

Meeting with Ambassador Ivo Daalder: 'NATO's Priorities'

A report of the discussion with the audience

On 3 September 2009 the Netherlands Atlantic Association organised a public meeting with Dr Ivo Daalder, the new Permanent Representative of the United States to NATO at 'Sociëteit de Witte', The Hague. Some 150 participants attended this first meeting of the new season in which Ambassador Daalder in particular wanted to discuss the current situation in Afghanistan and "why it matters to the United States and to the Netherlands".

Following Mr. Daalder's [lecture](#) the audience had the occasion to pose questions to the Ambassador.

Legitimacy

A number of questions concerned the legitimacy of the Taliban on the one hand and that of the Afghan government on the other. How can the political legitimacy of the Taliban, especially among Pashtuns, be undermined and how can the legitimacy of the Afghan government be increased? Mr. Daalder answered that he opposes the idea that the Taliban still enjoy political legitimacy in Afghanistan. According to him, several polls show that the Taliban "are not popular at all". The Taliban, however, manage to offer the



Afghan people some form of security (by means of money, food or protection). In other words, support for the Taliban is often a "function of despair". In order to undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban the Afghan government and NATO should provide for a better alternative both by providing security and building schools and hospitals. In order to increase the Afghan government's legitimacy the U.S. has sent 1,000 diplomats to Afghanistan to battle corruption and enhance the efficiency of state institutions. "Afghans need to believe they are cared for; then they will regard their government as legitimate." Civil assistance, from the lowest local level up to the central government, will therefore guarantee the legitimacy of the rulers of the country. The development of the local government in particular will be essential in the development of Afghanistan.

Strategy

An additional question regarding the war in Afghanistan concerned the grounds on which the Obama Administration revised the military strategy in this theatre. According to Mr. Daalder, a change in strategy has been necessary in order to safeguard the legitimacy of the ISAF operation in the eyes of the Afghan people. As General McChrystal, ISAF Commander, argued in his recent report: "We need to put the Afghan people first." This has also resulted in a change in the way ISAF forces operate. Saving citizens now takes priority over killing Taliban fighters. In addition, soldiers are encouraged to respect local customs and get out of

their vehicles once in a while. The Afghan people need to consider ISAF as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Goal

In one of the questions from the audience it was argued that there still exists some “vagueness” about NATO’s goal as regards the war in Afghanistan: is the goal of the war to root out Al-Qaeda and to defeat the Taliban, or are we in the middle of a nation-building operation? According to Mr. Daalder, the goal of ISAF is very clear: it is to make sure that Afghanistan will never again become a safe haven for terrorists. Therefore, NATO needs to be able to guarantee that Al-Qaeda cannot train terrorists in Afghanistan again. That requires a situation in which the Taliban cannot take over power again. This in particular means that the international community needs to focus on building institutions for the Afghan people and on trying to diminish the political legitimacy of the Taliban.

War of Necessity

Another question from the audience focused on the difference claimed by the Obama Administration between the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq. President Obama has referred to the war in Afghanistan as a war of ‘necessity’, but where does that leave Iraq? Is the war in Iraq one of ‘neglect’? Mr. Daalder answered that he wanted to make clear that the war in Iraq is a war of ‘choice’. The intervention in Afghanistan, however, was a direct response to the attacks of 9/11. For a while the war in Afghanistan has been neglected, but the Obama Administration now is intensifying U.S. efforts to win the war. The fact that U.S. foreign policy primarily focuses on the war in Afghanistan, however, does not imply that the US does not care about the situation in Iraq. The U.S. will do the best possible in Iraq, but the war in Afghanistan must be won.

Europe



Former Secretary-General of NATO Jaap de Hoop Scheffer once called the relationship between NATO and the European Union “absurd”. Mr. Daalder was asked whether he shared this view. The Ambassador answered that as a non-EU country it is not always easy to figure out how to cooperate with the EU. He said that it is the responsibility of the 21 members of NATO simultaneously being member of the EU to improve the cooperation and communication between both organisations. This is especially crucial considering the unresolved conflict between Turkey and Cyprus.

Replying to the question whether Europe should contribute more to NATO’s operations, Mr. Daalder answered that there is a huge misunderstanding about Europe’s role in Afghanistan – both in the U.S. and Europe. The European countries are responsible for 40 per cent of the soldiers and resources in Afghanistan, the largest European contribution in NATO history. That also implies that four out of the ten fallen

soldiers are non-American. Simultaneously, European countries are currently increasing – instead of decreasing – their contributions to NATO, such as Germany, Italy and France. The mission in Afghanistan is therefore becoming more and more of a collective NATO operation.

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