

NATO'S ROLE IN THE STABILIZATION PROCESS OF AFGHANISTAN

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Introductory remarks

It is a distinctive privilege and honour for me to attend this historical event and address such a distinguished audience on the current political and military engagement of the Atlantic Alliance in the stabilization process of Afghanistan.

My presentation will be articulated throughout three major parts. I will start by highlighting the evolution of the operational posture of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) in the run up to the recently held Afghan presidential elections. I will then provide a brief assessment of the presidential vote occurred on 09 October 2004. And I will conclude by underscoring the prospects and challenges for NATO's commitment to the promotion of long-term security in Afghanistan, in view of the renewed political momentum generated by this historical undertaking.

NATO/ISAF's evolving role in the run up to the Afghan presidential elections

Since August 2003, ISAF has been operating as a full-fledged NATO-led endeavour. The mission has been integrated within the command structure of the Atlantic Alliance and has been provided with the political oversight of the North Atlantic Council, in order to ensure the progressive achievement of NATO's end state. This entails the establishment of a multi-ethnic, gender-friendly, and stable Afghan government, capable to look after its own security issues and prerogatives, without the need for an open-ended political-military commitment by the Atlantic Alliance. ISAF's mandate, determined by the UN Security Council, is to provide support and assistance to the Afghan authorities in creating safe and sound conditions for the effective implementation of the Bonn Process. The latter represents a multifaceted framework designating the stages throughout which security, good governance, and the rule of law must be established, preserved, and enforced on a country wide basis. The UNSC Resolution 1510 of October 2003 authorised ISAF to expand its geographical outlook beyond its original territorial scope represented by Kabul and its immediate surroundings.

At present, ISAF is constituted by more than 9,000 troops, provided by 38 Countries, including NATO members, NATO partners, and non-NATO nations. This number comprises the 3 augmentation units deployed as Quick Reaction Forces during the peak of the electoral process, starting in late August 2004

(such units are in the process of being re-deployed, although a new force-augmentation process will be activated in light of the next elections for the two chambers of the National Assembly, Provincial Councils, and District Councils, scheduled in 2005). NATO/ISAF operates in Kabul, its immediate surroundings, and the entire northern region of the country. Kabul hosts the in-theatre NATO headquarters (currently EuroCorps) exerting command and control over the mission, as well as the so called Kabul Multinational Brigade carrying out patrols throughout the entire Kabul Area of Operations (AOO). In the northern region, NATO/ISAF is present with five Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), whose military component falls within the command and control of the Commander of ISAF (COMISAF).

The UN-driven mandate of NATO/ISAF cannot be labelled as that typical of a peace-enforcement operation, unlike the ongoing NATO-led endeavour in the Balkan region. In Afghanistan NATO troops are not in the driving seat. They are not the primary and ultimate arbiters in the security remit. The enforcement of security is the direct responsibility of the Afghan authorities. In the end, thus, the scope of NATO/ISAF's activities is to bolster a sense of Afghan ownership in the stabilization process of the country. The wide array of security challenges on the ground, coupled with a process of governance under development, has inevitably increased the expectations among the Afghan society of the added value that can be brought about by the presence of international security forces. Against this background, it is fair to conclude that the operational posture of NATO on the ground has evolved steadfastly and continues to adapt itself to the various dynamics existing on the ground. The following four major tasks are performed on a daily basis:

- area security;
- technical and logistical assistance in specific remits of the so called Security Sector Reform (SSR);
- engagement with various political actors in order to promote a participatory political process and – by virtue of that – national unity across all the ethnic lines;
- support to political initiatives aimed at bolstering the Afghan governance (such as the late 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga, an Afghan Grand Assembly convened to approve a new Constitution, which then entered into force in January 2004, and more recently the presidential elections mentioned above).

