



SPECIAL FEATURE

NATO in Afghanistan: Fault lines in the transatlantic alliance?

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

April 02, 2009

As newly elected US President Barack Obama and NATO leaders meet on April 3 and 4 to commemorate the Alliance's 60th anniversary, daunting challenges of turning the tide in Afghanistan face both the US and the NATO. Nearly six years after commencing its mission in Afghanistan, NATO continues to grapple with ways and means to deal with the rising violence caused by the Taliban-led insurgency.¹ More than winning the war in the largest out of area military operation, for NATO emerging successful is also about retaining its relevance in the post-Cold War world. The emerging fault lines in the troubled transatlantic alliance in addressing the conflict in Afghanistan is likely to be one issue of contention between Europe and the current administration. As President Obama garners support for the newly unveiled AF-PAK strategy, it would be timely to assess the type of support he would get in return from among NATO allies.

Rising instability and violence in Afghanistan

The Taliban-led insurgency has shown no signs of abatement, with a significant rise of violence level in parts of the South, South-East and South-West, leading to an overall increase in casualties from 2007. There has been a marked rise in both civilian and security forces casualties, as well as among the militants themselves when compared to 2007. Attacks against Afghan civilians and the International Community using Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) caused the greatest loss of life, while insurgents increasingly targeted isolated and vulnerable Afghan National Police (ANP) facilities, resulting in a significant rise in police fatalities. Furthermore, instability in Pakistan allowed insurgents to use safe havens from which to mount attacks across the porous border into Afghanistan.² In January 2008, a report issued by the Afghanistan Study Group claimed that the year 2007 was the deadliest for American and international troops in Afghanistan since the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001.³ However, in 2008, violence continued to escalate with a reported 30 per cent

increase nation-wide and an estimated 40 per cent rise in attacks over 2007 in the U.S.-led eastern sector.⁴

The mounting casualties also include soaring fatalities among civilians, primarily due to over-reliance on aerial bombing by the international forces, in the absence of adequate troops on ground and lack of 'human intelligence'. According to the United Nations, 2,118 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2008, compared with 1,523 in 2007. The 2008 figure is the highest since the Taliban government was ousted in November 2001.⁵ Such reports of mounting civilian casualties have a disastrous effect on popular perception by eroding support and causing resentment towards the international forces.

ISAF in Afghanistan

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commenced its mission in Afghanistan on December 20, 2001 as an UN-mandated European organisation but later evolved into a NATO-led mission in 2003.⁶ For the initial period, the ISAF mission, led by the United States was limited to Kabul. Subsequently, NATO took over command of ISAF in August 2003 and covered Afghanistan's whole territory to assist "the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance."⁷ The UN expanded NATO role vide Resolution 1776 on September 17, 2007, calling upon the alliance "to disarm militias, reform the justice system, train a national police force and army, provide security for elections, and combat the narcotics industry." Over the years, the number of ISAF troops has grown accordingly, from the initial 5,000 to around 56,420 (as of February 2009) troops from 41 countries, including all 26 NATO members.

NATO gradually took control of the Afghan theatre in four phases. During Phase One (2003-2004), NATO forces moved into Kabul and the northern part of the country, with French and German forces predominant in these areas. In Phase Two (May 2005), it moved into relatively stable western Afghanistan, with the Italian and Spanish forces at the core of the NATO force. In Phase Three (July 2006), ISAF moved into southern Afghanistan, where US, British, Canadian, and Dutch forces were stationed. Phase Four commenced in October 2006, when ISAF took control of the entire country.⁸

Issues affecting the effectiveness of ISAF

Absence of adequate troop numbers and lack of resources

Security in Afghanistan has largely been undermined by the inability of international forces to 'hold' on to the area cleared of insurgents particularly in the South and East. Even though the ISAF troop level has risen by an impressive 37 per cent in 2008 alone, the absence of adequate number of troops remains a critical factor behind the alliance not being able to secure the countryside. The current level of violence and insecurity can be attributed to

the short-sighted policy of the Bush administration immediately after the toppling of the Taliban regime in not expanding the ISAF outside of Kabul. With the objective of maintaining a light military foot print and preoccupation with planning for the war in Iraq, American policy makers initially sought to minimise the size, scope and functions of the ISAF.

