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Training Afghanistan's Security Forces: NATO Has Made Solid Progress

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Speaking in Brussels last week, outgoing U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates predicted a “dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance.” He stated:

The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress...to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.¹

These unusually harsh words reflect successive Administrations' frustration with NATO's unequal sharing of the defense burden over the years. However, they contradict President Barack Obama's positive remarks in London in May, when he described NATO as “the most successful alliance in human history.”² They also undercut U.S. General William Caldwell's message of success about the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM–A) earlier this month.

Although NATO's financial and operational burdens have not been equitably shared among the allies in Afghanistan overall, the 33-nation coalition that comprises NTM–A has made solid progress since its founding just 20 months ago. Coalition support for NTM–A has, in fact, been considerable. Crucially, NATO's European allies will be asked to step up to the plate once again in order to realize NATO's goal of transitioning responsibility for Afghanistan's security to Afghans by December 2014.

NTM–A's Progress. For Afghanistan to be a viable state, it needs a functional, non-corrupt security apparatus that can protect its people from the Taliban and other malevolent actors. Creating a self-sustaining national security force is one of NATO's greatest challenges in Afghanistan—a country wracked by decades of war, ethnic divisions, and widespread illiteracy.

Training efforts prior to NTM–A's establishment produced few solid results. NTM–A was created to bring unity to the international community's efforts to train the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and to produce concrete results. To these ends, its successes have been substantial. Speaking in Washington, D.C., earlier this month, NTM–A Commander General Caldwell outlined its progress:

- The ANSF has grown to 296,000 since November 2009, and NTM–A will constitute a 305,000-person ANSF by October;
- 8,000–10,000 recruits are now signing up to the Afghan National Army (ANA) every month;
- NTM–A has established 70 training sites located in 21 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces;
- Separate European Union and German training projects have adopted NTM–A's standardized

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program of instruction, establishing continuity and predictability for Afghan recruits;

- NTM–A has created an Afghan instructor training program so that Afghans can train Afghans going forward, and it aims to certify 4,000 Afghan trainers by December 2012;
- 12 vocational schools have been established that offer specialized training in areas such as engineering, logistics, signals, and intelligence; and
- Afghans are taking the lead for security—albeit in very small select areas.³

A Genuine Coalition Effort. NTM–A is a dual-hatted command, and General Caldwell is the commanding general of both NTM–A and its sister command, the U.S.’s Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC–A). NTM–A fields 1,570 institutional trainers from 33 nations, including just over 100 trainers from the U.S., meaning that this is a truly multinational effort. CSTC–A fields several thousand U.S. trainers alongside the NTM–A trainers.⁴ NTM–A trainers are dispersed throughout NATO’s 70 ANSF training centers, and countries such as Italy and France have also added much-needed niche capabilities such as gendarmerie training to NATO’s overall ANSF training effort.

Through March 2012, America’s coalition partners have confirmed pledges of 770 additional trainers for NTM–A along with additional support staff. Canada alone has pledged to provide 950 additional trainers and support personnel from July

onward. The EU police mission maintains an additional 305 staff comprised of 172 police officers, 45 rule of law experts, and 88 civilian experts, who are largely based in Kabul.⁵

Mentoring and embedded training teams—known as OMLTs and POMLTs—complement NTM–A’s work in the field under the command of ISAF Joint Command. OMLTs and POMLTs are a critical follow-on element of NTM–A’s success. The U.S. deploys 279 police mentoring teams and 76 army mentoring teams. At present, other coalition nations deploy 44 police mentoring teams and 80 army mentoring teams.⁶ A handful of coalition partners, including Poland, Spain, and Italy (albeit in small numbers), have increased the number of training teams deployed to Afghanistan since NATO’s Lisbon Summit last November.

Ensuring Sustainability. NATO must make certain that four interrelated components are in place to ensure long-term sustainability for the ANSF. It must (1) create ANSF officer classes who can lead Afghan forces in place of coalition trainers; (2) ensure that the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior are effective institutions controlling and overseeing the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), respectively; (3) build infrastructure to ensure that ANSF training centers are permanent; and (4) implement processes to ensure that the system self-generates.

These four goals require ongoing coalition support, both physically and financially. To reach these goals, NATO and coalition partners should focus on:

1. Valentina Pop, “US Defence Chief: Europe May No Longer Be Worth Defending,” *EU Observer*, June 10, 2011, at <http://euobserver.com/9/32473> (June 16, 2011).
2. Scott Wilson, “Where Gates Criticizes, Obama Celebrates,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2011, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/where-gates-criticizes-obama-celebrates/2011/06/10/AGerPEPH_story.html (June 16, 2011).
3. Lieutenant General William Caldwell, remarks at conference, “Transition in Action: Building the Afghan Army from ‘Boots on the Ground’ Up,” The Brookings Institution, June 6, 2011, at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/0606_caldwell/20110606_afghan_army.pdf (June 16, 2011).
4. A breakdown of NTM–A contributing nations is not available. The figures quoted above were given to the author during a private briefing.
5. EUPOL—*Serving Afghanistan*, Nos. 10–11 (June 1, 2011), at http://www.eupol-afg.eu/pdf/Newsletter10_11.pdf (June 16, 2011).
6. “Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF),” *NATO Media Backgrounder*, June 2011, at http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_06/20110608_backgrounder-ANSF.pdf (June 16, 2011).

- **Training Afghan officers.** A professional cadre of Afghan officers is needed to sustain the army and police force in the long term. Training leaders is harder, more time-consuming, and more expensive than training ordinary recruits. It is essential that NATO's coalition partners continue to send additional highly qualified trainers for this purpose and embed them where necessary.
- **Ministerial support program.** As part of Afghanistan's democratization, coalition partners have deployed thousands of military and civilian advisors to Afghanistan's various government ministries. More than 500 full-time coalition personnel have been deployed to the Afghan Departments of Defense and Interior. These two ministries will be responsible for oversight and management of the ANSF after 2014, yet they are only just coming to grips with the processes of national government. This ministerial support system will have to remain in place past 2014.
- **Financial support.** The U.S. has committed \$11.6 billion for NTM-A this year. \$12.6 billion will be spent in 2012. From 2013 onward, however, the U.S. will likely reduce its funding significantly. Afghanistan will not be able to self-finance the estimated \$6 billion annual cost of sustaining its security forces. The international community will have to be both generous and creative to ensure that these funds are available to Afghanistan until it has a national economic strategy. NATO's Equipment Donation Program and the ANA Trust Fund are two ways in which the coalition can continue supporting the ANSF.

Next Steps for the International Community.

To ensure that NATO's gains are not reversed:

- NATO's European members should send additional specialized trainers to Afghanistan to staff NTM-A's new vocational schools;
- Coalition nations including the Netherlands, Romania, and Turkey should reinforce paramilitary and public safety training in Afghanistan with more trainers;
- The EU should concentrate greater resources in its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) budget to reinforce the Afghan ministerial support program; and
- NATO should work with the Afghan Ministry of Defense to outline a strategy for ANSF funding after 2013.

Transitioning Security to Afghans. U.S. and coalition forces have made considerable progress in training the Afghan National Security Forces, but the job is by no means complete. NATO should ensure that progress is not undercut by premature withdrawal of troops or trainers, which would ensure that its successes leave with them.

General Caldwell has stated that NTM-A will be in a position to transition responsibility for Afghanistan's security to Afghans by December 2014. However, he is equally clear that NATO will still have to play a strong support role beyond 2014 if its efforts are not to be in vain.

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