldered much of the fighting there. “Countries sending their troops to Afghanistan have

¹⁴ Richard E. Rupp, *NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 19.

¹⁵ James L. Jones and Thomas R. Pickering, “Revitalizing Our Efforts: Rethinking Our Strategy,” Center For The Study of the President, Afghanistan Study Group, January 30, 2008 (second edition), 21.

¹⁶ Helle C. Dale, “NATO in Afghanistan: A Test Case for Future Missions,” Backgrounder, No. 1985, (The Heritage Foundation: December 8, 2006), 4.

placed a web of restrictions on how they can be used, creating headaches for combat commanders and hurting the coalition's ability to fight a resurgent Taliban."¹⁷

These inequitable burdens will undoubtedly add fervor to the public debate surrounding additional NATO support. Further exasperating this situation is the ongoing global economic crisis, which adds substantial relevance to this argument and contributes to the realization that public support and will is not infinite in regards to the expenditure of national resources abroad.

Historical Lessons

Current restrictions in Afghanistan bare resemblance to past events as some governments are determined to avoid high-danger combat situations or to not view a current threat as vital to its national interest. "Risk avoidance has played a significant role in NATO's slow and incremental deployment of PRTs in Afghanistan. Concerned that their troops would inevitably find themselves in serious combat, many NATO governments resorted to "tried and true" bureaucratic maneuverings to limit and delay their participations in ISAF operations."¹⁸

History provides many examples of these challenges, but unfortunately the lessons learned are not always translated into improved processes. For example, Somalia presented the international community with an applicable lesson from the early 1990s. It learned at great cost the difficulties of military and civilian incoherence resulting from coalition member's bureaucratic maneuvering. The UN peace enforcement mission (UNOSOM II) operated mostly in parallel with a U.S. military operation (UNITAF) and resulted in numerous problems.¹⁹ In

¹⁷ Jim Michaels, "Nations Limit Use of NATO Forces," *USA Today*, September 28, 2006, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-09-28-afghanistan-nato-caveats_x.htm (accessed February 28, 2008).

¹⁸ Richard E. Rupp, *NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 179.

¹⁹ Karin von Hippel, *Democracy by Force*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55.

some cases, military units supporting UNOSOM II had to “phone home” before becoming involved in actual combat. Most famously, the Italians had to delay a response to help Pakistani peacekeepers in early June 1993 because they needed approval from Rome, and partly as a result, 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed.²⁰

Similarly, as violence erupted between Croatia and Serbia in 1991, and among Serbs and Muslims in 1992, the U.S. and Europe were confronted with conflict on Europe’s immediate periphery, this time with differing views of national interest.²¹ In this example, Western capitals agreed that significant casualties, genocide, wide-spread human-rights violations, and economic upheaval were of great concern, but they did not equate “the crisis in the Balkans as direct threats to their vital interests.”²² These divergent priorities and problems are fully evident once again in Afghanistan.

NATO: Struggling for Support

Despite the lessons of the past, NATO has realized that leading the international effort in Afghanistan is problematic and poses many challenges not foreseen in its original charter. NATO’s mandate, grounded in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, originally dealt with the exclusive defense of its original member states. Article V states that all parties “agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against the rest of them all...”²³ With the end of the Cold War, in 1989, its mandate appeared to have been fulfilled. Nevertheless, the NATO members wanted to maintain and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Richard E. Rupp, *NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 64.

²² Ibid.

²³ Klaus Knorr, “NATO: Past, Present, Prospect,” *Headline Series* (No. 198), Foreign Policy Association: New York, December 1969, 5.

expand the alliance despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. This left NATO adrift in search of a new role, a role that continues to evolve.