The present ratio of NATO and US troops to the Afghan population is roughly 1/10th of the force level required to bring about stability when there is no active resistance or insurgency. In order to meet the demand for additional troops, military commanders repeatedly explored the possibility of shifting forces from other parts of Afghanistan. But such attempts are being undermined by the existence of “national caveats” or national restrictions directing how and where a country’s military forces may be employed, thereby severely restricting flexibility and creating serious operational constraints in Counter insurgency (COIN) operations.⁹

Even as the Obama administration decided to surge more forces into Afghanistan as part of the new strategy, a similar call by NATO commanders for more troops has evoked only a partial response. Canada and the Netherlands have already set timelines for the withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan. Other allies, including Germany, Italy and Spain operate in the rather peaceful western and northern regions of the country and, so far, have withstood pressure from other alliance members to deploy their forces to the southern and eastern provinces and join the American, British, Canadian and Dutch forces in fighting the raging insurgency. This distinction maintained between NATO countries of being a ‘stabilisation force’ or a fighting force has been the reason for the NATO being labelled a ‘two-tier alliance’, with “some allies willing to fight and die to protect peoples' security, and others who are not.”¹⁰

Generating resources for Afghanistan has also been a constant challenge for NATO. On March 31, 2009, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer called for international contributions to a broadened NATO trust fund for the Afghan National Army (ANA). NATO had created the trust fund in 2007 “to assist with the payment of transportation and installation costs of equipment donations by ISAF nations to the ANA.”¹¹ The fund so far has only \$25 million. In its broadened form, the fund requires almost two billion Euros every year,¹² a liability considered too high for NATO member states.

Problems of ‘unity of command’ and conflicting national agendas

The complexity of the counter insurgency campaign in Afghanistan is further compounded by the presence of two major international military coalitions – the US led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the ISAF. Existence of the two security apparatus with two commands violates the principle of ‘unity of command’ and creates a serious problem of coordination in the operational sphere.¹³ The attempt to merge the ISAF and OEF by the Bush Administration under one command has been resisted by NATO allies mainly due to the differing perceptions on the nature of the two operations and conflicting

national agendas. Britain, Germany, and France were the principal allies opposing the US proposition to merge the commands, intending to preserve ISAF as a stabilization force as opposed to a combat force that fights insurgency/terrorism.¹⁴

Differences in Counter narcotics strategy

Afghanistan produces more than 90 per cent of the world's supply of opium, which is the main source of funding for the Taliban insurgency. Taliban insurgents make an estimated \$100-200 million a year from taxing opium poppy production and trafficking. Thus, a reduction in opium production remains critical for shrinking the war chest of the insurgents. Moreover, most of the drugs from Afghanistan find their way into Europe. In spite of the fact that opium cultivation fell by 19 per cent in 2008, significant differences exist in the Allies' approach to counter narcotics in Afghanistan and this is working at cross purposes and undermining the allies' counter insurgency efforts. While US policy insists on using forceful means of complete eradication like aerial spraying, NATO allies are reluctant to do so mainly for reasons of losing the battle for hearts and minds. Forceful poppy crop eradication campaigns without alternative livelihood programmes have in some instances generated economic hardships for the people, thereby increasing discontent with the government and foreign forces and expanding the support base for Taliban particularly in the South and East.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)

With the objective of building the capacity and extending the reach of the Afghan government to address instability in remote, ungoverned regions, PRTs were established in 2002. Described as the "leading edge" of the allies' effort to stabilise Afghanistan, PRTs are integrated civilian-military organisations designed to meet three objectives: improve security, extend the reach of the Afghan government, and facilitate reconstruction in priority provinces.¹⁵ However, there are grey areas undermining the effectiveness of the PRTs in Afghanistan. For instance, conflicting national agendas and national caveats in PRTs create the problem of coordination between PRTs. Most allies with high 'risk aversion' are hesitant to actively engage with the Afghan population. With little oversight and transparency of how their funds are managed and projects implemented, PRTs projects are stymied by corruption and delays and are mostly viewed as a 'mixed bag'.¹⁶

Sanctuary in Pakistan

Apart from all these factors, NATO's failures seem to be emanating from elements outside Afghanistan rather than from internal challenges alone. Safe havens in Pakistan for the Taliban and the al Qaeda and their capacity to churn out an unending supply of fighters is said to be the biggest advantage for the insurgents. Haroon Mir, a political analyst and co-director of the Afghanistan Centre for Research and Policy Studies, recently said, "I think fighting in Afghanistan is meaningless as long as the insurgents and al Qaeda have their safe havens in Pakistan and training camps there. It does not matter how many

Taliban we capture and kill, it does not matter how many terrorists we capture and kill, because there will be enough recruitment in Pakistan and they will send more.”¹⁷ Instability in Pakistan and the presence of sanctuaries and safe havens in that country continue to pose serious challenges for ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan.

