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NATO Mission in Afghanistan: Problems and Prospects

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Introduction

After NATO's takeover of the command of International Assistance Security Force (ISAF) in 2003 and the entire international security operation in Afghanistan, including that of US forces in the south and the east, in 2006, the war-torn country should have been securer by now. It is not. Despite the fact that NATO currently has over 60,000 troops in Afghanistan, including majority of the 33,000 US troops,¹ it is unable to tackle Taliban-led insurgency, which has gained momentum each year since 2003. Consequently, at present, Taliban and their militant allies rule most of the insurgency-ridden southern and eastern Afghanistan.² Some 70,000 Afghan troops and a similar number of Afghan police have also failed to effectively complement the security mission undertaken by international forces in Afghanistan. The Obama administration intends to send 30,000 more US troops to Afghanistan in 2009.³ At the early April NATO summit in the French city of Strasbourg and the German town of Kehl, Washington may press NATO European allies like Germany, France, Italy and Spain to send additional troops to Afghanistan and make their forces already present in Afghanistan available for combat operations against Taliban and other insurgents—just as British, Dutch, Danish, Canadian and Australian troops do.

Even if we presume the Obama administration succeeds in realizing a greater European military commitment to Afghanistan, the principal question before NATO will still be the same as it was when it took over the two respective commands five years ago: whether, or how, the numerically stronger international troops can accomplish their mission—and just what the mission is. If the mission is to decimate al-Qaeda leadership and infrastructure, and defeat the Taliban, then we must remember that it was largely

¹ Updated figures are available on the official website of NATO, <http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan/index.html>, accessed on February 13, 2009. NATO's declared role in Afghanistan is "to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance. It does this predominately through its UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force."

² Dexter Filkins, "Taliban Fill NATO's Big Gaps in Afghan South," *New York Times*, 21 January 2009.

³ "NATO: 3,000 US Troops Deploy to Afghanistan," AP, January 27, 2009.

achieved before NATO assumed the commanding role of international security operations in Afghanistan. Then, what went wrong?

Main Problems

The NATO mission in Afghanistan currently faces at least eight main problems. These include the insufficiency of NATO troops, especially for combat operations; relative failure of security-sector reforms; crisis of leadership and governance in post-Taliban Afghanistan; Taliban's resort to terrorist tactics like suicide bombings; drug trafficking acting as a major source of insurgent financing; Taliban's resurgence in Pakistan's tribal and frontier regions and its linkage with Afghan insurgency; Pakistan's inability to combat its own Taliban insurgency, compounded by US drone attacks in its tribal regions as well as by recent tension in ties with India; and negative public perceptions about NATO mission in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, as well as real-politic concerns and interests of regional players—primarily Pakistan and Iran and secondarily China, India and Russia—regarding post-Taliban Afghanistan.

First, the shortage of troops, especially for combat operations, is a serious issue facing the NATO mission in Afghanistan since it assumed the ISAF command in 2003. The primary reason for this was the diversion early that year of the War on Terror from Afghanistan to Iraq, because of which the Bush Administration had to hand over the command of US troops in southern and eastern Afghanistan to NATO by October 2006. Since France and Germany had vocally opposed the invasion of Iraq, and European public opinion was also against it, the United States could not obtain the same security commitment from them for the war in Afghanistan as it might have secured in the absence of Iraq war. In the past five years, it is the perceived national interests and respective public opinion⁴ of Germany, France and some other European NATO members that have prevented them from proactively participating in the NATO mission in Afghanistan. This is despite the fact that at each NATO summit or meeting in the last few years, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has consistently called for

⁴ Christian Brose, "The Return of Unilateralism: Obama Edition," *Foreign Policy*, 19 January 2009, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/01/19/the_return_of_unilateralism_obama_edition, accessed on February 13, 2009.

more troop contributions from Germany and France for Afghanistan and the removal of national caveats placed on their troops in the war-torn country.⁵ Bush Administration's unilateralism grounded in the use of force, instances of collateral damage in NATO operations and the rising death-toll of NATO troops in Afghanistan may have influenced public opinion and state policies of NATO's major European allies, creating the continuing NATO troops shortage problem in Afghanistan.

