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U.S.-European Cooperation in Afghanistan

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General McCrystal's report to NATO governments offers a remarkably candid critique on allied efforts in Afghanistan to date. Many of the deficiencies identified result from the offhanded manner in which the United States and its allies backed into their current commitments. Despite a decade of hard won experience in the Balkans, none of the salient lessons from the NATO missions in Bosnia and Kosovo were originally applied in Afghanistan. Those guidelines included the importance of applying decisive force from the beginning, the need to quickly establish a secure environment and ensure public safety, and the importance of engaging neighboring states, particularly those inclined to be unhelpful. For the first several years after the fall of the Taliban, the U.S. and the rest of the international community comprehensively ignored all these lessons.

The Bush administration eventually reversed all of its early policies in Afghanistan, but this change of heart came too late to fundamentally alter the inadequate structures for international engagement there. By the time the United States was prepared to commit to a large-scale and truly multinational military endeavor, many allies had become comfortable with the divided command arrangements and unequal division of labor that had grown up. For the first several years after 9/11, it had been Washington that sought to limit NATO's responsibilities. Faced with a rising insurgency, brought on in part by its own early passivity, the U.S. gradually reversed this stance, only to find many allies seeking to limit their own and thus the Alliance's commitment. By the time that the U.S. was ready to fully commit to a NATO operation, many other allies were no longer ready to envisage such an expansion in the Alliance's role. Thus allied forces in Afghanistan continue to operate under two distinct command chains, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which come together under a single commander in theatre, only to diverge again towards different higher headquarters.

In addition to divided command, there is also an invidious division of responsibilities. Some allied governments are prepared to have their soldiers fight and die to secure contested areas of Afghanistan, others are not. The latter allies sometimes charge that the United States had engaged a 'bait and switch' maneuver, in which countries were recruited to do peacekeeping and then once committed to Afghanistan were asked to engage in counterinsurgency, or worse yet, counter-terrorism. To the extent that this is true, it was a deception in which allied governments themselves participated. European publics might legitimately claim to have been unaware that their troops

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would be going into a low-intensity conflict, not classic peacekeeping, but their governments had no such excuse as conditions in Afghanistan were as evident to them as anyone in Washington.

Nation Building on the Cheap

The structures for non-military assistance to Afghanistan have also been shaped by Washington's early refusal to take a leading role in the country's reconstruction. At the first international donor conference for post-Taliban Afghanistan in January of 2002, the international community pledged $5.6 billion in aid, of which only $360 million was to come from the United States. Even Iran made a larger pledge, as did the European Commission.

Secretary Rumsfeld subsequently defended what became known as the 'low profile, small footprint' approach to post-conflict reconstruction by arguing in speeches and op-ed articles that by flooding Bosnia and Kosovo with economic assistance and military peacekeepers, the U.S. and its allies had turned those societies into permanent wards of the international community. The Bush administration was going to avoid such outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq by limiting its commitment of soldiers and money, and thus encourage these societies to become self-sufficient more quickly.

Washington was thus not interested in heading an international reconstruction effort for Afghanistan, nor would the initial size of its aid program have justified such a role. The UN also sought to limit its responsibilities in this regard, preferring to focus principally on Afghanistan's political evolution, in particular the implementation of the Bonn Agreement and the establishment of democratic institutions, which it did very successfully.

Responsibility for supporting Afghanistan's development in other areas was therefore divvied up among a variety of actors. The U.S. took the lead in rebuilding an Afghan national army, seeking thereby to divert President Hamid Karzai from his efforts to promote an expansion of ISAF's activities beyond Kabul. But Washington had no plans (or funding) to demobilize the warlord-led militias, create a new police force, reform the penal and judicial systems, or stem narcotics production. So responsibility for rebuilding the rest of the security sector fell to others. Japan took the lead in supporting the disarmament and demobilization of warlord armies, Germany took responsibility for the police, Italy for the courts and the U.K. for counter-narcotics.

