

NATO's Survival Depends on Afghanistan

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General Stanley McChrystal has said that without additional forces America will experience “Mission Failure” in Afghanistan. There is a growing fear within both the American political right and left that General McChrystal’s request for additional troop increases in Afghanistan will start us on the road to another Vietnam. Shockingly, no one, not even the President, has yet to call for some form of comparable commitments from our allies. Ironically, it was the European members of the Alliance which took the initiative to invoke Article 5 after the 9/11 attacks, signaling that the attack was an attack against them all. Thus, Europeans were willing to make Afghanistan NATO’s war. During the initial phase of the “War on Terror,” the United States mistakenly believed it did not need allies and made little effort to involve NATO in its operations until overextension in Iraq forced the United States to seek allies when it set up the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Terrorist attacks on European cities have also made it clear that Europe has just as much at stake in Afghanistan.

However, NATO has yet to fully commit itself to Afghanistan. The current dilemma is that as Americans debate the merits of troop increases, even our staunchest European allies are talking about cutting troop commitments and searching for a way out. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown have even called for an international conference to establish an exit strategy for their forces. In the wake of the deaths of six Italian soldiers, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has also expressed his desire to bring Italian troops home. Both Canada and the Netherlands have already announced plans to withdraw their combat forces by 2011. European leaders have failed to grasp that a premature pullout from Afghanistan will irrevocably damage the transatlantic relationship.

The value of allies to a military campaign becomes obvious when examining the contrasting lessons from the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In Korea, I served as a company commander with the 25th division alongside a fearless Turkish brigade. Our UN allies, Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece and others, also fought with us. Today, South Korea is free, while South Vietnam is not. The Vietnam failure shows the folly of fighting an Americanized war without a broad coalition of allies.

The much needed increase of American resources must be matched by the Europeans; such a contribution could come in many forms. Unfortunately, at present, most European countries are dodging their responsibilities when it comes to committing necessary resources to the Afghan campaign. Most abstain from sending the essential trainers needed to build a strong Afghan army and police, a necessary element of any sustainable exit strategy. Current European troop commitments are a fraction of contributions to

previous NATO operations. More European troops were sent to Kosovo, and it is only roughly 1/60th the size and has 1/14 the population of Afghanistan. This is shocking, considering that al-Qaeda poses more of a direct threat to the cities of Europe than Milosevic's army ever did. Furthermore, of the 28 countries in NATO, only the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Poland, and the Netherlands provide sizeable forces that are not limited by restrictive rules of engagement. The countries engaged in the heaviest fighting—the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Denmark—are also the only countries contributing significant shares of their respective armed forces. Despite commanding six of the eight largest and most advanced militaries in NATO, France, Turkey, Poland, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Greece, have all committed less than two percent of their militaries as compared to other countries with smaller and less advanced forces. NATO is acting like a coalition of the barely-willing, not an alliance of the truly-committed.

What has happened to the alliance that won the Cold War? To understand this meager burden sharing, we must first understand the debilitating disconnects that are preventing NATO from functioning effectively in this war.

First, NATO has focused almost exclusively on Afghanistan even though the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership are based in Pakistan, where they are in close proximity to both nuclear weapons and AQ Khan, the principal disseminator of nuclear secrets. Despite this obvious interconnectedness, NATO has refused to fully embrace a broader Af-Pak mission. Many Europeans have said that their opposition to the war in Afghanistan was due in large part to the fact that the real enemy, the al-Qaeda leadership, is in Pakistan. If NATO adopted a fully integrated regional approach this line of opposition would be quelled.

Second, despite clear links between these attacks and NATO efforts in Afghanistan, Europe continues to inefficiently separate NATO-led operations in Afghanistan from, domestic counterterrorism, which is almost exclusively handled by national law-enforcement agencies, loosely coordinated through the European Union. Because of this, there is no comprehensive assessment or general understanding of the overall terrorist threat emanating from its base in South Asia. Therefore, decreasing European public support for the Afghan mission is understandable.

