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“NATO: New Tasks and Responsibilities”

Transatlantic Challenges: Post-Conflict Reconstruction

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This paper is written in a personal capacity. Though it reflects concerns shared by some ACBAR member organizations, this paper does not represent an official ACBAR position.

Introduction:

My remarks in the first section of my paper are intended to provide a realistic overview of the challenges that NATO faces as it expands its presence in Afghanistan. I hope my remarks will be viewed in the framework of the constructive critique intended rather than used to legitimize different NATO member states agendas. Afghanistan needs more engagement of the right kind, not less. And if lost, Afghanistan will be lost by default. The majority of Afghans do not want to be returned to any aspects of their recent past apart from what is now perceived as a golden age under the monarchy. In the second half of this paper I propose ways forward that could help ensure that NATO preserves the integrity of its mission in the eyes of those Afghans – school teachers, elders and moderate mullahs who command respect and influence within the fabric of Afghan society. Keeping the right Afghans on board will be crucial, particularly as NATO’s involvement increases in complexity with the dual challenge of involvement in peace enforcement as well as peace keeping operations, as stages three and four of its expansion are reached.

The remarks made earlier today by NATO’s Permanent Representative of the Republic of Lithuania and by Dr Judith Yaphe which identified lack of political will and the failure to commit sufficient resources by NATO member states as the main obstacles to NATO’s potential is exemplified in Afghanistan. However, I would emphasise that money alone will not solve Afghanistan’s problems which, above all, will have to be addressed over time. If NATO is to be successful in managing Afghan expectations, this will entail NATO delivering to Afghan concerns on their human security – by pushing forward on the establishment of the rule of law and order and confronting the burning issue of corruption. Issues of transitional justice have barely been touched.

NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan has, so far, been focused on helping keep the political agenda under Bonn on track. The underlying challenges to superficial perceptions of the Bonn Agreement’s success in this regard will emerge more clearly in the post-Bonn Afghan scene – when NATO’s role becomes increasingly central. As a member of the Afghan government recently remarked to me – “we can cut a path through the jungle, but where exactly is the path going?”
Where we are now:
The absence of Afghan national security forces capable of securing the state’s control over the means of violence in the short-term, meant that stabilization, following the overthrow of the Taliban, depended on the international community’s ability to react swiftly and effectively to security challenges emerging in the so-called ‘transitional’ period. Potential responses to the threat that a widening security gap posed to the Bonn process, such as a regional expansion of ISAF peacekeeping forces in 2002, were constrained by a number of factors however. Paramount amongst these, was the perceived interests of the US-led coalition forces in its prosecution of the wider ‘war on terror’ in southern Afghanistan and subsequently in Iraq. But international support for ISAF’s expansion was also withheld in European capitals, not only for reasons of insufficient political will but also due to European dependence on US capacity when it came to the air lift requirements entailed in any significant force expansion regionally in Afghanistan. And by the summer of 2002 the coalition was reportedly already moving assets out of Afghanistan in preparation for the war in Iraq. Repeated requests to the UN Security Council for ISAF’s expansion from President Karzai and the head of the UN mission, Lakhdar Brahimi, during the course of 2002 went unheeded. Instead, fears that the state building process was slipping out of the international community’s control drove the development of an expanded civil military affairs programme, launched in Kabul in November 2002. It was, as one of the architects of the Provincial Reconstruction Team plan said to me at the time, a question of doing nothing or trying to do something with the limited resources available.

The establishment of the Afghan state’s stability in the long-term was to be founded on an inter-related security sector reform (SSR) process consisting of five pillars: Justice; Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration; Police; Army and Narcotics. But, meaningful progress in all these pillars - with the exception of the development of a new Afghan army - depended on prior reforms in the relevant Ministries of the Afghan government. The international community lacked leverage however and political reforms, where they occurred were partial and subjected to long delays. This was particularly apparent in the implementation of the DDR process which did not start until October 2003. The success of police reform, for which the US government plans to allocate a further 910 million dollars, will also depend on reform taking place first or at least concurrently at the Ministry of Interior, for which there appears to be no strategy.