NATO faces numerous tensions from within, primarily driven by the national politics of its member states. However, fundamental to NATO's current inconsistent level of support in Afghanistan may be found in a qualifying phrase within Article V, which stipulates that each member "...will assist the party or parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other parties, *such action as it deems necessary*, including (but not mandating) the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."²⁴ Clearly this inclusion ensured that individual members would not surrender their sovereign rights to decide matters of peace and war. It also exposes a legal loophole that allows varying priorities reflected today in the disproportionate support mustered in Afghanistan. These priorities are driven by domestic issues, economics, and the nationalistic objectives of the individual NATO members.

Other NATO-led operations have engendered greater support. For example, after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in late 1995, NATO deployed 60,000 soldiers to Bosnia.²⁵ Following a spring 1999 air campaign against Serb forces, the Alliance dispatched 50,000 troops to Kosovo.²⁶ These deployments indicated that NATO was serious about its determination to implement the organization's mandates. One does not require significant training in military operations to conclude that current NATO troop levels in Afghanistan are woefully inadequate to address the country's needs and execute NATO's mandate. Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel

²⁴ Klaus Knorr, "NATO: Past, Present, Prospect," *Headline Series* (No. 198), Foreign Policy Association: New York, December 1969, 5 (Italicized emphasis and parenthesis inset added by author).

²⁵ Richard E. Rupp, *NATO after 9/11: An Alliance in Continuing Decline* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 177.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

John Nagl claims that based on population numbers and land mass size, it would take approximately 600,000 troops to provide the same proportional level of security to Afghanistan as was achieved in Bosnia.²⁷ Granted this simile encompasses a total force including a fully manned Afghan National Army, but the stark contrast is concerning.

The ongoing debate over additional troops to support Afghanistan has caused a split within NATO, according to Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, NATO's secretary general.²⁸ Currently, ample evidence exists suggesting that NATO's support in Afghanistan is less than optimal. Richard Holbrooke was quoted recently in the Washington Post stating, "NATO's future is on the line here."²⁹ International support has been slow to materialize and the application of a coordinated strategy appears to be lacking. Many experts conclude that organizational weakness, insufficient international support, and the decaying political climate as significant impediments to create sustainable momentum for peace and stability in Afghanistan.³⁰ The increasing insurgent activity suggests that an opportunity has been squandered and the gains made in Afghanistan following the initial U.S. rout of the Taliban have seriously eroded.

In order to recover, NATO must immediately retool its approach ensuring it has unity of command, unity of effort, and dramatically more resources to employ a successful counterinsurgency campaign. This is fundamental to establish order and facilitate the stability required for nation-building.

²⁷ John Nagl, author's notes from a panel discussion at The Foreign Policy Initiative, Washington, D.C., March 31, 2009.

²⁸ Craig Whitlock, "National Security Team Delivers Grim Appraisal of Afghanistan War," Washington Post, February 9, 2009, A13.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, "Thwarting Afghanistan's Insurgency: A Pragmatic Approach toward Peace and Reconciliation," Special Report 212, US Institute of Peace, September 2008, 11.

Perhaps in hindsight, the decision to relinquish the U.S. lead in Afghanistan was a mistake. With Iraq war plans being drafted and reviewed in 2002 and the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, the U.S. clearly shifted its focus off Afghanistan. The U.S. failed to capitalize on and consolidate the gains made in Afghanistan. An apparent opportunity was lost in Afghanistan and exchanged for a full U.S. effort to over-throw of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. This precipitated the relinquishing of command in Afghanistan to NATO leadership. Two major issues contributed to this decision and stalled the initial momentum. First, the U.S. did not really comprehend the decentralized, rural Taliban and Afghan way of war. Sun Tzu wisely wrote, “Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.”³¹ The U.S. failed to realize that the enemy in Afghanistan has nothing he needs to defend and die for; he can always run away to live and fight another day. Therefore, the rapid expulsion of the Taliban regime did not mean it was defeated. Yet it incorrectly led decision makers to believe that the time was right to shift focus to Iraq. Secondly, once military forces, equipment, and the U.S. national focus were directed towards Iraq, there simply were not enough resources available to dominate in both theaters simultaneously. Subsequently, NATO assumed command of its first “out-of-area” mission beyond Europe.

