

NATO in Afghanistan: There and Back Again

Written by Ondrej Ditrych

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ONDREJ DITRYCH, JUN 11 2012

"We've traveled through more than a decade under the dark cloud of war. Yet here, in the predawn darkness of Afghanistan, we can see the light of new day on the horizon."

— **President Barack Obama's** speech at
Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan May 2, 2012.

Three weeks after Obama delivered these moving words, the question of how to end NATO's largest out-of-area operation to date dominated the Alliance's summit in Chicago. Some 130,000 troops remain on the ground and the Alliance has suffered 3,000 casualties thus far, as well as costing thousands of Afghan lives. Instead of a bright future, however, it seems far more likely that an even darker one awaits Afghanistan when NATO troops leave the country in 2014.

The Road to Transition...

The Chicago Summit operationalized the transitional roadmap NATO previously agreed to at its Lisbon Summit in 2010. This roadmap stipulated that NATO and its partner countries participating in International Security Assistance Force-Afghanistan (ISAF) would transfer responsibility for securing Afghanistan to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) between 2011 and 2014. In Chicago, details of that plan were further specified.

NATO will gradually reduce the number of troops on the ground while simultaneously transitioning from a combat to a supporting role that includes training, advising and assisting the ANSF. Shortly before the summit, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai announced the third transition tranche that will take place this summer, after which time the ANSF will be in charge of providing security for about three-quarters of the country (compared to about half today). By mid-2013, when the fifth and final tranche commences, ISAF troops will switch to a primarily supporting role. They will nevertheless conduct combat operations until December 2014, when almost all of them will withdraw. Afterwards, a new, much smaller NATO training mission will be launched and Allies will also financially contribute to sustaining the ANSF.

That is the official plan. Worn out by the decade of conflict in the heart of Eurasia (the longest war in America's history), and facing financial strains brought about by a financial crisis and continued economic stagnation, NATO member-states will pull out of the country in "a planned, coordinated, and responsible manner." 33,000 U.S. troops, the same amount that the Obama administration surged in December 2009, are scheduled to redeploy by the end of September. The withdrawal follows the counterinsurgency strategy espoused by ISAF Commander Gen. John Allen in Chicago – namely, transitioning from actively combating the insurgency to transferring responsibility for security to the newly-empowered indigenous forces. Negotiations with the Taliban have not been ruled out. But they will only be pursued if the Karzai government takes the lead, Taliban leaders renounce ties to al-Qaeda, and embrace the constitutional government's vision for the future of Afghanistan.

NATO's vision of Afghanistan has been significantly scaled back in recent months. Moving away from grand schemes of a democratic, efficacious and prosperous state in the Western mold, the coalition now defines "success" as a government that is able to preserve a modicum of stability and prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for Al-Qaeda.

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...and Its Perils

Even these more modest expectations have a good chance of failing, however. The first challenge to the smooth transition is logistics. Since a group of NATO helicopters, fighters and a gunship accidentally hit two Pakistani border patrol checkpoints in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas' Mohmand Agency last fall, killing 24 Pakistani soldiers, Islamabad has refused to allow NATO supply lines to traverse its territory. Despite some promising rumors prior to the Chicago summit, a deal on reopening the routes was not reached. The closure does not imperil current ISAF operations. However, it has significantly increased the logistical costs of war. Despite the effort to increase the capacity of Northern Distribution Network (NDN) – including courting the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan – if relations with Pakistan do not improve, there is a risk that ISAF will have to leave some of its materials behind, with all the possible negative security consequences this entails.

Second, there is the process of coordinating a responsible withdrawal of ISAF troops among member-states with different political clocks. Already some ISAF member-nations have broken ranks. In April, for instance, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced that Canberra would be pulling out its 1,550 troops by the end of 2013, a year ahead of schedule. More recently, newly-elected French President François Hollande confirmed in Chicago that he would honor his election pledge to bring home all 3,300 French troops in Afghanistan before the end of 2012, despite strong pressure from Washington and other NATO members for him to relent.

