

NATO's Chicago Summit: A Snapshot of the Alliance's Slow-motion Overhaul

Written by Péter Marton

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PÉTER MARTON, MAY 28 2012

NATO's recent Chicago Summit produced no truly historical decisions. It did what was required to keep the Alliance's slow-motion overhaul on track, focusing on taking forward a "responsible" transition in Afghanistan and the cause of "smart" defence back home. Smart and responsible can be a good but boring combination and ironically this may be reflected in the unusually "timid" protests related to the Summit. Of course, with a war winding down and defence budgets shrinking, there was not much worth for the protestors to protest about. But in fact it is worth reflecting in more detail on how the current austerity crisis connects the two key items that figured on the Alliance's Agenda in the Windy City.

NATO is a strange animal in that it is constantly claimed to be in a crisis since its inception, even though it has accomplished a lot in its over sixty years of existence. Since the 1990s, the perpetual disquiet around it has been compounded by a questioning of the *raison d'être* of the organisation. The Alliance was told to go out of area or out of business. In Afghanistan, it continued in the former direction, taking lead of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003.

The ensuing period saw the security policy identities of several of the Alliance's key members fundamentally transformed. Germany, historically bound by its constitutional restrictions on the use of force, has come to shed further post-Cold-War self-limitations and eventually engaged in offensive ground operations, loosening its troops' Rules of Engagement, in the north of Afghanistan. Canada's peace nation identity has been equally questioned, and some would say reformed, under the Harper government and in the battlespace of southern Afghanistan. At the easternmost flank, Turkey, in the wake of its internal political shift and with a redefined role for political Islam under the country's new leadership from 2002, actively sought to remake its own self as well in its endeavours in Afghanistan. [1] Meanwhile, without exception all NATO countries engaged, together with global partners, in joint combined operations, in support of interagency or "whole-of-government" efforts, putting hitherto only imagined collaboration, unprecedented in scope and scale, into practice, improving interoperability. [2]

Yet, Afghanistan is not an undertaking promising very good results in the end. As NATO gathered for its Chicago Summit in the United States on May 20-21, partly with the aim of coordinating the Alliance's exit from Afghanistan, the talk about crisis and the questioning of *raison d'être* returned. Beside Afghanistan, the other key item on the agenda was Smart Defence, or the pooling and sharing of increasingly scarce defence resources in areas where this may be both feasible and possible, to maintain a must-have capability set on the collective level of the Alliance. NATO is thus turning inwards with a focus on how clever savings through sustained cooperation may justify its continued existence. A new publication by the Centre for European Reform bluntly reflected this as being the key current objective in the second part of its title: *How NATO can improve its fight against austerity*.

It may seem ironic that the Western Alliance finds itself in the present situation right after testing the very boundaries of its hard and soft power projection capability. The post-2001 years, as the mainstream narrative goes, saw an attempt at exporting the Western idea of statehood to one of the most challenging corners of the globe in this respect, to Afghanistan. The contrast is obvious: NATO will be happy now to count hardware, manpower and capabilities not lost as success.

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But the two key elements on NATO's Chicago agenda are interlinked in other ways, too. Firstly, it may seem logical that the combat operations "melting pot" of the Afghanistan theatre would now be followed by an attempt at working even more closely together – that improved interoperability would now be complemented by pooling and sharing on a new, increased level within the Alliance. In this respect, the current era of austerity may even help. However, a second link is that both interoperability and pooling and sharing have been, and are, challenging aims in terms of equitable burden-sharing. In this respect, the crisis is a cause for concern.

With large differences across NATO countries in military capabilities, political institutions, real or perceived national security interests, economic position and public opinion, it is hard for decision-makers even at these large heads-of-state-and-government get-togethers, such as NATO Summits, to resolve all the contentious issues and coordinate the distribution of necessary efforts. This has been the case with regards to force generation for the Afghanistan mission, and future pooling and sharing arrangements will demand more of the same in terms of cost-sharing, trust-generation and other sacrifices made.

Moreover, in the midst of all the difficulties this implies, one ought not to lose sight of the ultimate test of such efforts, beyond whether they take place at all. That is, how they measure up in light of the challenges to which they are supposed to be adequate response.

In Afghanistan's case, there is, seemingly, much cause for despair in just this respect. ISAF would never have been able to generate a 2/100 troops-to-population ratio or about 600,000 troops for the Afghanistan mission, thought to be a prerequisite of successful stabilisation operations anywhere. Not even together with Afghan security forces at their peak levels. Nascent Afghan National Security Forces still have to prove their ability to stand on their own, with the financial resources they can rely on about to significantly decrease soon. The current government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is not particularly strong and Afghan state institutions are described as corrupt by many. The insurgency looking to topple this government may have killed less foreign troops in 2012 than in previous years, but its various factions are clearly forces to be reckoned with at the same time as there seems to be no central negotiating partner on their behalf with whom a deal could be made or be bought. Pakistan remains a very problematic neighbour of Afghanistan, and is likely going to try to shape Afghan politics according to its own liking with redoubled effort once Western troop levels go down. Furthermore, at the recent Chicago Summit, one can hardly refer to the burden-sharing push to raise funds for the Afghan security forces for beyond 2015 as a success. In the wake of the Summit, there is also, it seems, a growing demand on the part of NATO countries for an accelerated security transition in Afghanistan. France, a country whose conduct may be a measure of the difficulties, decided to bring most of its troops home by the end of this year, weakening the unity of ISAF. Recently elected as President, François Hollande also postponed a decision on the French financial contribution to Afghan security forces for the moment.

However, it is worth remembering that the key goal of Western intervention in the region was disrupting and eventually destroying al-Qaida. This is a goal that could to a great extent be realised in latter years, chiefly by drone strikes carried out from Afghan bases but in Pakistani territory. If we therefore reconceptualise Afghanistan state-building as a stratagem in an indirect strategy vis-à-vis al-Qaida, one may say that ISAF eventually stayed long enough, and in great enough strength, in Afghanistan, no matter the problems that burden-sharing posed sometimes. Whether this will result in a long-term defeat of al-Qaida is another matter of course.

Similarly, in the case of Smart Defence, the proof of the pudding is not simply in the eating, but in the long-term question of how adequate as a diet it is. The eating, or more exactly the sharing of the meals, may prove testing if past experience is to guide us, although recent declarations related to the Alliance Ground Surveillance system, Baltic air policing and other matters are indications that Alliance members are continuing in the right direction. But the ultimate measurement of success will have to take place in the wider strategic context beyond the planning rooms and the conference chambers. NATO's slow-motion overhaul should result in an Alliance with meaningful capabilities to stand up to the challenges its strategic rivals and adversaries may pose.

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[1] Vamvakas, Petros: Turkey's ISAF mission: A maverick with strategic depth. In: Péter Marton and Nik Hynek, eds.: *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational contributions to reconstruction*. Routledge: London and New York, 2011, 243-260.

[2] "Joint combined" stands for operations involving various branches of the military ["joint"] and two or more countries' forces ["combined"].

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Péter Marton holds a PhD in International Relations. He is currently an Assistant Professor at Corvinus University and a Lecturer at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. His fields of interest are Foreign Policy Analysis and Security Studies, and his research currently focuses on the politics and the strategic challenges of international burden-sharing. His latest book on the subject is *Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Multinational contributions to reconstruction* (co-edited and co-authored with Nik Hynek; published by Routledge in London and New York, 2011). He has in the past also written for E-International Relations on NATO. Connected to this research he is a holder of the Bolyai János Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.