

ViewPoint

No Time to Lose

Five Steps for Success in Afghanistan

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SUMMARY

NATO's near-term priority in Afghanistan must be the implementation of the new strategy to which member-states agreed at their last summit. Time is of the essence since the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate. The alliance-wide agreement offers new momentum to focus on five critical areas:

- **Setting the right priorities: Focus on a three-track approach to security, politics and development**
- **Following a population-centric approach: Implement a strategy that aligns with the needs of the Afghans**
- **Expanding information campaigns: Work to galvanize support for the mission in Afghanistan**
- **Ensure secure and pluralist elections: Help create the conditions for a pluralistic presidential race to make the Afghan democratic process credible**
- **Enhance civilian-military coordination: Leave egos and agendas at the door and aim collectively for a sustainable Afghanistan**

European and American leaders have recently made a priority of renewing trans-Atlantic goodwill. They have accomplished much in this area, particularly in their cooperation on Afghanistan. At their summit in April, NATO allies committed themselves specifically to a new, ambitious and comprehensive approach to the country. That was the easy part. The real test, however, will be how – and how fast – they can implement this new strategy. NATO must convert its pledges on paper into realistic contributions.

The alliance must turn to underappreciated resources to do this. The European Union and its member-states have been contributing substantially to civilian capacity-building efforts and the reconstruction of vital infrastructure (schools, water treatment and roads). These contributions are critical if NATO is to succeed in its mission. And they must continue.

But success will also require NATO to step back from its one-dimensional focus on the military aspect of the mission. The alliance must explicitly recognize the critical role for civilian efforts. And each member of the alliance must determine the assets that they can best contribute so that the alliance can simultaneously pursue military and civilian goals.

NATO leaders have already affirmed that a comprehensive and integrated mission is essential for progress. Europe needs to diversify its contributions and raise its military profile, and the US needs to determine how to best deploy

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its allies' capabilities. These are the challenges for the months ahead. NATO has no time to lose. The next year is critical if the alliance wants to gain the upper hand in Afghanistan.

Opportunities for NATO to reverse Afghanistan's current downward spiral exist if the allies can take advantage of their complementary abilities. This paper will recommend five areas on which the US and Europe should focus to do this. These recommendations are not intended to provide an exit strategy; it is too soon to tell how events will unfold. But they can offer options to reclaim the international initiative through joint effort.

1) SET THE RIGHT PRIORITIES

The current US strategy in Afghanistan includes a general overview of its objectives and end goal. But as in all overarching strategies, it does not provide a fine-tuned approach for implementation. This would require an understanding of priorities by assessing the most urgent needs on the ground, and these needs go beyond security. Washington's constant fixation, however, on security has been detrimental. It has led to a disproportionate allocation of manpower and resources to this one objective. The alliance has tried to create a zone of security under the wrong conditions. Security will not and cannot emerge without addressing the immediate economic and social needs of the Afghan people.

Lessons from Iraq have shown that a one-dimensional counter-insurgency strategy is unsustainable. The approach must be multi-dimensional, and its objectives must be realistic and attainable within a politically acceptable period of time.

One of these objectives must be promoting good governance to improve the Afghan government's credibility and accountability among its people. Recent polling shows that this is a major concern among the populace. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) contributors must work with Kabul in the run-up to August's national elections to ensure a viable democratic process ahead of and during the vote. The Afghan government must have the trust of its people, which it can gain by showing that it has the capacity to lead.

US and European contributors to the mission in Afghanistan recognize the importance of good governance; they now need to set their priorities accordingly. On his last trip to Afghanistan in May, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner's delegation reflected Paris' dedication to a more comprehensive and multi-pronged approach. Mr. Kouchner was accompanied by advisers on three critical areas of a sustainable strategy: politics, security and development.¹

"Our clear, hold, build and sustain strategy depends [on] protecting the Afghan people. At a minimum, this includes providing continuous security, enhanced governance and rule of law, and a sustainable legitimate economy. It requires delivering the comprehensive approach that effectively combines military and civilian capabilities."
—Karl W. Eikenberry²

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Progress in these three areas must occur simultaneously. We cannot afford a “three-speed” approach as all three components are interconnected, if not intertwined. The security-centric approach has proven ineffective and obstructed efforts made on the other two fronts. In fact, focusing on any one of the three components would neglect the other two.

