

The Strategic Significance of Afghanistan

A Note of Caution to the NATO Summit

Helge Lurås, Ståle Ulriksen and Vegard Valther Hansen

Summary

The rapid rise of new Asian powers intensifies the recognition of diverging interests and abilities among NATO members. To the US, the geopolitical significance of Europe is declining. Its future challenger is principally China. Russia, for many decades the main rival, could suddenly become a strategic asset worth wooing by the Americans. For Europeans this is a confusing scenario.

Afghanistan has importance to the US beside its potential as a safe haven for anti-Western terrorists. It borders Iran. And although influence in Central Asia might not rival the importance of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, this is still one of the most important access routes for resources and markets throughout Eurasia.

The US and NATO have not excluded a long-term presence in Afghanistan. If all goes according to plan, that 'transition' would still leave a military 'training mission' beyond 2014. In effect that means bases. But withdrawing from a combat role requires the emergence of a new political reality in Afghanistan, and regional acceptance for an extended Western presence. To achieve these will prove extremely difficult.

Even if the US eventually acquiesces to complete military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the disparity in global reach and ambition will inevitably continue to tear the NATO alliance apart. Ahead of the November summit Europe seems determined to reclaim it as a *North Atlantic* Treaty Organization.

Introduction

The struggling allies of NATO – that once-proud symbol of Western unity – face stark choices at the Portugal summit in November. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been bereft of its original rationale but its members have been able to maintain at least some semblance of common purpose. Enlargement into Central and East Europe, the military interventions in the Balkans, and the perceived threat from Muslim terrorists have all served to bolster NATO. With the rapid rise of new challengers to US hegemony, however, the common interests and actions of NATO members can no longer be taken for granted.

The Cold War ensured that Europe was an area of the most intense geopolitical significance. With the rise of emerging powers especially in the eastern part of Eurasia, the US area of interest and concern has begun shifting from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, and from Europe to Central, South and East Asia. Russia, for many decades the main rival, could suddenly become a strategic asset worth wooing by the Americans. In geopolitical terms we might soon realize that 'it is all about China, stupid'.

As for the Europeans, they seem to be slightly bemused spectators to the Pacific game rather than players. Europe is trying to consolidate and cope with the aftershocks of megaprojects like the huge eastward expansion of the EU and the introduction of the Euro. On the other hand, Europe is separated from East Asia by mountains, steppes, oceans and formidable states like Russia, Turkey and Iran. These geographic and political facts shape European interests and the role that European states are likely to play in the new geopolitical realities of the early 21st century.

NATO and the War in Afghanistan

The logic of occupying a land-locked, economically marginal country in response to a terrorist attack from a group of radicals quite foreign to that very country (Afghanistan) is strategically and militarily questionable. Furthermore, Al-Qaida never constituted an existential threat to the US or its Western allies.

Enemies can, of course, prove useful for internal purposes. Moreover, Western leaders could project strength and vigour amidst the general stagnation and political disillusionment. Alliances were made and re-made; and smoke was created for geopolitical manoeuvres in pursuit of strategic advantages like oil. But nine years after 9/11 it makes sense to remain sceptical of the wisdom of the Afghan enterprise to long-term Western interests. The benefits to Afghans and their neighbours are also in serious doubt.

The Bush administration did not show any interest in outright occupation and state-building in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. Donald Rumsfeld wanted a quick and limited engagement in the country. In doing so he bypassed NATO, and the Europeans feared that the Alliance might slide into irrelevance. Intra-Western fractures over Iraq in 2003 deepened those fears. In response, Europe searched for a transatlantic political-military project – which they thought found in Afghanistan.

Thus the Europeans must take their share of responsibility for the expansion of objectives and means towards countrywide military presence and state-building that started with the creation of ISAF in 2001 and gained momentum since 2003. Afghan society – patriarchal and backward, culturally conservative, anti-secular and gender-illiterate – was a honey pot for enlightened progressives and Alliance-conscious Europeans alike. Moreover, the early 2000s were sufficiently close to the optimistic and hegemonic post-Cold War era for the belief in Western righteousness, and confidence in its transformative capabilities, to reign supreme – at least on the elite level. Interventionism was still a respectable ideology in many Western minds.

