

Not only “Containerspotting” – NATO’s Redeployment from Landlocked Afghanistan

by Heidi Reisinger¹

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On 31 December 2014, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, the largest military mission of NATO, will be history. In line with the political decision taken at NATO’s Lisbon Summit in 2010, ISAF troops will be leaving. With them will go all their equipment: a range of items, from weapon systems and armoured vehicles to chairs, kitchens and fitness centres used by more than 100,000 troops and approximately the same amount of civilian personnel. This is a gigantic project. If one thought getting into Afghanistan was difficult, getting out is a lot harder. It represents the biggest multi-national military logistical challenge in modern history. Millions of tons of materiel have to be de-militarized, dismantled, handed over, sold, scrapped, recycled, donated to the Afghans and/or third nations, or transferred home. More than 125,000 containers and 80,000 military vehicles have to be disposed of or brought back home to NATO nations and NATO partner countries. If the containers and the vehicles were placed one after the other, end to end, they would form a line as long as the distance from Berlin to Paris.

This “redeployment” is a national responsibility, with NATO playing an important coordination role and it is not only a question of logistics. It is an integral part of the overall ISAF campaign plan, and it is a full spectrum effort which has to be coordinated with the national plans of the ISAF nations, in line with the build-up of the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the transfer of security responsibility to Afghan partners. All this has to take place parallel to current active combat missions. Moreover, it has to take into account the requirements of NATO’s scheduled follow-on mission to ISAF, “Resolute Support”: the focus of this new mission will be to train, advise and assist, although the final set-up has yet to be determined.

As in a good short story, future perception of this important military mission will depend to a considerable extent on its ending – a successful and orderly redeployment. It will also be a moment of truth and of responsibility: history is full of dramatic examples of withdrawals from Afghanistan. When the last Soviet soldiers were brought home, it was clear that the Soviet Union was “leaving behind a war that had become a domestic burden and an international embarrassment for Moscow.”²



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² Bill Keller, Last Soviet Soldiers Leave Afghanistan, *The New York Times*, 16 February 1989.



NATO nations and their partners are determined not to repeat this pattern. They are well aware that ending this operation will be a difficult task for all parties involved. Looking for common solutions with long-standing Alliance members and partners seems to be natural under these challenging circumstances. So what are NATO countries and NATO partners doing to manage the challenge of redeploying from Afghanistan? And how does that affect NATO as an organization?

This paper endeavours to give a taste of the different logistical aspects of redeployment, and also the significant political implications. It analyses the most pressing challenges for ISAF redeployment and takes a look at the answers NATO has thus so far given to this challenge.

Successful redeployment would be, *inter alia*, an example of Alliance cooperation and coherence: in keeping together NATO member and partner nations, ISAF redeployment is both a challenge and a chance to create efficient collaboration patterns in military logistics that will impact NATO operations far beyond 2014. The way NATO manages this challenge will significantly impact on the political future of the Alliance internally, and also the way it is seen from the outside.

1. No blueprints: if you can redeploy from Afghanistan you can redeploy from everywhere

The virtual line of containers and vehicles mentioned above would be long enough to cover the distance between Berlin and Paris. For military logistics, the drama lies more in the fact that this long line would not be long enough to connect the Afghan capital Kabul with the closest deep sea port. The port of Karachi in Pakistan is more than 1,300 kilometres from Kabul, and almost 2,000 kilometres from Mazar-i Sharif. Afghanistan is a truly landlocked country, with poor infrastructure; distances have to be measured not only in kilometres or miles, but also in relation to the number of hours needed to cover them. The border crossing points are limited and difficult to use. If one also considers the extremes to be faced in terms of climate and terrain (up to 90% of the country is made up of desert or mountains, with sharp differences in elevation), it is no exaggeration to describe the whole operation as a logistic nightmare.³ In addition, many of the neighbouring and therefore potential transit countries are hardly known for their easy-going willingness to cooperate. Iran is a story in itself, an important partner and neighbour of Afghanistan but clearly not a partner of NATO. Pakistan is increasingly thought of as part of the problem, not of the solution. In Afghanistan's northern neighbourhood,

the Central Asian States of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan therefore become an essential part of the equation. Like a number of other transit nations, they are long-standing members of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, but challenging (even, in some places, impossible) as transit areas. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, not direct neighbours of Afghanistan, are on the long route north- and westwards – as are countries such as Russia and, to a certain extent, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. It has to be emphasized that most of them have been supporting NATO's mission in Afghanistan since the very beginning and offer all their infrastructure and airspace for ISAF cargo, sometimes without any caveats and in the face of grave domestic public concern. However, the routes in and out of Afghanistan are as reliable and strong as their weakest parts.

The Alliance does not have any blueprints for a redeployment project on this large a scale. While operations in Bosnia and Kosovo shaped the awareness of military planners regarding the challenge of drawdown and produced lessons learnt, these are of limited use for ISAF.

The US might benefit from its experience of leaving Iraq. However, this experience too is not readily applicable to Afghanistan, as Iraq's infrastructure and its proximity to Kuwait (with easy access to storage and container ports) made withdrawal from there comparable to a "cake walk." Compared with Iraq, even reaching the national borders is a far more problematic proposition in Afghanistan. In addition, the enormous problems of moving goods within the country are compounded by the question of how to reach the nearest deep sea port, involving several days of driving through dangerous areas and on difficult terrain.

2. Host nation support is crucial

A crucial factor for any kind of military (re-)deployment is, of course, the support of the host nation, normally delineated in the Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA). Possible continued presence of troops is a visible sign of this support. In the case of Iraq, there was no invitation for the US to stay, that complicated the situation. In Afghanistan, the scheduled follow-on mission after the end of ISAF has been mentioned above. NATO will be thus negotiating a SOFA with Kabul. This will be along the lines of the US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which is currently under negotiation, and will determine the conditions and goals of further military presence in Afghanistan. This means that post-ISAF arrangements and agreements will try to leave scope for a shift from an operational to a partnership perspective.

³ A.P. Betson, Nothing is Simple in Afghanistan: The Principles of Sustainment and Logistics in Alexander's Shadow, *Military Review*, 92(5), pp. 50-57.