Economic development was overseen by an even more unwieldy leadership group made up of the World Bank, the EU, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. To even cite the names of the membership of this steering committee is to acknowledge that no one was in charge.

The lead nation system has been modified over the years. As American assistance levels grew, the United States became the effective leader across the entire security sector, largely displacing Germany, Italy and the U.K. in their respective areas. The UN assumed a somewhat more central role in coordinating economic assistance. NATO became a major player, both in the military

sphere, and also developmental, via the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) set up under its auspices. But half of these two dozen teams are run by the U.S., completely outside the alliance framework, while NATO, a purely military organization, has developed no mechanism for directing, supporting, standardizing or even coordinating the activities of the dozen national teams under its nominal authority.

An Invidious Division of Labor

In the early years of the current decade, European assistance to Afghanistan exceeded that of the United States, and European troop numbers were near equivalent. During this period, both American and European efforts were, however, grossly inadequate to the task. Both the U.S. and Europe had committed much more money and manpower to stabilizing and rebuilding Bosnia and Kosovo than they did to an Afghanistan emerging from thirty years of full-scale civil war. Thus Bosnia received sixteen times more economic assistance, on a per capita basis, than did Afghanistan in the immediate postwar years. The NATO forces in Bosnia and Kosovo were each several times bigger than the allied commitment to Afghanistan during those years. Indeed the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR) in 1996 and Kosovo Force (KFOR) in 1999 were not only much larger in real terms, but were each some fifty times larger than ISAF and OEF combined in 2002 when compared on a per capita basis.

The EU as an entity has never embraced Afghanistan in the fashion it did the Balkans, or even some parts of Africa. In the Balkans the EU competed with NATO and the U.S. for influence, quickly gaining the dominant voice on matters of economic and social reform and eventually moving into the security sector as well. Both the European Commission and the European Council are prominently represented in Kabul, the one overseeing a substantial aid program and the other providing several hundred police trainers and advisers. Most European aid is being provided nationally, however, and member governments have been slow to commit personnel to the EU police mission, which is generally conceded by Europeans, as well as the Americans, to have been a disappointment.

As the American commitment to Afghanistan has grown, the distribution of burdens has become increasingly invidious. In the Balkans, European governments provided more than three quarters of the military manpower and economic assistance. In Afghanistan Europe provides less than one quarter. Afghanistan is, of course, a long way from Europe, but it is even further away from the United States. The intervention was precipitated by an attack on America, but Europe decided, unprompted, to declare this an attack on Europe as well. The Bush administration failed to capitalize on this initial commitment and Europeans now feel that they have less at stake here than does the U.S.

Renewed Pressures for Better Burden Sharing

Obama has not levied any serious demands upon European governments either for more effort or greater unity in Afghanistan. He has already increased American force levels by about a third, without urging any commensurate increase in allied troop strength. Washington made only limited efforts to sort out the tangled military command chain and to strengthen the structures overseeing non-military assistance. Rather the U.S. has chosen to work around these obstacles, focusing largely on reordering its own strategy and bolstering its own resources. The new American administration seems to have concluded that any large increase in allied contributions is unlikely, and that reform of the institutional arrangements for integrating American and allied efforts is therefore unnecessary.

Americanizing the war in this fashion eases pressures on European governments to do more, and reduces the burden on Washington to coordinate its strategy with others. The Obama administration faces constraints, however, in how far it can go in this direction imposed by domestic resistance, particularly in its own party, to this expanded American role. If Obama accedes to McCrystal's request for large troop reinforcement, the administration will almost certainly renew efforts to secure a larger allied commitment as well.

Over the longer term, it is also likely that Europe could come under new American pressures even if the situation in Afghanistan improves. To the extent that counterinsurgency gives way to peacekeeping operations, Washington is likely to want these duties to be shared more equitably by allies, particularly those that have largely shirked the hard fighting.