Second, Security Sector Reforms and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan have not produced desired results.⁶ Consequently, NATO has to share much of the burden of providing security to Afghanistan, amid growing insurgency. Under the UN-mandated 2001 Bonn Peace Agreement, the United States and Germany have respectively helped in the creation of Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, each of which is currently estimated to be around 70,000.⁷ But both are largely believed to be considerably under-armed, inefficient, oppressive and corrupt. Major combat operations in the south and east of Afghanistan, the main theatre of the battle against Taliban and other insurgents, are still led by US or NATO troops, and the Afghan army plays only a subsidiary role.

Italy has helped build Afghan judiciary, but it is yet to emerge as a viable national institution to provide justice. How could it, when the very warlords who committed war crimes in the past are part of the present parliamentary or governing structure in Afghanistan? Japan is responsible for undertaking the Demilitarization, Demobilization and Re-integration of former war combatants in Afghanistan, tens of thousands of whom are still armed and mostly fighting alongside Taliban. Finally, NATO's mission in

⁵ At the February 2009 Munich Security Conference, NATO Secretary-General urged French President Nicholas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel to respond positively to President Obama's decision to close down Guantanamo Bay and its serious focus on climate change, and share the burden of the war in Afghanistan. See "NATO Chief Says More Troops Needed in Afghanistan," *AP*, 7 February 2009.

⁶ Greg Bruno, "Afghanistan's Struggling Security Services," *Daily Analysis*, 7 July 2008, http://www.cfr.org/publication/16691/afghanistans_struggling_security_services.html?breadcrumb=%2Fbios%2F13554%2Fgreg_bruno%3Fgroupby%3D1%26hide%3D1%26id%3D13554%26page%3D1, accessed on 3 February 2009.

⁷ John Naghl, "How Not to Lose Afghanistan: More Troops, and Lots of Them," *New York Times*, 23 January 2009.

Afghanistan is also partially geared towards reconstruction. Its 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) face serious issues of civil-military coordination and shortage in financial contribution. Moreover, their reconstruction activities are confined mostly to peaceful northern Afghanistan, rather than the restive south and east of the country where they are actually desired.

Third, the continually acute crisis of leadership and governance constrains NATO mission in Afghanistan. There is no doubt that Afghanistan has made significant strides in the political domain since the ouster of Taliban. The political process supervised by the UN Mission for Afghanistan helped create a transitional administration under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, gave Afghanistan its first democratic constitution on the basis of which parliamentary and presidential elections were then held, and the country's existing executive, legislative and judicial organs came into being. Yet, as in the case of judiciary, the performance of parliamentary and presidential institutions is far from satisfactory. The government of President Hamid Karzai has failed to extend its reach beyond capital Kabul and parts of northern and western Afghanistan. The government structure, including the security apparatus, remains largely unrepresentative of Pashtun, the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan constituting the bulk of Taliban and other insurgent forces. The Afghan insurgency is partly fuelled by the lack of Pashtun representation in the Karzai regime, the corrupt and oppressive conduct of its regional officials, many of whom have a notorious warlord background, and President Karzai's failure, despite being a Pashtun himself, to coalesce ethnically different Afghans, especially the majority Pashtun, around his leadership.⁸

Forth, NATO finds it difficult to combat terrorist tactics such as suicide bombings being increasingly employed by Taliban and other insurgents in recent years. Consequently, each year, the alliance is losing more soldiers than before. Taliban and their insurgent-terrorist allies essentially pose a tactical rather than a strategic threat to the Afghan government and NATO mission in Afghanistan. They are apt at guerilla warfare,

⁸Kori Schake, "How Not to Lose Afghanistan: A War on Corruption, Too," *New York Times*, 23 January 2009.

which is facilitated by Afghanistan's unique rugged mountainous terrain. However, with the growth in insurgency, there are cases of conventional combat between Taliban-led insurgents, and international and Afghan forces. On such occasions, the US-NATO air power often proves a crucial winning factor, despite instances of collateral damage. But when it comes to the relatively recent terrorist tactics adopted by Taliban and their insurgent allies, such as suicide bombings targeting troops as well as people, international or Afghan security forces are rather helpless in preventing or preempting such attacks. The primary aim of suicide missions in Afghanistan is the same as has been the case during the Iraq war: to terrorize the security forces, particularly international, and the general Afghan population so that the troop-contributing nations can be dissuaded from making additional military commitment to the war in Afghanistan and the wider Afghan populace can be forced to opt for a political settlement in Afghanistan conducive to politically pragmatic or religiously regressive ambitions of Taliban and their affiliates. Obviously, the forces of insurgency and terrorism in Afghanistan capitalize upon NATO's internal bickering about the mission in Afghanistan. Suicide bombings reflect severity in terrorist tactics employed by Taliban-led insurgents-terrorists, and they have cost NATO and the Afghan government and public dearly both in military and human terms.

