

Meeting with NATO's Deputy Supreme Commander

On 19 May 2008 the Netherlands Atlantic Association organised a seminar on 'NATO after the Bucharest Summit'. The speaker on this occasion was General Sir John McColl, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) of NATO. The meeting was chaired by Dr Bram Boxhoorn, Director of the Atlantic Association, who recalled McColl's experiences as a former commander of ISAF and deputy commander of the Multi National Force Iraq. In his current function as DSACEUR he is, among other things, responsible for the military coordination between NATO and the European Union.

ISAF in Afghanistan

General McColl began his speech by expressing his respect for the efforts of the Dutch troops in Uruzgan, and for the sacrifices they have made. Yet public support is wavering, in Holland as well as in other European countries. Therefore it is important that both the government and the public are aware of what is at stake, namely our own security. In the post 9/11 world, external and internal security are interdependent. The chance of a terrorist attack in our own country is reduced by making countries like Afghanistan safe and stable. And that is exactly what NATO is doing right now, according to McColl. Despite the negative covering in the media, progress is being made. With a broad range of statistics he proved that progress had been "incredible" when compared to the Afghanistan of 2001/2002, when military operations began. Since that time, the economy has shown double digit growth percentages; thousands of schools have been built; and a civil government has been formed where there was none whatsoever.

However, two main problems still exist. One is the violence of the Taliban, and the other is the inability of the government in providing public goods, including safety. The solution for the first problem primarily has to come from the Afghan National Army (ANA) and ISAF, and its strategy is that of a 'growing ink stain'. District after district is being "purged" of Taliban and made safe for rebuilding society. By now, 91 percent of the violence occurs in only 6 percent of the Afghan provinces. The second problem is that of the weak government. Especially corruption puts great stress on society. Police forces are very often connected with the poppy industry, which remains a source of both corruption and terrorist funding.

On the long term, ISAF's role is that of assisting the Afghan people in rebuilding their own country. Therefore, McColl stressed, it is necessary to make our commitment and

dedication clear, both to our enemies and to our friends. National caveats for example, with which McColl has to deal regularly in his function as DSACEUR, are undermining this message of commitment.



The NATO-EU Relationship

In the second part of his speech, General McColl focused on the relationship between NATO and the EU. Since most members of the EU are part of NATO and vice versa, closer cooperation benefits all. McColl mentioned the seamless transition of the operation in Bosnia from SFOR to EUFOR, which is really a "success story" of the 'Berlin plus' agreement. By using the NATO command structure, EUFOR has been able to downsize its number of troops, and still remain present with a flexible and effective force. With Bosnia in mind, the gains of further cooperation are obvious. The EU can profit from the military hardware of NATO, while NATO can profit from the EU's diplomatic and economic power. Yet cooperation is not only effective, it is also necessary. Both organisations are threatened by the same danger, namely global terrorism. To combine efforts in the face of this "evil" is nothing more than logical. As an illustration of this, McColl quoted the famous words of Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

After his speech, McColl answered some questions from the audience, although he warned that as a military he could not venture too deep into politically charged questions. As a result, most attention was given to current operations in Afghanistan. On the question why European governments fail in communicating the significance of the ISAF mission to their own people, he answered that there is too much focus on the short term. Only by looking at Afghanistan as the failed state it was back in 2001, one can appreciate the progress that has been made. And only by looking at the long term can we see the significance of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. That is the strategic goal of NATO, and not to confront problems possibly arising from the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan, as a member of the audience suggested. When answering a question about the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) in Afghanistan, McColl remarked that different PRT's have different approaches towards their mission, and this has caused confusion with the Afghan people. Therefore, in order to make them more efficient and to be able to better respond to the Afghan expectations, it is necessary that approaches of PRT's are much more standardised. This will also make it easier to expand the role of the ANA in cooperating with PRTs.

As a closing remark, McColl urged for a better equipped, better funded and better (politically) supported NATO, in order to deal with future threats.

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