The Afghan 2004 presidential elections: a renewed momentum

The Afghan presidential elections held on 09 October 2004 have constituted a historical threshold and provided the parameters to assess the prospects and challenges lying ahead. The overall undertaking can be labelled as a success, despite various shortcomings recorded and the numerous issues that remain to be addressed in the immediate term. From a security point of view, in spite of various attempts pursued by insurgent actors (represented by Al Qaeda, the

Taliban, and the fundamentalist formation of Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin Hekmatyar), the presence of NATO/ISAF troops in Kabul, its immediate surroundings, and the northern region of the country (through an increased number of troops within the PRTs, plus Quick Reaction Forces on site, namely one Spanish Battalion in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, one US Company in Kabul city, and one Italian Battalion in the Kabul AOO specifically deployed in support to the election) and the assistance provided in the remaining parts of the country by the troops of the parallel military undertaking represented by the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom have proved to be an invaluable confidence-enabler for the Afghan population and an effective deterrent against terrorist elements. To a great extent the security success of the elections (chiefly corroborated by the manifestation of actually five major security incidents only, all tackled at the tactical level and outside NATO/ISAF's AOOs) have determined an operational defeat for the OMF. Nonetheless, insurgency remains a prominent constraint in the stabilization process of the country and must be factored in the shaping and implementation of the next steps.

From a political point of view, three elements of consideration must be underscored. First the *momentum* generated by the registration process, with the registration of more than 10.5 million eligible voters, has to a significant degree been preserved on voting day, when roughly 8.1 million registered voters showed up at the polling sites. Second, the high degree of support manifested for the newly elected President Karzai (former Chairman of the Afghan Transitional Authority), with 55.5% of favourable votes, has prevented the scheduling of a run-off (which would have been extremely demanding from a logistical point of view, it would have drained additional financial and human resources, and it would have presented additional security constraints). Also, it has provided Mr. Karzai with a wide degree of popular legitimacy and representation and a considerable leeway to promote a truly reformist agenda and keep the Bonn Process on track. In a similar vein, one should not disregard the fact that in several instances the votes have been distributed along ethnic lines and have met the expectations of some former and current warlords/regional leaders to reposition themselves and develop a new political identity.

Against this background a legitimate argument can be made that no risk for a constitutional vacuum actually exists. To this effect, the Afghan Constitution is illuminating. According to this, during the so called transitional period – lapsing between the election of the President and the election of the National Assembly – the former can exert the prerogatives bestowed upon the latter. Furthermore, the President has the authority to undertake the measures he reckons necessary to reform the executive and legislative branches. That said, political imperatives must be taken into consideration, given the shape through which the presidential vote has been distributed. Some warlords can nowadays legitimately claim their right to be truly engaged as political actors and can use the political process to manifest their opposition towards a certain policy course to be chosen by President Karzai. Moreover the envisaged elections for 2005 are likely to represent a framework where the actors mentioned above are going to leverage

their profile, since those very electoral undertakings will be perceived as the ones where their true political interests can be fulfilled. The real question remains to ensure that the process of integration of those figures within the Afghan political mainstream be shaped and implemented as a two-way endeavour, so as to ensure that all political actors are held accountable for their deeds. President Karzai himself will have a direct and personal role to perform in order to boost national unity, given the tendency by certain non-Pashtun political actors to perceive him not as a truly national figure, but just as a Pashtun leader.

The way ahead towards Afghanistan's long-term stability

Overall, the momentum generated by the recent presidential elections will be pivotal, because it will set the tone for the identification of the next steps to take, as well for their feasible implementation and sustainment. In this respect one must look at the current engagement – recently re-stressed by NATO in Afghanistan - as an indication of a long-term commitment. Essentially, NATO has undertaken two political pledges. The first entails the support to the next elections. The second refers to the expansion process, following the completion of stage 1 in the north of the country towards the end of this summer.

