

THE POST-NATO AFGHANISTAN: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Abdi Zenebe, PhD Candidate

Department of Political Science and International Relations,
Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Abstract

Since the 11 September 2001 attack on the U.S and subsequent wars Afghanistan has become at the forefront of the global agenda. The U.S involvement in Afghanistan is mainly to defeat al Qaeda and dismantle the Taliban regime that harbored al Qaeda. After nearly twelve years of war the U.S although appears to be successful in weakening Al Qaeda but not able to destroy the group. Now the U.S and its allies are planning to pull out of Afghanistan. Following the plan to withdraw all NATO combatant troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 there is a growing concern for the weak U.S established Karzai government in particular and Afghanistan at large. This paper inquiries into what the war achieved, how the NATO forces will pull out of Afghanistan and what awaits Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal.

Keywords: Afghanistan, the U.S, NATO, withdrawal, Taliban and al Qaeda

Introduction

The U.S administration's contradictory statements and the mismatch between the U.S administration's rhetoric and facts on the ground are the bases for my inquiry. The U.S administration, on one hand, claim to significantly dismantle its main adversary Taliban and that it is already established around 300,000 Afghanistan troops ready to take the security responsibility from the NATO forces completely by the end of 2014. However, on the other hand, the U.S administration is planning to provide a negotiated settlement with Taliban. So far, Taliban is reluctant to negotiate, which shows the power balance to the side of Taliban. In addition, the NATO and the Afghan troops hardly control areas beyond Kabul. Thus, this term attempts to unravel the above contradictions.

The aim of this paper is to examine the NATO achievement in Afghanistan especially related to the counterinsurgency program. The paper also attempts to identify alternative exit routes NATO is considering to transport its large cargo out of Afghanistan in the coming years. In addition, I attempt to analyze possible future security scenarios in the post NATO Afghanistan. The methodological approach I used in this study is qualitative methodology.

Qualitative methodology is more compatible to address the objectives. The major source is secondary sources that include documents, scholarly articles, news analysis, books etc. The selected method to study the topic is document analysis. The scope of the paper covers mainly the current developments unfolding in Afghanistan in relation to security. The NATO's remaining years are significant to understand the overall strategy of the U.S, as super power, war on terror that shapes its global security strategies. I organize this paper into five major parts. The first section discuss about the causes for the U.S-NATO involvement in Afghanistan. The second part is about the belligerents and the third part is about NATO's achievements. The fourth section discusses about the NATO pull out strategy and the fifth part is about the post NATO Afghanistan. Finally, I incorporated a brief conclusion.

Causes of the War

According to many observers there are three major causes for the U.S led NATO military engagement in Afghanistan. These are security, geopolitical and economic. The immediate cause for the U.S engagement in Afghanistan, in 2001, is related to national security matters. The U.S-NATO military campaign was focused to dismantle the Taliban regime that was harboring al Qaida. Afghanistan and the Taliban regime were labeled as rogue state and fertile ground for terrorism. Since 2001, Afghanistan becomes a top U.S security priority. (Birku, 2011:22)

The U.S army went to Afghanistan to achieve four major military objectives. These are “capturing Osama bin Laden, capturing Mullah Umar, closing down al Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere and releasing U.S prisoners in Afghanistan” (Jackson and Towel, 2006:176). Even though, initially the U.S major objective in Afghanistan was to destroy al Qaida and Taliban, it gradually adopted the task of nation building. The later task of nation building in Afghanistan by the U.S and its allies is unsuccessful so far, rather it made things more complicated in both local and regional politico-security spectrum. I will return to the latter point in detail in the topics to come.

Afghanistan has a “distinct geographical connection between Central Asia and the Middle East” (Rosén, 2008: 82). More to this, “the U.S is closely watching the co-operative framework between Russia, China, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan [under Shanghai Cooperation Organization]” (Birku: 24). The rivalry to dominate Central Asia between Russia, China and the U.S made Afghanistan geopolitically significant. In addition, the exiting tension between Iran and the U.S contributes for the strategically significance of Afghanistan in the eyes of the two states. Such strategic importance seems to have a vital place in the U.S desire to extend its presence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is also an important pass way to the economically reach region of Central Asia. The U.S desire to build oil/gas pipeline across Central Asia, according to some observers, is related to the U.S engagement in Afghanistan. As Birku cited from Yechury Afghanistan is vital “from energy stand point that stems from its geographic position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas export from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea”. (Birku: 27)

The Belligerents

The major actors in the Afghan war theater can be classified into two groups. These are NATO and Taliban. NATO represents all member states and international forces involved on the side of the U.S. Taliban; the name represents many groups that resist the foreign involvement in Afghanistan.

