



End-State Afghanistan: A European Perspective

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The international conference on Afghanistan called upon by Germany and the United Kingdom and to be held later this year or in early 2010, will probably offer the very last opportunity for the international community to turn the tide. It will also offer an ultimate opportunity for the EU and the member states to develop a truly shared European view on a comprehensive strategy and potential contributions. However, our actions in Afghanistan can only be part of a more global approach. This demonstrates that also the EU needs a coherent “Grand Strategy”. With the Lisbon Treaty we all signed up to this rather urgent objective.

When in 2001 the international community launched its intervention in Afghanistan it could count on broad political support and the understanding of a large share of public opinion. Eight years later the initial optimistic discourse has waned. Yet, defeatism, as it emerged a few years ago with regard to Iraq, is not warranted. Paradoxically the current situation, as bad as it may be, also contains hope for the better. A new approach, with more emphasis on the political and civilian aspects, is not just vital – it may still be achievable.

A bottom-up approach addressing separately the many dimensions and shortfalls of this very complicated crisis management exercise will clearly be insufficient to engender the kind of change required at present. The fundamental question to be addressed and answered is: how far are we down the road of a new strategy, shared by all actors involved, and do we have an implementation mechanism able to still generate success? Furthermore, how do we define success?

Serenity

A limited number of official publications do address these more strategic-level issues. However they always start from a national perspective emphasising the national contribution of participating countries and expecting other actors to fill the perceived gaps. This shows that an international community which can actually count on the active contribution of a panoply of actors, is still unable to achieve unity of effort and constantly needs to generate requests for “more”. This results in increasing political tension between the international community and the Afghan authorities as well as tensions within the international community itself, even among EU countries that jointly participate in operations or projects but now are looking for relief. This vicious circle must be broken. Unfortunately, a serene debate is hampered by a series of ambiguities that has characterised crisis management in Afghanistan from the outset.

Objectives and Means

All too often confusion is created – willingly or unwillingly – between strategic objectives for Afghanistan and the means required to achieve them. In particular, it has been unclear from the beginning whether the US considered state-building and reconstruction as key objectives in their own right, or merely a condition to achieve success in its “Global War on Terror”. It allowed for all kinds of mission creep, produced confusion at the political level and generated false hope among the local population. This probably explains why a sincere assessment of the indeed ambiguous, but at the same time ambitious objectives versus the required means is rarely if ever made.

At present the Obama Administration is recalibrating its strategic objectives and bringing more clarity. On the military side some tough “lessons identified” about counter-insurgency and counter terrorism are now being studied. It is too soon to judge how and whether the revised military objectives will be met with the current and planned US troop reinforcements. On the other hand, it is clear that the US is now giving priority to Afghanistan, embracing the political, civilian and military aspects of the crisis and planning to generate the corresponding additional military resources. But we can also observe that the participation of international partners in this debate and their influence on the strategic outcome remain rather limited.

A Two-Pronged Approach with Separate Civilian and Military Tracks

For the civilian dimension, initially both the definition and the implementation of a strategy for reconstruction had to a large extent been left to the Afghan government, with an international donor conference providing the necessary finance¹. Later on, attempts have been made by the international community to gain more grip on strategy and implementation, however with limited success². The

¹ The Bonn Agreement, 5 December 2001.

² Tokyo Conference (21-22 Jan. 2002), London Conference (31 Jan.-1Feb. 2006), The Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS – 2006) and The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS – 2008)

net result is far too limited. The objective “to clear, hold and build”- the military clearing and holding, and civilian partners together with local authorities taking care of the rebuilding - is far from being reached. From previous operations we know that in such a scenario the military runs the risk of becoming part of the problem rather than contributing to the solution.

For the civilian aspects as well, the Obama Administration has revised its policy. However, several elements still remain unclear and even worrying. In particular one could wonder whether the international community present in the field has reached consensus on any downscaled or revised civilian objective. Even if implicitly this would be the case, there is still no clear sign of any comprehensive process generating the required means, not even for a modest level of ambition.

NATO's Involvement

NATO finds itself in a rather exceptional situation. Not being involved in the initial military operations, it now leads an important part of the crisis management effort, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which has gradually come to cover the whole of the Afghan territory. Its task is to assist in establishing a safe and secure environment. However, the supporting political and civilian efforts - not a NATO responsibility- never fully materialized. The additional tasks subsequently assumed by NATO in the area of Security Sector Reform and civil-military assistance were and will - even with enhanced NATO recourses - inherently remain insufficient to turn the tide. As to the military dimension, NATO is far from being the only actor on the ground. NATO's mission is obviously only part of the broader efforts of the international community. The Alliance cannot be held responsible for the international efforts as a whole. Linking the future of NATO to the outcome of crisis management in Afghanistan, as argued by some, is not a constructive contribution to a serene debate.

The EU and its Member States

In 2001 Europe immediately voiced its solidarity with the US. But at the time the focus of the EU and its Member States was on the widening and deepening of the Union itself after the fall of the

Berlin Wall. The military dimension of crisis management for Afghanistan was only discussed sideways in the EU.