Fifth, the insurgency against US, NATO and Afghan troops is being financed by drug money, with which Taliban and their allies buy latest weaponry and are able to recruit more Afghans sympathetic to their cause. Under the Bonn Agreement, the United Kingdom is tasked with combating Afghan poppy cultivation and drug-trafficking, which have grown in scales unprecedented in Afghan history, and the revenue thus generated has become a major source of insurgent and terrorist financing in Afghanistan. The war-torn country today produces over 90 per cent of the world's heroin. Poppy cultivation and drug trafficking did actually decline during the Taliban regime, but the very Taliban today have no problem in financing their insurgency and terrorism with the revenue generated from a drug whose production and use is prohibited in Islam.⁹ A few years ago, the Karzai government had issued a decree banning the cultivation of poppy in the

⁹ Filkins, op cit.

country. Yet neither Kabul nor the United Kingdom has come up with a viable plan to help Afghan farmers seek an alternative source of livelihood by growing other crops. Nor have the Afghan or international security forces targeted major drug producing facilities and trafficking trails in eastern provinces such as Helmand, which are a hub of such activities.

Sixth, Pakistan's tribal border regions have become a safe haven for al-Qaeda, Taliban and other insurgents, and their cross-border traffic and participation in insurgency has perhaps become the most potent danger to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. The same Pashtun tribes straddle the Durand Line, the 2,500 kilometer unrecognized border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Interestingly, NATO's assumption of ISAF command and Pakistan's security operation in tribal areas had coincided in 2004. In the last over four years, just as Taliban-led insurgency has increased in Afghanistan, Pakistan's tribal regions, especially North and South Waziristan agencies, and the Swat valley in the Frontier province, have seen unprecedented growth in Taliban-led insurgency.

Given the unrecognized and porous nature of the border between the two countries, the mutual ethno-tribal affinity of Pashtun populations living across it, the continuingly heavy presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan's tribal regions, which had served as a sanctuary for Afghan jihad against the Soviets in the 80s and the launching post for Taliban movement in Afghanistan in the 90s, it is rather unthinkable to expect that cross-border trafficking of Taliban and their allies to and from either side of the Durand Line can ever stop completely. The problem is likely to persist as long as the war in Afghanistan continues, Pakistan's security operation in the tribal border regions does not gain further momentum, and the Afghan government remains unwilling to cooperate with Pakistan in establishing several hundred additional security check-posts along the border, fencing its infiltration-ridden zones and registering the daily traffic of people across it—steps that Kabul fears may lead to the recognition of Durand Line as an international border, an eventuality it does not still officially desire.

Seventh, NATO mission in Afghanistan is also indirectly affected by Pakistan's inability to combat its own Taliban insurgency, compounded by US drone attacks in its tribal regions as well as by recent tensions in ties with India. In the past over four years, correspondingly to the growth of Afghan insurgency, Pakistan has come under increasing pressure from the United States, NATO and Afghan government to prevent its tribal regions bordering Afghanistan from acting as a major sanctuary for Taliban-led insurgents in Afghanistan. Consequently, it launched a security operation in Waziristan agencies in the spring of 2004. During the Musharraf regime, however, the country's security establishment could only go to an extent in exercising the military option in tribal regions, especially against local Taliban who were considered to be a potential strategic asset in the longer run. However, military action against them was taken in some instances, either to assuage mounting external pressure or when it was found that they were harboring al-Qaeda terrorists. The Musharraf regime preferred to cut realistic deals with tribal Taliban Jirgas in South and North Waziristan agencies, whereby Taliban agreed not to host foreign fighters or cross into Afghanistan and the government released Taliban prisoners and provided financial compensation to Taliban. However, since the July 2007 Red Mosque operation in Islamabad, the mainstream Taliban forces and their allies have begun an all-out assault against Pakistani security forces in tribal and frontier regions, particularly Waziristan and Swat valley, and undertaken a suicide bombing spree across Pakistan, which has proven far deadlier than Afghanistan.