NATO

Following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the U.S administration immediately categorized Afghanistan as the major security threat. In addition, the attack “prompted Allies to launch Operation Active Endeavour, to adopt the Military Concept for Defense against Terrorism (MC472) and to initiate various capability and institutional changes”(NATO,2012:2). The U.S started air bombardment of Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 supported by the ‘Coalition of the willing’. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) established the Afghan Transitional Government on December 22, 2001. Initially, the ISAF had a limited mandate of peacekeeping in Kabul and its surrounding areas “to provide security for the interim Afghan government and UN agencies operating in the city” (Zisk, winter 2002-2003:36). In 2003, NATO overtook all the security responsibility in Afghanistan from International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and the United States. (Hansen; Toff and Wivel, 2009:84)

The U.S as a primary player in the Afghan theatre is working with 49 different states and the Afghan army as well as government (Katzman, 2012:24). NATO immediately after the attacks on U.S announced its Article 5¹⁸⁴ for the first time ever. Then Afghanistan becomes NATO's first mission outside of Europe. In October 2011 the number of international forces was about "130,638 military personnel deployed as part of ISAF, from 49 contributing nations" (Taylor, 2011:13)

According to Minuto-Rizzo (2010), there is no comparable international organization other than NATO to handle such a huge responsibility. The UN lacks the efficiency even if it has enormous legitimacy. The responsibility among the NATO member states and partner states is distributed unevenly as shown in the Table below.

States	No. troops	States	No. troops	States	No. troops
Albania	286	Germany	5000	Poland	2580
Armenia	126	Greece	153	Portugal	140
Australia	1550	Hungary	415	Romania	1873
Austria	3	Iceland	4	Singapore	39
Azerbaijan	94	Ireland	7	Slovakia	309
Belgium	520	Italy	3952	Slovenia	77
Bosnia & Herzegovina	55	Jordan	0	Spain	1526
Bulgaria	597	Republic of Korea	350	Sweden	500
Canada	529	Latvia	174	Macedonia	163
Croatia	317	Lithuania	236	Tonga	55
Czech Republic	623	Luxembourg	11	Turkey	1840
Denmark	750	Malaysia	46	Ukraine	23
El Salvador	24	Mongolia	114	United Arab Emirates	35
Estonia	159	Montenegro	39	United Kingdom	9500
Finland	156	Netherlands	183	United States	90000
France	3932	New Zealand	188		
Georgia	937	Norway	429		
				TOTAL	130,638

Source: ISAF Headquarters, 18 October 2011 (Taylor, 2011: 13-14)

Taliban

Different groups in Afghanistan organize the insurgency against the NATO forces under the name Taliban. However, there are many versions of the Taliban. Among the different versions of the Taliban, Quetta Shura Taliban (under Mullah Umar), Hikmatyar Taliban (under Gulbuddin Hikmatyar), and Haqqani Taliban (under Jalaludin Haqqani) have been prominent. In addition, other insurgency groups like al Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan operate in Afghanistan. (Katzman, 2012) There are some differences among the above groups. Some of them have a global agenda whereas others focus on local matters only. In addition, the area they are active differs. For instance, the Haqqani is more active in east of Afghanistan, whereas the Hikmatyar is more active in the south.

The insurgency groups also have many similarities. Among these, their ethnic group is the one. Most of the insurgency belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group. The Pashtun people inhabit eastern and southern part of Afghanistan and western part of Pakistan. The Pashtun people "pride themselves on never having paid taxes to any sovereign and never having their lands, which they consider veiled, or *purdah*, conquered". (Johnson and Mason, 2008:51)

¹⁸⁴ Article 5 of the NATO treaty states 'that an armed attack on one or more of [the allies] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all'

Similarly, they all are Muslims. Moreover, often they work together in a coordinated manner. In addition, it is reported al Qaeda has a close relation with both Hikmatyar and Quetta Shura Taliban.

NATO: ‘Achievements’

The achievements of NATO could be measured in terms of its objectives. As a security organization, its responsibility largely lies on security matters, specifically running the counterinsurgency¹⁸⁵ policy. The major achievement of the U.S was death of Osama bin Laden, the chief architect of the 9/11 attack, inside Pakistan. However, the counterinsurgency was not successful. The chief conniver of the counterinsurgency strategy, in Afghanistan, General Mc Chrystal outlined the program in the following manner, on August 30, 2006, That the goal of the U.S. military should be to protect the population rather than to focus on searching out and combating Taliban concentrations. Indicators of success such as ease of road travel, participation in local *shuras*, and normal life for families are more significant than counts of enemy fighters killed.

