

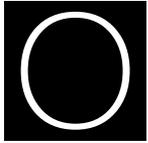
HOW SUCCESS IN AFGHANISTAN CAN BE DEFINED AND WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE

This article aims to explain how “success” can be conceptualized within the context of Afghanistan and explores the potential risks that the Transatlantic Alliance is about to face. The article consists of four parts. The first part contemplates upon the term “success” in Afghanistan and evaluates the efforts of the Transatlantic Alliance. The second part focuses on the lessons learned in the war on terror leading to the third part where NATO’s new approach in Afghanistan is explored. The final chapter discusses the future of NATO in relation to the situation in Afghanistan.

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On 11 September 2001, the world was shaken by the terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center in New York. The attacks were carried out by the fundamentalist terrorist network, Al Qaeda. The United States administration rapidly responded to the deadly terrorist attack by declaring a “war on terror”.¹ Afghanistan, as the first target of the United States led “war on terror”, has been suffering from the war between Taliban and NATO forces since 2001. Between 2003 and 2008 the priority of the United States has been the Iraq war. The Obama administration publicly announced its opposition to the Iraq war during the presidential campaign. As a result of Obama’s critical approach towards Iraq over that of Bush Jr., the scope of the United States again turned to “Operation Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan. In this regard, President Obama called the war in Afghanistan a “just war”² and the U.S.-led ISAF (International Security Force Assistance) in Afghanistan started to implement a new approach which aims to defeat the Taliban both militarily and politically. Until recently, the preference of Americans was to use hard power instead of soft power. Now we see an improvement in the struggle against Taliban, and this struggle has been supported with the tactic of “political offensive” which I will analyze in the upcoming parts of my article.

At this point, I think that it is appropriate to say that “success” in Afghanistan is being conceptualized by the Transatlantic Alliance as maintaining security and contributing to the post-conflict setting in Afghanistan. Parallel to this mission, the Obama administration increased American troops by 30,000 and asked European allies to send more troops to Afghanistan. Due to the reluctance of European allies, the United States took the sole responsibility of clearing Taliban out of Afghanistan, both militarily and politically.

The 21st century has been busy for policy makers in Washington DC. The ongoing war in Iraq created negative consequences for the Republican administration in Iraq. The overwhelming economic burden of the war led the United States into a financial crisis in the last years of the Bush administration. Since President Obama differentiated his approaches to Iraq and Afghanistan, it became clear that the war in Iraq was close to an end. According to this policy, Obama announced that the remaining troops of the United States would evacuate Iraq in 2011. As *The Washington Post* stated, “The withdrawal plan calls for reducing U.S. troops in Iraq from 92,000 today to 50,000 by the end of August, down from a peak of about 170,000 during 2007. The last U.S. troops are scheduled to exit at the end of 2011”³ This

¹ President Bush Declares “War on Terror,” Speech to a Joint Session of Congress, 20 September 2001.

² “Citing ‘just war’ Obama accepts peace prize: After escalating the Afghan conflict, he notes contradiction,” *Washington Post*, 11 December 2009.

³ “U.S. withdrawal from Iraq will be on time, Vice President Biden says,” *Washington Post*, 27 May 2010.

shift in the priority of the United States has shown that success in Afghanistan is more important and urgent than success in Iraq.

It has always been argued that the United States' foreign policies are set up for long term achievements, and not for short term goals. Since the Gulf War in 1991, the Bush, Clinton, and Bush Jr. administrations isolated and marginalized the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. These long term strategies resulted with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The war in Iraq caused large-scale protests from regional countries, as well as other countries.

The hostile perception of the United States was moderated with the election of Obama who was perceived as more moderate and Islam-friendly. It seems that it is not possible to win a war that can be thought of as a war against an ideology, by just implementing hard power. Taking into account that the Taliban has grassroots support in Afghan society, the Obama administration now finds it necessary to use complimentary "political" tactics in

order to win the war against Taliban. Previous years in Afghanistan have shown that without the support of local groups, modern warfare tactics are not capable of defeating the Taliban's paramilitary forces.

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The time spent between 2003 and 2005 does not hold good memories for the Transatlantic Alliance. The Taliban managed to recover by 2003 after the first strike of the United States-led NATO attack. One of the driving forces of this renewed insurgency was Taliban manipulation of the Afghans in southeastern Afghanistan against the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. Until 2005 the coalition forces in Afghanistan faced increasing unrest especially among southeastern Afghans. The region is also crucial as it is an interaction point for Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Obama's speeches before the election have shown that Pakistan will be receiving as much attention from the United States as Afghanistan, due to the growing power of the Taliban in Pakistan, which is perceived as a threat by the policy makers in Washington DC. Given the fact that Pakistan is one of the nuclear powers of the world, the stability and existence of a "democratic" Pakistan should be maintained. As President Obama states, the goal of the Transatlantic Alliance is to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaeda and its ally, the Taliban.⁴

⁴ "Afghanistan Debate Over, Now Time to Execute," *Atlantic Council*, 4 December 2009.