ISAF and OEF: Divergent Objectives

The most flagrant example of the divergent objectives and missions in Afghanistan is the coexistence of the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and ISAF missions. The Pentagon’s insistence upon incorporating European and Canadian military support on a bilateral basis, rather than facilitating it through NATO’s command structure is interesting. Michael O’Hanlon argues,

³¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 84.

“A formal NATO role in the war was neither necessary nor desirable, given the location of the conflict and need for supple and secretive military strategy.”³²

The effectiveness of the international effort was constrained while the U.S. military pursued its primary objective of eliminating terrorists. For instance, the U.S. initially entered into alliances with regional Afghan commanders, using their militias as proxy forces against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Although this may have been viewed as an economy-of-force option for the U.S., it ultimately contributed to de facto support of ill-legitimate regimes within Afghanistan.

NATO-led ISAF and OEF forces have some degree of overlapping responsibilities, but their primary objectives are different. NATO’s ISAF’s key military tasks include assisting the Afghan government in extending its authority across the country, conducting stability and security operations in co-ordination with the Afghan national security forces; mentoring and supporting the Afghan national army; and supporting Afghan government programs to disarm illegally armed groups.³³ While OEF’s primary purpose is counter-terrorism – which is not in the ISAF mission – to actively pursue and eliminate terrorist networks in Afghanistan and to stop the infiltration of Taliban forces from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

Changing political conditions, in the U.S. or in NATO, or the evolution of mission objectives on the ground in Afghanistan, are two examples of opportunities where one might obtain consensus for changes in command and control. NATO and the U.S. should aim to consolidate and integrate their missions to optimize the military principle of unity of effort. Until

³² Michael E. O’Hanlon, “A Flawed Masterpiece: Assessing the Afghan Campaign,” *Foreign Affairs* 81/3 (May/June 2002), 49.

³³ James L. Jones and Thomas R. Pickering, “Revitalizing Our Efforts: Rethinking Our Strategy,” Center For The Study of the President, Afghanistan Study Group, January 30, 2008 (second edition), 20.

recently, the U.S. has had reservations about merging the two missions until NATO “was up to the job.”³⁴ Encouragingly, the U.S. has recently refined its command and control structures to coordinate more effectively by appointing U.S. Army General McKiernan in charge of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and the NATO-led ISAF in Afghanistan.

Coalition Counterinsurgency Operations in Afghanistan

Unity of Command and unity of effort are essential to effective counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. They require the synchronized application of military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions.³⁵ Traditionally, conventional war fighting armies are not well suited to the demands of counterinsurgency. Successful counterinsurgents support or develop local institutions with legitimacy and the ability to provide basic services, economic opportunity, public order, and security. Paramount to success is the need to win the hearts and minds of the population and undermine or remove the insurgent’s cause.

Due to the present nature of the ISAF force (comprised of multi-national participants with a variety of missions, goals and limitations), synchronization and unity of effort becomes exponentially paramount to achieving success. Leaders should be required to establish an ethical tone and climate that guards against the moral complacency and frustrations that build up in a protracted COIN operation. Otherwise, institutional and cultural divides will further fracture the overall effort and ultimately embolden the insurgency.

³⁴ Embassy of Afghanistan-Tokyo, “Afghanistan Missions to Merge,” News article published February 13, 2005 by the Afghanistan Embassy in Tokyo, Japan, <http://www.afghanembassyjp.com/en/news/1061> (accessed April 20, 2009).

³⁵ US Department of the Army and Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM3-24 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, December 2006), 5-1.

For the coalition to implement a successful counterinsurgency campaign, senior commanders must be patient, tolerant, and understanding of the complexities (both military and political) that bring about success in international operations.³⁶ This is especially relevant to the current situation in Afghanistan, where there is an acute need for greater international coordination on both the military and civil sides of Afghanistan's stabilization and reconstruction efforts. It is a fact that some nations have strong national restrictions with regard to the type of operations their forces are authorized to undertake and the scope of non-military support they will provide. Furthermore, the inequitable application of international support (due to varied goals, objectives, rules of engagement, priorities, etc.) will send a mixed message to the population and degrade the overall effort.

