

Af-Pak, NATO and Ike's Playbook

ANALYZING AFGHANISTAN BY REVIEWING "THE VIETNAM WAR THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN"

Address by DAVID ABSHIRE, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO

Delivered to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Chicago, Ill., Sept. 22, 2009

There is a growing fear within both the American political right and left that General McChrystal's request for additional troop increases in Afghanistan will start us on the road to another Vietnam. Richard Haas, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, representing the heart of the establishment, has asserted that Afghanistan has shifted from a "war of necessity" to a "war of choice." This was followed by a dramatic statement from the conservative columnist George Will, who argues that we should withdraw the bulk of our conventional forces from Afghanistan and rely on *Predator* drones, cruise missiles and Special Forces as part of an anti-al-Qaeda strategy that concentrates primarily on Pakistan. In Congress, the powerful Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, David Obey, has given the Administration less than a year to demonstrate success. All of these voices contradict President Obama's assertion that continued operations are needed because of the al-Qaeda threat. If we pull out of Afghanistan, Pakistan would likely fall to the Taliban and Pakistani nuclear weapons would be up for grabs. This might invite India to intervene causing the conflict to spread across the region, thus making the current situation look tame in comparison.

As troop increases and the overall Af-Pak strategy are debated, it may be useful for the Administration to look towards a comparison with the Vietnam War that didn't happen. In 1954, President Eisenhower was confronted with the collapsing French military effort in Indochina. Viet Minh forces surrounded the French base at Dien Bien Phu, and the French were seeking American intervention. Prominent voices in the Eisenhower Administration, most notably Vice President Richard Nixon and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Radford advocated a forceful U.S. intervention to forestall a Communist victory over a close ally. Eisenhower questioned the utility of American intervention in what he saw as more of a French colonial matter rather than the broader struggle to contain Communism, but as the situation at Dien Bien Phu further deteriorated, he began to consider the consequences of Communist victory in South Asia and its impact on the entire region.

Before the American forces would intervene in Indochina, Ike determined that a clear set of criteria had to be met. The first criterion was the presence of indigenous support. The French had long been working, with American aid, to establish a Vietnamese-led army, but after eighty years of colonial rule, many Vietnamese

found it hard to believe that the French were fighting the Viet Minh for the sake of Vietnamese independence. The second and third criteria were whether American intervention would be able to turn the tide and fit within the larger strategy of the Cold War. Eisenhower did not want to commit American forces in an act of war only to face defeat or distract from the nation's strategic objectives. The fourth and fifth criteria were the presence of Congressional and allied support. Eisenhower facilitated off-the-record meetings between military and Congressional leadership to provide a full briefing of the situation and discuss options for intervention. Out of these discussions it became clear that Congress could not support American intervention without support from Great Britain and the ANZUS powers. Eisenhower contacted London, but Churchill showed little enthusiasm for intervention. As Dien Bien Phu was on the verge of being overrun, the French requested direct U.S. intervention, but Eisenhower held fast. There would be no American intervention without allies.

These criteria should be used by the Obama Administration to evaluate further deployments to Afghanistan. While the Eisenhower criteria were based around an initial intervention, they are of equal utility regarding a further recommitment. Furthermore, these criteria lay out how we can use further American deployment as leverage in Kabul and Brussels. In Afghanistan, we enjoy the support of the people, but we are confronted with a Karzai regime that is thoroughly corrupt. More American troops should be contingent on a top-to-bottom "clean-out" of the Afghan government. While I am inclined to believe in the need for more troops, the Obama Administration must show how this recommitment will not only disrupt and defeat al-Qaeda and their Taliban enablers, but also compliment the larger security strategy of the United States. Further deployment must also have Congressional support. Just as he did in the build-up to the Iraq "surge," Secretary Gates and other Administration officials must meet with Congressional leadership to build support for the deployment. This can only be done behind closed doors, not in committee hearings.

The most important step will be to make sure that a deployment of U.S. forces and a recommitment to Afghanistan is matched by a similar recommitment by our NATO allies and the G-20 nations. It is worth asking, by Americanizing the conflict while Europeans begin to prematurely withdraw, are we following the Vietnam path? The Eisenhower criteria were not met in 1954, but

under the Johnson Administration we unilaterally and incrementally increased our forces to half-a-million men, proceeding under the belief that there was "light at the end of the tunnel." This continued until the Tet Offensive destroyed President Johnson politically. The Vietnam failure shows the folly of fighting an Americanized war without a broad coalition of allies.

The value of allies to a military campaign becomes obvious when examining the contrasting from the Korean War. In Korea, I served as a company commander with the 25th division alongside a fearless Turkish brigade. Our UN allies, Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece and others also fought with us under the command of General MacArthur and General Ridgeway. Today, South Korea is free, while South Vietnam is not.

