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DISSECTING THE NATO DRAWDOWN:

WHY IS STRUCTURAL REFORM IN AFGHANISTAN SUCH A DUBIOUS PROSPECT?

With NATO-led security enforcement team International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)[1] being withdrawn from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan[2] in 2014, the transition to national recovery and independence after over a decade of military support and intervention is proving to be a complex, multidimensional regional challenge for Afghans and the international community alike. Protracted inadequacies in too hasty a complete drawdown on NATO's part are on the brink of plunging the already vulnerable nation into an exacerbated state of further sociopolitical distress. To complicate matters, there continue to exist certain indelible discrepancies between the actions and rhetoric of external actors engaged in Afghanistan:

Although the US spared no effort in legitimizing and launching military-backed counterinsurgency tactics on the ground during the war (e.g. the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on the WTC prompted the acquisition of Alliance support in initiating Operation Active Endeavour[3] and adopting MC472[4]),[5] her commitment to prevent continuing terrorist occupancy in Afghanistan was, to a notable extent, undermined by the reversion to lobbying for a "negotiated settlement"[6] with the Taliban.

Throughout the ongoing NATO intervention operations in Afghanistan, it has become evident that there remain several systemic gaps the international community has failed to bridge — between, for instance, employing zero-tolerance policies and creating pacific paths for 'cohabitation' with local insurgencies (e.g. as reported by a number of security-research

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[1] "NATO and Afghanistan: Questions & Answers." North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2013. Accessed May 25, 2015.
[2] Hereafter referred to as Afghanistan.
[3] OAE came into effect in October 2001.
[4] Military Concept for Defense Against Terrorism [NATO].
[5] Asey, Tamim. "What Now for Afghanistan?" The Diplomat, January 11, 2015.
[6] Zenebi, Abdi. "The Post-NATO Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges." European Scientific Journal 2 (2013). p. 234. doi: ISSN: 1857 – 7881.

watchdogs, the new Afghan administration has been in hot pursuit of this trend of tactical venues:

> "By engaging regional governments, [current Afghan President, Dr Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai] is taking significant steps to try to achieve a negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and insurgent groups"[7].

Moreover, whether NATO's methods of loosening Taliban grip on Afghan territory were indeed effective can be assessed against forward implications in a longer-term context: The nation's long-standing diplomatic ties to Pakistan facilitate crossings over the vastly porous Af-Pak border. It follows as no surprise that certain numbers of the Afghan Taliban, in having been coerced to concede their territorial power[8], are suspected to have been moving to operate and regrow their regime from Pakistan, as it is one of the most strategic access points to a new 'haven' for refocussing their efforts in adapted ways.

Of the various potential drivers of conflict that are not to be dismissed as future possibilities with which Afghanistan will have to reckon, rampant IO-inflicted disarray of societal structures, obstinately elbows its way onto the national sphere of influence. The geographic positioning of such a war-torn, economically disparaged, and constitutionally unstable nation as Afghanistan also makes internal security susceptible to the volatility of proxy wars — (and) to uncorked political tensions between nuclear powers India and Pakistan.

The struggle to stabilize Afghanistan has been exacerbated and alleviated in turns by land grabbing and power sharing. Over the years, delegation of responsibility across partner states and NATO member states has been imbalanced, as depicted by the table below:

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[7] Katzman, Kenneth. "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy." Congressional Research Service, 2015.

[8] Laub, Zachary. "The Taliban in Afghanistan." Council on Foreign Relations. July 4, 2014. Accessed May 19, 2015.