Since the present civilian government came to power in March 2008, it has intensified security operation in tribal and frontier areas, and adopted novel strategies such as launching local tribes against Taliban insurgents. However, part of the reason why the security forces have thus far been unable to neutralize the local Taliban threat effectively is that they are professionally not geared towards combating insurgency. The US drone attacks in tribal regions have also proven counter-productive to combating insurgency there with due public support, because of the instances of collateral damage from these attacks and growing public concern about the violation of country's sovereignty. Lastly, in the aftermath of November terrorist attacks in Mumbai and in response to India's consequent war-mongering, Pakistan had to re-deploy some of its

security forces fighting against insurgent Taliban in the country's western frontiers with Afghanistan to its eastern borders with India, which may have somewhat eroded the momentum in security operation in the past year.

The eighth and final problem confronting NATO mission in Afghanistan is how it is perceived by people in Afghanistan,¹⁰ Pakistan and Iran and what real-politic concerns and interests Afghanistan's two crucial South-West Asian neighbors and other regional states like China, India and Russia have regarding post-Taliban Afghanistan. The majority of Afghans and people in Pakistan and Iran tend to perceive the NATO mission negatively. It is often considered as part of a grand US-led Western conspiracy to occupy and exploit resource-rich Muslim regions, destroy Pakistan's nuclear programme, or change the revolutionary regime in Iran. Pashtun grievances regarding the unrepresentative nature of post-Taliban political setup, instances of civilian deaths caused by military operations by US and NATO forces, and the very fact that Afghan Pashtuns have always resisted foreign intervention are some of the key factors responsible for sustaining a negative, rather hostile, perception in Afghanistan's majority ethnic group about the NATO mission. Public opinion in Afghanistan's troubled parts as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan is rife with anti-Americanism, reasons for which are peculiar in each case, but this factor has marginalized NATO mission's significance as a multinational actor representative of the will of the international community as much as the UN Mission in Afghanistan does.

The Bush Administration's unilateral-militaristic approach re-enforced such negative regional public perceptions. This is in stark contrast to the 1980s jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, when not just governments but also people in Pakistan and Iran had wholeheartedly supported the Afghans and the international community's struggle for their liberation. The United States did not have good ties with Iran at the time, yet Tehran sponsored eight Mujahideen groups. Iran was anti-Taliban, yet it has played no role in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Pakistan was a Taliban ally, but it was coerced into joining the war against Taliban. The consequent problems relating to state policies and public

¹⁰ For discussion on the issue of perceptions, see Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Why NATO Mission in Afghanistan is Failing," *IPRI Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Winter 2008), pp 10-11.

perceptions in Afghanistan's two principal South Asian neighbors, negatively impacting the NATO mission, are a direct outcome of such contradictions. Lastly, US/NATO's inability to prevent India from extending its undue influence in post-Taliban Afghanistan, which is potentially inimical to Pakistan's regional interests, and to assuage Sino-Russian concerns about their future ambitions in the region constitute another set of reasons for regional state and public distrust and suspicion about the international security mission in Afghanistan.

Future Prospects

The future prospects of NATO mission in Afghanistan revolve around several crucial questions at this stage, as the process of re-thinking this mission and overall counter-terrorism strategy in Afghanistan and the region has just begun under Obama Administration. Questions such as, whether or how many more troops the United States will be able to secure from its NATO European allies, and what the nature and scope of their operational engagement in Afghanistan will be. Will a troops' surge in Afghanistan on the pattern of Iraq make any difference on the ground? President Obama has appointed Richard Holbrooke, architect of the historic 1995 Dayton Peace Accords on Bosnia, as his personal representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is expected to turn around the deteriorating security in the two countries' tribal borderlands hit hard by al-Qaeda-inspired and Taliban-led insurgency and terrorism—regions considered by President Obama to be the central focus of his administration's international counter-terrorism strategy.¹¹ The question is whether, or how far, Mr Holbrooke will succeed in solving all those problems identified above which are directly or indirectly impinging upon NATO's ability to tackle Afghan insurgency. Apart from exercising the troops' surge option in the short-run, what additional security, political and economic steps the United States and the international community are prepared to take as part of a broader strategy to end the war in Afghanistan and bring peace in its neighborhood. And, finally, will their overall political goal in Afghanistan continue to be determined by idealistic visions such as transforming a tribal society into a modern republic or will it have a pragmatic re-

¹¹ "Obama Says Pakistan, Afghanistan Require Wider Strategy," *AFP*, 22 January 2009.

orientation, one that is guided by restrained political ambition and includes unpleasant compromises?