An American-led war in Afghanistan

While the conflict in Afghanistan calls for greater leadership role for the new US administration in the transatlantic relationship, there are inherent dangers of tilting the balance by creeping “Americanization of the war”. NATO allies would like to be seen as ‘partners’ who are consulted and not constantly browbeaten in meeting US demands. The fact remains that NATO has struggled to retain popular support for its ISAF mission, amidst declining public opinion for US leadership in Afghanistan under the Bush administration. For example, the German Marshall Fund poll has found a sharp decline in European public opinion towards US leadership since 2002.¹⁸ This decline complicated the effort of allied governments to sustain public support for the ISAF mission. The Bush administration’s preoccupation with Iraq and its ‘neglect’ of the mission in Afghanistan had also created a problem for the ISAF to explain its continued involvement in that country. For instance, in February 2008 US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates stated rather unambiguously, “I worry that for many Europeans the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan are confused.... Many of them...have a problem with our involvement in Iraq and project that to Afghanistan.”

Further, US policy or the lack of it, has often left NATO countries searching for a tactical plan of action in Afghanistan. An example of this was provided by the “strategic vision” White Paper for Afghanistan, produced by the Bush Administration in April 2008. The paper stated the rationale for the Afghan mission that could be used to garner more public support for ISAF. The paper projected “some strides in bringing together allied views, but it also masked some important differences. It committed the allies to an indefinite period of time to stabilize Afghanistan, something that several allies had previously resisted. However, the paper also did not present a plan for engaging Pakistan or Iran; instead, the allies would continue to do so bilaterally, an approach that has not thus far yielded success in stemming the flow of arms or fighters into Afghanistan.”¹⁹

Recently, the NATO chief called for more European troops in Afghanistan to avoid the “Americanization” of the war after President Barack Obama stepped up the US military commitment there by promising to send in an additional 17,000 combat troops, increasing the numbers of the US forces in Afghanistan to around 55,000. He said that “This is not President Obama’s war... Allies need to do their part. I would not like to see a mission which is out of balance.”²⁰

Criticality of Afghanistan theatre for NATO

The NATO mission in Afghanistan today is seen as a test of the allies' military capabilities and their political will to undertake a difficult mission in a distant land and to sustain that commitment amidst emerging faultiness in the alliance and dwindling domestic support. Since the NATO's Washington Summit in 1999, the allies have sought to create a "new" NATO, capable of operating beyond the European theatre to combat emerging threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). NATO is seeking to be "global" in its geographic reach and in the development of non-member partner states that can assist in succeeding in an agreed mission.²¹

The mission in Afghanistan is also termed crucial for NATO's relevance in the post cold war era. Several NATO members have insisted that the allies must demonstrate the political will to counter the threat emerging from Afghanistan. Both Afghanistan and now Pakistan provide a test of will against the imminent danger of becoming targets of international terrorism embodied by the Taliban-al Qaeda combine. In the recent past, NATO governments have also repeatedly pledged to develop capabilities making their forces more expeditionary, flexible, and "deployable." The mission in Afghanistan surely is a real test of these capabilities. The pessimistic reports of the 'unwinnable war' in Afghanistan have also generated public debate within these countries against troop contribution and participation in the long war in Afghanistan.

President Obama's NATO Mission: Rebuilding relationships?

The election of Barack Obama is said to have ushered in a new foreign policy direction with greater emphasis on 'diplomacy and multilateralism'. To that extent, President Obama is clearly in favour of calling for more involvement, resources and contributions from NATO allies in Afghanistan. During his campaign pledge, he maintained that "Afghanistan is not a U.S. mission, it's a NATO mission, and one of the things that I think has been lost is the sense of international partnership in dealing with the problem of international terrorism."²² During the presidential debates, Obama had further emphasised that he would be looking to the NATO allies to increase aid in Afghanistan (the "good" war) while Iraq (the "bad" war) ends.

In this context the NATO summit on April 3 and 4 assumes added importance. President Obama plans to engage NATO nations for pushing towards a 'more for more' policy in Afghanistan. However, given that the NATO meet in Krakow on February 19-20, 2009 did not show many indications of increased troop contributions, whether he succeeds in persuading NATO countries to contribute more troops and resources remains to be seen. Moreover, there exist doubts among NATO allies about replicating the success story of Iraq or the Iraq template to Afghanistan particularly in terms of troop surge. At another level, the present troop surge also indicates that the Obama administration might rely less on NATO troop contributions.