To reverse the current downward spiral, international actors – be they military or civilian – must work together to achieve synergy and prevent the Taliban from regaining a foothold.

Areas that require increased attention and sustained resources include:

- **Security:** NATO must establish the “right” security. The alliance and the Afghan government must strike a balance between police and army forces to address adequately the need for local security and military operations targeting Taliban strongholds.
- **Good Governance vs. Corruption:** Corruption remains one of Afghanistan’s biggest problems. It undermines government credibility and instills distrust among the population. The Afghan people need strong, trustworthy leadership to consolidate their national identity and lay the foundation for a democratic state. NATO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund contribute to this effort by ensuring that the government does not fall into receivership. In return, Kabul has agreed to transparent use of funds. This arrangement must continue. Afghans must perceive their government as open and capable if they are to grant it legitimacy. Kabul must work towards developing the tools to secure and sustain a functioning society.
- **Economic Development and Promotion of Local Business:** Promoting business ventures will help sustain the country in the long run. It will create wealth locally, producing a nationwide ripple effect that may alleviate the sense of isolation that exists in many provinces. Unlike Iraq, with its significant urban population, Afghanistan is mainly rural and requires greater efforts to boost domestic commerce. In addition, the blooming of businesses in southern regions could replace poppy production as a source of income.
- **Education:** The experiences of Greg Mortenson³ in Pakistan clearly indicate the need for more emphasis on education. Afghans have much to gain from greater education as it increases their chances of becoming independent and self-sufficient. At the same time, they would see educational assistance as an illustration of the international community’s sincere willingness to further Afghan development. Such aid is, therefore, helpful for combating NATO’s image as an

“You have to attack the source of your enemy’s strength. In America’s case, that’s not Osama or Saddam or anyone else. The enemy is ignorance. The only way to defeat is to build relationships with those people, to draw them into the modern world with education and business. Otherwise the fight will go on forever.” –Greg Mortenson

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occupying force, defusing antagonism towards the West, and providing an alternative to the indoctrination process in Madrassas.

2) FOLLOW A POPULATION-CENTRIC APPROACH⁴

NATO has belatedly incorporated into its strategy that popular support is needed for establishing national stability. As the distinction between friend or foe is increasingly blurred, this realization has come none to soon. The blurring has served the insurgency well and has trapped NATO forces in a Catch-22 situation: The alliance is criticized for causing civilian casualties when it intervenes or for choosing not to intervene at all. This apparent no-win situation limits NATO's operational capabilities, instills further doubt about its purpose, and raises its fear of bad publicity in an already largely unpopular war.

The Taliban's use of the population as a constraining factor in rules of engagement bares similarity to the Viet Cong's tactics of the 1960s and 1970s. Viet Cong forces favored close combat to deprive US forces of major firepower (artillery support). American commanders had difficulty responding to this tactic, fearing casualties from friendly fire. This proved to be a major Achilles' heel for US armed forces.

"We will not win based on the number of Taliban we kill, but instead on our ability to separate insurgents from the center of gravity – the people. That means we must respect and protect the population from coercion and violence, and operate in a manner which will win their support."
–General Stanley McChrystal⁵

Insurgent forces in Afghanistan have used a similar approach to level the playing field by taking airpower out of the equation. It is, therefore, vital to combat this strategy by adapting to this nature of warfare. NATO forces cannot simply shoot their way out of a problem in Afghanistan.

