

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

NATO in Afghanistan

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Q1: What is the status of the war in Afghanistan?

A1: The mission in Afghanistan is facing a long list of challenges. The most glaring challenge is the lack of a coordinated strategy both at the military level and in the area of post-conflict reconstruction. Allied efforts on the ground currently resemble a patchwork quilt, consisting of varying capabilities and commitments, with no overarching design. Some innovative models—such as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—have been developed. But in the case of the PRTs, each is led by a different nation, with little cooperation or no common approach, resulting in confusion as to who does what, when, and where. The United States and its allies have also failed to develop a viable counternarcotics strategy. Recent estimates by the United Nations suggest that, despite sizeable sums spent by the West to put an end to it, Afghanistan's opium production continues to grow, increasing by 34 percent since last year. The country's output now accounts for a staggering 93 percent of the world's opium supply. Multiple ideas, ranging from new methods for poppy eradication to legalizing the crops for medicinal purposes, have been proposed to counter this trend, but consensus and resources remain elusive. Finally, because of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf's help in the hunt for al Qaeda, the United States and its partners have also neglected to address larger regional problems, especially the deepening unrest in Pakistan. As a result, Islamist rebellions in the lawless North-West Frontier Province and South Waziristan are growing and have had a dramatic destabilizing effect on Afghanistan.

Q2: Was Defense Secretary Robert Gates right to criticize NATO allies for doing too little in Afghanistan?

A2: Secretary Gates was correct in his assertion that some European allies have failed to commit sufficient troops and equipment (although such comments might have been better received behind closed doors). For months, helicopters and trainers have been in short supply. Despite U.S. pressure, though, many NATO allies are unable or unwilling to do more. Secretary Gates is also right to worry about the staying power of some NATO allies. Never having adequately explained to their publics the goals that their troops are helping to accomplish, most political elites in Europe are under enormous pressure to bring their troops home just at a time when greater support is needed. That said, some allies, such as the Dutch, the British, and the Canadians, have continued to make sizeable contributions on the ground, despite mounting public opposition.

Q3: What should be done to strengthen the Afghanistan mission?

A3: First, the United Nations should appoint a special high commissioner to take on the herculean task of coordinating the various international actors on the ground and provide a framework under which various soft and hard tasks can be merged. Paddy Ashdown is currently being considered as a candidate for such a role. Second, NATO needs to overhaul the overarching concept for its Afghan mission. That process should begin with clear agreement and articulation of the mission's aims, followed by a clarification of how NATO's role fits into what some have dubbed the three Ds: defense, development, and diplomacy. Leaders in NATO countries then need to take that strategy to their publics and reiterate why this mission is crucial for the future of Afghanistan, the safety and security of American and European citizens, and NATO more broadly. Third, more resources need to be put toward the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. That means greater involvement of multilateral and international organizations, such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the European Union. Those organizations are on the ground, but their contributions to date have not come close to matching the scale of the tasks at hand. Police training, for example, is still woefully underfunded. And without proper training, the local army and police forces cannot be entrusted to prevent the Taliban from establishing lawless fiefdoms from which attacks can be launched on the Afghan government. There must also be massive investment in rural development to give local farmers an alternative to growing poppies and thus undercut the Taliban's stranglehold on the opium trade.

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