Agreements such as the SOFA and BSA might appear essentially technical. However, for the fragile Afghan state they raise crucial questions of pride and national sovereignty. The Afghan President wants to avoid any heteronomy, even if well-meant, and to determine the terms and conditions of any agreements. With the prospect of Afghan presidential elections, scheduled for April 2014, local politicians are jockeying for position and do not want to be regarded as pushovers. The post-ISAF agreements and SOFA negotiations will be as challenging as today's regulations are controversial. According to the existing agreements, all ISAF-related players have complete and unimpeded freedom of movement or action throughout the territory and airspace of Afghanistan; importantly, all transactions they undertake in support of ISAF are exempt from Afghan taxes and duties.

However, the modern military practice of outsourcing services has created difficulties in relations with the host nation. Accusations that suppliers not only serve ISAF, but also use it as a cover to do other business without paying taxes to the Afghan authorities, have proved extremely embarrassing. Some companies have been heavily fined, but have refused to pay, and as a result, have been forced by the authorities to cease deliveries. NATO military logistics staffs were forced to deal with these cases and find alternatives, possibly by re-routing cargo, so as to keep supplies running.

Another challenge to NATO is the decree by Afghan President Karzai forbidding the use of private security companies to secure logistical supply routes within Afghanistan. This decree was driven primarily by the goal of transferring such security responsibilities to the Afghan state; a secondary motivation was to put a stop to the profitable dealings of private security companies and shift the proceeds to the Afghan public sector. Provision of security services is now the responsibility of the Afghan Public Protection Force, reportedly less professional than the private security companies and under-resourced. NATO supply lines within the country are thus, at present, seriously impaired. Unless the freedom of movement required for NATO-related activities within Afghanistan can be guaranteed without any ifs or buts, the Alliance's redeployment could be affected adversely. NATO's follow-on mission to ISAF will be less affected by such questions as there will be very little surface theatre movement. Most movement of military personnel and equipment is likely to be by air.

The more NATO transfers security responsibility to the Afghan authorities, the more self-confident Afghan partners will become. The Alliance should realize that this

will not always make things easier. Redeployment and continuing engagement will therefore necessarily depend on political coordination between NATO (especially the US, as the largest contributor) and the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). Strong political support for major border crossing points (Heyratan, on the Uzbek border; Torkham and Wesh, on the Pakistani border) and transit routes to neighbouring states are not sufficient, if convoys sometimes come practically to a standstill within Afghanistan itself. Deteriorating or inefficient host nation (and local) support may become the main obstacle for efficient redeployment.

On another contentious issue, NATO and GIROA are following the same line. Major transit countries have raised the question of whether a new United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) might be necessary for the follow-on NATO mission after 2014. This question raises the sensitive issue of Afghanistan's right to self-determination. The Afghan leadership refuses all attempts to rule the country from the outside, and reserves the right to have the GIROA take all necessary decisions in Kabul. However, the possible need for a new UNSCR holds enormous consequences for ISAF troops and their drawdown. Almost all transit agreements/arrangements are entirely tied to ISAF and the ISAF-sponsoring UNSCR. The implication, therefore, is that a new UNSCR would entail the need to renegotiate those transit agreements, possibly with the added complication of price rises and/or further caveats.

3. Logistics is a national business – but coordination is essential

Bringing home all the equipment and material that was dragged into Afghanistan for more than 10 years of operations would be difficult, even if NATO was leaving en bloc. However, it is not that simple. To be precise, it is not NATO but the troop-contributing nations (TCNs) who are leaving: 28 NATO nations plus 21 partner nations and NATO's Joint Forces Command Brunssum.⁴ NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan is therefore comparable to a situation in an apartment building, with all 50 tenants moving out at the same time.

Like each and every tenant in this analogy, every nation is responsible for its own material and equipment. Logistics are a deeply national business. Everybody has to pay for the re-transit of their own materiel. In NATO jargon, this is a classic case for the principle of "costs lie where they fall". There is no NATO common funding for the redeployment action, except in the case of NATO-owned

⁴ As operational command with responsibility for ISAF, JFC Brunssum is representing the NATO-owned or NATO-funded installations and equipment.



equipment, NATO Headquarters and NATO theatre airports of debarkation.

The analogy of tenants moving out also explains why logistics are a national business. Every family has household goods which it wants to see treated properly – dad's watch collection, mum's crystal glasses, and so on – not to mention the items that nobody wants other people to see. Most countries behave the same way, when it comes to military logistics and the highly classified IT systems used there: military logistics is very much about software, barcodes, classified information and national capabilities. Pooling and sharing is often not possible, given the incompatibility of IT systems. This is seen in the case of the two biggest troop contributors, the US and the UK, which both use nationally developed software that was not entirely interoperable with the Alliance system until recently. It can be regarded as a major step that converter tools now make this interoperability possible and allow the required data to be read.

Like the families in the apartment building, every TCN has to compete for advantageous conditions with the actors who now find themselves almost literally in an El Dorado: the logistics companies and the transit nations. This situation cries out for common and coordinated action – what NATO calls Multinational Logistics Solutions.

Though re-transit is a national business, it involves a range of very diverse players: (1) the TCNs, made up of 28 NATO allies and 21 non-NATO countries engaged in ISAF; (2) NATO as an organization, mainly NATO headquarters in Brussels, its strategic command (ACO/SHAPE) in Mons, Allied Joint Force Command in Brunssum, ISAF headquarters in Kabul and the NATO Support Agency (NSPA)⁵; (3) the Afghan partners (actually a large and very diverse group), (4) the transit nations, such as Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; (5) last but not least, the commercial logistics companies which will be transporting most of the ISAF cargo.

According to Alan Estevez, the US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Logistics, the biggest contractors involved in the move are the world's largest container lines – such as Copenhagen-based A.P. Moeller-Maersk A/S, the American President Lines unit of Singapore-based Neptune Orient Lines Ltd, and Hamburg-based Hapag-

Lloyd AG.⁶

Charter airlines – mainly the Russian Volga-Dnepr and the Ukrainian Antonov, with the world's largest fleet of AN-124 and IL-76 cargo planes – are also playing a large part in the withdrawal. In recent years, they have specialized in oversized cargo charter flights and ISAF nations' needs.

