The Afghan Reset

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Afghanistan is rarely out of the headlines — and seemingly for the wrong reasons. At the beginning of March, six UK military personnel were killed by a Taliban attack in what was the single worse loss of life for UK ground forces since the launch of the NATO–led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. This brought the number of UK dead to over 400 and the total number of ISAF fatalities to nearly 3,000. The tally among Afghans is even worse. The United Nations Mission to Afghanistan reported in February that 3,000 civilian deaths had occurred in 2011 alone. While the large majority was due to Taliban and other anti–government activity, night–search operations plus aerial and drone bombings, carried out by ISAF and its Afghan allies, still accounted for an estimated four hundred killed. The recent shootings of 16 innocent Afghans by an apparently deranged US soldier has only added to a perception, gaining ground even within the Afghan government, that the foreign military presence has outstayed its welcome.

For all this, NATO's sheer force of numbers has had some positive effect. Approximately 130,000 ISAF personnel are stationed in support of the government in Kabul following a surge of US forces in 2009–10. Over the last twelve months, these forces have contributed to a marked decline in anti–government attacks and a significant extension of areas under government control. Yet as the London–based Royal United Services Institute recently noted, the insurgency remains strong in the east of the country (its traditional Pashtun heartland) and has expanded into the north and west. The Taliban and its associates are not poised to take power across the country and the Karzai government remains, at least for now, secure in the capital. But this is at best a military stalemate. NATO has long since stopped talking about the possibility of a victory in Afghanistan; it intends to withdraw from combat by the end of 2014 with no foreknowledge of a decisive defeat of its adversary.

The 2014 deadline sits heavily in any discussion of Afghanistan. Details of the transition will become clearer at the Alliance's Chicago summit in May, but the US and France have already made known they will be seeking a significant reduction of their forces well before 2014 (Canada and the Netherlands, meanwhile, have already completed a retreat from counter–insurgency operations). The drawdown of personnel is based on a huge gamble: that the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) will soon be ready to take on a task which an alliance of the world's most powerful militaries is currently struggling to fulfil. Should that gamble fail, Afghanistan is likely to lurch into wholesale civil war. This may not see the Taliban return to power but it would certainly lead to a disintegration of the country — a collapse of the structures of governance and security, the ascendancy of warlordism and catastrophic socio–economic collapse.

It makes no sense to stave off that possibility by prolonging the NATO counter–insurgency operation. After a decade–long involvement it is no longer tenable to claim that more troops or better tactics will submit the Taliban to the will of the Alliance. But by announcing the determination to cease frontline duties, the US and its allies have, in effect, removed the main incentive for the Taliban and other anti–government elements to enter into serious peace talks. The nature of NATO's ongoing role, moreover, needs greater clarity. NATO and the Karzai regime have signed up to an Enduring Partnership (the UK and Afghanistan signed their own bilateral equivalent in January), which pledges the Alliance to help improve the 'capacity and capability' of the Afghan authorities in countering 'threats to the security, stability and integrity' of the country. This is a noble objective — even a moral one given the entanglement of the allies in Afghan affairs for so long. The UK has committed to oversee an officer training programme, but it is the American role that will prove decisive. Here the signs are not encouraging. As a report of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. has made clear, the funding envelope for training the ANSF will be cut significantly between 2012 and 2014. And decisions have still not been taken on levels of support beyond 2014.

The UK, the US, and others have invested lives, money, and political capital in Afghanistan. This ought not to be thrown away. Counter–insurgency may be running its course, but the Allies need to signal in deeds, as well as words, their ongoing determination to assist in the development of a stable Afghanistan. In Chicago, NATO is due to make good on its statements of intent. That will entail concrete and specific pledges of a long–term NATO mentoring and training role for Afghan forces. These should be credible and ambitious enough to ensure the ANSF can protect the Afghan population well beyond 2014.

After Chicago, the next milestone is the Tokyo Development Conference in July. Here, the international community will pledge financial support for Afghanistan for a decade ahead. While assistance to the security sector is clearly crucial, the development needs of the country (in agriculture, infrastructure, and education) must not be neglected. Over the last ten years, the cost to NATO of its involvement in Afghanistan has been approximately ten times the size of total official development assistance disbursed to the country. That Afghanistan has still ranked among the world's largest recipients of civilian aid simply gives point to the gargantuan size of the military spend. As withdrawal occurs, it is surely time for governments in Europe and America to rebalance these priorities.

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On Thursday 22 March, Alistair Burt MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO Minister with responsibility for Afghanistan) will visit the University of Birmingham to discuss the UK's role in Afghanistan. His talk "UK engagement in Afghanistan" will be followed by open questions from the audience.

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