

Briefing Memo

Alliance and Peacebuilding: Afghanistan as an “Out-Of-Area” Operation of NATO

YOSHIZAKI Tomonori

Chief, 5th Research Office, Research Department

With the inauguration of President Barack Obama, new developments are expected in the Afghanistan War, which, in the shadow of the Iraq War, has been dubbed “The Forgotten War.” The key to improve security will be a “surge” strategy led by the US. During his presidential campaign, President Obama promised the dispatch of two or three additional brigades to Afghanistan.

For the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which commands the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), this new strategy could become a litmus-test of alliance solidarity. As security in southern Afghanistan deteriorates following the resurgence of the Taliban, frictions emerge. US Secretary of State Robert Gates warned that the future of NATO would be threatened if it became a “two-tiered alliance” of countries which conducted “counterinsurgency operations” and those that did not. The former group may include the US, UK, Netherlands Australia, and Canada; the latter Germany, which places priority on reconstruction efforts in the relatively safe northern area. So far NATO has carried out post-war reconstruction and stabilization operations in the former Yugoslavia. The political conditions in Afghanistan, however, are completely different; ISAF must win the “hearts and minds” of the population while conducting counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. Herein lies NATO’s dilemma.

This article analyzes the Afghanistan issue from the standpoint of NATO’s “out-of-area” operation. The main points for discussion are as follows: First, why did NATO, which had formerly been engaged in crisis management only in Europe, decide to intervene in Afghanistan? Second, how did NATO’s direct involvement influence operations led by ISAF? Finally, what are the future challenges for ISAF, which pursues simultaneously both “hard” counterinsurgency operations and “soft” reconstruction assistance?

Background of NATO Involvement in Afghanistan

NATO has been commanding ISAF since the summer of 2008. It should be emphasized, however, that immediately after 9/11, NATO had only a “light footprint” in Afghanistan. In fact Britain was the only member country that joined the US in its military intervention under

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Although it invoked its collective self-defense clause on September 12, direct support to the US was mainly limited to operation of AWACS (airborne warning and control system) and maritime surveillance in the eastern Mediterranean. The limited nature of NATO's involvement was a result of American preference for the "coalition of the willing" formula, which ensured that the OEF, which was based on the US right of self-defense, would not be restricted by other alliance members.

What changed this limited involvement was the Iraq War. In the process of preparations for the Iraq War, the so-called "Bush doctrine" of pre-emption was published in *National Security Strategy of the United States* in September 2002. It described WMDs and international terrorism as "new threats." NATO then transformed its policy in order to participate in the fight against terrorism in the global arena, to dovetail with this US stance. Although a historic decision had already been made at the North Atlantic Council in Reykjavik in May 2002, it did not get media attention at the time. In its final communiqué, NATO hammered out a new policy: "To carry out the full range of its missions, NATO must be able to field forces that can move quickly to wherever they are needed, sustain operations over distance and time, and achieve their objectives." In other words its crisis response operations would no longer be subject to any geographical limitations, if the situation require it. This made it possible for NATO to extend its frontline eastward to Afghanistan. In 2003, following the US attack against Saddam Hussein and Bush's declaration of "victory," US-led multinational forces assumed responsibilities of the Iraq stabilization operation. In August of that year NATO assumed command of ISAF operations in Afghanistan. This implied that NATO would be involved in Afghanistan, and not in Iraq.

Expansion of ISAF Operations by NATO

NATO's involvement in Afghanistan changed ISAF operations in three ways. First, the scope of ISAF operations expanded greatly. In its initial stage, ISAF's mission was limited to providing security in and around Kabul, including Bagram Air Base. After NATO arrived, ISAF extended its operation in a counter-clockwise fashion to the areas north, west, south and east. It eventually took charge of stabilization operations in all parts of the country.

The second change was an increase in ISAF force strengths. In early 2002 its size was only 5,500. After repeated requests from field commanders, however, this number ballooned to about 51,350 by the end of 2008. The US has dispatched the largest number of troops (19,950), accounting for about 40% of all ISAF personnel, followed, in order, by the UK (8,745), Germany (3,600), France (2,785), Italy (2,350), the Netherlands (1,770), and Poland (1,130). Fifteen non-NATO countries have dispatched personnel to the ISAF. Among them, Australia (1,090 troops), which is operating in southern and eastern areas where security conditions are deteriorating, has been

praised for contributing more than the average NATO member state.

