

AFGHANISTAN: FACING THE FUTURE



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AFGHANISTAN AND NATO WORKING TOWARD TRANSITION
FROM BATTLEFIELD SUCCESS TO LONG-TERM STABILITY

By per Concordiam Staff

The typical bustle of a spring afternoon ended abruptly when explosions ripped through the air and the sounds of automatic weapons fire echoed through the streets and bazaars of central Kabul. After six months of relative peace in Afghanistan's capital city, insurgents had returned with their trademark brand of death and destruction. A few years ago, attacks were frequent and NATO troops did most of the fighting, but this time things were different. Afghan security forces successfully turned back an enemy offensive with minimal casualties and very little support from international troops, and according to *The Economist*, "News footage of brave, bloodied Afghan commandos caused a swell of national pride in a country unused to government heroes."

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the coordinated attacks of April 15, 2012, on Afghan government buildings, Western embassies, and International Security Forces (ISAF) bases in Kabul and three regional capitals, calling it the beginning of their "Spring Offensive." The rapid and effective Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) response quickly contained the Taliban fighters, preventing them from reaching their targets, and limiting civilian casualties. ISAF commander, U.S. Gen. John Allen, was impressed with how quickly and effectively Afghan security forces reacted: "They were on the scene immediately, well-led and well-coordinated. They helped protect their fellow citizens and largely kept the insurgents contained." Allen also noted that ISAF helped only with helicopters and advisors, calling their success, "a testament to their skill and professionalism."

Only one week before, the United States and Afghanistan signed an agreement transferring control of most special operations missions and the management of the prisoner detention and interrogation process to Afghan forces. NATO is scheduled to end combat operations by the end of 2014, with all security responsibilities handed over to the ANSF, and this agreement was a major step in the transition.

The transition to Afghan self-sufficiency is well underway. By December 2011, ANSF had assumed security responsibility for eight of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and parts of 12 more, including most of the larger cities and encompassing more than half the population. Afghan government institutions are progressively more competent and Afghans are increasingly taking the lead from international partners in reconstruction and development projects and a wide range of non-security operations. Democracy is taking root and Afghan women have emerged from virtual confinement to reclaim their places in public life.

This progress is also testament to the dedication and sacrifice of military and civilians from the 50 nations contributing to ISAF who have worked diligently in that decade, first to re-establish a basic foundation of security and stability, and then to build on that with development and reconstruction efforts, aided by funding from at least 16 non-Alliance nations. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), ISAF's principal tool in this field, tie everything together by bridging the gaps between military and civilian capabilities – working with Afghan officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and aid agencies.

Misconceptions abound as to what role the Allies will have after 2014, as many believe that January 2015 will arrive with all Alliance and partner troops out of Afghanistan and the security commitments made by Allied nations fulfilled. After more than 10 years of combat operations in Central Asia, public support is waning in the West, especially given austerity budgets caused by economic problems at home. Progress has been made in Afghanistan, though at times it's been painfully slow. But the job is not finished and the fact remains that creating a stable and prosperous future for Afghanistan should remain a priority for Europe and NATO for many years. Our political leaders will need to effectively take this message to reluctant voters at home. Though the NATO combat mission ends in 2014, the Allies will stay in Afghanistan in the form of advisors, aid agencies, trainers and even businessmen.

A STABILIZING PRESENCE

Afghanistan has been at war for more than 30 years. Millions of Afghans are still refugees, mostly in neighboring countries. Investment is difficult to attract without security. Poor economic prospects and the country's weak institutions and lack of security have helped make Afghanistan the world's primary supplier of heroin, feeding violence, organized crime, corruption and addiction in the region and globally.

Since Operation Enduring Freedom began in October 2001, defeating al-Qaida and establishing a free and stable Afghanistan have been the primary goals of the Allied mission. Afghanistan was chosen by al-Qaida as its base of operations and training largely because the country's anarchic, war-torn society – and sympathetic Taliban government – provided fertile soil in which to operate free from the prying eyes of Western intelligence agencies. Failure to stabilize the country and rebuild the infrastructure would leave a void likely to be exploited again, following the withdrawal of Alliance forces, by al-Qaida or a similar extremist group. “The aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is a warning against abrupt departures, leaving ill-resourced governments behind,” *The Economist* wrote in March 2012. “NATO's strategy is designed to prevent a repeat of that disaster by providing the Afghan government with adequate security forces and encouraging political reconciliation between it and its enemies.” A stable Afghanistan is critical to the security of its people, the region and, as shown by numerous terrorist attacks planned and coordinated from within its territory, the rest of the world.

After months of difficult negotiations, the U.S. and Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement in May 2012 that lays out the structure of U.S. involvement through 2024 and, according to *The New York Times*, “covers social and economic development, institution building, regional



A midwife counsels new parents on child care at a basic health center in Badakhshan.

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cooperation and security.” A few days later, at NATO’s 2012 meeting in Chicago, countries in the coalition committed to “continuing financial contributions to Afghanistan’s security forces and to training and equipping them,” the *Times* said.