Removals companies (mainly Afghan and Pakistani) have also found ISAF an increasing source of business opportunities, as the shipping companies take out contracts with local trucking firms which carry the cargo to ports. The drivers risk their lives on the roads of Afghanistan and Pakistan, but this work earns them far more in a few days than they usually earn in a month (or even a year).

All these different actors and companies, big and small have to be brought together and coordinated, as the re-transit of materiel has to fit into the overall operational plan. This requires that all the parties involved show flexibility, transparency and real team spirit, especially among ISAF nations as local companies, warlords and businesses have nothing to gain from efficient redeployment.

4. A challenging mixture of logistics and politics

Bringing the millions of military and non-military items back from landlocked Afghanistan to the seaports on the East and West coasts of the US, to Leipzig, Sydney or Stockholm would be challenging enough in itself, but the logistic difficulties are only a part of the overall endeavour. Some might even call it the easy part, as most other steps are contingent on complex political developments, over which NATO has only marginal influence. Redeployment is not only about transporting military goods to and from a difficult and distant region, but handing over installations, responsibility, and therefore political power. Not to forget that everything has to be done in the context of – and simultaneously with – active combat missions. A US commander gets to the heart of the problem: "If we're knee-deep in combat operations, the natural tendency is to hold on to materiel ... just in case."⁷

Two scenarios are illustrative of the difficulties involved, and are briefly considered below.

⁵ The NATO Support Agency (NSPA) is NATO's Integrated Logistics and Services Provider Agency, combining the former NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMSA), the Central Europe Pipeline Management Agency (CEPMA) and the NATO Airlift Management Agency (NAMA). See <http://www.nspa.nato.int/en/index.htm>

⁶ Gopal Ratnam, Leaving Afghanistan is a \$7 Billion Moving Task for U.S., 12 May 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-13/leaving-afghanistan-is-a-7-billion-moving-task-for-u-s-.html> and Ernesto Londoño, Scrapping equipment key to Afghan drawdown, *The Washington Post*, 19 June 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-06-19/world/40067061_1_afghanistan-war-mine-resistant-ambush-protected-sustainment-command/2

⁷ Nate Rawlings, Return to Sender, *Time*, 18 March 2013, p. 30.



(1) If a nation is, for example, responsible for running an airport or a military base, it can pack and leave only when responsibility has been successfully transferred to the Afghans or, in certain cases, to another international organization. If there is no such transfer, the facility must be restored to the same standard as when NATO took over. This challenging mixture of military logistics and political action has to be coordinated by NATO: every step has to be integrated into the campaign plan, which includes the development of Afghan capabilities as well as the handing over of political and military responsibility.

(2) If the installation is to be closed down and dismantled so as to leave empty desert, then questions such as scrapping, selling, dumping and recycling have to be addressed. To ensure uniform standards of base closure, NATO's Allied Command Operations (ACO) has issued a directive for all ISAF nations, with detailed guidelines and advice.

A senior German logistics officer in the German Armed Forces Operations Command (Einsatzführungskommando der Bundeswehr) summarizes the principles as “what went in goes out again: no mountains of rubbish or scrap heaps must be left in Afghanistan. Nothing that could be dangerous for people or the environment must remain.”⁸

The sheer number of sites and bases that have already been closed could give a misleading impression of the ISAF base closure programme. Approximately 800 bases, big and small, are involved. Of these, more than 600 have already been closed or transferred. This may sound impressive, but experts know that the facilities concerned were mainly the low-hanging fruit. The really important ones, in troubled areas, have not yet been touched.

Finally, ISAF's follow-on mission, Resolute Support, has to be further specified, in order to make a reasonable decision on which bases might be required. This squaring of the circle, which takes into account a variety of political developments and decisions, represents the most pressing challenge to military planners and logisticians.

5. The cost factor – the search for creative solutions

In times of severe budgetary restraints, cost effectiveness is a central requirement. Even if the estimated sums are

as secret as many other logistic details, what is certain is that redeployment will cost a fortune. For the US, which holds the lion's share of materiel deployed in Afghanistan, the estimates range from 2 to 7 billion USD.⁹

As an example to illustrate the scale of costs, bringing a standard cargo container from Northern Afghanistan more than 5,000 kilometres to Germany costs the German tax payer between 7,500 and 40,000 euros. The estimated 4,800 German containers alone would thus cost 36 million euros, if transported in the cheapest way available. This is of course not possible, as military and sensitive equipment has to be flown out for 40,000 euros per container. The estimated costs for air transit alone will be 150 million euros.¹⁰

For more than twelve years, 50 nations have brought in equipment and supplies to maintain more than 100,000 troops and the same number of civilian and contracted personnel – from basic everyday necessities, medical treatment and entertainment to resources to maintain and service military equipment. The analogy with the apartment building shows the structural challenges but trivializes the dimension of ISAF redeployment: the issue here is about infrastructure and equipment that has to be taken care of in the ballpark of a city the size of Geneva.

There are several possible ways of deal with the issue: (1) hand the resources concerned over to Afghan partners; (2) sell them; (3) dismantle them and then sell them; (4) donate them. Each of these alternatives would be cheaper than redeploying it as cargo.

