

NATO'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

As the Former NATO Senior Civilian Representative for Afghanistan, Hikmet Çetin clarifies NATO's role in Afghanistan. He describes the social and economic problems that are intertwined with the security challenges and highlights the ongoing collaboration with the Afghan government, neighboring countries and NATO Partners in this complex effort. Çetin shares his insights as to how misperceptions about NATO's mission can be overcome and concludes by underlining that NATO will remain on the ground until self-sustaining local security structures are established.

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NATO's adaptation process to the post-Cold War security environment has become much more complex in the post 9/11 context. From an Alliance that was formed to deter and counter conventional massive threats, the North Atlantic Alliance has evolved into a collective security organization with new means designed to face asymmetric challenges.

The 1999 Strategic Concept already reflected a radical evolution in parallel with the emergence of new types of threats such as "oppression, ethnic conflict, economic distress, the collapse of political order, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction". This marked the establishment of "non-Article 5" missions and operations, which are broadly defined as crisis-management and peace-building operations. The 9/11 attacks marked the beginning of out-of-area operations.

Today, NATO is the most capable security organization in the world. Its missions cover an extremely broad area and the Alliance deals with a wide range of contemporary issues related to security, from science to training opportunities for the Middle East. The operation led in Afghanistan is undoubtedly the incarnation of all these evolutions, as well as a litmus test for NATO's relevance.

NATO arrived in Afghanistan in accordance with a UN mandate comprising tasks related to assisting the Afghan government in the fight against terrorism, corruption and training of local armed forces. Today, NATO's efforts in Afghanistan are threefold. On the one hand, ISAF¹ provides the military efforts, although it widely contributes to the overall institution building process and reconstruction efforts. On the other hand, the Senior Civilian Representative is responsible for promoting NATO's political-military commitment to Afghanistan in liaison with all relevant actors. Finally, as of September 2006, NATO launched a massive cooperation program with Afghanistan focusing on defense reform, defense institution-building and security sector reform.

NATO's role in Afghanistan is therefore well defined today. However, it is subject to evolution according to local and global circumstances, in order to adapt to various challenges that come about on the ground.

The most serious of all challenges faced by NATO in Afghanistan is certainly the security situation. Although ISAF has played a crucial role in eradicating some militias and helping the Afghan government seize control of a larger portion of its territory, there are hardcore remnants of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, although the notion of suicide attacks was unknown in the country until 2001, a large number of such attacks have taken place since 2005. Recent figures show that the number of suicide bombings increased seven fold between 2005 and 2006. This can be explained, among other reasons, by the arrival of fighters from other war zones in the Middle East as well as from Central Asian countries, motivated by financial gain as well as extremist ideology. Along with Afghan citizens and coalition forces, NATO troops also suffered from these attacks.

This situation is linked to increasing local support for the Taliban. Despite all the efforts of by the international community and the domestic government, in certain zones where the government and Afghan security forces do not have full control, the local population is obliged to rely on security provided by the Taliban.

¹ International Security Assistance Force.

One of the most tragic features of the ground situation in Afghanistan is the civilian casualties. Unfortunately, in many countries there is a lack of differentiation between casualties caused by the coalition forces and those caused by actions led by NATO forces. This is also the case in my country, where the media doesn't distinguish between the two operations. This has a very deep and negative effect on public opinion and the image of NATO. This is a major problem in the long term, since it may affect the contributions made by Allied and Partner countries to ISAF.

The security aspect is intertwined with the very deep economic problems in Afghanistan. The country's economic and social indicators are among the lowest in the world, comparable with the least developed countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, which makes Afghanistan entirely dependent on foreign aid. The country lacks adequate supplies of drinking water, its infant mortality rate is among the highest in the world, life expectancy is extremely low at about 43 years, unemployment is at serious levels and more than half of the population lives below the poverty line.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that Afghanistan is a global hub for the production of narcotics, which constitute the main livelihood of a considerable portion of its population. The poppy growing season usually coincides with an increase in violent attacks. Many international organizations and countries try to offer alternative livelihoods to the Afghan people, with varying degrees of success. In this context, NATO's role in the fight against narcotics is slightly ambiguous. PRTs² are not directly responsible for counter-narcotics activities. Rather, according to ISAF's mandate, NATO is there to assist local authorities in such missions. NATO's partners are also involved in these efforts: there is a pilot project in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council aimed at training Afghan officials in the fight against narcotics.

In face of such difficult conditions in the field of security and economic and social development, how can NATO fulfill its role in Afghanistan?

In the security realm, the primary condition for ISAF's success is giving all the necessary means and capabilities to the local security forces. Currently there are approximately 60,000 basic-trained Afghan National Police officers in the country. The Afghan National Army (ANA), on the other hand, is made up of 50,000 men. The international community also strives to train judges and prosecutors and to build effective communication systems between the center and provinces. However, huge challenges still lie ahead: The ANA faces high desertion rates and both for the police and the army, recruitment is extremely difficult and faces competition by local militias.

Another main ingredient of the recipe for NATO's success in Afghanistan is civil-military cooperation. NATO is no longer solely a military Alliance. It is widely considered a political-military organization. Parallel to this evolution, it is clear that NATO operations cannot be exclusively military efforts. Indeed, a large part of ISAF efforts is concentrated on reconstruction activities. It is indisputable that the success of PRTs is due to their important civilian components.

² Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Moreover, it has now become clear that the international community in general and NATO's operation in particular will not succeed in Afghanistan without the active contributions of neighboring countries, primarily Pakistan. This is especially crucial in terms of border control, intelligence sharing, and counter-terrorism.

NATO's efforts in Afghanistan have also taught us the importance of cooperating with other international organizations, with NATO's Partners and with the neighbors of the country that we operate in. On the ground, NATO operates in constant coordination with other international organizations such as the United Nations Assistance Mission. NATO's Partners' role has also been crucial. Indeed, many Partner countries, as well as third countries that are neither Allies nor Partners, are making substantial troop contributions in the framework of ISAF.

Finally, the grave misperceptions that exist regarding NATO's role and actions in Afghanistan draw attention to a need for a public diplomacy strategy for ISAF, both in Afghanistan and in the Allied countries.

In Afghanistan, we should concentrate all our efforts on making sure that NATO is not perceived as an invader force and that its role is complementary to local efforts. We should draw attention to ISAF's reconstruction and institution-building efforts, which are at least as vital as security efforts. It is also very important to implicate Afghan officials in public diplomacy efforts in a spirit of ownership, as well as to demonstrate cultural sensitivity while sending the messages that need to be understood.

In Allied and troop contributing Partner countries, efforts should be aimed at full transparency and extensive information on the operations and casualties. In order to make sure that troop contributions continue over a long period, we should explain to the Western public that our efforts in Afghanistan are complementary to those of the Afghan government, that they should not be mixed up with those of the coalition forces, and that we have achieved a great deal of success in helping the Afghans already.

NATO's role in Afghanistan is to help establish a self-sustaining security system in a very broad sense. Only then will the Alliance be able to leave Afghanistan. However, this effort should not be seen merely as an exit strategy for the international community. Of course, building local structures is a pre-requirement for leaving Afghanistan. But more importantly, it is the ultimate goal that we should be aiming for, given that it is the key to creating a successful State and winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.