Fig. 1.[9] Troop Deployments Quantified: Afghanistan 2011 Statistics

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)

Distribution as such is also a sensitive issue in other respects; not only for foreign fingers in the Afghan pie, so to speak; but also in relation to the internal dimension (specifically, ethnic representation). This problem has a myriad of problematic ramifications:

> "[The] Afghan National Army (ANA) and [local police force] do not represent [all] ethnic groups of the country. The forces of the Afghans do not have the balanced proportion of the ethnic groups like Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik and Uzbeks; [therefore,] technically[,] the Afghan troops are on the 'fault line.' Due to these reasons, desertions [of members of the] Afghan forces [is becoming increasingly common]. [C]onstant vigil is kept on Afghan forces so that they may not harm their trainers or leak secrets to [the] Taliban. [Neither] the US [nor] NATO forces [trust] ANA. […If] this is the existing plight of an army, their future strength is really a big question mark."[10]

The significance of adequate representation in this regard can be further extrapolated in two-pronged fashion: First, not sufficiently accentuating a sense of national priority toward attending to cultural sensitivity (as pertaining to ethnic differentiation) implicitly paves the way for external agents in particular to erroneously homogenize "the Other" (i.e. in this case, Afghan civilians and other locals). Second, the composition of appropriated protectorates impacts public security interests. Backlashes of neglecting to safeguard against informed, remedial action include (i) security personnel suffering estrangement from their 'cause'; and (ii) inefficacious

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[9] Courtesy: ISAF HQ.
[10] "US-NATO Exit from Afghanistan: Challenges and Options Beyond 2014." pp. 63-64. 2014.

groundwork for intelligently scoping out regional tensions to (periodically) assess security needs therein. The figure below depicts population variance from the ethnic lens:

Fig. 2.[11] Comparative Statistical Overview: Ethnic Distributions Across Afghanistan
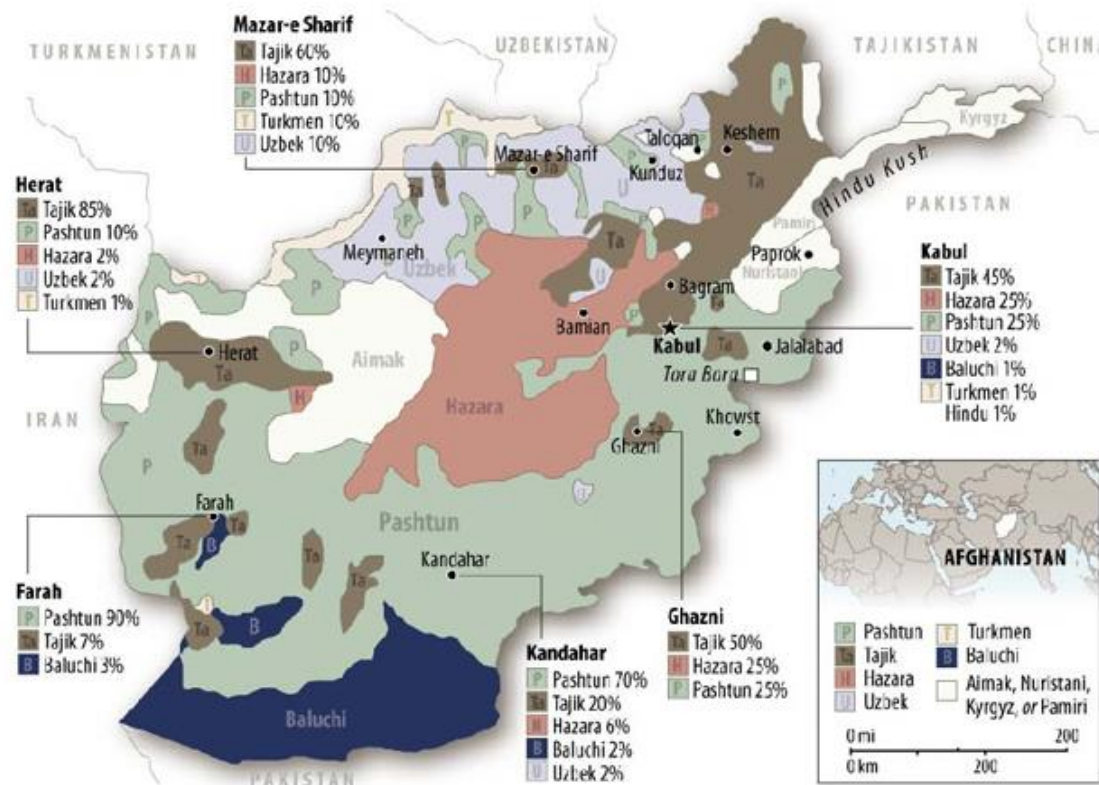
Courtesy Congressional Research Service