ISAF must, therefore, adopt a population-centric approach. This will best serve the interests of the Afghan people and drain support from the Taliban. Without the ability to recruit, the Taliban will be forced into a reclusive posture. This is their usual response to a situation in which they face overwhelming odds of failure. Adopting a population-centric approach is not a panacea. However, it should enable NATO forces and international actors to regain a stronger footing in Afghanistan.

NATO and other international actors can neutralize the Taliban's recruiting capabilities in other ways, too. They must strive to stem the effects of fear, lack of opportunity and lack of trust in the government. Tools of a population-centric approach include:

- **Strengthening ties to the local communities and their leaders:** This legitimizes the presence of ISAF forces. Proximity to communities is key to instilling trust and preventing the Taliban from infiltrating villages and usurping power from tribal leaders.

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- **Addressing vital needs:** Sewage, Water, Electricity, Academia and Transportation (SWEAT, to coin a term from the Iraq war) remain unfulfilled, basic needs for Afghans. By providing these services, ISAF also removes another source of dissatisfaction that aids the insurgents. Many Afghans join the insurgency not by conviction, but due to a lack of viable alternatives. Education has proven to be an effective tool for progress and fostering mutual understanding between Afghans and ISAF. The population must understand that NATO and international actors are there to provide assistance, not solely to conduct military operations.
- **Training a professional and multi-ethnic police force:** This would manifest good governance and sustain a governmental presence on the provincial level; police forces would gain a greater communitarian approach. Their multi-ethnic composition would preclude a power grab by any one group, ensuring smoother cohabitation with the population and limiting the potential for corruption.
- **Establishing good rapport with local power brokers:** NATO should reach out more regularly to tribal leaders and their councils to understand better the Afghan mentality and social structure. This will provide commanders on the ground with insight into acquiring the cooperation of the Afghan people and identifying moderate Taliban leaders who may be willing to reconcile with the Afghan government.

3) EXPAND INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

A lack of information campaigns has been detrimental to ongoing operations as Afghans have yet to understand the purpose of NATO's presence in their country. This paucity of communication has helped nurture the belief that international assistance is an occupation, providing the insurgency with yet another recruiting tool.

Similarly, public outreach in Europe and the US has been unsuccessful in garnering support for Afghan operations. Governments throughout Europe debate the mission intensely, only to hit political obstacles when they try to allocate additional resources to it. At the same time, Europeans see the dominant American role as an attempt by Washington to foist its foreign policy on others. And a US-led advocacy campaign would only reflect poorly on Europe's ability to act independently, damaging the credibility of European leaders. Europe needs to develop its own message and public-relations campaign.

To counter public hesitancy in Europe for operations in Afghanistan, NATO capitals should consider:

- **Developing an outreach campaign** tailored to each contributing member-state. A campaign that works in France may not be effective in Germany. Europeans should consider using polling resources and marketing experts to strive for maximum impact.

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- **Shifting the measurement of success** away from casualty numbers to success stories, such as road and school construction. Publishing Taliban casualties places a focus on hard power, which has a negative impact on European public opinion.
- **Promoting Afghan voices** by encouraging Afghan delegations to visit European and American legislators. This will put faces to the Afghan mission.
- **Using new technologies** to increase access to information about operations. This information is currently on the Internet, but difficult to locate. NATO should prepare more frequent informational material that outlines its efforts and projects. Greater public understanding of the mission would generate more widespread recognition that the West is committed to success in Afghanistan.

4) ENSURE SECURE AND PLURALIST ELECTIONS

The Afghan government must increase its legitimacy and credibility, which have suffered over the last two years. The upcoming national election provides an opportunity to do this. An unsuccessful election process would further isolate the government from its constituents. International concern, particularly in Europe, has already highlighted a lack of competitiveness in the presidential race. An uncontested win by incumbent Hamid Karzai would fuel cynicism among Afghans and slow democratization efforts. Karzai's profile as the sole plausible candidate has already tarnished the electoral process and disillusioned other candidates and their supporters.