A key to success in Afghanistan, and what should be a by-product of a coordinated international effort, is to provide legitimacy to the central government. If NATO's leadership continues to allow divergent priorities and regional inequities to fester, they will contribute to the perception of a decentralized state, with an ineffective central government, and inadvertently reinforce ill-legitimate power structures within the country.³⁷

Consideration must be given to not only the roles and missions of the various partner nations, but it must address the inherent capability gaps, technological disparities, and intelligence stove-pipes resident within the coalition. Without addressing these concerns, unfavorable perceptions will likely develop as various sectors of the population interact with the ISAF (and other agencies) as they apply different solutions to similar problems.

³⁶ James L. Jones and Thomas R. Pickering, "Revitalizing Our Efforts: Rethinking Our Strategy," Center For The Study of the President, Afghanistan Study Group, January 30, 2008 (second edition), 21.

³⁷ Rani D. Mullen, "Centralization versus Decentralization: The Importance of Timing," in *Building State and Security in Afghanistan*, ed. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber and Robert P. Finn, 75-84 (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2007), 83.

Perceptions are Reality

The old adage that “perception is reality” holds especially true in Afghanistan. Even though NATO is currently leading the campaign in Afghanistan, it is perceived to be a U.S. predicament locally and in many respects internationally. According to recent surveys, Afghan support for the U.S. has dropped from 83% in 2005 to a current level of 47%.³⁸ Growing discontent over civilian casualties, primarily due to aggressive air strikes, has contributed to this negative sentiment. As we have re-learned recently in Iraq, air power is not a suitable replacement for boots-on-the ground when attempting to improve security and quell an insurgency. Although precise in their delivery, this impersonal application of force – and subsequent collateral damage – often creates additional recruits for the insurgency.

Efforts must be made to ensure a positive perception is realized as a result of NATO involvement. At times, NATO’s goals and objectives lend themselves to misinterpretation not only by Afghans, but non-NATO countries as well. “NATO, as a Western alliance, is regarded with considerable mistrust by the other 166 United Nations member states; that a primary NATO aim is to assert, by military means, its energy and power interests in opposition to other United Nations member states.”³⁹ With three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council being members of NATO, one can appreciate the origins of this opinion. The inefficiencies of a non-resolute alliance and perceived biases – evidenced today by conditional support in Afghanistan – have blurred the Alliance’s roles and responsibilities further. Some NATO purists would argue that, “NATO must revert to being freedom's watchdog – not the

³⁸ Gary Langer, Director of Polling for ABC News, “Public Opinion Trends in Afghanistan,” CSIS (February 11, 2009), 28.

³⁹ Hans Von Sponeck, *The UN and NATO: Which Security and for Whom?*, Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, February 17, 2009, http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2009/02/17_vonsponeck_un_nato.php (accessed March 7, 2009).

U.N.'s lap dog.”⁴⁰ Regardless of one’s personal opinion, an increased investment in diplomatic capital will be an enduring requirement to sustain, rebuild and produce the cooperative partnerships required for success in Afghanistan.

The Enemy is Operating in the Seams

A coordinated effort that includes diplomatic, economic as well as military partnerships is essential to minimize the existing weaknesses and gaps that currently exist within today’s international support. The war in Afghanistan has demonstrated that the Taliban and Al Qaeda have identified many of these seams. They intend to exploit them and have adapted to U.S. and coalition tactics by dispersing their forces and operating remotely as independent groups. Anthony Cordesman’s book “The Lessons of Afghanistan” clearly states how this insurgent force has been capable to undermine the nation building efforts.⁴¹ He further reminds us that even the most decisive military victories can lead to a strategic failure if diplomatic and political efforts fail to engender the support of the population. The enemy in Afghanistan will look for ways to exploit coalition military superiority, by enticing a strong military over-reaction to produce civilian casualties. This potentiality exposes another seam in the coalition.

