

Afghanistan: new manoeuvres

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The American government will send a further 3,000 marines to Afghanistan and is pressing for other NATO member states to provide additional combat-ready troops. Will a military escalation lead to success? The evidence since 2001 is far from encouraging and alternatives to an offensive war now ought to be seriously considered.

The recent attack against the hotel Serena in Kabul fits into an emerging pattern in which military escalation is increasingly met with more sophisticated terrorist attacks by the Taliban. Tension within NATO between member states is now palpable. Countries which have entered the country's trouble spots in the South - the USA, the UK, Canada and The Netherlands - want others to join them. Other countries such as Norway, Spain and Germany, amongst others, are sceptical. Many advocate an "Afghanization" of the military effort. NATO will discuss escalation plans in April at a meeting in Bucharest. In the meantime, it's important to take stock of the experience to date and to establish what the alternatives are at present.

The strategy of additional military force and an increasingly offensive war have, up until now, led to an experience both as generally negative as it is relatively clear cut. The international military escalation has taken place gradually, albeit with a noticeable jump in 2004 when the United States government more than doubled its presence from around 8,000 soldiers to approximately 20,000. At present, NATO has more than 40,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, besides a further 8,000 troops under US command who are waging their own war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In total, the USA and NATO have more than tripled their forces since 2002 and numbers are now approximately half of those which the Soviet Union had in the country for most of the war in the 1980s.

What outcome has this led to? The Taliban have gone from carrying out isolated attacks in 2003 to becoming an efficient guerrilla organisation. Taliban resistance really got going in 2005, the year after the Americans doubled their military presence. From a military point of view, the Taliban are the weaker side in the conflict, but they have learned quickly and increasingly use the tactics of "asymmetrical warfare", such as suicide bombing, roadside bombs, and hostage taking. Each time NATO has sent more troops, the Taliban have risen to the challenge and met it. The number of attacks on foreign forces, humanitarian aid workers, the Afghan police and other government agencies has steadily increased - most recently with a 20 percent jump between 2006 and 2007. Suicide bombings have gone up from three in 2004 to 17 in 2005, climbing to 123 in 2006, before reaching 137 last year. In 2002, there were none at all.

Geographically, the unrest has spread from its heartlands in the south and the east to the whole of the southern part of the country. Various skirmishes in the border provinces with Iran in the West have also taken place. The Taliban have also shown their offensive capability in the north. In more and more regions of the country, the Taliban go about their business quite openly. They run their own local administrations, levy taxes on the population and have implemented their own legal system.

There are clear signs that NATO is losing ground with Afghan public opinion. Recent surveys carried out by Western research units, despite certain shortcomings, deserve to be taken into account in this regard. A research unit with close ties to the echelons of power in Washington has shown that less than half of the population in six southeastern provinces devastated by the war considers the presence of NATO to be positive. In the country at large, the same numbers think that NATO is just as responsible for civilian casualties, fatal or otherwise, as the Taliban. And the number of those casualties increases at the same rate as the war intensifies. The United Nations estimates that more than one thousand civilians were killed last year. During NATO's extensive Operation Mountain Thrust in the summer of 2006, reliable sources indicate that between 500 and 600 civilians were killed over a four week period. President Karzai publicly criticised NATO at the time and underlined the fact that Afghan lives count just as much as anybody else's.

NATO accepted the criticism but, in practice, end results have not changed much. Waging war on a guerrilla movement by means of a widespread bombing campaign almost inevitably brings with it the loss of civilian life, and NATO especially uses air strikes in order to limit troop casualties on the ground. The number of air strikes rose by 20 per cent between 2006 and 2007, to a total of 2,740 sorties. That is double the figure for Iraq in the same year. The Taliban, who themselves display considerable contempt for civilian life, are quick to issue press briefings highlighting the victims of the international war. By doing so, they score considerable propaganda victories.

At the same time, opinion polls show that Afghans are losing confidence in the government. Faith in the resilience of the international presence and the government in relation to the Taliban onslaught is also falling. The growing protests against the war's civilian casualties may only be the tip of the iceberg. A report by the US President's National Security Council in December this year reached a bleak conclusion: the USA and NATO are losing the war.

Given that considerable military escalation has already taken place, and that little or no ground has been won as a result - and in some areas it seems to have been counterproductive - it seems imprudent to simply offer more of the same. To carry on with an offensive war with additional troops will probably only lead to a further round of escalation by the Taliban. A widening of the war on the Pakistani side of the border will be seriously problematic for the same reason.

Instead, NATO should seriously evaluate a number of alternatives which have emerged from policy discussions in Brussels, Kabul and other capitals, but which up until now have been little more than background noise. They touch on possible outcomes such as:

- Modifying the approach to that of a more defensive war, reinforcing aspects of "stabilisation", concentrating on the security of the everyday Afghani instead of a militarily defeat of the Taliban.
- "Afghanise" the war by arming local groups so that they can protect civilians because the formation of the Afghani army and police force is a slow process.
- Invest more in negotiating with Taliban leaders and those with links to them at the local level, just as the British have done in areas in the south.
- Emphasise the decentralisation of state functions, creating local, traditional power structures, for example, village councils which can handle a series of issues, from aid through to the resolution of conflicts and litigation.

None of these alternatives lack drawbacks. We know this from our experience in Afghanistan and in other places. But we also know that a simple military escalation is not only insufficient - something which NATO clearly recognises - but that it will also probably not bring about the desired results. The countries within NATO which are sceptical about a military surge should consequently lead the way in assessing a change of course.

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