

Roundtable Forum - AFGHANISTAN - WHAT NEXT?

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"What next for Afghanistan?"

International Affairs Forum posed the following question to eight commentators on Afghanistan: "The report by the Afghanistan Study Group warns the conflict there could become a 'forgotten war' and that Afghanistan is at risk of becoming a 'failed state'. Is this a fair assessment, and what can and should be done to stop this happening?"



Responses

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**It's NATO's War! Or isn't it?**

The assessment that the Afghan conflict might become a 'forgotten war' is a U.S.-centric perspective. Understandably so, given that in the race for the White House the 'other war' – the one in Iraq – preoccupies political and media attention. It is Iraq, not Afghanistan, which will affect American electoral behavior.

The European situation is quite different. Political elites are concerned that NATO might fail in its single most important military operation, a scenario that deeply worries European governments. Afghanistan has become the subject of considerable political debate across Europe. Just consider the German case. Whether to send German combat troops into Southern Afghanistan to help NATO allies fight the Taliban-led insurgency has become a highly controversial issue which will also play a decisive role in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Likewise, the Dutch government is struggling to sustain parliamentary support for its military engagement at the Hindu Kush. Rather than a 'forgotten war', the Afghanistan campaign in European capitals is perceived as 'NATO's war'.

Yet, NATO is not on a path to victory. It is politically and militarily ill-prepared to 'fight' a counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan. NATO allies still do not share the same view on the nature of conflict. While Anglo-Saxon allies perceive the Afghan operation as a 'counter-insurgency' campaign, continental European countries like Germany talk about a 'post-conflict reconstruction' effort to avoid the connotation of its forces being involved in a war-fighting operation. Political rhetoric matters when making strategy: The lack of political consensus on the nature of the conflict will render the formulation of sustainable NATO counter-insurgency strategy close to impossible. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates' recent warning of a 'two-tier' alliance probably comes too late.

On the operational level of the war in Afghanistan, the picture does not look much better. NATO lacks critical military assets to conduct a successful counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan. This includes tactical airlift, specialized infantry and military police. Again, Germany is a good example. What must sound odd from a U.S. perspective is a fact: by providing a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) of about 250 troops the German armed forces will get close to reaching their limits in terms of their ability to provide sustainable combat elements for the Afghan operation. Most of its remaining combat troops are designated to NATO's Reaction Force (NRF), a force of rather limited utility in the Afghan theatre. Most other European allies are also severely short of capabilities adequate to the Afghan 'battlefield'.

Further, while there is agreement within NATO about a 'comprehensive approach' which integrates military and civilian instruments operational reality remains sobering. Neither are most allies willing nor capable to foster such a whole-of-government approach at the national level. At the international level, organizations such as the EU, who take pride for their civilian reconstruction capabilities, have largely failed so far too – as evident in the flawed EU efforts in training Afghan policemen. However, by now it should have become obvious that Afghanistan is not only NATO's war. For the Alliance can only address the military dimension of the counter-insurgency campaign. If the international community wants any reasonable prospect of success other international organization better start filling the gaps regarding the diplomatic and economic aspects.

What should be done? The Western security community has to face some painful truths. First, Afghanistan is a failed state and it will take more than a decade of sustained political, military and economic investments to stabilize and rebuild it. Second, NATO is engaged in a long-term counter-insurgency operation, a challenge

which it has never encountered before and for which it is ill-prepared. Third, by now there is a considerable risk that the 'alliance of democracies' will lose this war at the home front. Against these difficulties, NATO needs to agree on a coherent and sustainable strategy for its Afghan operation; one that its member states can subscribe to and rally behind. Yet, the most important step is to recognize that this is not solely NATO's responsibility.

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