For some time, nations have been doing “aggressive housekeeping” (once again, the analogy of the apartment building is appropriate here). This can mean identifying what will be needed in the next month or and maybe also during the follow-on mission and get rid of everything else. Thus it is that, in recent months, no charter flight bringing supplies to the troops in Afghanistan has flown back empty. The US is busy flying out equipment by Boeing C-17 cargo aircraft from Bagram airport, where a plane takes off or lands every minute and a half.¹¹

Many items are not only cheaper but also easier to scrap than to bring home. Even properly functioning military equipment might thus end up as “gold dust” on Pakistani scrap markets – especially US heavyweight vehicles,

⁸ Rückkehr aus dem Krieg, documentary by Sabine Rau, Christian Thiels und Jürgen Osterhage, Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk 2013, <http://www.ardmediathek.de/das-erste/reportage-dokumentation/die-story-im-ersten-rueckkehr-aus-dem-krieg?documentId=15759562>

⁹ Ratnam, *ibidem.*, and William La Jeunesse, Uncle Sams's Yard Sale: Gov't looks to unload Afghanistan war hardware, *Fox News*, 18 August 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/08/18/it-could-be-uncle-sam-biggest-yard-sale/>

¹⁰ Operation Rückzug: Die Bundeswehr verlässt Afghanistan, documentary film by Jürgen Osterhage und Thomas Kaspar, ARD-Studio Neu-Delhi, phoenix 2013, <http://www.doku-stream.org/operation-ruckzug-die-bundeswehr-verlasst-afghanistan-doku-3/>; Frank Wahlig, Ende eines Kampfeinsatzes, 13 September 2013, http://www.tagesschau.de/wahl/parteien_und_programme/afghanistan3132.html

¹¹ Rawlings, *ibidem.*



known as MRAPs (Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles), designed to protect troops in transit from improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and ambushes. These MRAPs are bulky and heavy (14 tons and more), cost the US taxpayer about a million USD each, and it sometimes would not pay off to bring them home (or to US bases in Europe).¹² For German heavy vehicles too, the same logic applies and it is alleged to have occurred that troops “used them as target practice” (i.e. shoot them to pieces) with redundant ammunition. This sounds perverse, but meets two objectives: getting rid of excess or time-expired ammunition and making it possible to sell transportable pieces of metal for scrap.

Returning to the analogy of the tenants in the apartment building, what else would “John Doe” do to lower the costs? He and his children could sell their possessions through internet platforms and at flea markets. Something similar is taking place in this “largest retrograde mission in history”, as a senior US logistics officer puts it.¹³ Experts might also call it “Uncle Sam’s biggest yard sale”.¹⁴ Pakistani markets are being flooded with equipment originating from the ISAF troops. It is impossible to determine where this comes from: if it is sold by traders, or stolen in the almost daily attacks on supply and retrograde convoys.

Online too, good bargains can be found. As soon as inventory has been transferred to US storage outside Afghanistan, it might be decided that US troops do not need the equipment any longer and it can be sold on *www.govliquidation.com*. Almost anything, from aircraft parts to field gear and even whole vehicles, can be purchased.

Why not leave equipment to the under-equipped Afghan units or greedy transit nations? ISAF nations are aware that donating or selling materiel to the Afghan partners or transit nations is tricky. Equipment can fall into the wrong hands, or can be used against peaceful demonstrators. Local authorities may not have adequate budget and personnel skills to operate and maintain such equipment. Therefore most nations have to approve any

such sales or donations through their foreign military sales programmes, which represent a considerable bureaucratic hurdle.

While NATO is not involved in donation deals with transit countries, it fully coordinates all donation projects to Afghan partners. NATO’s Training Mission to Afghanistan (NTM-A), which is an integral part of ISAF and will also end on 31 December 2014, is the single point of contact with the ANSF concerning all donations of ISAF installations and equipment – whether Alliance-funded or nationally funded. This ensures a coordinated handover, with the added advantage of minimizing any donations which do not make sense, could create problems or would simply serve the national interests of the donor (getting rid of unwanted materiel). In NATO terms, the Alliance does not want to leave a burden to the Afghans.

Clear thought must be given to which equipment Afghan partners can handle not only today but also tomorrow. A German TV crew who visited a former Bundeswehr base in Faizabad, only six months after the handover to Afghan special police forces, was surprised that the facility was not fully operational; in other words: nothing was working. Cars were at a standstill, toilets blocked, water unavailable, the power generators (which had been specially bought to serve the Afghans’ needs) out of order. The Afghan police battalion had run out of spare parts and gasoline, and tried to muddle through the Afghan way.¹⁵

Transit nations, who sometimes have extensive “shopping lists”, should also consider carefully whether donated parts of different weapon systems would really enhance their capabilities. As a Tajik expert puts it: “We would shoot a little, ammunition will run out, and the weapons will turn into scrap, because, first, there is no money to buy them, and second there is no corresponding [support] agreement.”¹⁶

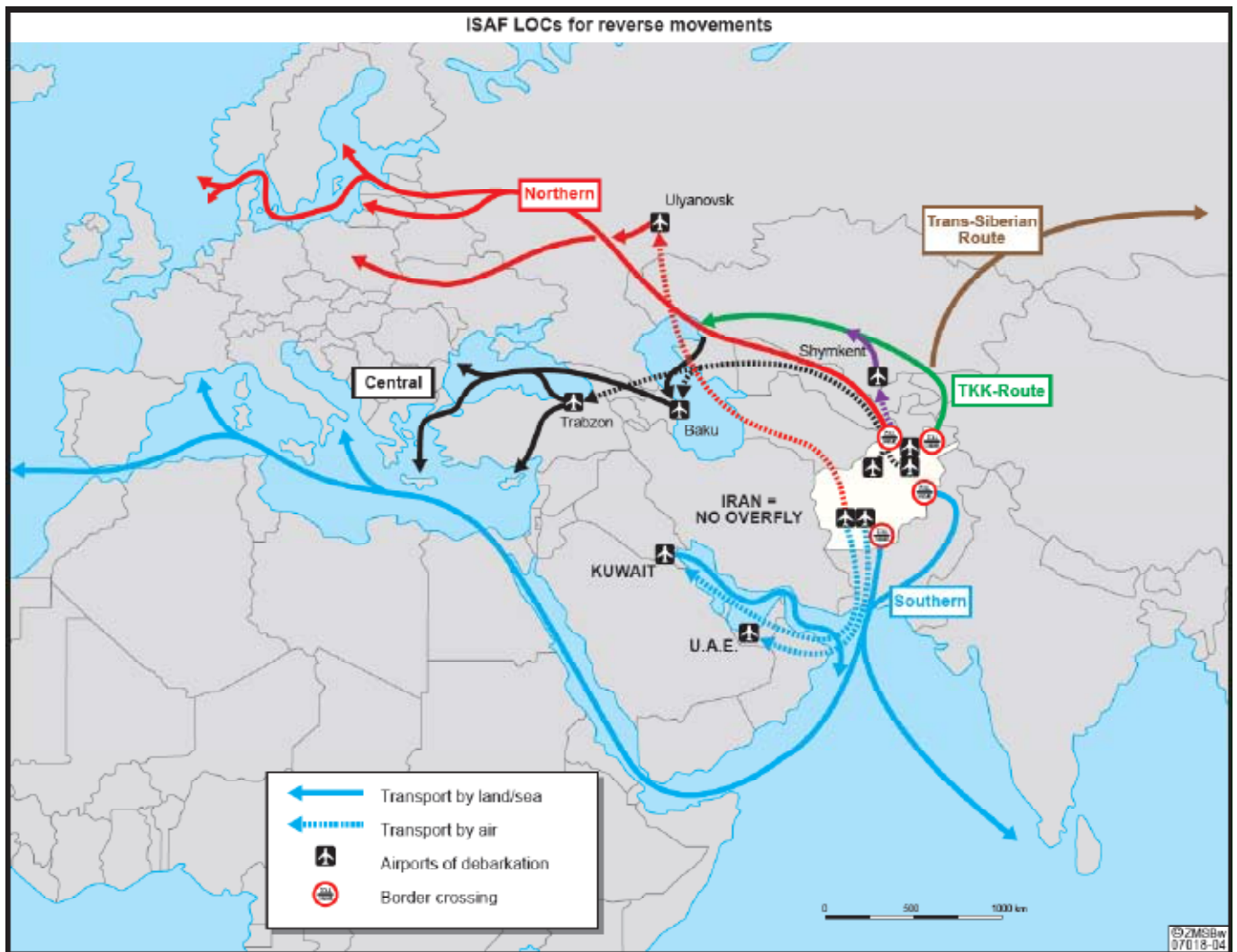
¹² Londoño, *ibidem*.