The third was the way that NATO involvement changed the nature of ISAF operations. Originally, the ISAF was mainly in charge of post-conflict reconstruction, while the counterinsurgency operations were handled by US-led coalition forces. However, enhanced coordination and cooperation between ISAF and OEF became inevitable due to the decaying security conditions in Afghanistan. Since 2006, ISAF also has been conducting counterinsurgency operations and assuming wider responsibilities in the south. Peacebuilding being one of its primary missions in Afghanistan, NATO has become more active in pursuing a comprehensive approach along with the UN, the European Union (EU) and other international organizations, in order to win “hearts and minds” of the population.

Challenges to NATO’s Afghanistan Policy

Stabilization efforts in Afghanistan must strike a delicate balance between offensive operations such as the “surge” strategy and peacebuilding activities. These two aspects need to be considered more closely.

First, a surge strategy in Afghanistan has been considered as a viable option in the past and was partly implemented well before Obama’s calls for the dispatch of more troops. General David D. McKiernan, Commander of ISAF and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, had been requesting 15,000 to 20,000 additional troops to fill the gap. As a “temporary measure” 3,200 Marines were dispatched in the spring of 2008, and one additional US Army brigade is planned to be reinforced at the beginning of 2009. Moreover, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, announced that 20,000 to 30,000 additional troops will be deployed by the summer of 2009. NATO will need to take clear steps to meet the demands of this new strategy during the 60th anniversary of the alliance. Its focus may be on how to deal with “national caveats” over particular types of activity, especially those of European troop-contributing countries.

Additionally, assisting security sector reform, including police and defense reform, will be the key to NATO’s role in peacebuilding in Afghanistan. It must be admitted, however, that the less secure the country is, the more difficult it is to reform its security sector. This is because insurgents may target the police and the military in order to disrupt the nation-building efforts by the government. The description above fits Afghanistan, where the Taliban's resurgence is a reality. For example, there were 1,200 police casualties in Afghanistan in 2007, and a similar number is expected for 2008.

Although the initiative of the local government is crucial for success in security sector reform, it

may be difficult to transfer authority over security to the host country during the early stages of reconstruction. The personnel ceiling for the Afghan National Army (ANA) of up to 70,000 was confirmed in the Afghan Compact of 2006, but Kabul has requested that this be doubled. The cost for defense buildup is expected to be about US\$2-2.5 billion, or three times annual government revenue. There are also certain limits to the training ANA by the US, UK, Canada and other foreign militaries. Carrying out education and training in a foreign language in Afghanistan, where the literacy rate is only some 20%, can easily give the impression that only elite Afghans are being promoted. To reduce the opposition to international troops, assistance from the UAE, a non-Western Muslim country, is meaningful – although their presence in the field is relatively small.

Finally, ISAF's dual strategy of reconstruction and counterinsurgency is the best option available, but may have its own limitations. Take, for example, the UK-led convoy operation Op Oqab Tsuka in the summer of 2008. Some 4,000 ISAF and 1,000 Afghan National Army personnel delivered 51 megawatts turbines to Kajaki dam. This hydrogen power plant is planned to produce electricity for an extra 1.9 million residents. It should be noted that the convoy killed an estimated 200 insurgents during the operation. The battle between ISAF and the Taliban to win the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people will not end anytime soon.

In conclusion, there is no silver bullet when it comes to security in Afghanistan. Can ISAF win people's hearts and minds through a dual strategy that combines the use of force on the one hand and peacebuilding on the other? This is the dilemma facing NATO.

The purpose of this column is to respond to readers' interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS. A "briefing" provides, among other things, background information. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

Please contact us regarding any questions, comments or requests you may have. Please note that no part of this document may be reproduced in any form without the prior consent of NIDS.

Planning and Coordination Office, The National Institute for Defense Studies

Telephone: 03-3713-5912

Fax: 03-3713-6149

E-mail: nidsnews@inds.go.jp

Website: <http://www.nids.go.jp>