Success of other (past) NATO operations, such as the meticulous execution of UN mandate in Libya via Operation Unified Protector, can serve as indicators for reshaping of future action: It is noted that UNSCRs 1970 and 1973[12] were enacted and actualized by NATO command, to quash the Qadhafi regime, in February 2011.[13] When the action plan is analyzed, the specificities of what needs to be carried out become apparent as key factors in securing achievement: For the Libya case, there were targeted milestones and applicable plans of action — enforcing a no-fly zone; stressing an arms embargo on the high seas (to prevent weapons transfer); capitalizing the absolute nature of the need for civilian lives to be protected by any and all necessary means; and so on. With all objectives having been met "to the letter," the operation was terminated on

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[11] Courtesy: CRS.

[12] Relating to the condemnation of the "gross and systematic violation of human rights".

[13] "NATO and Afghanistan." North Atlantic Treaty Organization. May 7, 2015. Accessed May 20, 2015.

October 31, 2011.[14] The precedent for this was, however, initiation of a de facto military overtaking by NATO for carrying out the security enforcement agenda. For application to the Afghanistan context, there is of course a greater need for delicately balanced, multi-faceted collaboration between NATO task forces and local bodies.

This is particularly prudent with the changing face of security and peacebuilding overall: With hermeneutical approaches to peacebuilding being continually refined through legislative/UN-media and other lenses, the contemporary focus is evidently in envisioned extents and limitations of multinational operations — it is no longer so much about ('merely') preventing conflict and/or an outbreak of war in a capricious geopolitical environment as about endowing local administration and civil society with autonomously defensible and regulatory capacities.

So, in light of the prevailing spectrum of ground complexities in Afghanistan, NATO's new non-combat "Resolute Support" operation (launched at the start of January 2015)[15], which marked the significantly lowered numbers of on-the-ground NATO personnel (reduction to a 34,000-strong US force in February 2014[16]), needs to be verily supplemented by standardized-minimum achievements on the following counts:

(i)   Designing a network coordination[17] system that hoists change-agents with specific field knowledge (spanning sociocultural and linguistic competencies) to key positions of influence in both military and peacebuilding processes;

(ii)   Facilitating impactful sharing of geopolitical intelligence on national provinces (particularly rural ones[18], or ones in which inhabitants have especially limited access to justice, as well as transportation and other resources), to develop better informed security strategies thereof;

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] "A New Chapter in NATO-Afghanistan Relations from 2015." North Atlantic Treaty Organization. May 1, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2015.

[16] Katzman, Kenneth. "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy." p.25. Congressional Research Service, 2015.

[17] Primarily, this refers to the need for facilitating more effective, clear and goal-oriented communication and partnership between IOs, dynamic on-site research teams, local NGO staff and media representatives, ministerial departments, and so on.

[18] UNHCR observations indicate the shifting nature of Taliban resurgence strategies, in their having moved from targeting international military personnel to aiming for low-security points in unregulated rural areas: Doing so enables them to gain land and power, by asserting authoritarian control over local communities.

(iii)   Collaborating more closely with local CSOs and parliamentary executives[19] to underscore for all engaged actors the appropriate sociopolitical relations to be shared between Afghan military forces and the public;

(iv)   Setting a clear protocol and budget for state-based action (military and otherwise) in the event of future militant uprisings by insurgent actors; and

(v)   Establishing accessible channels of dialogue between local youth enrolled at national colleges and NATO/state officials, for discussion and debate on nation-rebuilding imperatives.

