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WAS AFGHANISTAN WORTH IT FOR NATO?

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With exactly six months to go before NATO leaders gather in Wales in September for the last summit since the beginning of the Afghan war, it is already clear that Afghanistan is going to cast a dark shadow over the meeting. As international forces prepare to leave the country at the end of the year (save for a small training and advisory force assuming an agreement with Kabul can be reached in time), the security situation in Afghanistan looks perilous and could easily tip over into chaos, even civil war.

Commensurate with the end of the ISAF mission is also a growing debate about the decade-plus war effort in Afghanistan. For NATO, the outcome of the debate is critical and is going to have long-lasting repercussions for the alliance going forward. A new Gallup poll suggests that a growing number of Americans now think the Afghanistan war was a mistake compared to 2001 (49% vs. 90%). NATO thus runs the risk of emerging out of Afghanistan in a much worse shape than when it went in. More than 3,300 coalition troops have died since the invasion began in October 2001 and thirteen years of war has cost the US alone more than 600\$ billion thus far. For an alliance that is already facing challenges on multiple fronts (budget, caveats, internal consensus, its relationship with Russia, and instability in North Africa and Middle East), this is a dangerous prospect.

So a key question that NATO leaders must address at the Wales summit is whether Afghanistan really was worth it or not? To evaluate this we must consider three separate, but related, issue areas: NATO's security contribution in Afghanistan, the path toward democracy and human rights in the country, and the impact of the mission on NATO itself.

First, when evaluating NATO's security contribution it is helpful to remind ourselves that ISAF's original mandate was to assist with creating a secure environment in Kabul and surrounding areas. As the security situation on the ground worsened, and while the Iraq war was consuming important American resources, this 'light footprint' approach was jettisoned in favor of a more robust mission. As a result, NATO's role evolved from a small peacekeeping-like mission into a full-fledged stabilization effort. By the end of 2003, United Nations extended ISAF's mandate and the Alliance renewed its commitment to the Afghan state-building process, marking a watershed moment in the West's thus far rather limited engagement in the country.

While the early objectives of rooting the country from al Qaeda's terrorist infrastructure were achieved fairly quickly, the broader set of goals proved far too difficult to reach. The security situation in the country remains very fragile. Numerous security challenges – ranging from an active insurgency (including the Taliban) and other militia groups, to conflict spillover from Pakistan to trafficking of narcotics – continue to plague the prospects for stability and development in Afghanistan.

With Bin Laden out of business and Afghanistan's decreasing role as the most dangerous platform of international terrorism (replaced by Syria as the top destination for foreign

jihadists), NATO appears to have fulfilled its top priority of defeating Al Qaeda, removing the Taliban repression, and contributing to improving Afghan internal security. Still, NATO's support for the national policy of reconciliation with the Taliban has been a failure. This policy did not assure a minimum of political stability with the Afghan government or a realistic perspective of any security compromise after NATO's coming withdrawal.

Second, for better or for worse, progress made in Afghanistan over the past decade is often underplayed. Despite many shortcomings, the international community has actually made huge strides on a number of development goals in Afghanistan such as education, public health, and transport infrastructure. The security environment provided by NATO helped to improve the United Nations' role and to attract foreign investment – both direct causes to the fact that health expenditures increased from 9% of GDP in 2001 to 65% in 2014, but also to the fact that in 1990 only 900,000 children were in school compared to 7,8 million in 2014. Can we say that NATO's mandate in Afghanistan has been focused on human development? No. But we can certainly conclude that a more stable and secure daily life with less terrorism and Taliban rule have been a key factor of transformation on crucial human development indicators in Afghanistan. Finally, Afghanistan has also made democratic progress. It has held two successful presidential elections so far (the third is scheduled to take place in April) and two parliamentary elections. Afghan elections were not a reason for NATO's presence, but its forces helped to promote at least an institutional practice for national voting.

Still, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world and is not expected to become self-sufficient during the next decade. Moreover, these gains are now in jeopardy if all foreign troops were to suddenly leave along with huge reductions in foreign military and development assistance totaling \$8 billion a year — money that Afghanistan remains heavily dependent on. A key ambition for the transatlantic community must therefore be to safeguard some of the development achievements made in Afghanistan over the past decade – a task that will require a serious commitment. Fortunately, the international community has already started this process. During the Tokyo conference, the international community pledged a 2015-2024 annual supplement of \$4 billion for Afghan security forces and an equal amount in development and economic assistance. It is important that the withdrawal of foreign troops does not correspond with a sudden depletion of aid money for Afghanistan. While this is of course not NATO's role, what the alliance can do is to help sustain an internal security environment that is stable enough to attract foreign investment.

Third, the longest lasting and most extensive mission ever undertaken by NATO, ISAF has absorbed tremendous resources and political attention and has come with extremely high human and fiscal costs. As a result, alliance solidarity has taken a heavy toll. Moreover, commensurate with the worsening situation on the ground, public support on both sides of the Atlantic for the mission has gradually eroded. According to the 2012 edition of the Transatlantic Trends survey, 75% of the European public and 68% of the American respondents supported either total withdrawal or troop reduction from Afghanistan.

Still, the fact that NATO countries have fought alongside each other in Afghanistan for over a decade is a remarkable achievement in and of itself. Significant gains have also been made in terms of improving interoperability between European and American forces through fighting alongside each other for over a decade. Although the ISAF mission has highlighted severe capability gaps, it also encouraged a necessary modernization process of European forces,

pushing them to develop more expeditionary capabilities and to test their own long-term strategic commitment to such a demanding and delicate mission. But for a long time national caveats were a major source of friction between NATO allies, causing desperation in Washington and negative repercussions for cooperation on the ground in Afghanistan. With the coming end to the ISAF mission, there is a significant risk that many of these gains will now be lost, including progress on interoperability. NATO must therefore take steps to ensure that progress on these aspects are preserved – for instance through more joint trainings and exercises.

When evaluating our three criteria, it does seem that NATO and the West, despite many obvious shortcomings, have achieved some important objectives in Afghanistan. It relieved Kabul from the Taliban regime, contributed to improving human development indicators, and strengthened allied cooperation. Although Afghanistan may accordingly have been worth it for NATO, a key question now is how sustainable these gains are after the international forces leave the country?

In fact, there is a considerable risk that Afghanistan will see a painful deterioration next year and beyond. Insurgents could retake key areas in the south and east of Afghanistan soon after foreign troops leave these areas. Kabul, and its surrounding region, could also come under more heavy attack. On top of Taliban resurgence, there is also a somewhat smaller risk that Afghanistan would once again become a major safe haven for international terrorists. A deteriorating situation in Afghanistan would also heighten regional tensions, especially between India and Pakistan.

In response to these gloomy prospects, it is vital that the West does not abandon Afghanistan to its own fate – but instead remains committed to post-2014 Afghan stability and development. For NATO, thirteen years of war in Afghanistan would otherwise be unjustifiable and a waste of Allied blood and treasure if post-2014 will merely bring the country back to 2001 again. It is crucial that a deal with the Afghanistan government to ensure a continued NATO presence in the country to train and advise Afghan forces is quickly signed. NATO must also do everything it can to engage regional powers (China, India, Pakistan and Russia) in Afghan stability and to ensure the pursuit of common security policies to avoid regional spillover of terrorism and drug trafficking.

At the next NATO summit in Wales, allied leaders should therefore take pride in their accomplishments in Afghanistan over the past decade, but also declare a willingness to continue the support Afghanistan over its next ‘transformational decade’. They should do so not just for Afghanistan’s sake, but also for their own.

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