In a recent report to Congress, NATO command issues regarding the prosecution of counterinsurgency operations and its rules of engagement were identified as areas of potential concern. In response to a coordinated attack, it is foreseeable that NATO units could “exceed their mandate by undertaking offensive combat operations against insurgents, possibly causing

⁴⁰ Pittsburg Tribune-Review article, *NATO: A UN Subsidiary*, March 27, 2008, http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/opinion/archive/s_559177.html (accessed March 10, 2009).

⁴¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2002), 28.

political difficulties between NATO nations that will likely be politically sensitive to ‘mission creep.’”⁴² Insurgent forces know this, and they will exploit it.

By creating disorder in Afghanistan, the insurgency can easily complicate NATO’s efforts and embolden its supporters. Their strategy will seek to take advantage of the vacuum of international efforts in Afghanistan created by world’s preoccupation in Iraq.⁴³ Although current events in Iraq favor a shift away from this fixation, it will continue to drain resources away from the overall effort in Afghanistan for some time. Al Qaeda and the Taliban will capitalize on this reality by consciously and deliberately planning operations that will drag coalition forces into a long, exhausting and continuous battle. As with most insurgencies, time is on their side if the counterinsurgent force fails to generate positive momentum within the hearts and minds of the population. With the current state of limited resources, the NATO-led ISAF is unlikely to generate significant changes to alter this calculus. David Galula describes the advantages an insurgent force has over a counterinsurgent force due to its unpredictable nature and relatively low-cost to create turmoil.⁴⁴ He uses an analogy that if a bridge is blown up, then all bridges need to be guarded; if a single grenade goes off in a public building, then all public buildings become potential targets and requires protection. Without a reinvigoration of support to ISAF, the insurgency will gain greater advantage as the war is prolonged.

With the protraction of the war, opportunities exist for other disenfranchised groups to emerge and complicate the solution. Today’s insurgency in Afghanistan does not represent a monolithic group with a clear set of political demands. Instead, it includes a number of

⁴² Andrew Feickert, “US and Coalition Military Operations in Afghanistan: Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, June 9, 2006, 18.

⁴³ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Penguin Group, 2008), 245.

⁴⁴ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security Int’l, 2006), 6.

independent and decentralized organizations, including the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hezb-i-Islami and the Haqqani network, as well as criminal organizations and a range of sub-tribal groups. These various groups may have ideological links and may co-operate on occasion, but they are fighting for different reasons and are not subject to one central authority. This provides the international community potential opportunities to exploit – even if one at a time – on the road to success.

To achieve our national security goals, deliberate efforts must be coordinated to maximize the potential benefits of international support, while avoiding operations that fracture long-standing social cleavages. Most countries supporting the mission in Afghanistan underestimated the difficulty, scope and costs of rebuilding. None-the-less, the well of Afghan will has not run dry. “What sets Afghanistan apart from so many other projects in nation-state building undertaken by the international community is that the overwhelming number of Afghans...approve of the sustained involvement of foreigners in their country.”⁴⁵ Should the international support wither, and Afghan support not nourished, the war is ours to lose.

Breaking the Addiction to U.S. Military Power

In order to sustain Afghan support, some recognized experts have asserted that a “light-assistance footprint” provides hope for legitimate Afghan rule.⁴⁶ Although this paper has argued that increased NATO participation and assertive U.S. leadership and coordination promise the swiftest prescription to remedy Afghanistan’s ailing situation, an alternative hard-love remedy is interesting to consider.

⁴⁵ Marvin G. Weinbaum, “Rebuilding Afghanistan: Impediments, Lessons, and Prospects,” in *Nation-Building: Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, Francis Fukuyama, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 141.

⁴⁶Ibid, 126.