Until such a time that relevant milestones can encapsulate wider-reaching grasp, capacity and vision, desired structural reform in the national sphere is likely to remain out of reach. The 2014 withdrawal of NATO's 87,000 troops[20] deployed to Afghanistan (prior to the Resolute Support launch) has not only been interpreted in variant ways by the local parties[21], but has also inculcated a culture of militancy-linked dependency. As a result, local Afghan troops are, in a multitude of ways, floundering to fill their long-time interveners' shoes, even as specialized training is administered to them.

Moreover, with the (reasonable) assumption that the reform in question would entail a more self-sustaining system with good governance and established rule of law, the prerequisite foundation of autonomy for such a state must be built on democratic principles, the embedding of which requires protection of uncorrupted electoral processes across the nation. As stipulated in 2014 DIIS report, the importance of achieving this is vital to the survival of Afghanistan's security landscape:

> "It is absolutely necessary that these elections are held in a fair and free manner and are not open to the allegations of corruption that blighted the 2009 presidential elections. If Afghanistan fails to meet this condition, then the internal acrimony will destroy the chances of peace and security, and it will lapse into chaos again. This carries within it the danger of the re-appearance of non-state terrorist groups again in Afghanistan."[22]

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[19] Objectives of this step involve cultivating cross-dimensional initiatives to address the multi-layered problems of Afghan society in an interdisciplinary manner.

[20] "US-NATO Exit from Afghanistan: Challenges and Options Beyond 2014." p. 61. 2014.

[21] Although the US-led NATO mission was 'organizationally' declared to have been successful, the Taliban issued a statement expressing how they viewed the lowering of ISAF's flag on Afghan land (after the 13-year intervention) as a demoralized defeat over time.

[22] Aziz, Khalid. "Conditions for a Successful Transition in Afghanistan Post-2014." Danish Institute of International Studies, 2014. doi: ISBN 978-87-7605-659-9.

Furthermore, given that the Taliban regime has been taking to more insidious, 'under-the-radar' measures (i.e. expansion through control of vulnerable village communities rather than open combat with foreign armed bodies and/or the state)[23], it seems too optimistic to believe that even an adequately trained local-military sector would be sufficient to enforce compliance or punitive measures on undaunted radical groups such as the Taliban.

NATO conflict-management training initiatives designed to address this very issue would have to involve (further) fortifying province-based monitoring and regulation means of support, which can be accomplished by building on the already formulated idea of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and applying it not only to educational and industrial contexts[24] but also to security enhancement on a 'micro' level. However, over their effective years, the PRTs have incurred some specific challenges, including (i) deficient representation and involvement of local authorities[25]; and (ii) faltering political will for multinational cooperation (e.g. former Afghan President Hamid Karzai's insistence on withdrawal of foreign assistance on such provincial echelons).

These obstacles may (respectively) be overcome through enforcing equal participation and affirmative-action policies, and prioritizing a decisive, time-bound ministerial consensus on mutually agreeable extents of foreign 'intervention' in civil service. In addition to continuation of such 'mid-range' efforts, the supplementary 'macro' requirements for implementing integrated multilateral cooperation are no less important, on the larger scale.

Ultimately, what needs to be firmly cemented as a diversified cornerstone of all Afghan ministerial practices and nation-rebuilding efforts is a number of factors, among which priorities are (legislative enforcement of) state obligation, and feasible project development (to be sustainable by local organizations) — stumbling blocks that NATO and other engaged IOs have not quite managed to effectively dislodge as of yet. The enduring path to structural reform in Afghanistan's sociopolitical landscape will remain contingent on the success of this endeavor, at least for the foreseeable future.

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[23] Cf. footnote 6.

[24] The UK-led Helmand PRT, for example, was a collaborative (multinational) effort to support nation rebuilding in development contexts, including education reform and coverage of basic needs.

[25] As remarked on by former Farah PRT Commander Lawrence Vasquez in 2010.

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