That there is potential for “mission failure” unless a fully resourced, comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy is pursued and reverses Taliban momentum within 12-18 months. About 44,000 additional U.S. combat troops (beyond those approved by the Obama Administration strategy review in March 2009) would be needed to have the greatest chance for his strategy’s success. (Katzman, 2012:21)

There was, however, intense debate about the wisdom behind this surge. For instance, the dramatic increase in the number of troops was highly criticized by the Defense Secretary of the time Robert Gates. Gates was worried about the rise in the number of U.S troops because it might create a “sense of occupation [on the side of Afghans] that could prove counter-productive” (Ibid). After tense debate in the U.S president Obama announced on December 1, 2009:

That 30,000 additional U.S. forces (a “surge”) would be sent (bringing U.S. levels close to 100,000) to “reverse the Taliban’s momentum” and strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government.

That there would be a transition, beginning in July 2011, to Afghan leadership of the stabilization effort and a corresponding beginning of a drawdown of U.S. force levels. (Ibid)

Nevertheless, the U.S-NATO led counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is largely considered as a failure. The counterinsurgency, the skeptics fear leads the U.S into a ‘quagmire’. The aspiration to win ‘hearts and mind’ was not successful as expected. The U.S soldiers’ misconduct¹⁸⁶ and the indiscriminate drone attacks made the U.S and the international forces more unpopular in Afghanistan. Likewise, the other objective of the counterinsurgency, i.e. ‘clear, hold, and build’, failed to materialize in Afghanistan, because of stiff insurgency resistance and limited NATO troops on the ground to accomplish such a task. NATO/US and the Afghan Army have a very limited control over much of Afghanistan. (Branch and Wood, 2010: 3) Moreover, there is a limited trust between the NATO forces and Afghan forces. In contrary, counterinsurgency highly requires the close collaboration between the foreign forces and local forces, both police and the army.

Although, there is a limited progress in the area of nation building the international forces in Afghanistan have some success story when comes to socio-economic areas. In particular, the women involvement in public affairs showed a remarkable increase since the NATO involvement in Afghanistan (Chishti, 2010:254).

¹⁸⁵ Counterinsurgency was unpopular among the U.S political circle since the Vietnam War. However, it was reintroduced during the Iraq War (II) in 2004. From Iraq, it transferred to Afghanistan theatre in 2009.

¹⁸⁶ There are large numbers of accusation on the U.S troops in Afghanistan such as the burring of the Quran, denigrating the dead, killing of civilians etc. This significantly reduced the U.S image in Afghanistan and across the Muslim world.

NATO Pull Out

The NATO is looking to pull out of Afghanistan as much as possible with ‘a minimum of exit cost and a toll in lives’ (Daxner, 2011:71). In the Lisbon NATO Summit, November 9-10, 2010, member states agreed, “that the transition to Afghan leadership would begin in 2011 and would be completed by the end of 2014” (Katzman: 21). The pull out of the U.S troops, biggest contributor, begun in July 2011. In mid-2011, the U.S troops stationed numbered around 99,000. However, in May 2012 the number of U.S troops dropped to 90,000. Other states are also putting deadlines for their troops pull out such as France, Canada, Australia and others. Both the absence of progress in Afghanistan and domestic politics in each of the states seems the reason for the early exit.

Nevertheless, exit from Afghanistan is for the NATO forces are getting difficult. The pull out strategy of the U.S seems to suffer a big blow after Pakistan closed the road to Afghanistan. Now what is worrying NATO is “how to leave Afghanistan without losses rather than when to leave” (Burlinova, 2010:1). The Pakistani route to Afghanistan was the major supply route to the NATO forces. However, Pakistan closed its doors after U.S air attack killed around 24 Pakistan troops stationed near the Afghanistan border in November 2011. Since then high level U.S, officials are considering alternative route to facilitate relatively easy and less costly withdrawal. Recently, the Foreign Secretary Clinton signed a treaty with three Central Asian states for the same purpose. Although Pakistan and the U.S have already amended their broken relation the possibility of weakening relation remain imminent. This appears mainly true because on the Pakistan side the U.S refusal to halt repeated drone attacks on the Pakistan soil could be a deal breaker. The U.S in its part continued to criticize Pakistan, especially the intelligence, support to some insurgence groups in Afghanistan. An allegation Pakistan has been categorically denying.

Despite all these, the alternatives are less attractive compare to the Pakistani route in terms of both safety and cost. The international forces “has [estimated] 122,000 shipping containers and 70,000 vehicles in Afghanistan” the transportation of such a huge load create an enormous logistical challenge to the NATO forces (Merey, 2012:2). Compare to the other routes the Pakistani (southern) route is cheaper. However, Pakistan closed the route because of the incident indicated above. Hence, the NATO forces are obliged to search for alternative routes to transport their cargo out of Afghanistan. Alternatives to the Pakistan or the Southern route are the following:

- A) the Northern route – the transportation of NATO equipment’s via “former Soviet republics in Central Asia such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan”(Ibid) and Kirgizstan. Then the cargos will transfer to train to reach a port. These states will demand a higher fee for the passage.
- B) Air- very expensive and there are huge loads that cannot be transported through the air.
- C) Iran- ‘not an option’ because of the unfriendly relation Iran has with the U.S and other NATO member states.