“Afghans, I think, are largely disillusioned with the whole democratic experiment, and many of them are sitting on the fence, and so it’s a very critical time right now for Afghanistan to try to restore some faith in their democratic system.” –John Dempsey⁶

An uncontested Karzai re-election is also not in the international community's best interests. If Karzai were to win in such a scenario, the international community would lose political leverage over him. With little political opposition at home, Karzai may grow complacent and impede NATO's completion of its Afghan mission.

It is, therefore, pivotal that NATO work with the international community to:

- **Allocate military and police resources to secure the election:** Increase patrols in villages and engage community leaders to advocate political participation and reassure the population. Voters cannot become victims of intimidation. A redeployment of police and military forces will be required to ensure this does not occur.
- **Increase visits by international leaders, particularly those of NATO member-states, to Afghanistan prior to the election:** These visits should make a point of giving needed political

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exposure to all candidates. Increased consultations with all candidates would also lay the groundwork for relations with the incoming Afghan president.

- **Pool United Nations expertise:** This would add clout to the electoral process and centralize lessons learned from Afghanistan's first post-invasion election.

5) ENHANCE CIVILIAN-MILITARY COORDINATION

Section 1 of this paper addresses the urgent need for increased coordination between civilian and military agencies in Afghanistan. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has called for a civilian surge in Afghanistan, but this is unlikely to yield any progress as long as a tug of war between civilian and military authorities exists. To reverse the current downward spiral, NATO, non-governmental organizations, provincial reconstruction team (PRT) leaders and civilian crisis-management units must cooperate and end turf wars.

An expansion of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) mandate, which is being debated, may be perceived as another impediment to establishing a division of labor among agencies involved in Afghanistan. They may be reluctant to let yet another cook in the kitchen. However, the UN has over time improved its coordination abilities and amassed significant expertise in civilian crisis-management. As such, UNAMA would likely be an effective contributor, especially if it focuses on coordinating and implementing the civilian crisis-management response to the current situation on the ground.

CONCLUSION

Much of the narrative about NATO's mission in Afghanistan has centered on measuring the allies' commitment in terms of troop contributions. Military resources are undoubtedly key to the mission, but they should not monopolize the discussion. There is a role for civilian efforts that are also integral to success. Europe should take the lead in this area. It has a vast pool of resources and expertise that complement the military assets already committed by the US to Afghanistan. European leaders can lead the effort for a "civilian surge" by spearheading police training and deploying their crisis-management assets.

NATO remains committed to Afghanistan despite a challenge from public opinion. Yet Europe's ability to deliver remains up for debate. The new US strategy on Afghanistan has created new momentum by clearing the way for more contributions from the alliance's European member-states. Now they must step up to the plate. Time is essential. With this new trans-Atlantic momentum, NATO has a unique chance to reverse the tide in Afghanistan. NATO should grab it.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Bernard Kouchner visited Afghanistan on May 14-16, 2009, accompanied by Pierre Lellouche, France's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, General Roland Gilles, Director General of the National Gendarmerie, and Alain Deloche, President of "La Chaîne de l'Espoir." Kouchner's three-track strategy bears a striking resemblance to the "3-D" (defense, diplomacy and development) approach introduced by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

² Said in Senate Foreign Relations Committee testimony during his hearing to become US ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, March 26, 2009.

³ Greg Mortenson is the founder of the non-profit Central Asia Institute (www.ikat.org) and Pennies For Peace (www.penniesforpeace.org), and co-author of *Three Cups of Tea* (www.threecupsoftea.com).

⁴ The concept of a "population-centric approach" was first put forward by Andrew Exum, Fellow at the Center for New American Security.

⁵ Tactical Directive: HQ ISAF, NATO/ISAF UNCLASS, July 6, 2009
(http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/Tactical_Directive_090706.pdf).

⁶ "All Things Considered", National Public Radio, May 8, 2009
(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103947969&ft=1&f=1004>).

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