Third, the Alliance inefficiently operates under a laborious consensus decision making process that requires total unanimity. This policy remains, despite NATO's massive expansion (from 16 to 28 members) since the end of the Cold War. Because of this, NATO lacks the ability to act decisively. While NATO can break out of this decision making process when it comes to a humanitarian mission or counter-piracy operations, NATO continues to follow this inefficient procedure when it comes to making decisions regarding the war in Afghanistan. Recently retired Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, General Bantz J. Craddock, has stated that because of this policy it took NATO over a year to adopt a coherent counternarcotics strategy. This policy tragically undermines NATO's ability to fight a war.

Fourth, the European public is disconnected from the reality that the failure to deal with the al-Qaeda threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan could destroy the historic transatlantic Alliance that helped prevent World War III. A recent poll showed that 58 percent of Europeans see NATO as being essential for security, but only seven percent support sending more troops to Afghanistan. The same poll showed that American support for closer transatlantic ties has dropped dramatically since 2004. Europeans must be convinced that without greater burden sharing in Afghanistan, the future of NATO is in doubt. As President Obama's Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, has said, "Afghanistan represents the ultimate test for NATO." President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski has also written that a NATO pullout from Afghanistan "would undermine NATO's credibility." This would be reminiscent of when the Vietnam failure undermined America's actions on the international stage for decades. Such a development would undercut Europe by hastening the transfer of global power to Asia.

While the current situation is dire, history shows that it is not insurmountable. During the Cold War, NATO occasionally faltered under Soviet pressures and political infighting but it never allowed the Soviets to divide Europe and America, which was their ultimate goal. When President Reagan appointed me NATO Ambassador in 1983, the Alliance was facing a crisis just as serious. NATO was politically paralyzed in the face of the Soviet Union's attempt to sever the Alliance by deploying missiles that could hit Europe but not America. Some NATO members claimed that counter-deploying missiles would be viewed as provocative. Thus, the Alliance was unable to reach consensus, and refused to meet conventional defense requirements. In reaction, US Senators spoke of withdrawing troops. This helped shock NATO into embracing aggressive reform. With a talented new Secretary General, Lord Peter Carrington, new Senate collaborators and a few key European leaders such as German Defense Minister Manfred Wörner, we developed an ambitious reform agenda and simultaneously covertly helped countries navigate domestic political opposition to counter-deployments. This allowed us to rally NATO and overcome the last crisis of the Cold War.

Fortunately, dramatic leadership on both sides of the Atlantic can remobilize the most successful Alliance in human history. Members of Congress should tell their European counterparts that if NATO fails in Afghanistan, it will be increasingly difficult to convince Americans of the need for NATO.

Unfortunately, at present, most of NATO's attention is centered on future restructuring for its new Strategic Concept to be released in late 2010. Though essential, this focus on the future is disconnected from the American and European political clocks, where waning support for an eight-year-long war demands an immediate revitalization of NATO. This reform effort also overlooks the fatal blow that failure in Afghanistan could deliver to the transatlantic relationship. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the able chair of the new Strategic Concept, should exceed her mandate and call for the immediate revitalization of the Afghanistan effort. President Obama can help, but he must go beyond simply telling Europeans to pledge more—both the Bush and Obama administrations failed using that tactic.

To save NATO, Europe needs Churchills, not Chamberlains. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen may be a Churchill, but other European leaders must also rise to the occasion. We already have innovative military leaders in Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, and President Obama has been steadfast on the danger of al-Qaeda and the Taliban but he needs political allies. We find that Congressional leaders are only too willing to bear the message to Europe, that urgent reform is needed. After this preparatory work is completed, a major political initiative is needed to turn around the Alliance as it was turned in the 1980s. President Obama with a few brave European leaders must call an emergency Heads of Government meeting aimed at boosting commitment so that Afghans can be properly trained to assume responsibility for their own security. In Afghanistan, NATO is fighting for its life—it better start acting like it.