The intent of Obama in talking with NATO allies, howsoever highlighted, is less important than what Obama demands from NATO, and what NATO allies are capable of delivering. It is unlikely that the April meet would lead to an amicable resolution of the issues between the United States and Europe on addressing the Afghan quagmire given that the 'end state' is not clearly defined. In addition, before taking any further steps in Afghanistan, the Central and Eastern European constituents of NATO who mostly take a hard-line stance against Moscow, would like to be informed about the Obama administration's 'reset' policy towards Russia and its implications. At the same time, Germany, which is dependent on Russia for energy supplies, will have its own concerns. Russia continues to remain important for NATO's transport supplies and is likely to pull strings to have its 'sphere of influence' clearly delineated. All these pulls and pushes would have their impact on the commitment of NATO countries in Afghanistan and the success of the Alliance in stabilising that country.

Notes

¹ The insurgency which includes a symbiotic relationship of Taliban guerrillas, followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's radical group Hizb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, al Qaeda and its affiliates, religious clerics, narcotic traffickers, anti-government armed groups, tribal fighters and self interested "spoilers" in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. While most of these groups may not share the political goals of the Taliban, they do share a common agenda in preventing or limiting the writ of state authority. This inference was derived from interviews, briefings, and discussions with the locals, government officials, academics, media persons, aid workers in various Afghan provinces in May-June 2007.

² *Afghanistan Report 2009*, NATO, p.6, Available at <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/index.htm>

³ "Revitalizing our Efforts, Rethinking our Strategies," Report of the Afghanistan Study Group, Center for the Study of the Presidency, January 30, 2008, p.17.

⁴ Vincent Morelli and Paul Belkin, NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance, CRS RL33627, January 23, 2009.

⁵ Dexter Filkins, "Afghan civilian deaths rose 40 percent in 2008," *International Herald Tribune*, February 18, 2009.

⁶ For further details see Paul Gallis, NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance, Congressional Research Service Report, RL33627, Updated July 16, 2007, p.3.

⁷ "NATO's role in Afghanistan," <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan/index.html>

⁸ For details about stages in NATO's expansion, see Paul Gallis, NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance, Congressional Research Service Report, RL33627, Updated July 16, 2007, p.3.

⁹ Reportedly, there are 102 restrictions that have been placed on forces by their nations and 50 of these restrictions are considered to be "operationally significant".

¹⁰ US Defence Secretary Robert Gates in February 2008 warned the future of NATO is at risk due to differences over Afghanistan and that it may become a two-tier alliance. See "NATO 'at risk over Afghanistan'", February 7, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7231909.stm

¹¹ "NATO to contribute to the sustainment of the Afghan National Army," http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52178.htm

¹² "NATO chief calls for contributions to trust fund for Afghan army," March 31, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/31/content_11108449.htm

¹³ Some countries contribute forces to both OEF and ISAF, while others contribute strictly to ISAF. See Andrew Feickert, U.S. and Coalition Military Operations in Afghanistan: Issues for Congress, CRS Report RL33503, Updated December 11, 2006, p.2

¹⁴ Germany opposed a merger of the commands because German forces in ISAF were trained only for stabilisation, and not for counter-insurgency operations. The French view was somewhat different; they were concerned that the Administration, after having a US commander in place to guide all military activity in Afghanistan, might use NATO as a “toolbox” to accomplish Washington’s broader objectives. See Paul Gallis, no. 6. Also see Judy Dempsey and David S. Cloud, Europeans balking at new Afghan role, September 14, 2005, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/09/13/news/nato.php>

¹⁵ Briefing on the role of PRT’s at ISAF HQ, Kabul, June 17, 2007. Also see ISAF PRT Handbook, Edition 3, February 3, 2007. Further details see Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment, An Interagency Assessment, USAID, June 2006, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADG252.pdf.

¹⁶ This inference was derived from discussions with locals in Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Kabul and Jalalabad during a field visit to Afghanistan in June 2007.

¹⁷ “Why NATO is not winning in Afghanistan,” *Economic Times*, April 01, 2009.

¹⁸ Transatlantic Trends, The German Marshall Fund, September 2008.

¹⁹ “ISAF’s Strategic Vision,” NATO summit, Bucharest, April 3, 2008.

²⁰ James G. Neuger, “NATO Opposes ‘Americanization’ of Afghanistan War,” March 30, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601082&sid=anojZhrn0VCA&refer=canada>

²¹ This change in overall mission initially reflected a NATO consensus that the principal dangers to allied security lie distant from the treaty area and require new political tools and military capabilities to combat them. For further details on the ‘new’ and ‘global’ NATO, see Vincent Morelli and Paul Belkin, no. 4.

²² Mark Silva, “Obama: ‘Exit strategy’ for Afghanistan too,” *The Swamp*, February 27, 2009, http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2009/02/obama_exit_strategy_for_aghani.html

* * * * *