The year 2008 was perceived as a turning point by the majority of the world. The Bush administration had caused a dramatic rise in anti-Americanism among Middle Eastern societies. It was expected that Obama would bring a new dynamic

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to American foreign policy and repair the broken ties with the people of the region. The relations between the United States and the region's authoritarian regimes had been close despite the highly hostile feelings towards the U.S. Obama's critical approach to the Iraq war was one of the reasons why Obama's policy represented "hope". Obama announced that the withdrawal of troops was to be realized by 2011.

Is such a decision only driven because of his liberal views? It could perhaps be argued that it is also due to the fact that by 2008, the United States-led coalition was on the verge of failing in Afghanistan.

The current situation in Afghanistan can be defined with the aim to implement political and militarily offensives together. It became clear that Operation Enduring Freedom could not succeed with bullets and bombs alone. Since the new approach in Afghanistan complements a military offensive with a political offensive, there is a growing number of combatants on the field. Efforts to strengthen and stabilize the political system in Afghanistan became the main priority. Rasmussen defined this new approach as "a political offensive that aims right at the heart of the Taliban." This political offensive aims to develop a post-conflict setting in Afghanistan and promote local participation among society. In this regard three steps have been taken to drive that political challenge: Peace *jirga*, the Kabul Conference and elections in September. Rasmussen argued that these steps are all Afghan-led, but NATO is providing support.

The peace *jirga*⁵ is a local Afghan tradition that aims to bring disputants together and reach a consensus among them. This Karzai-led initiative can provide a chance to implement a local conflict resolution tool at the national level. If this peace *jirga* is to be successful, it will push Afghan society to participate more in the state building process. In intra-state and inter-state conflicts, "Multi-Track Diplomacy" can offer an alternative to official negotiations. Since the role of local groups is high in war-torn societies, having a consensus is a prerequisite to reach a peaceful setting. In this sense the international community and ISAF should focus

⁵ Afghani peace building tradition.

on the implementation of Karzai's peace jirga in order to include local groups in the state building process. An important part of the peace jirga is that the Taliban is not invited to the gatherings, though individual Taliban fighters are welcomed. This initiative appears to be part of a "DDR"⁶ process, aiming to cut the links between Taliban and its fighters. It is doubtful that a DDR process can lead to success unless the armed conflict between the Transatlantic Alliance and the Taliban has come to an end.

The second step of the "political offensive" is the Kabul Conference which will be held at the end of July 2010. The Kabul Conference is a big chance for Afghan local and national authorities to exchange opinions on the formation of state institutions. The aim of the Kabul Conference is to transfer power from coalition forces to Afghan national forces.

One of the most criticized features of intervention-makers are their poor exit plans. It is obvious that every conflict intervention model needs long term planning. In practice we see that most international interventions lack a good exit plan. In Afghanistan the situation is not very different. What we see in the third step of the political offensive is that elections are perceived as the ultimate cure in war torn societies.

Having noted that these political tactics are complementary to the military offensive, it should be mentioned that 2010 is the most crucial year for the war in Afghanistan. The United States has widened its scope in Afghanistan and is pushing the Transatlantic Alliance to remove Taliban off the field. They have asked European partners to increase their combatants but the answer that they received was not positive. One of the former U.S. ambassadors to NATO expressed the growing perception in the United States that the European partners of NATO are becoming security consumers and not security providers.⁷

Afghanistan has been a swamp for several military campaigns. The expansion of Alexander the Great came to an end at those lands. The trigger of the Soviet Union's dissolution was pulled in Afghanistan. Even the United States has been suffering in Afghanistan. The death toll has already reached one thousand.⁸ Several European countries including Turkey have rejected taking an active role in fighting the Taliban. The German President resigned after his remarks on the German involvement in Afghanistan.⁹ One can argue that no major partner of NATO is willing

⁶ Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants in post-conflict situations

⁷ "In Afghanistan, NATO is fighting for its life," *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 December 2009.

⁸ Report by iCasualties, www.icasualties.org/oef

⁹ "German President Quits Over Remarks on Military," *The New York Times*, 31 May 2010.

to increase its involvement in Afghanistan. The military aspect of the Transatlantic Alliance is mostly carried out by the United States army. The number of American forces will probably reach 150,000¹⁰ by the end of 2010. The Marja and Kandahar offensives are independent variables in Afghanistan. If they succeed, there may be a possibility to implement post-conflict setting strategies.

In the contemporary world, NATO is the only multi-national military organization. The alliance intervened in several armed conflicts such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Nowadays, Afghanistan is one of the main objects of international politics. As the armed force of the Transatlantic Alliance, NATO has also been acting as a post-conflict intervention platform that contributes to the state building process. In the case of Afghanistan, NATO has two roles. First, NATO has been fighting with Taliban on the field. Second, NATO supports the 'Afghan-led' state building activities. These two roles make NATO a party to the conflict. All the NATO-supported state building activities lack long term planning and this situation has the potential to cause NATO to face failure in "Operation Enduring Freedom". The political agenda of the world is getting busier day by day. NATO as the only multi-national military organization should embrace its new role in Afghanistan which is to defeat Taliban and translocate the power to Afghan national forces. The only way to reach success in Afghanistan is to have sustainable democratic governance. The developments in Afghanistan in the years ahead will no doubt be used to evaluate the success of NATO.

¹⁰ "Doubts as Karzai Launches Peace Bid," *ABC*, 1 June 2010.