

Afghanistan

The Patience Game

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What exactly is the international community doing in Afghanistan?
The answer to that question depends on whom you ask.

President Barack Obama has said that the U.S. goal in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) is to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including the Taliban movement. The Dutch government also has a 3 D approach, although there, the Ds stand for something completely different: Defence, Diplomacy and Development, being the core issues of the Dutch counterinsurgency activities in Afghanistan.

To the average Taliban member, the international community is a bunch of infidel crusaders who should be chased out of the country as soon as possible; a corrupt Afghan politician or civil servant may see it as an inexhaustible source of additional – albeit illegal – income. The answers of average rural dwellers in Afghanistan (i.e. the vast majority of the population) will depend on where they live. In quiet areas, they may benefit of international development projects, be those government- or privately sponsored. In the volatile eastern and southern provinces, the violence may lead the local population to conclude that the international community is to blame for the civilian casualties, even though, according to NATO figures, some 80 per cent of those are caused by the Taliban or other insurgent groups.

At the time of writing, it was not decided yet whether the United States would send additional troops to Afghanistan under the flag of ISAF, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Earlier this year, the U.S. already sent sizeable reinforcements to Southern Afghanistan (two brigades and support troops, totalling some 17,000

military personnel). There was a debate within the Administration whether or not additional reinforcements were really necessary, after the Commander of ISAF, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, had called for 40,000 extra troops (the current total strength of ISAF stands at some 71,000 military personnel from 43 nations, the majority of those forces – 36,000 – concentrated in the South).

Likewise, the Dutch government had not yet made up its mind whether or not to extend its military presence in one of the key provinces of Southern Afghanistan: Uruzgan. It had decided, however, to give up its role as ISAF’s lead nation in the province by 1 August 2010 and, as a consequence, its slot in the rotating command of Regional Command South (RC(S)) of ISAF. That particular decision must have come as a disappointment to NATO, and as of mid-November, no other member state of the Alliance has volunteered to take over the Dutch role. This may well imply the United States seeing itself compelled to take over the Dutch leadership in the province in the absence of alternatives. Interestingly enough, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation has said it will stay in Uruzgan province after 2010. It, not the Dutch military, runs the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) – the core unit in ISAF’s operational concept. The question now is whether the government of the Netherlands will deem it necessary to protect its PRT in Uruzgan with Dutch troops, or that it will rely on other allies, such as the U.S. or Australia (which has a sizable troop contingent in Uruzgan).



After this brief introduction, let's take a closer look at some crucial issues. For the sake of clarity, I shall not use any 'D words'. Instead, I have chosen three 'C words': Capabilities, Confidence, and the Clock. Capabilities, as in troop numbers and civilian assets; Confidence, as in the trust Afghans and the public in troop-contributing countries bestow upon the Afghanistan mission; and the Clock that ticks away, leading to impatience as to the timely realisation of the goals that have been set. These issues are – of course – interrelated, as will become clear later on.

Last October, I visited Afghanistan for the 4th time since 2006. I spoke with Dutch Major General Mart de Kruif, at the time rounding up his one-year command over the 40,000-odd ISAF troops in Southern Afghanistan. I also visited Uruzgan province and talked with Australian, Dutch, and U.S. military personnel. I attended two *shuras*, the traditional meetings in which tribal leaders and village elders discuss matters. I visited two areas close to the provincial capital Tarin Kowt where efforts were underway (or were in their final stages) to deny access to the Taliban. In November, I attended a detailed media briefing by General Egon Ramms, the German Commander of NATO's Joint Force Command Brunssum, which oversees ISAF operations and who as such is the senior of ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal.

Capabilities: the U.S. and NATO...