First, there cannot be two opinions about the fact that the Taliban-led insurgency has gained momentum exactly during the period when NATO took over the command of military missions in Afghanistan and the US diverted its attention to Iraq war. Part of the reason why NATO's major European members such as Germany and France were reluctant in rendering their soldiers for combat missions or sending additional troops was that United States, which had sought their cooperation in Afghanistan after 9/11, got more involved in Iraq war, which itself was not approved by these countries. Now that the Obama administration wants to make Afghanistan its administration's top priority and the European Union has started to cooperate with the United States over Iraq, it is reasonable to expect Germany, France, Spain and Italy agreeing at the April NATO summit to contribute additional troops to Afghanistan and remove national caveats restricting their participation in combat operations against Taliban-led insurgents. President Obama's personal appeal in Europe, and his instant and bold steps such as the disbanding of Guantanamo Bay, the review of rendition policy, and the serious focus on climate change—all of which seem to indicate multilateral-inclusive trend in US foreign policy—may have helped assuage European public opinion about Washington's exclusivist, unilateral approach visible mostly during two terms of the Bush Administration. Despite this, if the United States fails to secure greater European military role in the Afghan war, then merely dispatching 30,000 more US soldiers to Afghanistan by the end of this year may not be enough to combat Taliban-led insurgency involving severe tactics such as suicide bombings and surprise hit-and-run maneuvers. On the other hand, if tens of thousands of more European troops also join the military effort, then the international troops' surge may succeed in revering the course of insurgency in Afghanistan.

Second, apart from securing the troops' surge at full scale, there is an equally important question: whether putting more boots on the ground can make a difference in the Afghan war, as the same did in the case of Iraq. Surely the ethno-tribal challenges of insurgency in Afghanistan are much graver than Iraq, even though there may be some

similarities in cross-border insurgent-terrorist infiltration between the two cases. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has over 30-year long war history starting from an internationally sponsored jihad to a regionally-sponsored Afghan infighting to al-Qaeda's sponsorship of international terrorism under the Taliban rule, and finally culminating into another internationally-sponsored war against Taliban-led insurgents that continues until now. This long tale of warfare itself highlights the complexity of the military challenge confronting US and NATO forces in Afghanistan—and Iraq nowhere nears such complexity. Even otherwise, Afghanistan's tale of warfare goes back to centuries, and modernity has never touched ground there, contrary to Iraq under Saddam Hussain or before. Does this mean that troops' surge, even at the level desired by the Obama administration, will not work in Afghanistan? Not necessarily. It can work, provided the exercise of military option at an enhanced level is synchronized with an over all diplomatic strategy of accommodating the aggrieved sections of Afghan society, primarily the Pashtun, in Afghanistan's political, security and economic structure. If the ultimate aim behind intensifying the Afghan war effort is to exert so much pressure on Taliban-led insurgents that they eventually agree to negotiate peace largely on the terms and conditions of the international forces or state parties fighting against them, then there are chances that such an effort will succeed. But if the troops' surge is not used as a short-term military means to achieve a long-run political goal, which may necessitate making some pragmatic and unpleasant compromises, and is solely aimed at militarily crushing an enemy, then its chances of success are relatively bleak in view of the historically-rooted intricacies of the current Afghan insurgency.

Third, as for the rest of the seven above-mentioned problems impacting NATO mission in Afghanistan, their solution also depends largely on what new security, political and economic steps are taken by the United States and its international counter-terrorism allies, considering Afghan war's reemergence as a top priority in the international community's quest for peace and security in South-West Asia. An equally important question in this respect is whether the world will continue to ideally aspire for an Afghanistan that is modern and compatible with Western standards of democracy and freedom; or it will, instead, mellow down its ambitions and seek a pragmatic solution in

Afghanistan, one that helps its tribal society to politically evolve and be at relative peace within and, more importantly, pose no threat to regional and international security.