As far as the first aspect of the equation is concerned, the rationale upon which NATO/ISAF modus operandi will be based will virtually reflect the one which has characterized NATO/ISAF's support to the presidential electoral process completed just a few weeks ago. PRTs will be augmented (as per the local security requirements assessed by the PRT Commanders) and quick reaction forces will be utilized for a determined period of time, in order to provide COMISAF with the necessary degree of operational flexibility he will need to tackle all possible contingencies that could unfold in the run up, during, and after voting day. The determination of the force posture will to a vast degree depend upon the format of the elections (to be conducted all at once or in sequence) and their time-line. Until now different options are being taken into consideration by the Afghan authorities, in close cooperation with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA).

In any event, a key priority will be to extend the reach-out effect of NATO troops on the ground. Such conclusion rests upon the following two-fold assumption. First, the number of candidate will inevitably be high, rendering the security dynamics associated with the 2005 electoral process extremely localized. Secondly, the kind of threat posed to this undertaking will not be limited anymore to the presence of insurgent elements (determined to continue attempts to derail the process *per se*), but it will include the determination by local actors (with some degree of military leverage) to attempt to influence in various forms the outcome of the vote.

This last consideration helps to understand thoroughly the utmost relevance of the second political commitment made by NATO, i.e. a continued expansion of its

geographical outlook in a timely fashion. This objective will be pursued through the already mentioned PRTs. PRTs are frameworks manned by civilian and military personnel contributed by NATO nations, with the task to assist the Afghan authorities in extending progressively their leverage on a country-wide basis and support the establishment/enforcement of security, the creation of governance-capabilities, and the promotion of social and economic development. At present 19 PRTs are operating in the country, 5 under the military command and control of NATO/ISAF (in north, north-eastern, and north-western Afghanistan) and 14 under the command and control of the parallel military undertaking represented by the just mentioned US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (in the remaining parts of the country). NATO/ISAF and Enduring Freedom operate with two distinctive (yet mutually re-enforcing, because they strive towards the achievement of the same strategic objective) mandates. One in support to the overall state-building process of Afghanistan, the other for the conduct of counter-insurgency operations. The widening of tasks of Enduring Freedom, with an increasing inclusion of stabilization efforts, has progressively blurred such clear-cut distinction, but I will return on this aspect later on towards the end of my presentation. There are thus specific structural and operational features that characterize both models. NATO/ISAF-led PRTs are shaped through an apparent distinction between the civilian and military component, with no real hierarchy between the respective heads, who in any case share information and coordinate their activities in order to ensure maximum synergy of efforts. Moreover, the military foot-print is relatively light, at a company-level. A different read-out transpires from the examination of the Enduring Freedom-led PRTs, where the head of the civilian component is subordinated to the military commander and the military posture is quite robust, at the battalion/brigade level.

The PRTs have exerted an invaluable supportive role in the implementation of the so called Security Sector Reform (SSR). The SSR represents another framework, embedded within the broad context of the Bonn Process (mentioned before), where five different remits have been created and are being implemented (each under the leadership of a G-8 nation). These include the Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration Process of private militias (DDR, under the Japanese leadership), the training of the Afghan National Army (ANA, under the US leadership), the training of the Afghan National Police (ANP, under the German leadership), the reform of the judiciary (under the Italian leadership), and the fight against the production and trade of narcotics (under the UK leadership). At present, more than 20,000 private militias have been “DDRd”. The ANA has reached a capacity of 14,000 troops (including the first elements of four Regional Corps Headquarters in Gardez, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif), the ANP of 48,000 troops (including recently trained units used in support to the elections). Moreover, important new legal efforts have been undertaken. They include the approval of a new code of criminal proceedings and the submission to the Minister of Justice of various drafts (a new penitentiary law, and index of legal sources presently applicable, and a juvenile code). Some

judiciary reform projects are also due to start in three different provinces (Kunduz, Balkh, and Wardak).