¹³ Londoño, *ibidem*.

¹⁴ La Jeunesse, *ibidem*.

¹⁵ Rückkehr aus dem Krieg, *ibidem*. “Adjusting” the German camp in Kunduz to Afghan needs prior to its hand over in October 2013, cost the German tax payer 25 million euros. Also this investment will fall on stony ground if the ANSF does not manage to establish a functioning supply chain.

¹⁶ Abdullo Habib in an interview with the Avesta news agency, 7 March 2012, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 8 March 2012.



6. The transit routes: there was a road in, there must be a road out

NATO nations have several possibilities for transporting cargo into and out of Afghanistan. The easiest way surely is to use large cargo aircraft. This is the most costly way, but also the safest and fastest. For all kinds of combat and sensitive gear, it is therefore the only means of transportation that can be used. However, for furniture, air conditioners and all kinds of commodities, the Ground Lines of Communication (GLOCs) are available and will be used.

All routes on the ground have their advantages and disadvantages. There is no land route that works reliably enough not to require alternatives. In addition, most land routes can be used only with “multimodal” transit, i.e. by combining different means of transportation.

(1) The Southern GLOC (SGLOC or PAKGLOC) is through Pakistan. Cargo has to be driven by truck and

loaded on to container liners in Karachi. This route, especially for TCNs deployed in the South and East of Afghanistan, is the most favoured line of communication. Due to political disputes between Pakistan and the US, this important route was closed for eight months from late November 2011 to July 2012. The closure and the resulting problems are well remembered by the logistics officers. When Pakistan closed the border crossing points and impounded the 10,000 containers (in many cases food supplies) which ISAF nations had lined up in Karachi for transit in both directions, this resulted in considerable wastage and legal problems. Since reopening, the route has functioned well, but further disruptions could occur at any time.

Even if the SGLOC/PAKGLOC is considered to be the most efficient route, frequent losses and damage to cargo as a result of possible insurgent/criminal activity will have to be taken into account. For sensitive and sophisticated cargo, nations will therefore have to find other ways out.



(2) The Central LOC through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, the Southern Caucasus and Turkey might become one of the most frequently used routes out of Afghanistan. Close cooperation and combined efforts between NATO member Turkey and NATO partners Georgia and Azerbaijan make this LOC attractive. Turkey has even extended its railway network.¹⁷ Germany, ISAF's third biggest troop contributor, will fly most of its own equipment out on chartered flights from Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan to Trabzon in Turkey. There, a German logistics unit re-routes cargo and vehicles by road to a modern deep sea port, for loading on to container ships and chartered roll-on/roll-off (RORO) vessels.¹⁸ By the end of the withdrawal, half of an estimated total of 4,800 German containers will have been transferred by this route. This solution will not prove cheap, but is very reliable. It gives Germany the advantage of not having to stand in line with other TCNs waiting to pass the bottleneck of Uzbekistan on the Northern route.

(3) The Northern LOC (NGLOC), through Central Asia and Russia, seems to be almost as famous as the ancient Silk Road. ISAF nations have not put greater effort into any other line of communication.¹⁹ Transiting through Afghanistan's northern neighbour Uzbekistan, then through Kazakhstan, Russia and Latvia to the Baltic Sea, this route has been extremely successful for supplies entering Afghanistan. The big TCNs like the UK, Germany, France, Spain and, of course, the US continue to use it extensively. Washington started to work on this route in 2006, when relations with its former prime partner Pakistan became more and more difficult. The US' Northern Distribution Network (NDN) is identical to NATO's NGLOC, but it is based on bilateral legal transit agreements that go beyond the NATO agreements.²⁰ The NDN could almost be called a sustainment concept that includes transit/transport. It will therefore have a particularly important impact on post-ISAF cooperation of transit nations.

The establishment and operation of the NGLOC would not have been possible without the lead nation role played by Latvia, which is keeping NATO nations and NATO

partners together in this venture. Latvia is the main hub for sustainment via the NDN and NLOC. During many years Latvia has maintained a high level of commitment to the hub, the functionality, and development. This support has paid dividends to the ISAF mission, in particular for sustainment activities during the PAK GLOC closure mentioned above.

Latvia has also assigned a NATO Liaison officer to Tashkent with the purpose of being the ears and eyes on location in Uzbekistan and do trouble shooting at lowest level. The function is dedicated to all transit issues which may occur during transit of ISAF cargo via Uzbekistan.