Barnett R Rubin and Ahmed Rashid recently made a strong case for a “grand bargain” in Afghanistan in a *Foreign Affairs* article,¹² which criticized the United States under Bush administration for its “reluctance to involve competitors, opponents, or enemies in diplomacy.” “Rethinking US and global objectives in the region,” they contend, “will require acknowledging two distinctions: first, between ultimate goals and reasons to fight a war; and, second, among the time frames for different objectives. Preventing al Qaeda from regrouping so that it can organize terrorist attacks is an immediate goal that can justify war, to the extent that such war is proportionate and effective. Strengthening the state and the economy of Afghanistan is a medium- to long-term objective that cannot justify war except insofar as Afghanistan's weakness provides a haven for security threats....This medium- to long-term objective would require reducing the level of armed conflict, including by seeking a political settlement with current insurgents.”

Their justification for rethinking these objectives and US counter-terrorism policy in Afghanistan is based on what they claim to be the growing willingness of Taliban and other insurgent leaders to not let their country become a safe haven again for international terrorism by al-Qaeda. For this reason, Barnett and Ahmed argue, the United States “should seek to separate those Islamist movements with local or national objectives from those that, like al Qaeda, seek to attack the United States or its allies directly—instead of lumping them all together...An agreement in principle to prohibit the use of Afghan (or Pakistani) territory for international terrorism, plus an agreement from the United States and NATO that such a guarantee could be sufficient to end their hostile military action, could constitute a framework for negotiation. Any agreement in which the Taliban or other insurgents disavowed al Qaeda would constitute a strategic defeat for al Qaeda.”

¹² Barnett R. Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (November-December 2008), pp.30-45.

Fine argument, but the worsening insurgency in Afghanistan's eastern and southern areas and Pakistan's tribal regions bordering Afghanistan does not seem to suggest that the security environment there is ripe enough for creating a framework within which the process to negotiate pragmatic deals such as the above can genuinely start right away. As it happened in Pakistan's case from 2004 to 2007, the government's appeasement of local Taliban in the form of a few pragmatic agreements only enabled the latter to buy time, re-energize and then pose a bigger security danger. Part of the reason was that prior to each deal and in the aftermath of its collapse, Pakistan's security operation did not intensify as much as it should have. It is only since the start of last year, when the current civilian government took over, that this operation has gained due momentum and creative new strategies such as the launching of tribal Lashkars against Taliban insurgents, such as in the Bajaur agency of tribal areas, have been adopted with relative success. If insurgency has still spread, it is less because of the resolve of the government and more due to the lack of security forces' ability to fight counter-insurgency warfare.

It is true that certain signals are emerging from the interlocutors of Taliban and other insurgents that they have disassociated themselves from al-Qaeda, or are willing to do so;¹³ and that they are willing to be part of an interim government in Afghanistan provided the United States and NATO announced a schedule for phased withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan to be replaced by troops from Muslim countries.¹⁴ But, then again, such signals are emanating from a few moderate figures of Taliban—such as Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi and Mullah Abdul Zaef, former Taliban foreign minister and ambassador to Islamabad, respectively—and other groups whom we cannot describe as speaking entirely for the militant leadership of the forces of insurgency in Afghanistan. Given that, in the next few months, or perhaps a year or so, the United States and NATO have no option but to intensify the security operation in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Pakistan may need to further intensify its own security operation, and seek urgent counter-insurgency help from the United States and NATO as their strategic ally in the international counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan and its own bordering

¹³ See Ibid; Nick Robertson, "Taliban Split with al-Qaeda, Seek Peace," CNN, 6 October 2008, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/10/06/afghan.saudi.talks/index.html>, accessed on February 13, 2009.

¹⁴ Background interviews with senior Pakistani and Afghan diplomats, Islamabad.

regions. Such intensified military campaigns on both sides of the Durand Line may crush Taliban-led insurgents sufficiently, separating them from al-Qaeda and creating moderate constituencies in their ranks willing to negotiate pragmatic peace largely on the terms of their legitimate national and international opponents.