As noted in the 2006 Afghan development strategy report “The Afghanistan Compact,” security and development are two sides of the same coin. “Genuine security remains a fundamental prerequisite for achieving stability and development in Afghanistan. Security cannot be provided by military means alone. It requires good governance, justice and the rule of law, reinforced by reconstruction and development.” Development is impossible without security, but deep and lasting security cannot be achieved when basic needs are not met.

The Alliance partners recognize this duality and have committed to continued military and civilian support for Afghan development and security after ISAF’s combat mission ends. Despite substantial improvements in ANSE, according to the BBC, “many observers question how it would fare against the Taliban without help from NATO.” So, on the military side, the Allies will continue to train and provide intelligence support to Afghan security forces and Allied special operations teams will remain in a counterterrorism capacity to prevent the return of al-Qaida and its ilk.

On the civilian side, numerous nongovernmental and humanitarian organizations, from the United Nations Development Program to privately funded aid groups, such as the International Rescue Committee, are active. They provide food, shelter and medical care and are working to build schools, hospitals, roads, water treatment systems and all other infrastructure damaged and long neglected during the decades of war. For instance, much of the irrigation infrastructure was destroyed by the Soviet troops in the 1970s and never replaced through years of war, but Afghanistan has a largely arid climate and agriculture is highly dependent on irrigation. Afghanistan has always had a primarily agrarian economy and almost 80 percent of the population works the land, though most are engaged in subsistence farming. Irrigation infrastructure projects and introduction of more efficient agricultural techniques have already vastly improved agricultural output. In addition to feeding people, this has the added benefit of helping fight narcotics trafficking by reducing dependency on opium production.

KEY TOOL FOR DEVELOPMENT

PRTs will continue to play an important role in development. There are currently 26 PRTs spread throughout Afghanistan and NATO leadership views them as an important and effective tool, moving forward, in the development and rebuilding of the country. PRTs are a blend of military and civilian experts in engineering, agriculture and foreign

affairs that work together with Afghan partners to support development projects and help coordinate and provide security for projects of NGOs and aid agencies. A PRT from the Czech Republic operating in Logar province in south-east Afghanistan has been heavily involved in agricultural development projects, including training and seed distribution. The Czechs funded and facilitated the construction of four milk collection and cold storage facilities, which allow small farmers a centralized place to sell their milk, reducing spoilage and increasing production. A Lithuanian-led PRT in Ghor province, consisting of team members from Croatia, Denmark, Georgia, Japan, Romania, Ukraine and the United States, operates a police training center.

One purpose of the PRTs is to extend the authority of the Afghan central government while mentoring and facilitating local ownership of development projects. “The concept behind that is to help train, educate and create an environment within which governance can self-sustain,” UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan Representative Mark Ward said. The importance of Afghan ownership of all aspects of the processes cannot be overstated, as the building of a sovereign, peaceful and stable country – the primary goal of Allied operations in Afghanistan – would not be possible without determined Afghan leadership. “A paradigm shift is underway; the aim is sovereignty – empowering Afghanistan to take charge of its own destiny and turning direct military and civilian action of the international community into a supporting role,” Zahir Tanin, Afghanistan’s representative to the United Nations told the UN Security Council in March 2012.

The Afghan economy has been growing rapidly, at an average annual rate of 8.9 percent from 2002 to 2010, according to World Bank data. The Bank expects strong growth to continue; however, it underlines that most recent growth has been the result of foreign aid and security expenditures and warns that longer-term growth will depend on the effectiveness of economic development projects in areas such as mining and agriculture. The country has made huge improvements in key development indicators. The mortality rate for children under five has been almost halved since 2006. School enrollment is up by 600 percent and enrollment of girls is up more than 1,300 percent since 2001. Democracy is taking root, as well. Elections are still flawed, and official corruption is a serious problem, but average Afghan people, including women, have a voice in their government after years of repression. Women not only can vote, but 69 were elected to parliament in 2010. They have been freed to return to work, to go to school and to pursue professional lives, including service in the military and police. In early 2012, the Afghan National Army began training female commandos to serve with special operations units conducting counterinsurgency “night raids.”

NEED FOR GOOD NEIGHBORS

Stability in Afghanistan will help breed stability in the entire region. To the north, Afghanistan is bordered by former-Soviet Central Asia, a region struggling to transition to democratic governance and integrate into the world economy. To the south is nuclear-armed Pakistan, still hosting almost 2 million Afghan refugees. Iran, also host to multitudes of Afghan refugees, lies to the west. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan could allow over 2 million Afghan refugees to return, alleviating their neighbors of the burden, and spur widespread economic growth in the region as security brings new industries and opens up trade corridors closed for decades.

Pakistan, the most important neighbor, has a complicated relationship with Afghanistan. The countries' border splits the large Pashtun ethnic group. Pakistan was one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan, yet it signed on early as an important regional ally in the NATO undertaking to oust the Taliban and destroy al-Qaida. Pakistan benefits from a stable Afghanistan, as unrest increases the flow of refugees and the threat of Islamist militancy spilling over and contributing to Pakistan's own militancy problems.