It is well-known that NATO has become reliant on the dominance of the U.S. military. There have been conscious efforts by most member countries to down-size their military spending in favor of other domestic programs, which directly places increased reliance on U.S. military capability. Therefore, hypothetically, if U.S. support was less enthusiastic – perhaps if the attacks of 9/11 did not occur on U.S. soil, but in another nation’s cities – a reduced number of U.S. troops would be available to NATO’s disposal. The alliance would be forced to seek alternative ways to quell the insurgency and re-establish legitimate governance in Afghanistan.

With a decreased capability towards direct military action, increased emphasis on civil, legal and humanitarian issues would ascend to predominance – and it would not exclude the possibility of some level of reconciliation with the grievances of the insurgent’s cause. This type of focus has proven successful in other counter insurgency operations in the past. One example is the British’s successful counter insurgency campaign during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). In that case, the British implemented what became known as the “Briggs Plan.” Central to its success was the recognition that “...political action designed to separate the insurgents from their supporters should take priority over purely military action, and an atmosphere should be created in which insurgency did not disrupt the process of legitimate government.”⁴⁷ They also established an elaborate committee structure – called the Federal War Council – which worked down through state, district and even village committees; an approach that would be applicable to Afghanistan’s rural architecture and decentralized culture. This plan empowered local governances and community leaders to take ownership in the political and civil processes, which enabled them to best apply resources – and witness results – to issues in their towns. In Afghanistan, it would legitimize a centralized government which could enable decentralized

⁴⁷ Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2001), 100.

control by exercising authority and coordination through the allocation of resources – in support of its local communities. This would be a logical proposition in Afghanistan – a country lacking wide-spread security and a complex communication and transportation infrastructure.

Change Now to Improve NATO's Future Viability

The U.S. must take this opportunity to lead a change within NATO if the future viability of NATO is a strategic objective. Using its operation in Afghanistan, changes within the current command structure and how the alliance operates could provide quantum leaps towards improved inter-alliance integration and effectiveness. For NATO to be viable in the 21st Century, it must transform operationally from its 20th century operational construct. In Afghanistan, a policy should be adopted that would force unit integration to a lower level. Instead of dividing Afghanistan into isolated areas and carving out niches for NATO countries to support individually, a greater effort should be placed on integrating units – perhaps down to the Battalion or Company level – to improve ground level inter-operability and understanding. The intent here would be to cross-cut many of the stove-piped issues that are not only current challenges in Afghanistan, but ones that will grow in scale over time if NATO intends to lead future similar campaigns short of all out war.

NATO should also capitalize upon this opportunity to fashion systemic improvements within the alliance in order to address the capability gaps of its member nations. Specific integration and modification of doctrine, language training, increasing combined operations, intelligence sharing, equipment resourcing and compatibility are all worthy investments towards the future viability of NATO and would synthesize ongoing efforts in Afghanistan.

Realistic Harmonization of Policy

Given the numerous limits on capacities, capabilities and the willingness of NATO's members to support the accomplishment of its stated objective, a pragmatic and practical understanding is required. As defined in the Report of the NATO committee of Three in 1956, "Consultation within an alliance means more than an exchange of information though that is necessary...It means the discussion of problems collectively, in the early stages of policy formulation, and before national positions become fixed."⁴⁸ Looking forward, realistic success will only be achieved by maximizing the available contributions that each nation is willing to offer. Encouragingly, the current U.S. National Security advisor, retired Marine General James Jones, articulated this position recently stating, "In Afghanistan, you think of the presence of the U.N., of NATO, of the EU, the World Bank, the IMF, and so you ask yourself, why is there a sense that we're backsliding in Afghanistan? And part of it is that we just haven't been able to coordinate all three legs of that stool I was referring to [security, economic development and the rule of law in government] and this is a different approach."⁴⁹

The harmonization of available contributions is the only way for today's coalition of the willing to maximize its collective effort and generate an effect greater than the sum of its parts. Without assertive and proactive leadership, this mosaic of caveat laden support will produce isolated endeavors that will certainly delay the establishment of a self-sustaining Afghan government and potentially erode the bedrock of NATO.