Whether nation-building in Afghanistan could have succeeded had the inputs been more consistent and wholehearted from the start is something we will never know. But reality has left the US and its increasingly disillusioned NATO companions with the mess of today. The stated objective now is for Afghans to take ‘responsibility’ for their own security within a few years. To achieve this, the NATO alliance has been churning out Afghan armed police and military recruits at a staggering rate. A total of 300,000 security forces are set to be part of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) by the end of 2011. Between 30 and 40% of the recruits disappear from the forces every year.


In order to defeat the Taliban in 2001, the US made allies with the mainly non-Pashtun Northern Alliance as well as with various Pashtun warlords and tribal leaders who were in opposition to, or could be lured away from, the Taliban. These allies became entrenched in the highly lucrative business of supporting and providing services to the foreign military and aid community. The drug business picked up as well. Corruption became rife throughout the Karzai regime.

In 2008/09, Western publics were offered some optimism on the Afghan war from an ostensibly ‘new’ strategy of counterinsurgency (COIN). This was to be a population-centric military mission carried out through surging Western forces and a greater focus on protection of civilians and building local governance and economic development. In parallel, US Special Forces have targeted mid-level insurgent commanders for capture or kill operations. With the arrival of General David H. Petraeus, this rather enemy-centric part of the current population-centric strategy seems to be increasing, leaving much less talk of COIN. At the same time there are now tales of ‘negotiations’ with some Taliban elements. How much truth there is to this is uncertain – according to US Special Representative Richard Holbrooke, ‘less than meets the eye’.

President Barack Obama has re-emphasized the regional dimension as key to solve Afghanistan’s problems, and has stepped up pressure on the Pakistani army to conduct operations against pro-Taliban militants along the Afghan border. But the US and NATO are justified in remaining sceptical as to the sincerity of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. Progress for NATO in Afghanistan could encourage a protracted US military presence there – to which both Pakistan and its strategic partner China would be, at best, ambivalent. Better then, perhaps, to keep the Taliban in business.

Obama has been criticized for sending mixed messages when he announced his Afghan strategy in December 2009. On the one hand he decided to send an additional 30,000 troops. But he also made it clear that withdrawal would begin in July 2011. According to the critics, that would leave too little time for the extra troops to make a decisive impact, and it would encourage the Taliban simply to wait the Americans out.

ISAF has sounded cautious optimism in the weeks leading up to the November NATO summit, but other voices remain sceptical to its claims of progress. The Taliban have been forced back from some areas in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, but they remain with a presence and constitute a threat both to ISAF and the local population. Moreover, insurgent activity has picked up in several provinces in northern Afghanistan. Many believe the Taliban is tactically avoiding battles on ISAF’s terms, and that they have the



capacity and intention to return in full once the draw-down begins to take effect. Local communities seem largely to be sitting on the fence, and the performance of the ANSF is less than persuasive. To counter this, various local militias are being armed and encouraged to participate in local security initiatives and outright battles alongside ISAF and ANSF forces.

The US and its Afghanistan Policy

Upon taking office President Barack Obama claimed publicly that the US objective in Afghanistan was to 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al-Qaeda'. But, given the stakes actually involved, this singular obsession with Al-Qaeda seems strategically confusing. From Obama's Wars by Bob Woodward, it might appear that the US policy debate suffers either from deep dishonesty or pervasive delusions among the principals involved. The public cover of counter-terrorism that the Bush administration used, in part, to legitimize a sustained and worldwide projection of American power now seems to have taken centre stage behind closed-door deliberations.

Estimates put the total number of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan at less than 180. In order to hunt down these ragged would-be terrorists, the US and NATO are keeping 150,000 soldiers in Afghanistan at a cost of over \$100 billion a year? If that is the whole story, then the West is indeed in serious drift.

The perceptions, and realities, of the global distribution of power have changed over the last decade, spurred on by the increasing realization of China's rise and Western decline. Even if Al-Qaeda were the determining and overwhelming reason for the invasion of 2001, the evolving global circumstances have forced new considerations into the fray, or will do so in the near future.