Although many transit nations are involved, the NGLOC works flawlessly for goods entering Afghanistan. For re-transit, however, this route has so far performed far below expectations. Insiders estimate that approximately 54,000 containers had left Afghanistan until July 2013, but less than 100 made it through the NGLOC. Today only two containers a day pass through Uzbekistan, the first country on the long ground route north and westwards. The NGLOC is considered to be secure – there are no cases of pilferage known. It is reliable and cost-effective, but suffers from problems mainly caused by the Uzbek bureaucracy and something that can only be described as an irrational fear of anything entering Uzbekistan from Afghanistan.²¹ There seems to be only one solution to these problems: to circumvent the country. Given the weather conditions and limited infrastructure, the KKT bypass through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is probably not a game changer, but could become increasingly important. Due to rough road conditions and severe weather challenges this route is complicated to use mainly during the fall, winter and spring season. The same is true for the US-only Trans-Siberian route by truck to sea ports in the Russian Far East. Some nations have tested to the feasibility of overflying Uzbekistan. Other nations suffering from "Uzbek fatigue" have opted for completely different solutions, as seen in the example of Germany airlifting its westbound equipment to Trabzon. In other cases, nations have set up hubs in the Middle East. The NLOC, despite the enormous political

¹⁷ Unfortunately and expectedly, Armenia is not part of this important regional cooperation. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia casts its shadow even over the totally unrelated issue of ISAF redeployment. Even the use of maps has become complicated. Political maps, i.e. with national borders indicated, seem to be avoided in NATO expert rounds, so as not to end up in endless political discussions about occupied territories. New members and partners have introduced considerable difficulties into the work of the Alliance in this respect; see also the FYROM case (Turkey recognizes the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia by its constitutional name), or the tensions between Turkey and Israel.

¹⁸ Roll-on/Roll-off ships are designed to transport wheeled cargo.

¹⁹ Heidi Reisinger, "How to get out of Afghanistan: NATO's withdrawal through Central Asia", NDC Research Paper 79, Rome June 2012, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=341>

²⁰ The NDN encompasses the Central Lines of Communication (CLOC) and the Northern Lines of Communication (NLOC). NDN LOC's includes multimodal routes to Turkey via Baku and Trabzon, the Ulyanovsk multimodal LOC, the Ground LOC via Uzbekistan and the TTK route.

²¹ This fear of opening the door to organized crime, with drug and arms trafficking, seemed to have been confirmed when the first ISAF re-transit container entered Uzbekistan. Inside, the Uzbek customs officials found weapons which had been forgotten under a seat.



support it enjoys, was therefore not yet able to fulfil its potential. Kazakhstan has offered the use of its port at Aqtau on the Caspian Sea, and recently also developed a modern multimodal transit centre in Shymkent. Russia, which has always supported ISAF transit, has offered the Ulyanovsk airport and transit centre, despite sharp domestic opposition. Ground routes via Uzbekistan cannot be fully used unless the Uzbek portion is properly functioning. At present, NATO is trying to fulfil Uzbek requirements for equipment to make border control and customs procedures more efficient (forklift trucks, cranes etc.). In addition, a US-provided scanner is being installed at the Afghan border and another is waiting to be delivered for use at the Kazakh border.

Creative solutions cost money. As already mentioned, one of these was to fly equipment out to Ulyanovsk in Russia, and then continue via road and rail. A Proof of Principal, as NATO calls the trial run, was very successful, but unfortunately more expensive than other multi-modal options or even flying directly home. Unlike Turkey, Russia offers an all-inclusive service to avoid having military personnel from NATO nations on Russian territory. Use of the Ulyanovsk facility is thus subject to the nations concerned signing contracts with Russian cargo airlines. At the time of the trial, this involved an unacceptable level of expenditure. A container transported by ground routes and dispatched in Ulyanovsk cost three times more than other multimodal (fly-rail-sail) options.

Overall, it is fair to state that all the ground LOCs – especially the NGLOC/NDN – work well and are reliable as far as *inbound* cargo on its way to Afghanistan is concerned. However, redeployment is about *outbound* cargo which is leaving Afghanistan. Apart from costly solutions involving one or more flights, only the SGLOC through Pakistan is fully operational. All the others have good potential, but are severely hampered by the bottleneck in Uzbekistan, bad weather and road conditions or missing rail connections.

NATO has entered into transit agreements which ISAF nations can use with all the relevant transit nations (Pakistan, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Two further transit nations, Georgia and Azerbaijan, offer their airspace and infrastructure as if they were de-facto NATO members. Some ISAF nations also have bilateral agreements with transit nations: these bilateral arrangements are tailored to national needs and go beyond the NATO agreements. Irrespective of these, it is a remarkable step forward – and an important gesture of partnership – that the transit nations have entered into agreements with NATO without any particular advantage to themselves, and have made their infrastructure available to the ISAF nations.

It was mentioned before that these agreements are tied to ISAF. When ISAF ends, it will be an open question whether “ISAF” re-transit arrangements can continue. Only the agreement with Pakistan explicitly includes transit after December 2014. The question of ISAF redeployment after 2014 might become pressing: currently, it seems likely that some ISAF nations’ redeployment will extend into 2015 – or even 2016.

7. ISAF is now in NATO’s DNA

In the course of more than a decade of common military action in Afghanistan, the Alliance has reached its highest level of interoperability ever in many areas. This is seen in terms of Alliance coherence, common understanding and the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach, as well as the attempt to work together in areas that have previously been the exclusive preserve of individual nations. ISAF redeployment is therefore a catalyst for common logistics, in which NATO acts as a true broker, enhances information sharing and multinational cooperation, synchronizes national and Alliance action and deconflicts where necessary.

It started with the small things. Even agreeing on a common term for the winding down of ISAF was an issue for the TCNs in Brussels. Is it “pullout”, “withdrawal”, “drawdown” or “reduction”? No, it is redeployment. This is a rather technical term, which does not imply any judgment of the mission. It leaves open whether it is accompanied by a significant reduction of troops. In addition, this term describes an action which is more than a logistic task, which should be considered as an operation in itself, but which is still a part of the overall campaign plan. The redeployment of ISAF troops and equipment is also about such questions as force protection, strategic communication, base closure, demilitarization, dismantling and disposal. All of this raises important questions regarding standardization. As NATO nations have to find the answers to these questions, ISAF as a mission is a driver not only of interoperability, but also of logistics synchronization, harmonization and coordination. ISAF redeployment can therefore be seen, inter alia, as an important step towards common logistics support solutions.