The NATO powers expressed their desire to take back significant amount of the military hard ware they were using in Afghanistan. However, given the difficult situation NATO forces are in, they will be forced to leave behind large amount of weaponries behind. These weaponries if they fell on Taliban or al Qaeda, hand they might be used to attack the West. These weapons, leftovers, could create power imbalance and exacerbate the already volatile security condition in Afghanistan.

Post-NATO Afghanistan

As the foreign forces preparing to pull out of Afghanistan, many are asking what they are living behind. And as stated above, although there are some gains made by the help of foreign troops, Afghanistan still remain largely insecure where “insurgency still operates, poverty still festers and there is nothing resembling a genuine rule of law” (Ibid). Now it is accepted, it is nearly impossible to set up the envisioned ‘liberal nation state’ in Afghanistan.

What the U.S seems to achieve is ‘a cold peace’ because it become unattainable to win the war. In this section, I try to outline different scenarios concerning the future of Afghanistan after the NATO forces withdrawal.

Some scholars proposed a federal system that allocates significant power to the regional players, because the central authority already has no strong authority. Some even suggested dividing the Afghan providences along ethnic lines. However, in both cases it is unlikely to ensure stability in Afghanistan. Others are proposing for involving Taliban in the Afghan government. However, this also has its own challenges. First, the NATO and their Afghan partners need to make ‘a significant compromise’, and this could be considered as a defeat. Second, most prominent Taliban actors are not willing to work with the present arrangements. The attempt to broker a deal with the Taliban failed recently after the U.S troops went on a killing rampage on civilians. Others are indicating, the possibility of putting Afghanistan under UN protectorate. However, this is also hardly enables to halt the civil war in the country.

On the latest summit on Afghanistan, the Chicago Summit May 20-21, 2012, the NATO members’ states and their partner reaffirmed their commitment to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Chicago Summit’s general principles indicated, “[O]ur efforts are part of the broader engagement of the International Community as outlined by the Kabul Conference in July 2010, the Istanbul Process on regional security and cooperation which was launched in November 2011 and the Bonn Conference in December 2011”. (NATO, 2012: 1) The establishment of Taliban ‘contact office’ in Doha, Qatar created tension between the Karzai government, which felt sidelined, and the U.S.

Recently, the Western states are experiencing economic difficulty. As a result, many doubt the full realization of these commitments to Afghanistan. The U.S. has repeatedly indicated its desire to transfer its Afghan responsibility to some other international body. The Chicago Summit main aim was Afghanistan. The Chicago Summit was expected to “finalize the plan to transfer all security responsibilities to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. The summit will also establish enduring political and financial commitment to Afghanistan” (Coffey, 2012: 1). To help the Karzai government firmly stand on its feet seems to require enormous capital and strong dedication. However, both are missing in Afghanistan. With the international forces living behind very corrupt government, ill-trained soldiers, aid and drug driven economy the return of Taliban regime to power seems inevitable. All the gains the U.S and NATO are proud of could be lost in a few weeks, if the Afghan government does not continue to get the assistance.

I suspect in the early years after the NATO forces withdrawal Taliban will regain significant position, if not all, in much of Afghanistan. However, securing stability and order remain a challenge. In addition, the West will continue to support some groups and Pakistan might also fund some other groups. Therefore, I fear a Somalia like situation might surface in Afghanistan. At worst a protracted civil war will loom across much of Afghanistan with no strong central authority and foreign powers covert involvement.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is significant to understand where the U.S. is heading on its war on terror. US-NATO forces were successful in the initial phase of the Afghan war. They secured a quick victory against al Qaeda and Taliban forces. U.S targeted assassination was also successfully eliminated prominent al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. In addition, the NATO forces were successful in securing main diplomatic quarters of Kabul.

Nevertheless, since the launch of the counterinsurgency strategy, in 2006, the insurgencies become powerful. The counterinsurgency’s main objective of nation building fails to realize. NATO and its allies could not continue the war, agreed to leave Afghanistan

in 2014. Hence, NATO's exit strategy and the future fate Afghanistan becomes a major global agenda.

In general, Afghanistan showed the limits of the Western military powers. The U.S and its allies are now forced to reconsider their overall strategy on the so-called war on terror. The Afghanistan they are leaving behind may be much more a security threat than before the invasion. Today al Qaeda is proliferated in many parts of the world. In addition, the problem in Afghanistan is already spilling over to neighboring states like Pakistan. However, the overall impact of the NATO involvement in Afghanistan is yet to be seen in the years to come.

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