Afghanistan has a border with Iran, the importance of which is obvious given that 'all options' are on the table. But even more, a US military presence in Afghanistan gives the Central Asian states a credible strategic alternative to Russia, China and Iran. The US has a history of abandoning its allies. Potential partners – among them also Russia – would feel more reassured as to the long-term value of this association if the US were also convincingly dependent upon them. And with bases in Afghanistan, the US would be so, for logistical reasons. Heightening the stakes of this 'new' Great Game is, of course, the importance of Central Asia in both the production and transport of fossil fuels. Securing such geopolitical interests through the military engagement in Afghanistan makes a strategic sense which Al-Qaeda, with all due consideration to its disruptive effects on Western societies, must struggle to match.

There is also merit to the view that Afghanistan and Central Asia are somewhat marginal to the strategic competition between the US and China. The seaways through and from the Middle East are of far greater importance than the land routes further north. Moreover, the struggle for control and dominance will be fought more effectively in space and in cyberspace. But even if a longer-term projection of US land (and air) power into Central Asia is considered too ambitious and not worth the cost (and perhaps also blatantly provocative to rising powers and thereby potentially backfiring), the strategic consequences of abandoning this 'front' in the effort to contain China (and others) should at least be recognized by Western policy-makers. China is diversifying its access routes to resources and markets in all directions. The corridor through Central Asia is clearly considered important to the Chinese, and thus should be to its rivals. If the US military leaves Afghanistan, it will find it very hard to create a justification for returning in the future. What China readily accepted in its backyard in 2001 might no longer apply.

It is hard to know what kind of reasoning is really going on in Washington. There are good reasons to stick publicly with the story of Al-Qaeda. After all, it seems better to fight a defensive war for the protection of the homeland rather than an offensive war for resources and strategic dominance. Here we should note that Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently reassured America's wary Afghan allies that 'we are never leaving'. And to those on the ground, who see the huge bases being built, the US indeed seems to be preparing for a lengthy stay.

The Path Ahead in Afghanistan

The US and NATO have still not burned the bridges to a long-term presence in Afghanistan. In fact, the hoped-for trajectory would leave a residual military force in a training and assistance capacity for the Afghan government well beyond 2014, when the projected 'transition' to Afghan security responsibility is set to be achieved. If all goes according to plan, that 'transition' would still leave open the possibility of continued US military bases in Afghanistan from which to project power into Central Asia. What is less clear is whether the US and NATO policy-makers are really aware of these 'strategic' and geopolitical aspects of their current trajectory. Publicly, they claim ignorance, insisting that they will not stay 'one day more than required'.

In order to be able to withdraw from combat roles but still remain in a military capacity, the US and NATO must bank on the emergence of a different and more harmonious political reality in Afghanistan. But those who expect any kind of lasting and formalized political 'deal' between pro-government and pro-Taliban groups, especially on the premise that Western

forces are allowed to stay, should think twice. Politics in Afghanistan is much too fragmented and fluid, among those that have and have not (yet) taken up arms against ISAF. Groups will ebb and flow, and so will conflicts. No Afghan leader speaks for more than small part of the population, and shifting loyalties are common. Unless Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China can all agree to a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan, and thereby use their good offices to suppress, or at least not encourage, any significant local sabotage against this plan, the Western forces are bound to find themselves in hostile human terrain for the duration of their stay. But how likely is such a regional acceptance, given the global shifts in power?

Conclusion

One of NATO's main problems is the lack of clear thinking and honesty about the real stakes in Afghanistan. This lack of top-level candour and clarity as to the stakes and motivations undermines the very purpose

of the objectives now being pursued in the Afghan war.

The upcoming summit might be too soon for NATO to make up its mind as to how to approach the decline of West, and the rise of the rest of the world. The strategic concept should therefore be work in progress. But as it now looks, the message from Europe to the US seems clear: On the global stage you are on your own. European states are not harbouring any credible global ambitions.

Even if the US should eventually acquiesce to complete military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the disparity in global reach and ambition is bound to keep tearing the Alliance apart, with the US shifting its focus more and more to the East. NATO then will, at best, remain what it always was – until the ISAF mission – a *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*.

About the Authors

Helge Lurås specialises in geopolitics and political-military strategy. Lurås has previously worked for the Norwegian Intelligence Service, the Norwegian Armed Forces, the UN and NATO.

Ståle Ulriksen is Head of NUPI's Department of Security and Conflict Management. His research focus is on war, military operations and international military cooperation and integration.

Vegard Valther Hansen is Deputy Head of NUPI's Department of Security and Conflict Management. He specialises in security policy, security assistance (SSR) and military strategy.