



INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

NATO in Afghanistan: Turning Retreat into Victory

BOTTOM LINES

- Afghanistan is a positive case of NATO's political adjustment to counterinsurgency warfare and civilian-military integration.
- NATO's narrative can be challenged on whether it has truly been fighting international terrorism and whether its accomplishments pertaining to building an Afghan state are sustainable or have qualitative value at all.
- A credible post-2014 partnership with Afghanistan needs a clear coupling to NATO's security expertise to have a real impact on its domestic politics.

By *Henrik B. L. Larsen*

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SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY

Afghanistan forced NATO to undergo a long adaptive process to be able to operate in an unprecedented and harsh strategic theater. It differed fundamentally from NATO's previous peacekeeping missions in the Balkans because the traditional division of labor between civilian and military efforts could not be maintained in practice. The UN state building agenda (Afghanistan Compact) tied NATO specifically to the security pillar throughout the country, which proved to be a gross underestimation of the actual resources required for such an effort. NATO contributors initially preferred a "light footprint" approach with a limited number of boots on the ground to avoid repeating the Soviet Union's negative experience. It proved inefficient, however, and warlords and power brokers did not demobilize and arbitrate disputes

through Western-style elections and centralized institutions.

To combat the growing insurgency, NATO decided in 2008 to significantly escalate the number of troops throughout Afghanistan and adopted a new strategy to win the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people. The surge was designed as a last attempt to clean up the Afghan government and to allow the Afghan authorities the necessary breathing room to assume responsibility for security throughout the country, as NATO would gradually withdraw towards the end of 2014. NATO and the Afghan government have agreed to an "Enduring Partnership" for the 2015–2024 period, when NATO's role will be delimited to a mere support function (security assistance and funding). While the original ambition of a democratic Afghanistan centralized in Kabul remains a priority on paper, security-sector building, with the purpose of ensuring a manageable transition, has now become NATO's primary concern.

The Afghan authorities are scheduled to take full responsibility for security throughout the country by the end of 2014 when NATO's presence will be

reduced to a classroom mission. NATO will then have been engaged in Afghanistan for more than a decade. NATO has made it clear that the drawdown is irreversible and is implementing the hand-over of the security responsibilities to the Afghan authorities, province by province. The Afghanistan campaign in both blood and treasure has become NATO's most demanding operation in its history. The Afghanistan experience is likely to impact NATO's willingness to engage in similar operations in the future. Turning retreat into victory is essential for NATO and its most enthusiastic members that want to see NATO playing an active international role going forward.

NATO'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

The drawdown process begs a re-evaluation of the official narrative that NATO and its member states have been telling themselves to justify their involvement in a protracted and costly stabilization effort. This grand narrative can be described—and challenged—along three main points.

First, NATO emphasizes that the eviction of al-Qaeda—the original primary objective behind the invasion of Afghanistan—has succeeded. The threat of international terrorism against Western countries has significantly diminished compared to the situation before 2001. Al-Qaeda is significantly weakened and no longer possesses training camps in Afghanistan from which it can launch terrorist attacks against the Western world. Al-Qaeda's long-time leader, Osama bin Laden, was killed in 2011, as a symbolic closure of the September 11 terrorist attacks that precipitated NATO's involvement in the first place after the activation of the collective defense clause for first and only time in the alliance's history. NATO is right insofar as al-Qaeda has lost its foothold in Afghanistan. On the other hand, this objective had been largely achieved by the end of 2002, well before NATO assumed formal responsibility in Afghanistan in 2003. The reality is that drone attacks and special operations have been hugely helpful in weakening al-Qaeda—within and outside Afghanistan. This stands in contrast to the fight against the Taliban, which has much deeper political roots. If the aim was to remove

al-Qaeda, it poses the question of whether a large-scale stabilization effort against the Afghan Taliban as a major opponent, who believes in fighting foreign invaders, has been worth the effort.

As a second criterion, NATO emphasizes the progress achieved in terms of state building during its presence in Afghanistan. The number of children attending school, the creation of infrastructure throughout the country, economic growth, and recruitment of soldiers and policemen for the Afghan army and the Afghan police are clear examples of concrete measures that NATO wants to emphasize to convince domestic audiences that progress has been achieved. However, the difference between the NATO narrative and the realities on the ground is striking. NATO uses quantitative success criteria for building an Afghan state but the picture is less optimistic if one focuses on the real, qualitative effect of these numbers. The actual ability of the Afghan security forces to facilitate security and stability is a telling example. The Afghan Army, in mid-2013, reached approximately 183,000 personnel according to NATO's numbers but only a small percentage of these are able to operate in the field without NATO/U.S. support or to operate at all. In terms of state building more broadly defined, foreign aid constituted around 80–90 percent of the Afghan state budget at the peak of the surge. The extreme internationalization of the Afghanistan state building project casts serious doubt on the sustainability of the results achieved when NATO and the West withdraw from the country—first militarily, then economically.

As a third criterion, Afghanistan has been a positive test for NATO's cohesion power as a defense alliance. NATO countries have agreed both to dispatch troops to a daunting task in a country as remote as Afghanistan and to undertake a difficult transformation to a new kind of operation where the civilian and military domains are closely integrated. NATO in Afghanistan simply was not able to rely on other international or national actors on the ground and, therefore, had to develop the necessary civilian capabilities to act on its own. Afghanistan has been a relatively positive test for NATO's ability to adjust to a new strategic theater, despite diverging national

doctrines pertaining to military-civilian integration and internal political disagreements between allies on whether NATO should “go global” or remain a Europe-centric alliance.

CONCLUSION

NATO after Afghanistan is an organization that suffers from a certain fatigue pertaining to future stabilization challenges. NATO will not automatically cease to conduct operations after 2014, but the level of ambition will be lower. The Afghanistan experience and the failures of the light footprint approach calls for a thinking that is less liberalist “in the abstract” and more focused on provision of basic services (security, development, and governance). This applies also to NATO’s many partnerships worldwide that are defined flexibly but lack real political substance. Moreover, increased budgetary pressures and economic, domestic concerns constrain almost every Western government from engaging in new foreign commitments.

NATO’s continued influence on Afghan politics post-2014 depends on its ability to integrate a political-military package in which demands for domestic, political change are tied to NATO’s core incentives (security expertise and funding). Political consultations alone will have little impact on Afghanistan or any other state in the region. The Enduring Partnership, which was signed at NATO’s Lisbon Summit in 2010 and substantiated at NATO’s Chicago Summit in 2012 should move beyond mere funding of the Afghan security forces until 2024 and commit the Afghan government more closely to its responsibilities in line with the international state building agenda.

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RELATED RESOURCES

Hynek, Nick and Peter Marton, eds. *Statebuilding in Afghanistan. Multinational Contributions to Reconstruction*, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2012.

Rynning, Sten. *NATO in Afghanistan. The Liberal Disconnect*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Williams, Michael J. *The Good War: NATO and the Liberal Conscience in Afghanistan*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

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