⁴⁸ Joseph J. Wolf, *The Growing Dimensions Of Security: The Atlantic Council's Working Group on Security*, (Washington, D.C.: Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 1977), 80.

⁴⁹ National Public Radio Interview, "Jones: Afghanistan Strategy A 'Three-Legged Stool,'" (Morning Edition, NPR: March 31, 2009), explanatory inset added by author.

Concluding Thoughts

Can a large-scale international coalition defeat an insurgency while simultaneously providing security, facilitating good governance, all the while simultaneously embracing nation-building efforts? The verdict is yet to be determined. What is clear is that the U.S. must readdress its policy to compensate for the existing vulnerabilities of the NATO-led ISAF. Clearly, if a stable, peaceful, and self-governing Afghanistan is in our nation's national security interest, then the U.S. must assert its strength and leadership. Most observers predict that ISAF's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan will require several more years of concerted effort. Direct U.S. leadership is required to solidify the cohesiveness of NATO's efforts in Afghanistan as well as ensuring the alliance's credibility and future viability in international affairs.

The war in Afghanistan will only be won by Afghans. The international community is needed to set the conditions for their success through a sustained and long-term commitment to the country and the people. Resolute and concerted synchronization is required to optimize the delicate balance and proportionality of the interrelated fundamental principles of security operations, economic development and good governance.

NATO must lead a bottom-up strategy, integrating the strengths of a counterinsurgency strategy with its nation-building efforts. Due to the local and rural nature of the insurgency, a bottom-up approach is necessary to complement top-down efforts. "Security and stability in Afghanistan has historically required a balance between top-down efforts from the central government, and bottom-up efforts from local actors."⁵⁰ Through improved assimilation of its military force providers and integration of civilian expertise and resources, NATO can be

⁵⁰ C. Christine Fair and Seth G. Jones, "Securing Afghanistan: Getting on Track," United States Institute of Peace Working Paper (January 23, 2009), 24.

postured for success not only in the current fight, but for future contingencies as well. One can envision a future NATO operation where forces are not isolated by distinctly delineated areas of operation based on their ethnicity or country of origin. Instead, supporting members would be able to integrate various sized units with another member's forces. This organization would also have the capacity and capability to blend non-military support seamlessly into its command structure, optimizing expertise from civilian agencies – agriculture, judiciary, banking and commerce experts. It would be a transformation or evolution of a 20th century, cold-war, military defense alliance into an adaptable, effective and respected international organization capable to provide security – inclusive of economic and humanitarian interests – well into the 21st century.

Thankfully, there are no valid predictions of an impending large-scale conventional or nuclear war on the foreseeable horizon. However, the battles of tomorrow are likely to be as equivocal as they are today. The current irregular warfare battles in Afghanistan are being watched by enemies the world over. The commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command recently testified to congress he was “Absolutely certain that irregular warfare will be part of future conflicts and a weakness that enemies will continue to exploit.”⁵¹ It would be in NATO's best interest to take this prospect on board to optimize its future potential, or not and jeopardize its future relevancy.

Symbolically, the participation of NATO forces in Afghanistan is significant, but actions speak louder than words. Except for a few notable exceptions, public support for military operations is negligible amongst most NATO countries. The U.S. will be compelled to shape its

⁵¹ Rebekah Gordon, “New Equipment Should Protect From the Start: Irregular Warfare Must Be A ‘Core Competency,’ Mattis Testifies,” Inside the Navy, March 23, 2009.

policy options not only to support Afghanistan's immediate future, but the future of NATO as well. President Obama will have to decide how far he will carry the inevitable differences and face the reality that these disagreements concern fundamental questions of NATO's future and reach.⁵²

⁵² Henry A. Kissinger, "A Strategy for Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2009, A19.

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