November saw an extraordinary difference of opinion between two senior U.S. officials. After General McChrystal voiced his desire for 40,000 additional troops, the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, General (ret.) Karl Eikenberry, was reported to have stated that dispatching additional U.S. troops

was not warranted unless the dysfunctional central government of President Hamid Karzai were to get its act together in terms of taking good governance seriously and tackling the widespread corruption. This was – of course – a political signal, rather than the outcome of a military analysis. President Karzai, who back in 2001 was spirited to power with the active support of the CIA and U.S. Special Forces (SF), as described in detail by Dutch author Bette Dam in her book *Expedition Uruzgan – The Road of Hamid Karzai to the Palace*, appears to have become a burden rather than an asset in the attempts to stabilise Afghanistan.

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"If they can survive until tomorrow by helping me, they'll help me," an ISAF officer says. French ISAF troops in Nijrab valley, Kapisa province, Afghanistan (Photo: *Le Parisien*, NATO/Ph. de Poulpiquet)



At his headquarters at the sprawling Kandahar Airfield Base, General Mart de Kruif said that in the south, the problem was not so much the mere number of troops but the additional capabilities needed to make any major operation a success. He mentioned in particular civilian capabilities, both Afghan and international. It is one thing to attack a Taliban-held territory and chase them out, but holding on to that area and establishing proper local governance and effective policing, and making it possible for national and international aid organisations to do their work is an entirely different matter. Yes, additional troops would be welcome in order to be able to enter into areas where the Taliban or others were still in control – and stay there.

'Population-centric warfare', as the current counterinsurgency strategy of NATO in Afghanistan may be defined, demands a 24/7 presence of forces in order to protect the local population, but it also demands civil servants that can read and write, policemen that are not corrupt or embroiled in local disputes, trained units of the Afghan National Army, etcetera. It is interesting to note, by the way, that without giving any widespread publicity to the fact NATO has indeed changed its mode of operating, in particular in Southern Afghanistan. When ISAF deployed there in the summer of 2006, it launched a few large-scale offensives which, in hindsight, were to some extent useless. For instance, Operation Medusa in 2006 saw a massive deployment of men and firepower against the Taliban in an area west of Kandahar City. It was successful – for a while. The ISAF troops were withdrawn after the

completion of the operation and the inevitable happened: the Taliban returned and regained control. Similarly, Operation Achilles (Helmand province, 2007) was only a short-term success.

Was NATO wrong in the beginning? One might argue it was. Counterinsurgency has traditionally not been something studied (nor practised) in the Alliance to any serious extent. But NATO seems to be a fast learner, adapting to new circumstance with new strategic and tactical guidelines. Is it learning fast enough and are the guidelines effective? Only time will tell. General Egon Ramms said: "ISAF cannot be defeated militarily." But he also made it clear that by using military means alone, it cannot win either.

Additional ISAF troops do make a difference. Thanks to the relatively massive influx of U.S. Marines and a Stryker Brigade, General de Kruif was able to launch key operations last summer in Helmand and Kandahar provinces respectively. Still, in two of the six central and southern provinces covered by RC(S), there is no permanent ISAF presence: Nimruz in the west (bordering Iran) and Daikundi (north of Uruzgan).

To illustrate the troop size issue, let's take a closer look at Uruzgan province. It comprises six districts. In only three of those, there is a permanent presence of the Dutch-led ISAF troops and more or less functioning local governance. Within those three districts, ISAF has

[Major General Mart de Kruif, Commander of Regional Command South, made it clear that ISAF troops only move into an area if they know they can provide 24/7 security to the population \(Photo: personal collection H. de Vreij\)](#)

Opinion

established 'ink spots', jargon for areas which are under the control of ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). No total control, as the Taliban and other insurgents have managed to retain some influence even in areas just the proverbial stone's throw away from the provincial capital Tarin Kowt, but enough control to declare the 'ink spots' parts of the somewhat grandiosely titled 'Afghan Development Zone'.