A 2008 International Crisis Group report on Afghanistan¹⁵ suggests that “seeking a political solution should not mean negotiations with the Taliban, which would draw more violent extremists into government.” If negotiating peace with Taliban is out of question, then what other alternative course of action is left for the international community to politically resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. The report does not explain. Obviously it is difficult to negotiate with terrorists. In the last few years, Taliban and other insurgents have increasingly resorted to terrorist tactics such as mass suicide bombings targeting security forces and common people alike in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is only through a full-gear counter-insurgency campaign—involving a mix of combat, and intelligence and security measures to prevent and preempt terrorism—that the recent severity in Taliban insurgent-terrorist tactics can be tackled effectively. However, this does not mean that political and economic incentives should not be offered simultaneously to capitalize upon the opportunities if and when they come along the way, as the presently inescapable military push moves forward in future. If and when the intensified military operation starts to break the back of Taliban-led insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the respective international and state parties may have greater avenues and more opportunities for realizing their broader security, political and economic objectives. The troops’ surge in Iraq did help isolate al-Qaeda from Sunni insurgents, curtail sectarian violence and suicide bombings, and create moderate constituencies among the forces of insurgency willing to live in peace with the post-Saddam political reality in Iraq. Achieving the same in Afghanistan may be more difficult, but it is not impossible.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan: The Need for International Resolve*, Asia Report No 145 (Brussels/Kabul: International Crisis Group, 6 February 2008), p 19.

It is clear that NATO has not functioned as a coherent military alliance with a clear mission and objectives in hand and necessary support of governments and people in the region. A security-cum-reconstruction mission led by foreign forces that does not have the required domestic and regional support may not succeed in crushing extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan. Not only does the NATO mission in Afghanistan lack commitment from several of the alliance states for more personnel, money and equipment, it also suffers from a crisis of credibility caused by its failure in realizing the desired goals of reconstruction and security sector reforms.

Afghanistan's present security predicament is caused by a number of intricate factors, mostly rooted in the past over thirty years of warfare. Given that, the recent rise of Taliban militancy in Afghanistan, and its linkage with Pakistan's tribal belt, cannot be seen in isolation from the 1980s internationally-sponsored jihad against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, the regionally sponsored intra-Afghan warfare in the country during the 1990s, which produced the Taliban phenomenon, and the situation in the country since the start of the anti-Taliban war in 2001. It is within this broader historical context that the underlying causes of NATO's failure in Afghanistan actually lie. Finding a single cause of a complex problem—such as considering Taliban's re-grouping in Pakistan's tribal regions and their infiltration into Afghanistan as the principal source of Taliban insurgency there—is simplistic and dangerous.

The aggravating drug problem, the continuing power of warlords, faltering reconstruction and development, un-representative nature of the regime in Pashtun perceptions, the existence of alleged al-Qaeda/Taliban safe havens in Pakistan's tribal belt, the rise in civilian casualties in US/NATO operations and its negative impact on the Afghan public opinion are some of the indigenous sources of the growing extremist-nationalist anti-US/NATO movement in Afghanistan today. As long as these issues remain unsettled, Taliban-led militancy will continue to gain momentum. Likewise, the issue of Taliban regrouping in Pakistan's tribal regions and its linkage with Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be tackled without the required Afghan-US/NATO response to Pakistan's proposed measures for tightening security along the Durand Line, in the presence of millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan's tribal regions, and the continuity of US/NATO "hot pursuit" tactics as well as the absence of development there.

All of these are very complex, historically rooted problems characterizing the current ground realities in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal regions. Each one of them requires a long-term agenda for its settlement, something that NATO's current mission in Afghanistan lacks acutely. It is not that NATO needs to make a drastic increase in troops to make a difference in its war effort in Afghanistan, the main problem, as identified above, is the unwillingness of several NATO members to commit more troops for combat role. NATO has to overcome this problem, by convincing all of its members to lift respective restrictions imposed on their operational role in Afghanistan. For the purpose, however, the Alliance has to address all of the concerns being expressed by its European members regarding the war effort in Afghanistan. Accommodating Pashtun interests in the power structure of Afghanistan is another precondition for NATO's success in Afghanistan, one that cannot be realized as long as genuine representatives of Afghanistan's majority population remain politically an aggrieved party in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's NATO-led security sector reforms, including the expansion of Afghan national army and police and realization of Afghan reconstruction goals, depend upon how quickly the manifold causes of Afghanistan's insecurity dilemma are addressed effectively. Apart from Pashtun alienation from the country's power structure, these include the culture of warlordism and its close affinity with the drug problem, the continuing problem of refugee presence in Pakistan's tribal region and its linkage with insurgency in Afghanistan, and the negative local and regional perceptions about NATO's Afghan mission. By using force alone as a principal counter-insurgency means, and without taking forceful steps to combat drug problem and warlords involved in it, NATO cannot hope to achieve credible results in its current security-cum-reconstruction mission in Afghanistan. And, obviously, if NATO fails in Afghanistan, it cannot hope to play an effective role in international peace and security.