Predictably, when it comes to redeployment, there is no easy answer to the famous Kissinger question of whose telephone number should be dialled at NATO. Who owns this endeavour, in which political and operational aspects are interwoven on all levels?

Experts talk about the architecture of ISAF redeployment, as an attempt to coordinate many stages in decision-making. This involves not only strategic political issues



dealt with at NATO Headquarters, but also strategic military questions handled by the Alliance's strategic command; the entire ACO chain of command is also part of this architecture, including ISAF Headquarters in Kabul and the ISAF TCNs.

NATO Headquarters has formed a task force, led by the Assistant Secretary General for Operations and co-chaired together with representatives of the International Staff and International Military Staff. This task force mainly provides political-military strategic support and guidance from ACO; it negotiates in close collaboration with military experts from SHAPE, with partners and with transit nations. The task force also ensures political coordination with the ISAF nations, and encourages their cooperation on logistic matters.

As mentioned above, ACO has issued a directive to give nations guidelines on all relevant redeployment questions. These range from the architecture of redeployment, clarifying roles and responsibilities of the involved NATO bodies and ISAF nations, to concrete directions regarding how to leave a site. Irrespective of the ISAF drawdown, ACT is currently working on a redeployment doctrine.

To come back to the Kissinger question and give a clearer answer regarding who to call: for political strategic issues, call NATO Headquarters Operations Division; for military strategic issues, the SHAPE J4; concerning donations to Afghan partners, call ISAF/NTM-A Headquarters in Kabul.

NATO's central role as an organization is to: (1) provide political support and guidance, convincing ISAF nations to overcome national reflexes, be transparent and share information about their deployment plans and equipment; (2) support and coordinate the political process of transferring security responsibility to Afghan partners; (3) embed the redeployment phase politically into a long term partnership strategy with Afghanistan; (4) establish and politically support the various LOCs, negotiate and maintain transit agreements that can be used by NATO and ISAF nations; (5) develop standards and guidelines regarding how the Alliance (including the non-NATO TCNs) should leave theatre (donation, disposal etc.); (6) coordinate, synchronize and deconflict national (re-) deployment plans; and (7) coordinate these national plans with NATO capacities and the ISAF campaign plan.

NATO as an organization has grown significantly in this ongoing process of redeployment. Nations, jealous of their sovereignty and wishing to preserve their self-

sufficiency, showed little willingness in the past to share (re-)deployment information and assets. They now understand the complexity and necessity of coordination far better. NATO's subject matter experts are in close contact with national planners, but they are aware that they can only ask, not task. Nations can change their mindset only gradually: they must be convinced of the benefits offered by sharing and cooperation.

There are a number of tools which help keep all NATO players informed and share responsibilities.

At regular intervals, the TCNs are invited to a Redeployment Logistics Conference at SHAPE, where NATO gathers information about national redeployment plans, synchronizing and deconflicting them while ensuring consistency with NATO redeployment capacities and the overall campaign plan. The conference in May 2013 saw the active engagement of 26 out of the then 50 TCNs. Given that the 26 nations were the main troop contributors; this can be regarded as a very good level of participation, indicating growing understanding of the need for common logistics.²²

As for any operation, SHAPE created and developed the strategic level Multinational Detailed Deployment Plan (MNDDP) for redeployment. This is integrated into the ISAF campaign plan at the theatre level and represents the central tool to monitor, coordinate and deconflict national redeployment plans in line with Alliance capacities. The full use of this tool has made a huge improvement: it is particularly helpful to the ISAF theatre Commanders and the nations, enabling them to understand the complexity involved in deconflicting the TCNs' national plans.

NATO can gather and coordinate the information provided by the nations about their plans and needs, and suggest pooling and sharing arrangements. NATO can suggest and offer mutual support solutions and commercial solutions, with the assistance of the NATO Support Agency (NSPA). However, this does require that the nations themselves engage.

NATO had to push hard for multinational solutions and got little response in the beginning. At the ISAF meetings, there were many questions such as "Do you want to have 50 glass crushing facilities or individual contracts for base closure?" It is obviously hard to overcome ingrained national patterns and do more and more with partners "the NATO way".

Some nations come together almost naturally. In Helmand province, for example, the UK, Estonia and Denmark are sharing a vehicle-washing facility. Turkey, Georgia

²² Many TCNs have very small troop contingents that do not require explicit redeployment planning, or have bi-national agreements with a major troop contributor such as the US or UK.



and Azerbaijan are working together so as to make the CGLOC transit route a success.

The biggest supporters of common logistics solutions are the new members who, together with non-NATO nations, are right on top of multinational solutions and close cooperation. The latest logistics exercise, organized by NATO's Multinational Logistics Coordination Center (MLCC) in Prague and host nation Slovakia in June 2013, is emblematic in this respect. Thirty-five nations, including NATO member states and partner countries, took part in this largest-ever logistics exercise, where four multinational so-called Smart Defence projects were successfully tested.

It is also a newer NATO member who acts as lead nation for the NLOC. By constant political support for this critical supply line and in general by maintaining close cooperation between NATO member states and non-NATO transit nations, Latvia has demonstrated that one small and relatively new Ally can make an important contribution.

In order to maintain close contact with transit nations, the network of liaison officers in the region has proved an effective tool. There are transit liaison officers in Uzbekistan, and Pakistan, as well as US border teams in Pakistan and Uzbekistan at the border crossing points mentioned above.

For the sake of completeness, the special case of NATO property or NATO-owned equipment should also be mentioned. Emphasizing that the redeployment of equipment is nationally organized and funded means omitting the more complicated case of such equipment. If the items concerned are no longer needed to meet the Minimum Capability Requirement (MCR), they have to be redistributed, written off and deleted from NATO lists. This sounds easy, but the example of the two NATO-funded airports of debarkation, Kabul and Kandahar, shows that matters are more difficult in practice. Processing of these facilities, which will probably not be used by Resolute Support, has proved no easy matter. Without digging too deep into directives, it should be clarified that the NATO committees or bodies which authorized the initial funding must also be involved in the redeployment procedures.