A specific attention must be paid towards the Counter-Narcotics pillar, given the significant extent of drugs-related phenomena and the effect that this very pillar has across the SSR board. Currently, the production/trade of drugs counts between 50% and 60% of Afghanistan's GDP. Roughly 260,000 Afghan families are involved, totalling 1.7 million people (approximately 7% of the entire national population). In May 2003, the Afghan government adopted a National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS). Such a strategy is articulated throughout a seven-year process aimed at the 70% reduction of illicit drugs by 2007 and their complete elimination by 2012. Its implementation is based upon three inter-related facets: law enforcement, alternative livelihoods, and demand-reduction. At present, the Afghan lead on counter-narcotics rests upon the Counter-Narcotics Directorate (CND) embedded within the Ministry of Interior. In the immediate future specific priorities have been set from the Afghan side. They comprise the enhancement of Afghan institutional posture on CN issues, including the potential scenario of a full-fledged CN Ministry, and an increase of training and operational capabilities for the Central Eradication Force and Counter-Narcotics Police.

The role performed by the PRTs with regard to the SSR has essentially regarded the realms of DDR/Heavy Weapons Cantonment (almost 2,800 – out of an estimated 4,500 ca. - heavy weapons were disabled and cantoned), and – to a certain extent – ANA and ANP training. The present general assessment is that the timeline of the SSR process must regain *momentum* and must enjoy an extended and sustained degree of support from international actors, given the inability for the Afghan governance to cope alone with the most prominent challenges. This is particularly relevant with respect to the operational capabilities which at present characterize the posture of the national security forces. The ANA still depends extensively on the multi-faceted support provided by the Office of Military Cooperation of Enduring Freedom. The police lacks proper equipment and communications tools. Moreover, the command and control relationship between the ANA and the ANP remains to be defined. The contribution both entities have given with respect to the presidential elections constitutes a good omen for the future, but many gaps remain to be bridged. As far as CN issues are concerned, they also must be tackled thoroughly and extensively, for no real progress will be achieved and will be sustainable if a significant portion of the national economy remains heavily influenced by the production and trade of drugs. Besides, NATO/ISAF's expansion on the ground will inevitably raise expectations, as a mere reflection of the physical presence on NATO soldiers within contexts characterized already by ongoing activities for the production and trade of illicit drugs.

In the broader sense, specific priorities remain to be addressed. Among these, ensuring that PRTs are a vehicle to extend the government's authority, as opposed to developing into surrogates of the national sovereign power;

determining a clear balance between security-driven and reconstruction-driven tasks; guaranteeing regional operational flexibility, whilst establishing strategic objectives that could render the PRT concept beneficial on a country-wide basis; enhancing the civilian pillar of PRTs; and ensuring strategic coherence amongst their various civilian components.

Conclusive remarks

In view of the above, the current *momentum* in Afghanistan must be preserved. For this to happen the International Community must remain engaged for the long-haul and Afghan-international cooperation must be enhanced in order to provide a meaningful support to the bolstering of Afghan ownership over the security and political future of the country.

NATO's imperative will be to uphold the political commitments already undertaken with regard to the next electoral process and the PRT-driven expansion endeavour and deploy in a timely fashion the necessary operational means to back them up. In a similar vein the already good level of cooperation between NATO/ISAF and Enduring Freedom will have to strive towards further synergy, given the multifaceted contribution provided by both military mission to the state-building process. Moreover, increased synergy will need to be proactively sought in order to ensure maximum coherence of the various efforts displayed by international and Afghan actors alike. The creation of joint mechanisms, including (but not limited to) the PRT Executive Steering Committee and the recently approved concept of an SSR Strategy Coordination Committee under the Afghan President's leadership constitute steps towards the right direction.

Finally, utmost emphasis will have to be put on the steadfast development of a process of Afghan institutional accountability at various levels of the Afghan governance, so as to ensure that all actors involved can be held publicly responsible for their contribution to the progress of the rule of law.