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NATO in Afghanistan: All for one but anyone for all?

Samuel Chan

4 March 2008

In 2007, violent incidents increased by 27%, with the majority in the eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan. Concurrently, NATO has been plagued by internal disagreements over troop deployments to these restive provinces. As the winter snow thaws, and the wheel of violence prepares to turn once more, NATO needs to urgently address this issue as Afghanistan stands at the crossroads -- the path toward a failed state an unlikely but less distant scenario.

AS AFGHANISTAN approaches its seventh *Nawroz* (Spring) since the fall of the draconian Taliban regime, physical security remains illusive in this land that seems to be caught in a vortex of perpetual cycle. The situation today is much different from the chaos of previous regimes; however, Afghanistan currently stands at the crossroads of progress, with the prospects of slipping into a failed state an unlikely but less distant scenario.

Afghanistan's long-term stability lies with its leaders, youth, institutions (both constitutional and tribal) and neighbours. But the current milieu dictates a substantial, almost complete, reliance on foreign powers. While much aid has been poured into the development of the state, the United Nations-mandated and North Atlantic Treaty Organization-led mission has been tasked to provide security and a stable environment for development, the establishment of the rule of law, and effective governance.

Pressure to withdraw

Around 41,700 troops from 39 states currently operate under the auspices of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with another 20,000 operating outside the hierarchy under the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (to hunt for *al Qaeda*). The brunt of the fighting, however, have been shouldered by forces stationed in the restive eastern and southern poppy-strewn provinces, the majority of whom are American (15,038), British (7,753), Canadian (1,730), Dutch (1,512) and Australian (892), all invaluable supported by the Danes, Romanians and Estonians.

The disproportionate fighting and casualties suffered by ISAF forces in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan have resulted in heightened domestic pressure calling for the withdrawal of respective troop contingents, prompting NATO to emphasise 'appropriate burden sharing' by all member states. In particular, Canada has warned of withdrawal from a combat role in February 2009 unless additional troops are sent to Kandahar, while the Dutch government expects a complete withdrawal of its troops from Uruzgan by December 2010.

Countries with sizeable troop numbers in theatre have been singled out to deploy troops southward, namely Germany (3,155), Italy (2,358), France (1,292), and Spain (763), all of whom are currently stationed in Kabul, and the relatively calm western and northern provinces. Despite the appearance and debate of this issue at previous high-level NATO-meetings in Riga, Latvia (28-29 November 2006), Noordwijk, The Netherlands (24-25 October 2007), and Vilnius, Lithuania (7-8 February 2008), no long-term and concrete measures have been taken to bolster troop numbers to relieve pressure on ISAF's southern front. The recently announced deployment of a 2,200-strong US Marine Expeditionary Unit to reinforce ISAF-units in southern Afghanistan will bring welcomed combat muscle, but the Marines' seven-month tour is a short-term, stop-loss measure, not a permanent strategic solution.

When NATO convenes its next course charting Summit in Bucharest, Hungary (2-4 April 2008), the contentious issue of troop contribution and deployments will undoubtedly be raised, and NATO must address the implications in troop shortfall. Germany, Italy, France and Spain may seem irresponsible for not deploying southward, but it must be understood that their respective contingents are critical to the relative stability in western and northern Afghanistan.

Relative calm is not peace

Relative calm must not be mistaken for peace, more so in light of crime and drug syndicates, feuding strongmen, ethnic rivalry between government officials, and the Taliban shadow which is perceived to be moving northward; all factors which could conflagrate the region. Yet, NATO members must also understand that eliminating national caveats which restrict where their forces can operate, and contributing a quantity of troops which reflects their relative military strength, are both critical to mission success in Afghanistan, and in turn, the future of the 59-year old NATO-alliance.

At the operational-level, the status quo will not result in a dramatic capture of large swaths of territory by anti-government elements. It will, however, allow such insurgents to operate with impunity within territorial niches and continue terrorising the indigenous population; impede much needed development to stem the narcotics trade; and create instability through thuggery, suicide attacks, and the targeted assassinations of pro-Karzai officials, *mullahs* (religious leaders) and tribal elders. ISAF has the ability to clear any Afghan territory of insurgents. But due to the inability of Afghan security forces to hold captured territory, inadequate ISAF troop numbers, and subsequent reoccupation by insurgents, results are often 'pyrrhic' victories.

This 'game' suits the insurgents well for they operate seamlessly within both physical and human terrain, without the pressures of domestic audiences, and independent of time. ISAF on the other has often resorted to airpower to redress insufficient troop numbers (3,572 coalition air-strikes were carried out in 2007, 20-times the level in 2005), with the risk of alienating the Afghans through civilian casualties. Essentially, the 'hearts and minds' of the indigenous population are not for ISAF to 'win', but definitely for them to 'lose', the result of which is incomprehensible.

Options for NATO

While member states mull over troop deployments, a few possibilities exist for NATO. They include the deployment of additional brigades from the 207th and 209th Corps of the Afghan National Army

(ANA) stationed in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif to southern Afghanistan. With their role as the eventual sentinels of Afghan democracy, and their willingness to fight, the ANA would continue to improve and benefit from the operational experience and responsibility. In addition, the Afghans will witness firsthand the quality of its ethnically-balanced army.

Another strategic option is for NATO to cede complete operational control over the whole of Afghanistan and concentrate solely on the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) will in turn expand and take responsibility for peacekeeping and development in western, northern, and central Afghanistan. Countries which have previously been hesitant to deploy troops under ISAF command (which is led by an American four-star General) will now have an avenue to contribute to the rehabilitation of this war-torn South-West Asian state.

The way forward is hazy and NATO must act with urgency if it is to be 'successful' in Afghanistan. The alliance must constantly remind itself of its goals, and its reason for being in Afghanistan. Failure in Afghanistan will not only impact on the lives of Afghanistan's 30 million inhabitants, but those in the Caspian region, south and central Asia. Above all, a NATO alliance cannot be predicated on flying flags alone; it must return to the basic tenet of "All for one, and one for all".

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