Outcomes of SSR have been poorly analysed – another side-effect of a security situation which has mitigated against the conduct of independent field research by senior academics. Academic research halted at the end of the 1970s and despite the sterling contribution of the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit in Kabul, policy makers do not have enough detailed, objective information about the actual outcomes of policies being enacted. How successful is the Reintegration component of DDR? Are the huge cash-for-work programmes being implemented by USAID as an adjunct to poppy eradication efforts being manipulated by local government officials? Despite numerous calls from the NGO sector evaluations of the cost effectiveness of other development actors including the private sector and the military have been virtually non-existent. Despite this, informed Afghans and expatriates alike, know that ultimately the DDR process has mainly been an
expensive charade, serving to deepen existing problems of illegal armed groups and police reform. Neither will be resolved before the Parliamentary elections in September.

A culture of impunity, well documented by human rights organizations, both indigenous and international, continues to rule. Judicial reform has made painfully slow progress while the crisis caused by the lack of prisons delays plans to bring well known narcotics traders to specially convened courts. An integrated coherent approach to SSR does not exist and the lead nation format to SSR does not appear to have facilitated the formulation of one.

Overall, the ‘security gap’ has slowed the pace of reconstructing Afghanistan’s war-shattered infrastructure and significantly increased its cost financially. The cost of insecurity was not factored into donors’ development funding calculations at the first pledging conference in Tokyo. Foreign investors, needed to develop the private sector and provide jobs, have been frightened off. Consequently, the private sector, designated the driver of Afghanistan’s economic development by the Afghan government and its international supporters, remains, and is expected to remain, absent. Economic development is also hampered by the weak outcomes of civil service reform so far at the centre which does not bode well for attempts to reform provincial administrations. Most damagingly of all to the long term success of the Bonn Agreement, the security vacuum provided optimal conditions for the restoration and rapid expansion of the opium economy.

The narcotics trade has fuelled corruption at all levels of government and assisted criminal networks to penetrate Ministries at the centre as well as administrative structures at the provincial and district levels. Or government administration tends to be simply ineffective due to a chronic lack of capacity. Overall, the failure to address the overarching question of security at the outset, has led to the creation of a vicious rather than a virtuous circle in Afghanistan. As early as March 2003, the then Minister of Finance, Ashraf Ghani, was publicly warning donors in Kabul, that the country was becoming a narco-mafia state. Opium poppy eradication efforts so far have made little impact. A recognized expert on the opium economy in Afghanistan, William Byrd of the World Bank, warns that eradication measures have resulted in the cultivation of poppy in parts of the country where it had not been cultivated before.

At a conference in May on Afghanistan post-Bonn, hosted at Wilton Park by the British government and attended by representatives from leading donor nations, members of the Afghan government and the head of the UN Mission in Afghanistan, the recognition that Bonn represented “unfinished business” resulted in the agreement of a post-Bonn compact or framework between the international community and the Afghan government. It was also agreed that the UN should continue to play some kind of coordinating role following the Parliamentary elections this September. Details were not discussed, but any diminution in the political role of the UN in Afghanistan would be a backward step given the capacity constraints of the Afghan government currently masked by expatriate technical assistance. The question was also raised as to whether, in the event of the political process failing, the international community had a Plan B? Critics of the international state building efforts in Afghanistan so far, would question whether there is even a Plan A. Fears that the
establishment of the Afghan Parliament may result in the political paralysis of the executive were also aired.

The issue of long-term US bases in Afghanistan is a controversial one and is being used in the campaigns of Karzai’s political opponents in the run up to the Parliamentary elections. Ethnic polarities, clearly identifiable in the voting patterns of the October 2004 Presidential elections, are reportedly hardening on the back of the Northern Alliance’s subsequent loss of key Ministries and the belief that the ‘Reconciliation Programme’, aimed at the political rehabilitation of ‘moderate’ Taliban, signaled a resurgent Pashtun political agenda at the heart of government. Political disaffection from the centre has increased in parts of the North. A UN representative who naively opened a meeting with local notables recently in Faizabad by stating that he was there to support the central government did not get the response he expected. Should current trends continue, the stated objective of the PRTs – to expand the legitimacy and authority of the central government, could prove to be more of a liability than an asset. Strategists need to start thinking ‘bottom up’ in their approaches.