The remaining three districts are less densely-populated and could to a certain extent be compared to the 'Wild West'. In two of them (Charchino and Shahidi Hassas) there are small U.S. Special Forces units linked to similarly small units of the Afghan National Army. One talks of dozens, not hundreds of military personnel per district. Sometimes, Special Forces of other nations, including the Netherlands, infiltrate in enemy-held territory. But beyond the direct sphere of influence of these SF firebases, the Taliban have to a large degree freedom of movement. In the third district, Gizab, matters are even worse. Here, there are no foreign or Afghan troops. There are also no representatives of the central government. The simple conclusion is that NATO in general, and the Netherlands in particular, dispatched too few troops to the province to bring it under control in its entirety. The Dutch Battle Group is 600-men strong, which in practice means that at any given moment, no more than 200 soldiers can operate 'outside the wire' on average at any given moment. That is not much, to put it mildly.

But numbers alone do not tell the complete story. The ISAF Rules of Engagement (ROEs), some argue, stand in the way of a robust approach. While the details of these ROEs are secret, enough has been published to deduct that 'Opposing Militant Forces' – one of the umbrella descriptions of the Taliban and other insurgent groups – can be attacked in self-defence, in other words when ISAF troops come under attack. A more complex precondition is called 'hostile intent'. This means that a tactical commander must be absolutely certain that a person, or group of persons, intend to attack or otherwise use violence. But as in any counterinsurgency environment, making a clear distinction between the local population and armed 'spoilers' is not easy. Or as one Dutch Marine told me in Uruzgan: "Your average militant may be a farmer in the morning, the village elder in the afternoon, and a fighter after dark." In addition, ISAF is under strict orders to prevent civilian casualties as killing innocent civilians works counterproductive and drives the local population into the arms of the opponent. The Taliban appear to be well-informed about this guideline, as they have been seen disguised as women wearing a *burka*, or surrounding themselves with women and children when gathering for action.

... and the Afghan National Security Forces

Helping to build an effective Afghan National Army (ANA) and, to a lesser extent, the National Police (ANP) has been a key issue in ISAF's

strategy. In fact, it has been called "the ultimate exit strategy." If and when the ANA and ANP would be able to stand on their own feet and provide adequate protection to the population, ISAF could leave Afghanistan. But it may take many years before that point is reached. And comparable to NATO's early strategy in tackling the insurgency, there has been a notable shift in its approach towards training the ANA.

First, there was the concept of Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs), in which a handful of experienced ISAF military personnel would be 'attached' to an Afghan unit and operate under the motto "train as you fight." The U.S. ran a similar training effort, called 'Embedded Training Teams' (ETT), part of the US-led 'Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan' (CSTC-A) which, in turn, was part of the U.S.-led counterterrorism operation Enduring Freedom. But in the autumn of 2009, NATO launched a full-fledged 'NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan', modelled after its earlier training project in Iraq. In addition, ISAF Commander General McChrystal said that the OMLT/ETT concept should be widened to the extent that ISAF units would be permanently 'partnered' with units of the ANA. CSTC-A was to merge with the NATO training mission.

NATO Ministers of Defence, meeting in the Slovak capital of Bratislava in October 2009, also decided that NATO would take care of training the National Police. That was a direct slap in the face of the European Union which from the outset had promised to provide adequate training of the Afghan National Police, but failed to keep that promise. After the designated member state, Germany, failed in its early attempts to train the police on behalf of the EU, an EUPOL training mission in Afghanistan was launched, but it is hopelessly understaffed. NATO and CSTC-A will soon merge their police-training work, effectively sidelining the EU.

One may ask whether it was wise to task a military alliance to train policemen, as it does not really have any significant experience with that kind of work. But as General Ramms explained, the ANP is in fact a paramilitary force. It also has a markedly higher casualty rate than the ANA: some 1,500 men per year, as opposed to an average of 700-800 ANA casualties. But NATO could call on the European Gendarmerie Force, composed of, and experienced in, precisely the kind of work ANP personnel do: paramilitary policing. Said General Ramms: "It will take quite some time until the work of the average Afghan policeman in the south of the country can be compared to, let's say, the kind of work a London bobby does."