Conclusions

US/NATO and Afghan authorities in Afghanistan's southern and eastern regions and Pakistani government in the country's tribal and frontier regions can win the battle against Taliban-led insurgents if they resolve to undertake a decisive military push not

to achieve a military victory, but to facilitate a pragmatic political resolution of the conflict. A twin-pronged strategy based on the use of force against the Taliban and their extremist affiliates directly engaged in terrorism, and the pursuit of dialogue with those among the Taliban who are willing to compromise for the sake of legitimate political and economic benefits, has greater chances of success. Barnett and Ahmed¹⁶ have argued for expansion in the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and the gradual transfer of Afghan security to them. The Afghan National Army is set to increase up to 134,000 by 2011.¹⁷ The Afghan police will have a similar strength by then. However, as the Afghan national security apparatus expands and assumes greater responsibility, its composition has to extend to those among Taliban and other insurgents who vow for peace as a result of the intensified military campaign this year and beyond.¹⁸ Apart from expanding Afghan security forces, the deployment of troops from relatively neutral Muslim countries like Tunisia and Morocco in Afghanistan remains a viable option. The United Arab Emirates already has a small contingent of forces in the war-torn country. Including a credible Muslim component in the international security forces operating in Afghanistan will provide them greater legitimacy and improve local and regional public and state perceptions about them.

2009 is a crucial year in post-Taliban politics in Afghanistan, as the forthcoming presidential polls may facilitate the emergence of a more credible leadership and representative government in Afghanistan. It is only then that the international community's broader agenda of achieving political stability, economic development and social progress in Afghanistan can be realized effectively. A Contact Group mandated by the UN Security Council, as suggested by Barnett and Rubin,¹⁹ cannot achieve such goals, nor can it assuage regional concerns, such as those of Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia. We need to remember that none of the UN envoys and plans in the past made any

¹⁶ Barnett and Ahmed, op cit.

¹⁷ See Nagl, op cit; and U.S. Statement on Expansion of Afghanistan National Army, 10 September 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/September/20080910152705eaifas0.3181879.html>

¹⁸ In my own conversations with top Pakistani and Afghan diplomats, it appears that Taliban and other insurgents are particularly aggrieved at the domination of non-Pashtun people in Afghan national army and police. That is why one of their key demands will be to give them their due share in the Afghan National Security Forces, whenever the process of peace-making in Afghanistan begins.

¹⁹ Barnett and Ahmed, op cit.

difference on the ground in Afghanistan. Diego Cordovez left behind a messy Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Mahmud Mestri and Dr Norbert Holl played a disastrous role during the Taliban rule. The UN six-plus-two plan proved a non-starter until the end. Each time the UN got involved in political resolution of the Afghan conflict, it only re-enforced competing and conflicting external interests in the war-torn country.

Instead of a UN Contact Group, the United States and its NATO and non-NATO allies have to handle the Afghan project with greater commitment and resolve. Mr. Holbrooke is a great negotiator. His diplomacy in the Balkans was guided by pragmatism and multilateralism, and decisiveness—and the same principles seem to guide the Obama Administration, as it undertakes the greatest of all American missions in the post-Cold War period. He has just concluded a trip to the region, listening to the leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan and making a sense of the ground realities there. Mr Holbrooke did go to India as well, because the Obama Administration thinks the peace process between India and Pakistan, especially over the Kashmir dispute, is crucial for winning the war against terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal regions. We shall wait and see as to what sort of broader policy changes the Obama Administration undertakes in the coming months to combat Taliban-led insurgency and explore the possibility of peace and development in the region. If these policy changes pragmatically aim to address all the above-mentioned factors undermining NATO mission in Afghanistan and limiting Pakistan's success in the tribal regions, then there is hope that the situation in the case of Afghan war may start to make similar progress as has been the case in Iraq recently.