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NATO Must Refocus on Afghanistan

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On October 9–11, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s 28 defense ministers will meet in Brussels. The top priority for the United States at this ministerial meeting should be ensuring that NATO demonstrates resolve and commitment to Afghanistan—especially in light of the recent “green on blue” attacks. The Alliance needs to realize that reforms such as Smart Defense will be meaningless and the credibility of the Alliance will be in doubt if it is not successful in its current operations.

Current Situation. Starting in late 2009, the military campaign focused on southern and southwestern Afghanistan, mainly Zabul, Kandahar, and Helmand provinces, which are considered to be the center of the Taliban-based insurgency. With the security situation

largely improved in southwestern Afghanistan, the focus has since shifted to eastern Afghanistan, primarily Paktika, Paktiya, and Khost provinces (the P2K region).

This area borders Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, contains many of the traditional avenues of approach from the Pakistani border regions to Kabul, and is the home base of the Haqqani Network. Securing Highway One between Kabul and Kandahar will also be an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) priority.

The security situation on the ground is improving slightly but remains fragile. Levels of violence are slightly lower across the country when compared to last year. In fact, figures recently released from NATO show that the number of enemy-initiated attacks has decreased by 33 percent since August 2010.¹

The recent suicide attacks in Kabul should not be viewed in isolation, however. Although Kabul accounts for almost 15 percent of Afghanistan’s population, the city accounts for less than 1 percent of the country’s violence.

So far, NATO’s transition strategy, although not perfect, appears to be working. The first tranche of provinces, districts, and

municipalities, which contain 25 percent of Afghanistan’s population, were handed over to the Afghans in July 2011. The second tranche was announced in November 2011. The most recent round of transition took place over the summer. Currently, the Afghans have the lead on security for more than 75 percent of the country’s population, and the goal of full transition is on target for the end of 2014.

NATO’s Strategy Should Be Transition, Not Egress. NATO members and coalition partners should not use the progress seen with transition as an excuse to leave Afghanistan prematurely. Any withdrawal of NATO forces should be based on improved conditions on the ground and on military advice. When these security conditions are met, NATO’s withdrawal should be a phaseout, not a walkout. The 2010 Lisbon Declaration stated that the “transition will be conditions-based, not calendar-driven, and will not equate to withdrawal of ISAF-troops.”²

Regrettably, the Chicago Declaration in May 2012 did not include the “conditions-based” language and instead focused less on the security conditions and more on the end-of-2014 deadline. This change

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is likely due to the fact that many NATO allies are under considerable public and political pressure to leave Afghanistan. The last of the 33,000 U.S. surge troops in Afghanistan were withdrawn last month—most likely against military advice. The U.K. announced they will withdraw 500 troops by the end of the year, and France's new president, socialist François Hollande, will bring all French troops home by that time as well.

NATO partners further afield are also losing resolve. Australia announced that all of its troops will be leaving Afghanistan by the end of 2013 instead of the end of 2014 as previously planned. New Zealand promised to bring its troops home by April 2013. The Republic of Georgia planned to double its contribution later this year in Helmand province, making it the largest contributor per capita in ISAF. However, with the recent election victory by the opposition Georgian Dream coalition, the future of this deployment is uncertain.

NATO Must Support Afghan National Security Forces. Success will be achieved when Afghanistan is able to manage its own internal security in order to prevent al-Qaeda and its allies from re-establishing terrorist bases in the country as they did before 9/11. In the context of security, NATO's modest goal is to raise the Afghan forces to a level where they can both take on the Taliban and prevent international terrorist groups from coming back to Afghanistan without the help of tens of thousands of NATO troops.

Afghanistan will need financial support from the international community for the foreseeable future. A major part of the post-2014 commitment to Afghanistan will be mentoring, training, and funding the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Maintaining the ANSF at a reduced level of 230,000 troops (down from the current 352,000 level) will cost the international community approximately \$4 billion per year—what the U.S. currently spends every 12 days in Afghanistan.

Sadly, the international community's financial contributions have come up short. Although the U.S. has so far committed \$2 billion, other NATO members like the U.K. (the world's 7th largest economy) and Germany (the world's 4th largest economy) have contributed only \$110 million and \$195 million, respectively.

Considering that a strong and capable ANSF is the ticket out of Afghanistan for NATO forces, it is absurd that member states have not been able to pledge what—in the big picture of the cost of the campaign—is a negligible sum.

NATO's current strategy in Afghanistan calls for the gradual transition of security control from NATO forces to Afghan forces while simultaneously training and equipping an Afghan Army and Afghan Police. This strategy is achievable, but only if NATO leaders stay committed to the campaign, both financially and militarily, until the very end.

U.S. Leadership Is Weak Inside NATO. The U.S. needs to use the

upcoming NATO Defense Ministers meeting to demonstrate leadership inside the Alliance, but this is easier said than done. The U.S. has not led by example in Europe. European countries regularly use American defense cuts as political cover for their own defense cuts, and they point to America's recent troop withdrawal as justification for their own troop reductions.

With the Administration's so-called pivot to Asia, lack of interest in European missile defense, and reduction in U.S. troop numbers in Europe, many in the Alliance are questioning how serious America is about trans-Atlantic security.

At the upcoming NATO Defense Ministers meeting, the U.S. needs to:

- **Call for a “conditions-based” transition strategy.** The language used in the 2010 Lisbon Summit Declaration—missing in the 2012 Chicago Summit Declaration—needs to be re-adopted by NATO.
- **Ensure adequate funding for ANSF.** Call on NATO and non-NATO partners to properly fund ANSF well into the future.
- **Encourage NATO partners to show resolve.** The U.S. should encourage its partners in Afghanistan to resist the temptation to withdraw troops prematurely.

The Road to Afghanistan Stability. NATO members need to stop pretending that Afghanistan

1. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, International Security and Assistance Force, “ISAF Monthly Data: Trends Through August 2012,” September 24, 2012, http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/20120924_NIU_ISAF_Monthly_Data-Release%20%28Final%29.pdf (accessed October 3, 2012).

2. News release, “Lisbon Summit Declaration,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, November 20, 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm (accessed October 4, 2012).

is the number one priority for the Alliance and start demonstrating that it is. This will require NATO leaders to prepare their nations for a difficult campaign between now and the end of 2014, show resolve with troop numbers, and seriously commit the required funding for the ANSF after 2015. None of this can be accomplished without American leadership.

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