A Future Role for NATO in the Greater Middle East?

Jan Willem Honig

Shortly before the Istanbul Summit I addressed the topic of a possible role for NATO in the Greater Middle East, arguing that NATO should not accept a role in Iraq nor extend its role in Afghanistan, though probably it would do both. In the subsequent discussion I was reproached with taking a rather “melancholic” view. Now, after Istanbul, my melancholy has only increased. The Summit went less well than even I expected. For the first time, I began to fear that we may perhaps have seen a reversal in transatlantic attitudes to NATO.

Traditionally, the Europeans were always more keen on the Alliance than the United States. which, as a superpower, needed NATO less than the weaker Europeans and might abandon it. After Istanbul, one can argue that that may no longer be so clear-cut. The sincere, renewed interest of the United States in European help was not reciprocated. Have the Europeans finally begun to question the fundamental value of NATO and the transatlantic partnership? Though many believe that a US Presidential election victory of Senator John F. Kerry this November would consign the current crisis to the long list of transatlantic spats that mark NATO history, that may actually not happen. Are the Europeans losing interest in NATO for reasons that even Kerry cannot fix and his election might actually make worse? My argument has evolved into one that claims not only that NATO should not get involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also that it will not do so with Bush, nor with Kerry – and that puts the future of the Alliance on the line.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Iraq and Afghanistan are examples of societies in which force is regarded as an acceptable instrument in building structures of governance. The warlords in Afghanistan and, in US military parlance, the “noncompliant forces” in Iraq are engaged in a struggle to define their place in the emerging national political structures. As the outside intervention forces consider force an unacceptable element in domestic political discourse, their immediate challenge is to try to take the violence out of the political process.

The record of Western forces is not very good in this respect. Bosnia and Kosovo may appear the major success stories of the past decade, but a closer look suggests a different picture. The NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) that went into Bosnia after the Dayton Accords in 1995 and NATO’s 1999 Kosovo Force (KFOR) are often presented as examples of how the presence of intervention forces can suppress local violence. However, although NATO forces certainly helped in raising the cost associated with renewed violence, in both cases the key ingredient for ending hostilities was an agreement between the conflict parties rather than the deployment of intervention forces. This local agreement derived its strength from three factors.

First, despite the widespread view at the time that the war represented an uncontrollable outbreak of ethnic hatred, the warring parties (which actually consisted of relatively few “warriors”) were in fact tightly controlled by a small number of political actors. So a high level political decision to stop fighting meant it would stop. Second, a renewal of hostilities was effectively prevented by a development beyond the influence of the intervention forces, namely the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic. Third, as the limited participation by the population in fighting the war suggested, force was seen as an extraordinary instrument of politics. Are these conditions present in Iraq and Afghanistan?

In Iraq the emerging focus of the coalition forces is to ensure security. This is the critical precondition if democratic state-building is ever to take place. But in a society without
experience of democratic politics, it is the traditional patron-client networks that are jockeying for power. For them there is everything to gain and everything to lose. With such high stakes force is an important and legitimate instrument. At present, it is used as part of a remarkably clever, well-organised strategy. First, the emerging, US-backed government and its nascent security structures are targeted with bullets, bombs and rockets. In addition, there is an underreported but extensive assassination campaign going on that targets the civil elite of non-partisan professionals, like academics, civil servants, engineers and the like, who are critical to any effort of rebuilding the country. Second, the civil reconstruction effort is hampered by targeting foreign workers and critical infrastructure elements, like oil pipelines and tankers. Third, US forces are attacked. The American military faces a difficult choice. They can either minimise their exposure to casualties by “hunkering down” in their bases and so in effect leave the field to their opponents, or they can take the war to the enemy. The latter approach increases their own casualties as well as the loss of innocent Iraqi civilian lives because of their inability to target the guerrilla enemy precisely and their proclivity to use overwhelming force.

In other words, the Americans do not have very good military options in defeating the insurgency. The best option is ultimately a political one: that is, to create the ultimate patronage network centred on the new Iraqi state and financed by its key asset: oil. That will not be democracy and it is still vulnerable to the type of destabilising campaign we are already witnessing. Such a body politic will have to be shored up by force. Can this necessary force be applied in ways that accord with our values? The current experience, that has already involved widespread torture and many civilian casualties, suggests not. Do the European NATO allies want to participate in such a campaign for such a political objective? In Afghanistan, NATO’s ISAF has fared better. But then ISAF has been focused on Kabul – a city that in many ways is not central to the country’s political life. Political power has traditionally been fragmented among a substantial number of regional strongmen. The man in Kabul was just one of these, whose position had become vacant when the United States toppled the Taliban. Power may be contested in many places across the country, but there are no more power vacuums for ISAF to move into. ISAF has understandably been very cautious about moving out of Kabul. Nonetheless, as ISAF was meant to be for all of Afghanistan, it must extend its reach. The Istanbul Summit confirmed this, but the caution regarding expansion of the field of operations is as strong as before. The NATO Secretary General’s amazing troubles in getting the actual manpower and materiel on the ground are not likely to abate. What is needed is a massive effort, with Provincial Reconstruction Teams swamping the whole country and engaging not simply in building roads and schools (as now), but primarily in enforcing political transformation. That process, however, faces essentially the same practical options as coalition forces face in Iraq (but without the potential economic self-sufficiency provided by oil). Does NATO want to be involved in an unpalatable use of force to ensure an unpalatable political outcome?

Is NATO the Answer?

The Istanbul Summit in effect provided an answer: NATO does not want a serious, politically transformative role in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The reason is not simply that the policies of the Bush administration have antagonised a few governments in “old Europe” who block the formation of NATO’s famed consensus. It goes deeper. NATO is no longer an organisation of necessity for the Europeans, but one of choice. Despite all the talk about the seriousness of the threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, they are not in the same league as the Soviet threat. Europe’s survival is no longer at stake. These lesser threats have effectively emancipated Europe in the field of security. The extent to which NATO member governments have gone along with the United States is partly the result of an entrenched tradition that sees the transatlantic link as the bedrock of the Alliance, and partly the result of concern regarding the new threats. However, the lack of support from electorates suggests
that they are far less swayed by tradition and the new security fears. Apart from the United Kingdom and some of the new member states, most NATO governments have begun to take these signals on board. The Iraq fiasco may prove a fatal blow to NATO. Istanbul has made it conceivable that the Europeans will duck the challenge of Iraq by giving up on the transatlantic relationship and thus on the Alliance. Paradoxically, a Kerry administration could hasten this fate. A Democratic victory would end the useful pretence that Iraq was only a temporary aberration by a peculiar administration. It is unlikely that Kerry will cut and run from Iraq. Instead, he will also come to NATO and ask for help. European governments will find it much harder to turn him down than Bush. But turn him down they must. Their electorates will not accept the type of war that must be fought. And, in contrast to the Cold War years, their electorates matter more to them than the transatlantic link. That would be an ironic reversal if it was the Europeans, and not the Americans, who gave up on NATO.

Dr. Jan Willem Honig is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of War Studies at King’s College London.