8. After me, *no flood* – special concerns

ISAF redeployment involves not leaving behind such eyesores and hazards as military scrap on street corners, dangerous equipment or polluted sites.²³ But what about

the silent army of helpers?

Local Afghan contractors have made clear how concerned they are about what will happen to and with them and their families after the magic date of 31 December 2014. Will they be accused, ostracized, attacked, or even killed as collaborators? Many ISAF nations have therefore set up programmes to support their Afghan helpers. However, far less attention is given to the thousands of contractors coming from third countries. Nobody knows exactly how many contractors work for ISAF, but experts estimate that the number of contractors by far exceeds the number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. It must therefore be assumed that a minimum of 120,000 contractors are working for ISAF troops in Afghanistan. Many of them are employed by private commercial companies; others come individually from all over the world to work for ISAF.

This “army” of civilian contractors seems to be a world of its own. In some military camps, which are the size of small towns and need huge numbers of service workers, contractors can in some cases, live in areas like ghettos.

All contractors known to NATO are covered by the Military Technical Agreement and are therefore, as service providers to NATO/ISAF, exempt from taxation and customs duties. All employees are required to show a passport and a visa to access ISAF bases.

The contractors in turn employ subcontractors, often very hard-working individuals (sometimes referred to as “ghosts”) who lead a completely shadowy existence. They have no official legal status. Many arrive with no invitation or visa (sometimes even without a passport): they are “just there”. Needless to say, nobody has a clear idea of the amount of equipment used by contractors and subcontractors, making any prospect of an organized drawdown unlikely complex prospect.

Since the appearance of this phenomenon, it has always been a touchy question who exactly monitors and supervises the civilian contractors. For several years it seems to have been a question of ad hoc muddling through – which could become a problem for redeployment, if NATO does not want to leave behind this huge work force. There is reason to fear that many contractors will stay behind, unaccounted for – they have no better place to go. They will stay on base and try to make a living. When the base is closed, they will become “leftovers” for NATO to handle.

It will be up to ISAF nations to take care of their civilian contractors, support them when it is time to leave Afghanistan, or take them with them. NATO is

²³ The few exceptions will essentially regard ISAF vehicles which were blown up by IEDs, and whose extrication would mean risking lives again.



endeavouring to ensure that nations will not simply end the contracts and turn the contractors adrift.

Another open question and hot potato for NATO/ISAF is communication, both with the Afghans and with the public in the various ISAF nations. Strategic communication is traditionally difficult for multinational organizations. Richard Holbrooke memorably asked, “How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world’s leading communications society?” Still, we seem not to have learned how to “get the message out.”²⁴ After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was clear why NATO nations went into Afghanistan; but this certainty faded away – and, with it, public support for ISAF. Why NATO is now wrapping up the campaign seems to be even less clear.

On the other hand, the simple logic of the Taliban seems crystal-clear: they are leaving – we won. NATO and ISAF nations therefore *have to* communicate the truth, even if it is more complicated. NATO has to explain again and again what redeployment is, and what it is not. It is not a rush to the exit, and it does not mean abandoning Afghanistan and the Afghans. On the contrary, as part of a wider transition, the whole engagement is based on a long-term strategy of building up the ANSF, transferring security responsibility and finally moving from operations in Afghanistan to partnership with Afghanistan.²⁵

The more the Afghans can assume their sovereign responsibilities, the more ISAF activities and ISAF troops can be reduced. Redeployment is therefore also a sign of trust that the Afghans can handle their own business. It is a mark of success. Last but not least, ISAF redeployment is a central and natural part of the ISAF campaign plan, and should be a central and natural part of any military campaign plan.

Redeployment in a nutshell

There’s never a good time, or no time is better than now. It was stated at the beginning of this paper that the ISAF mission will be judged to no small degree by its ending. Most Afghan problems could not be solved by NATO and its partners, but the country was given a real chance to develop in a different direction than in previous

decades.

Redeployment should therefore be seen as a natural part of the ISAF mission, which offers not only challenges but mainly opportunities. Afghanistan today is not comparable to the failed state of 2001. Today, the Afghan authorities are able to take over security responsibility and determine the country’s political development.

Only for and with the Afghans. Acting in concert with the Afghan government and local Afghan support is crucial for success, in all phases and aspects of the ISAF redeployment and the follow-on mission Resolute Support which will concentrate on train, advise and assist. Conceptually, for NATO as an Alliance, Afghanistan will shift from an operational issue into the partnership area. NATO is prepared to work with Afghanistan as a partner in the long run.

Difficult but doable. Redeployment involves complicated logistics, but getting out ISAF equipment is mainly a question of time, risk and money. NATO’s mission in Afghanistan illustrates the modern understanding of “tooth to backbone” – the idea of the tooth to tail ratio no longer applies.

For NATO as an organization, ISAF is a perfect example of how collective logistics can be implemented. This is far from limited to multinational action, as it adds the NATO dimension with regard to such essentials as command and control, common funding and common contracting. In other words, NATO ensures the all-important connection among members and partners, as an indispensable broker.

No way back to a kind of pre-ISAF mode. ISAF nations should appreciate and further enhance the level of interoperability – also between member states and partners – and common logistics, resisting their national instincts to get things done alone. However, the mindset of common logistics and doing it the NATO way has to be put into practice constantly: a professional, efficient and coordinated ISAF redeployment is not the end of the story. Redeployment is more than dealing with cargo and containers: it is also a key factor in NATO’s future as an expeditionary political-military Alliance.

²⁴ Richard Holbrooke, Get the message out, *The Washington Post*, 28 October 2001, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/13/AR2010121305410.html>

²⁵ This “Enduring Partnership” is oriented to the long term. NATO favours the setting up of a multinational helicopter wing, with Afghanistan as a partner nation. Even if having Kabul contribute to a NATO mission with this capability might be a totally unrealistic prospect today, NATO is trying to plant the seeds of such co-operation.