Unifying Command and Control

One means would be to consolidate NATO and American command arrangements. At present the American and allied military efforts in Afghanistan are divided between OEF and the ISAF. These two forces operate in generally distinct geographic areas, but some assets are necessarily employed in support of both, and some intermingling cannot be avoided. Divided command of this sort inevitably produces unnecessary friction, and is a standing invitation to misunderstanding, failure to render prompt assistance, and at the worst, fratricide.

There are American and allied troops in both command chains. Within Afghanistan itself the command chain of these two forces converge under General Stanley McChrystal, but then diverge again. McChrystal reports to two superiors, both American Generals, one in Tampa, Florida and one in Mons, Belgium. General Petreaus, in Tampa, is responsible for OEF, as well as for military operations throughout the surrounding region, including Pakistan. Admiral Stavrides is, at least nominally, in charge of ISAF, which included most but not all American troops in Afghanistan.

Of course one can continue to muddle through with this ludicrously complex and confusing arrangement, but the results are bound to be sub-optimal. There are two steps that could help. One would be to merge ISAF and OEF, the second would be to create a new major NATO command for Afghanistan, co-located with the American Central Command, under General Petraeus in Tampa, thus giving that officer undivided authority for Afghanistan. Either step could be done independently of the other, but only doing both would fully align NATO and American command arrangements.

A common European reaction to this proposal is a concern that it would diminish NATO and thus European oversight of the war and bolster American control. The reverse is true, however. Under current arrangements the top commander in Afghanistan and both of his superiors are American. But the supreme NATO command has no responsibility for the bulk of Western troops in Afghanistan, whereas the American theater commander, General Petraeus, does not report to the North Atlantic Council and has no responsibilities towards the alliance. Creating a major NATO headquarters parallel to CENTCOM would thus give European militaries and governments a great deal more insight into and potential influence over the entire Afghan effort.

Integrating Military and Civilian Efforts

Successful counterinsurgency requires the intense integration of civilian and military expertise. This is very difficult, particularly when done on a multilateral basis. The civil effort in Afghanistan is particularly fragmented due to the failure, going back to late 2001, to appoint any person or organization in charge of coordinating these activities.

Richard Holbrooke's appointment has put a single official in charge of American non-military activities in Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan. Several European governments have recently moved to create similar positions. It would be helpful if Europe could be encouraged to appoint a single individual of comparable stature, representing the EU to coordinate their national efforts and work with Holbrooke on a unified Western approach to stabilization and reconstruction in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Provincial reconstruction efforts also would profit from better coordination. There are currently 26 PRTs in Afghanistan, of which the majority is run not by the U.S., but by 13 other allied governments. There is no central structure overseeing these disparate efforts, setting common standards, establishing development priorities and otherwise supporting these teams. The U.S. and the other governments fielding PRTs should consider establishing a common administrative office in Kabul which would be responsible for developing a common doctrine, working with NATO, the UN, the World Bank, the Afghan government and other donors to set common development goals and channeling additional resources to these provincial teams. This office might be organized and staffed through NATO. This would take NATO a bit beyond its hitherto exclusively military area of competence, which some allies have been reluctant to do, preferring to bolster the EU's

capabilities for the projection of "soft power'. Alternatively the EU might partner with the U.S. to create such an office. This, along with the nomination of a Holbrooke-type equivalent, would require a decision by European governments to collectively assign a priority to Afghanistan, and to an EU role in Afghanistan from which they have heretofore shied away.

Conclusion

Obviously, from an American perspective, the contribution that Europe could make would be to match American efforts in Afghanistan across the board. No one in Washington or Europe thinks this is remotely likely. The second best option is to at least strengthen the machinery that ties American and European efforts together. Unifying American and NATO command arrangements, appointing a prestigious European envoy for the region with real control over EU assets, and establish a joint U.S.-EU mechanism to backstop the PRTs would go far in remedying current deficiencies.