Third, there is the problem of seeking a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In the process of downsizing its expectations, it has become possible for NATO to imagine the Taliban having a stake in the future of Afghanistan. Such a negotiated settlement is needed. But the Taliban seem increasingly less interested in NATO's overtures. The senior leaders are not keen on dealing with the Karzai government in Kabul, which they see as illegitimate and almost certain to collapse when foreign troops leave the country.

In a statement issued shortly before the Chicago summit, Taliban leaders condemned plans for a continued international military presence in Afghanistan after 2014, outlined in the strategic pact negotiated by Presidents Obama and Karzai. The Taliban see this agreement as the continuing foreign occupation of Afghanistan. Furthermore, Pashtun Afghans, the ethnic group that is the Taliban's natural constituency, increasingly view the ANSF as an occupying force in its own right, given that it is dominated by Tajik and Uzbeks. Pashtuns, on the other hand, only make up 4% of Afghan forces despite comprising 42% of the population as a whole.

But perhaps the largest problem is the sustainability of NATO's plan. Despite the large problems that exist today, much has been achieved in recent years. For example, insurgent attacks have been steadily decreasing as ISAF and the ANSF have begun holding territory in the South of the country. Similarly, there are now 7.2 million children attending primary schools in Afghanistan (seven times more than in 2002), 2.7 million (38%) of which are girls (fourteen times more than a decade ago). Some government institutions have been reformed and boosted. Roads have been built, a railroad network has been planned, and some contracts for extracting the country's natural riches have been awarded. But this positive momentum is easily reversible.

The real yardstick by which to judge Afghanistan's future prospects will be the Presidential election in 2014, in which President Karzai will not be eligible to run. Scenarios of internecine civil warfare or the re-Talibanization of the country are real, perhaps more real than NATO's transition scenario. Furthermore, *even if* events conform to NATO's vision, it is still far from certain that member-states possess the political will to continuing footing the enormous bill that will be required to build an Afghan state in the coming decades.

Afghanistan has one of the bleakest economic outlooks of any country in the world. For example, the \$15.7 billion of annual foreign aid Kabul receives is roughly equivalent to the country's entire GDP (23% of which came from opium exports in 2010). Part of that aid is consumed by corruption; most of the rest leaves the economy anyway as it is spent on imports and external contracts. As such, the most drastic of scenarios observers have predicted – premised on a decline in aid – may be exaggerated. Yet even in the rosier future scenarios, the economy, despite its natural riches and favorable geopolitical position in the Eurasian heartland, will develop only gradually.

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One consequence of this lack of economic growth is that the Karzai government will not be able to pay the bill for the ANSF (several times higher than the country's current internal revenue) for a decade or so. This has prompted NATO member-states to negotiate how to distribute the financial burden they will assume. The ANSF will cost about \$4.1 billion annually and the U.S. wants its NATO partners to cover at least \$1.3 billion of that sum. Even if met, this money will only sustain an ANSF reduced from the 352,000 troops (currently being trained) to the 228,500 troops that is NATO's new target. If security deteriorates as the foreign troops withdraw, it is even less likely that this smaller force will be able to reverse this trend than it would be the case with the original number. Furthermore, NATO has yet to explain what will become of the 120,000 newly trained security professionals who will find themselves unemployed? If recent history is any guide, Afghanistan's future may be just as bleak as the recent past.

By invading Afghanistan, NATO took both political and moral responsibility for its future. It is possible that, at the end of the transition process, NATO will fail its test of responsibility – both *vis-à-vis* its own constituencies and the people of Afghanistan. This scenario can probably still be averted. Yet this will not only require a set of practical steps, but also a more fundamental change of mindset. Some modicum of success will not be possible unless there is a frank and open discussion in NATO on the transition challenges – a discussion free of cognitive closure and denial.

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Ondrej Ditrych is a research fellow at the Institute of International Relations (IIR) in Prague. He writes on U.S. and EU foreign policies, transatlantic security and terrorism, and is an editor of IIR's new forecasting publication, *World Politics: Scenarios 2012-2013*.