Prospects for Afghanistan’s reconstruction are also affected by the regional context as NATO analysts will be fully aware. Afghan alarm that some of its neighbours are getting up to old tricks is growing. But growing instability in Baluchistan and Uzbekistan and recent political outcomes in Iran are further factors that will need to be taken into account.

There is no denying that the operational context to NATO’s expansion is complex and highly challenging. Or, that under any circumstances, the obstacles to building a viable polity in Afghanistan, to which exit strategies are linked, are both historic and formidable. Much will depend on NATO having clearly defined its mission in Afghanistan and having a strategy in place to reach identified goals.

Since November 2004, I have attended a series of conferences linked to NATO in which ways to enhance the synergy of civilian and military actors have been examined. These have focused on NGOs. But though NGOs continue to provide a significant proportion of the acutely needed implementing capacity the government lacks, they are not involved in the political scenario that NATO has to confront. NGOs are struggling to maintain the provision of fundamental services to the majority poor of Afghanistan – in health, education and the provision of clean drinking water, in an increasingly difficult security and funding environment. And like all development actors in Afghanistan, the long-term developmental role of NGOs has been subsumed to the short-term political objectives that have punctuated the ambitious Bonn Agreement.

NATO’s ability to transform itself in the post Cold War era is now linked to its fortunes in Afghanistan. Equally, Afghanistan’s chances of charting a path away from a past that holds no legitimacy for its people to a stable future will also be increasingly linked to NATO. It is highly unlikely that NATO member states will depart from the PRT format which has accurately been labeled an attempt to provide security on the cheap. How then can existing resources be recalibrated and focused to further these mutual interests?
At a meeting with a senior policy maker at the National Security Council in Washington in June it was emphasized that progress towards a democratic, accountable Afghan state was an Afghan responsibility: to the degree that people have voice and power they can pursue change, I was informed. Afghans, demonstrating considerable bravery and sophisticated powers of judgment are attempting to do precisely this. And I would like to provide a recent example.

The essentially non-confrontational German PRT approach in Kunduz and subsequently Faizabad in the Northern Afghanistan has not received the approbation that other PRT approaches, such as the British, have won. The latter tackled security issues more directly and also demonstrated a willingness to conduct far-reaching patrols on a regular basis to the outlying areas of the five northern provinces it covers from its PRT base in Mazar-e-Sharif. These patrols and regular meetings with local notables within and outside administrative structures boosted Afghan confidence that the international community was paying attention to their problems. Though in effect, the British PRT has punched above its weight in the promotion of raising local perceptions of international attention that can be enough to assist Afghans in challenging incidents of corruption and the abuse of power and altering the status quo in the process.

In Northern Takhar at the end of May there was a popular uprising against a commander led by teachers, elders and mullahs – who commanded respect locally and were able to mobilize several hundred people. Approximately 150 militia men started beating the demonstrators up, which precipitated a response from the German PRT. The Afghans had taken a risk on drawing in the PRT which had paid off. In addition, the local police chief, who had been recently appointed, had the confidence of the demonstrators. The German PRT is now working much more closely with UNAMA analysts in the field in terms of information sharing in the aftermath of the demonstration and is conducting weekly patrols. It has maintained contact with the leaders of the demonstration thereby shielding from retaliation.

Conclusion:

What lessons can be drawn from this incident? That popular actions can shape the international agenda and that shifts in perceptions of power locally are possible to effect with active support from the PRTs. But, that momentum in this and similar cases will depend on maintaining PRT engagement in support of the high expectations raised. The increased confidence that results from the type of incident that occurred in northern Takhar – news of which would have immediately spread on the Afghan grapevine - may at long last serve to put the Afghans “in the driving seat”. Up to now, as a colleague of mine has ruefully observed, ordinary Afghans have not even been in the car. Lessons learned also indicate the importance of keeping the pressure on the central government to ensure the appointment of police chiefs capable of winning the confidence of Afghan people. Reportedly, there was also good coordination with the Afghan national army. These are the kinds of synergies that are capable of delivering a transition to a more stable future. It may sound like a small beginning, but, if NATO member states could commit the political will to utilize existing resources by allowing PRTs the flexibility to
engage directly in the protection of the neutral space, that at a minimum, Afghan civil society actors need, one thing might just lead to another.