Pakistan worked with the West to provide a base of support for the mujahedeen's fight to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan in the 1970s and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency maintained close links with the Taliban in the decades that followed. According to the 2010 Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Independent Task Force report, Pakistan also has a complex relationship with Islamic militants within its own borders. Associations and loyalties have blurred. It is clear that Pakistan would like an Afghanistan that is nonthreatening to its interests and one that is stable enough not to export radicalism and refugees.

Though some Central Asian countries are rich in energy and other natural resources, the region has suffered from corruption and organized crime, fed by narcotics trafficking out of Afghanistan; violent extremism, influenced by the proximity of the Taliban and its extremist ideology; and ethnic discord. Peace and stability in Afghanistan would lessen the strain on these countries, while creating economic benefits for all. Indeed, a stable Afghanistan could link Central Asia to the India's booming markets.

Russia, China and India also have interest in stabilizing Afghanistan. Russia has been battling a domestic drug addiction epidemic, fed largely by Afghan heroin, which, like in Central Asia, cultivates organized crime and corruption. All of the regional players would accrue economic benefits from increased trade and economic activity integral to peace and stability. The CFR report hopes that, moving forward, "the reduced NATO commitment to Afghanistan could lead states like China, Iran, and Russia

– which contribute little to security efforts and pursue self-serving agendas – to think more seriously about issues of regional security," leading to a regional initiative that could spark a workable Afghan peace settlement.

SPREADING THE WORD

Allowing for the obvious difficulties of nation-building thousands of kilometers from home, NATO's plan is working. Progress has been slow and hard to achieve, but Afghanistan is becoming increasingly stable and a lasting peace seems achievable. The population is war weary and yearns to be sovereign and free of foreign soldiers. But for success to continue, the Alliance needs to win the battle of public opinion and make the case to the Afghans that NATO can continue to help the country move forward; to build on the fragile progress already made.

The International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) did a survey of students at Kabul University in 2011. The study found that this elite group of young Afghans generally looked favorably on the international military presence and the international community's political and security goals that are supportive of democracy and women's rights, but are often hostile towards ISAF's actions. ICOS says this indicates that "the international mission has won their minds but not their hearts" and points to a failure in strategic communications.

Even more troubling, the survey revealed a "widespread lack of knowledge of the 9/11 attacks," indicating that after 10 years of military intervention, the international community has failed to make understood, even to an educated segment of the Afghan population, what provoked the intervention in the first place.

Political leaders in NATO countries will also need to win the battle of public opinion at home. It's been more than 11 years since NATO intervened in Afghanistan, a period twice as long as World War II. The war is increasingly unpopular in NATO countries. Almost 3,000 Alliance troops had been killed as of April 2012, and hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent. NATO has made a commitment to support Afghanistan's development and reconstruction and to defend her fragile democracy, but to fulfill that commitment, NATO leaders will need to persuade the voters that the Afghanistan project remains a good investment, not only in Afghanistan's future, but in world peace. The CFR report "U.S. Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan" sums up what's at stake:

"All of Afghanistan's neighbors may already be hedging their bets in anticipation of a return to Afghan civil war. Renewed competition for influence in Afghanistan has the potential to rip the country apart, despite the fact that each state in the region would benefit far more from a period of peace and stability. Afghans would again suffer



Afghan children sit in a classroom in Kabul. The number of children enrolled in school has increased more than sixfold since 2001.

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the most, with millions of refugees streaming across the borders into Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere. Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics, already fragile, would be especially threatened by the turmoil of a renewed proxy war in Afghanistan. Moreover, the world would suffer if Afghanistan's internal conflict permits a return of al-Qaeda and other international terrorists."

STICKING AROUND

The Taliban, while not defeated, have been reduced as an effective military force and, given the great strides in capabilities made by the ANSF, with assistance from NATO, are probably no longer an existential threat to the government. U.S. Adm. James Stavridis, NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, told The Associated Press that a third tranche in the security transition would soon begin, placing over 75 percent of the population under the protection of the ANSF.

Evidence of Afghanistan's increasing stability was evident in the aftermath of the April 2012 attacks. Though somewhat

hysterical early reports in the Western media compared the attacks to Tet Offensive from the Vietnam War, the attackers failed to breach any secure areas and casualties were relatively light. Observers in Kabul noted that life had returned to normal just a few hours after the attack. Despite these signs of progress, continued success isn't guaranteed and a premature withdrawal would put all of the accomplishments in jeopardy. "It's important that all ... ISAF nations and other nations involved in international effort contribute to Afghan security forces post 2014," Stavridis said.

As British Prime Minister David Cameron told Parliament in March 2012: "Our mission in Afghanistan remains vital to our national security. Our task is simple," he said. "It's to equip the Afghan government and forces of Afghanistan with the capability and the capacity to take care of their own security without the need for foreign troops on the soil." Continued success to meet the goals stated by Prime Minister Cameron will require a recommitment by the Allies and the government and people of Afghanistan. □