As to the civilian aspects, we can draw a parallel: the crisis in Yugoslavia came too early for any significant military ESDP response³; the one in Afghanistan too soon for any significant civilian ESDP support. Notwithstanding the remarkable progress recently achieved in the area of civil and civil-military operations⁴, the EU is still not able to generate capabilities at the level required to support an operation such as the one in Afghanistan⁵.

Where the European Commission has supranational authority, various projects have been set up in Afghanistan. It expresses solidarity, in the same way as the Member States do. And indeed, the Member States showed solidarity right from the start by providing military, civil and financial support but – with a few exceptions such as the UK – remain absent from the strategic debate. Based on their own logic and priorities, governments set an upper and lower limit for their respective contributions, which differ widely, but are all based on the same premise of doing “the minimum necessary” to maintain “good relations” with the US. Europe’s absence in the strategic debate

³ Lessons drawn from the inability of the EU to intervene with military means at the outbreak of the crisis in Yugoslavia (1991) led to the 1998 French British bilateral summit at Saint-Malo which defined the main objectives and the framework of the ESDP. At the Cologne European Council (1999), Member States signed up to these proposals.

⁴ With the Headline Goal 2010 impressive conceptual work has been done in recent years to identify the civilian capabilities required to support the all in all very moderate EU military level of ambition, notably of deploying at short notice a military force of 60,000 men supplemented by corresponding air and naval assets. However, it remains difficult for countries to commit themselves to provide the required civilian capabilities. In contrast to the military, police officers, judges, experts in rule of law and civil administration are focused on tasks within their respective countries. There are (as yet) no EU-owned civilian units or groups of experts, dedicated for immediate deployment in the event of an upcoming EU crisis management operation.

⁵ Apart from the political aspects and the fact that the Union has to support a series of ongoing EU-civilian and civil-military operations, there is the additional difficulty that initially civilian ESDP capabilities have been developed to operate in a “safe and secure environment”, a situation that has seldom or never existed in Afghanistan. And in this respect, Afghanistan is not that exceptional a theatre. In order to cope with grey situations, called “pre-stability” or “fragile security”, the only option is to even further enhance the ongoing civil-military cooperation within the Union.

impedes the development of a strategic vision on the deployment of its own assets. In this context, a comprehensive approach is all but impossible.

To Conclude

To put the crisis management on the right track it is now -more than ever- time to do away with all of the remaining ambiguities and ill-defined objectives. The new international conference called upon by Germany and the United Kingdom on 6 September, backed by France and to be held later this year or in early 2010, will probably offer the very last opportunity for the international community to do so and to turn the tide in Afghanistan. It will also offer an ultimate opportunity for the EU and the member states to develop a truly shared European view on strategy and implementation. Is Afghanistan and the wider region of importance or not? What is the desired end-state?

The only hope for the better is for the conference to generate a global understanding among all relevant actors on the strategic objectives, on a comprehensive roadmap and finally, on a mechanism to generate the required financial, civilian and military means. A credible burden-sharing can only be based on commonly identified strategic shortfalls. This is not a plea for “more”, but above all for “better”. There is no military solution, but neither is there at present a political solution without the military means. These can however only be successfully deployed if part of a truly comprehensive approach and above all, in the context of a political roadmap which involves all regional actors⁶. Our actions in Afghanistan can only be part and parcel of a more global approach.

In turn, this demonstrates that the EU needs a coherent “Grand Strategy” about the values it wants to protect and how it should act as a responsible actor within the international community to empower these values. The *European Security Strategy* allows for hope in that direction, but hope is not a strategy.

⁶ See hereafter; “Crisis management Operations: An EU checklist”.

Crisis Management Operations: An EU Checklist

During my tenure as permanent representative to the Military Committee of the EU (2002 - 2007), I could observe that throughout the planning process for a military or a civil-military operation the following principles and guidelines were always taken into account in order to safeguard chances for success:

1. Absolute clarity of the military tasks and objectives to be achieved (thus avoiding mission creep as well as creation of false hope).
2. Rules of engagement allowing the use of force whenever required to achieve the mission of the operation.
3. Unity of command.
4. Generation of sufficient forces for the objectives (which otherwise have to be adapted in function of the available forces, or deployment cancelled or postponed).
5. Guaranteeing the security of one's own forces.
6. The availability of reserves able to cope with any worst-case scenario.
7. Clear assignment of the non-military tasks to other partners present in theatre (who in turn have to go through a similar checklist).
8. Clarity of the desired end-state, the ultimate objective (the military objective being only a means to that end).
9. Support of public opinion at home and of the local population on the ground.
10. Primus inter pares: a comprehensive political strategy.

Compelling such a list is of course easy; fulfilling all of these conditions in real life is another matter. The complex crisis management for Afghanistan illustrates this. Yet the list is useful, as a tool to analyse what went wrong and how we can do better in the future.

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