Confidence

The key issue in Afghanistan is the confidence the population has in its own authorities (ANSF, local administrators) and in ISAF. They want security first and foremost, and security that lasts. And of course, they want a better life. Afghanistan is one of the poorest

countries on earth and often, people survive day by day. That poverty also influences their stance. "If they can survive until tomorrow by helping me, they'll help me," a Dutch ISAF officer once told me. "If they can survive by helping the Taliban, they'll help them. That doesn't make them dangerous extremists. You and I would, under the circumstances, probably do the same," he added. With the vast majority of the Taliban living in the rural areas themselves, the authorities and ISAF must be able to convince them that security, once established, can be guaranteed in the long run. Otherwise, locals will understandably expect that the Taliban and other groups will just bide their time and come back, with a vengeance, once ISAF or the ANSF were to leave a given area. This explains, of course, why NATO/ISAF has chosen for a 'population-centric' approach, and why Major General de Kruif said that ISAF will only move into an area if and when it knows it can provide 24/7 security to the population.

Obviously, having individual ISAF troop contributing nations announce they will withdraw the bulk of their troops from Afghanistan, as the Netherlands has said it will do in 2010 and Canada in 2011, does not help to enhance confidence among the population. Nor does the impatience that seems

Helping to build the Afghan security forces is the ultimate exit strategy

to prevail in opinion polls in ISAF countries. The population at large seems to expect quick fixes of the many problems in Afghanistan, whereas in none of the key issues – from insecurity, corruption, or reconstruction – quick fixes are possible. And on the issue of the number of ISAF troops available, it is clear that there are not that many as NATO would like or need. This, for instance, causes commanders to rely more on close air support or the use of heavy artillery than they would like, as this inevitably increases the risk of 'collateral damage', i.e. civilian casualties, which in turn seriously undermines the confidence Afghans have in ISAF and the international community at large.

Likewise, unfulfilled promises made by the Afghan authorities do not promote confidence either. Be it tackling corruption, or providing (and training) enough troops and policemen, dispatching civil servants or doctors to remote areas, these are all issues in which the central government has not done quite everything that was promised or expected.

There are unfulfilled promises from the side of the international community as well. The UN mission UNAMA has, so far, not really lived up to expectations, both in practical (amount of staff and projects) and

political (interaction with the Afghan authorities) terms. Likewise, the efforts of the European Union, in particular in the field of police training, certainly do not match the grandiose statements made in Brussels these past few years. While the activities of the EU and the UN do not get much public attention, they are, nevertheless, crucial to the wider process of nation-building in Afghanistan. According to General Ramms, that process comprises some 70-80 per cent of purely civilian activities, as opposed to 20-30 per cent military efforts.

The Clock

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. Or, as General Ramms put it: "The clock works against us." There is a saying in the Middle East which Taliban spokesmen were quick to copy. "You have the watches, we have the time," the saying goes. As the clock ticks on, the confidence of the Afghans in the international community in general – and ISAF in particular – is dramatically decreasing, polls suggest. The clock also affects the understanding of, and support for the ISAF mission in the countries that provide the troops (and cope with the casualties). This in turn affects the stance of Western politicians, who – in general – do not have a tendency to go against public opinion. In a worst-case scenario more countries will follow the example of Canada and the Netherlands and withdraw their troops. That would mean ISAF's job will have to be done in an ever-increasing measure by the United States, which – in absolute numbers – is already the single key player. And that development would seriously undermine the credibility of NATO as a trustworthy alliance in which all members carry their share of the burden.

For all this involved, be they Afghans, the EU, the UN or NATO, patience may be wearing thin as the reasons for the first Western intervention in Afghanistan, right after the events of 9/11, are becoming a more and more distant memory.

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