

How to Handle a Possible Escalation of Conflict in Afghanistan?

Assessing the Implications of a Future Crisis

As NATO's mission in Afghanistan represents the biggest challenge and single most important role of the Alliance, more human and physical resources and attention should be devoted to the problematic region. The significance of the job can be described as combining military duty with the capacity-building efforts. Stabilizing Afghanistan will lay out the capacity of NATO in handling unpredictable events and its potential of providing a secure environment.

Diagnosis: The Decisive Issue

I will start to contend that diagnosis of the situation carries a great deal of significance before any operational decisions would be made. Today's most critical issue is **improvement of border control and containment of terrorist squads**. Before safeguarding Afghan territory and preventing various instruments of terror, a sustainable establishment cannot be enforced. Given the unfavorable geographical conditions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the necessity for maintaining border security has become more crucial and border control in the region is as important as the capacity of NATO units and Afghan police forces. At this time, the question becomes whether it is more rational to respond Taliban forces militarily and be confronted by them or to tighten the control and reduce the transits, if not stop at all, so that military option can become a secondary choice and the number of casualties of NATO forces can be reduced.

It is now time to decide whether NATO should continue to be relying on its self-confidence and superior military force in dealing with Taliban forces and giving the latter a chance to escalate their status to find new recruits thanks to considerable losses on NATO forces

or initiate a new effort to cut the transits of terrorist groups. There are two actions in dealing with the issue. NATO should consider:

- To start and develop a dialogue with the tribes at the border.
- To increase its intelligence capacity in the region so as to learn better the intentions of the leadership of these tribes.

As the influence of tribal leaders has been tremendously high on the youth on both sides of the border and they are very much respected by potential insurgents, there is a need to work very closely with the tribes and their spiritual leaders. The fact that the daily lives and norms of tribal people are very much shaped by their religious beliefs, NATO needs to work closely with moderate religious and spiritual leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan with the help of officials.

There is a need for a civilian initiative formed within NATO having a separate task to deal with the tribes. Such a move can decrease the concern of the tribes as a Western-led military organization may not be welcome by the religious locals; hence, it is anticipated that non-uniformed civilian initiatives are embraced by them more. In doing so, providing modest funds to the tribes in an effort to upgrade their livelihood can be considered as a constructive method. Such a move needs to be realized with strict scrutiny and it can serve to completely tear their ties, if any, with the Taliban. Apart from the substantial border issue, the following list gives a group of actions that can be taken from short to medium to long-term periods.

Steps that can be taken in the short-term (between now and the next 12 months)

The first issue is security. NATO needs to address and answer whether its forces are sufficient in handling and controlling the security in Afghanistan. NATO is currently leading some 32,000 troops from 37 countries. Whereas a number of countries pledged additional assets,

including fighters, helicopters, and infantry companies as well as training teams to guide Afghan National Army, we should be able to be clear on the sufficiency of these capabilities in providing and maintaining security. Nevertheless, Turkey had the lead of International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan twice for a total of 14 months (June 2002-February 2003 and February-August 2005) and there is a **domestic constraint** for a bigger job: The fact that Turkish public opinion is already divided on Turkish army's role in the region, **a new and greater peacekeeping responsibility can be politically very hard to be assumed.** Turkish position should be that all the NATO members must "shoulder the load"; yet, every member follows its own public opinion: A good example is what happened in 2002 when England was so ready to transfer the commanding duties to another country because of the pressure it was receiving from the domestic opposition. Turkey's constraints should be well understood by NATO members as it already had the third largest contingents among 36 states in ISAF as of last year and the troops will increase even more when Turkey will assume the Kabul regional command in April 2007.

The second issue is cooperation with Pakistan. NATO members should help Pakistan more to deal with border controls, intelligence capacities, and military operations at the border. So far, the biggest ally of NATO in the region in terms of military and nonmilitary operations has been Pakistan, who provided intelligence aid as well as military support at the border and within its own territory. Pakistani forces have conducted several operations in the geographically disadvantaged area at the expense of drawing criticisms from their local people. Pakistan's support should not be taken for granted and needs to be overtly praised by NATO member countries as well as their media. However, western media's broadcasting and news on Pakistan significantly decrease the morale of its officials. It needs to be reminded that last summer, a disastrous series of attacks in London similar to 9/11 were able to be prevented by a major success and cooperation of Pakistan intelligence units.

Third, public diplomacy should be increased and treated as a priority. Informing the wider public about NATO's activities and role in their lives for a better future will serve to exterminate the prejudices and recruit local people for future cooperation. No outsider can be fully successful without the internal support and NATO must prove that it is a reliable partner.

Steps that can be taken in the mid-term (12 to 36 months)

In the medium term, nothing seems more important than to empower President Karzai. Whenever all the segments of Afghan society will embrace him as their sole representative, the job will be much easier. In order to achieve this, among many things, a series of improvements are desperately needed. Afghanistan has hunger for many things: Services, health, education, shelter, food and so on. Very concrete steps should be taken in changing the lives and elevating the standards of Afghan people. Attaining any of these needs or at least making a development will strengthen Karzai. As the population becomes increasingly neutral, if not hostile to the forces of the Alliance, Karzai should be in the front more and NATO and civilian organizations should leave the stage to him so that he will be given full credit for any positive changes.

Second, internal security has to be improved and it should be realized by the local authorities. The competence of domestic security forces will play a major role in the stabilization of the country and boost the self-confidence of Afghan leaders as well as the public.

And third, NATO forces should seek every way to **make distinction between the local people and Taliban forces** to avoid additional confrontation and not to further lose the civilian support, which is almost offset by civilian casualties resulting from NATO operations. Here, the existence of Turkish forces in the region poses another domestic constraint since Turkish public opinion also includes those who think "Muslims shoot Muslims", and that "our soldiers are victimized" as a consequence of American anger and willingness for retaliation following 9/11.

Tackling the fundamental problem: Steps in the long-term (36 months and onwards)

Afghanistan is a huge complexity and militaristic solutions alone are not sufficient. The first thing is to recognize the importance of reconstruction and development to Afghanistan's long-term stability. Hence, current level of aid should be expanded and a call by UN for broader international assistance should be considered.

The next thing to consider is that failing states serve as perfect sanctuaries for terrorist squads. This is where the importance of capacity-building, institutions, and democratic governance and accountability come in place. The superiority of the Alliance leaves no hesitation for on-the-ground failure; however, asymmetric and nonconventional terrorism, proliferation and misuse of new technologies pose a huge threat.

The third suggestion I would like to make is the role of economic and civilian efforts, apart from military interventions, in handling terrorism. Today, there is a greater need than ever for transatlantic cooperation, and European members of NATO can be helpful in addressing these needs, such as humanitarian aid, crisis management, disaster response, monetary aid, state-building, and border controls, some of which are perfectly experienced in the evolution of EU.

Last but not least, we should be able to deal with the underlying factors providing tangible and intangible basis for terror, such as poverty, social inequality, poor infrastructure, hopelessness, and women's role in the society. Here comes the role and significance of international players; including but not limited to United Nations, European Union, World Bank, IMF, and Asian Development Bank. Afghanistan is certainly winnable, but only if a collective effort could be undertaken and NATO would not be left alone.