It is shocking that as we increase our commitment to Afghanistan, almost no one, including the President, has yet to call for some form of comparable commitments from our allies. Ironically, it was the European members of the Alliance that took the initiative to invoke Article 5 after the 9/11 attacks, signaling that the attacks of that day were an attack against them all. Thus, Europeans were willing to make Afghanistan NATO's war. Unfortunately, during the initial phase of the "War on Terror," the U.S. mistakenly believed it did not need allies and made little effort to involve NATO in its operations, until overextension in Iraq forced the U.S. to seek allies when it set up the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In the years after 9/11, terrorist attacks on European cities have made it clear that Europe has just as much at stake in Afghanistan, but NATO has yet to fully commit itself to Afghanistan. The current dilemma is that as Americans debate the merits of troop increases, even our staunchest European allies are talking about cutting troop commitments and are desperately seeking a way out. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, both facing tough reelection contests, have even called for an international conference to establish an exit strategy for their forces. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has also called for an exit plan for Italian forces. The U.S. must understand that further Americanization of the war without increased allied support is a recipe for disaster while European leaders must grasp the fact that a premature pullout from Afghanistan will irrevocably damage the transatlantic relationship.

The much needed increase of American resources must be matched by the Europeans; such a contribution could come in many forms. Unfortunately, at present, most European countries are dodging their responsibilities when it comes to committing necessary resources to the Afghan campaign. Most abstain from sending the essential trainers needed to build a strong Afghan army and police, a necessary element of any sustainable stabilization and exit strategy. Current European troop commit-

ments are a fraction of contributions to previous NATO operations in the Balkans. More European troops were sent to Kosovo, and it's only roughly 1/60th the size and has 1/14 the population of Afghanistan. This is shocking, considering that al-Qaeda poses more of a direct threat to the cities of Europe than Milosevic's army ever did. Furthermore, of the 28 countries in NATO, only the U.S., U.K., Canada, Poland, and the Netherlands provide sizeable forces that are not forced to follow restrictive rules of engagement that limit them to assisting in non-combat roles. Both Canada and the Netherlands have already announced plans to withdraw by 2011. NATO is acting like a coalition of the barely-willing, not an alliance of the truly-committed.

What has happened to the alliance that won the Cold War? To understand this meager burden sharing, we must first understand the debilitating disconnects that are preventing NATO from functioning effectively in this war.

First, NATO has focused almost exclusively on Afghanistan even though the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership are based in Pakistan, where they are in close proximity to both nuclear weapons and A.Q. Khan, the principal disseminator of nuclear secrets. Despite this obvious interconnectedness, NATO has refused to fully embrace a broader Af-Pak mission. Many Europeans have said that their opposition to the war in Afghanistan was due in large part to the fact that the real enemy, the al-Qaeda leadership, is in Pakistan. If NATO adopted a fully integrated regional approach this line of opposition would be quelled.

Second, despite clear links between terrorist activity and attacks throughout Europe and NATO efforts in Afghanistan, Europe continues to inefficiently separate NATO-led operations in Afghanistan from, domestic counter-terrorism, which is almost exclusively handled by national law-enforcement agencies, loosely coordinated through the EU. Because of this, there is no comprehensive assessment or general understanding of the overall terrorist threat emanating from its base in South Asia. Therefore, decreasing European public support for the Afghan mission is understandable. Despite both the EU and NATO headquarters being located in Brussels, bureaucratic jealousies have created a "Maginot line" between NATO and the EU that prevents any substantive cooperation. This severely hinders both counterterrorism in Europe and joint NATO-EU training missions in Afghanistan.

Third, the Alliance inefficiently operates under a laborious consensus-based decision making process that requires total unanimity. This policy remains, despite NATO's massive expansion (from 16 to 28 members) since the end of the Cold War. Because of this, NATO lacks the ability to act decisively. Mighty Albania can block an Alliance initiative! While NATO can break out of this decision making process when it comes to a humanitarian mission or counter-piracy operations, NATO continues to follow this inefficient procedure when it

comes to making decisions regarding the war in Afghanistan. Recently retired SACEUR, General Bantz J. Craddock, has stated that it took NATO over a year to adopt a counter-narcotics strategy. This policy tragically undermines NATO's ability to fight a war.

Fourth, the European public is disconnected from the reality that the failure to deal with the al-Qaeda threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan could destroy the historic transatlantic Alliance that helped prevent World War III. A recent poll showed that 58 percent of Europeans see NATO as being essential for security, but only 7 percent support sending more troops to Afghanistan. The same poll showed that American support for closer transatlantic ties has dropped dramatically since 2004. Europeans must be convinced that without greater burden sharing in Afghanistan, the future of NATO is in doubt. As President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski recently wrote a NATO pullout from Afghanistan "would undermine NATO's credibility." Furthermore, the new head of the British Army, General Sir David Richards, has warned that a NATO defeat in Afghanistan would embolden extremists around the world. This would be reminiscent of when Vietnam undermined America's foreign policy on the international stage for decades. Such a development would undercut Europe by hastening the transfer of global power to Asia.

While the current situation is dire, history shows that it is not insurmountable. During the Cold War, NATO occasionally faltered under Soviet pressures and political infighting but it never allowed the Soviets to divide Europe and America, which was their ultimate goal. When President Reagan appointed me NATO Ambassador in 1983, Alliance was facing a crisis just as serious. NATO was politically paralyzed in the face of the Soviet Union's attempt to sever NATO by deploying intermediate SS-20 missiles that could hit Europe but not America. Several NATO members would not counter-deploy missiles, claiming it would be viewed as provocative. In addition to its failure to reach consensus on counter deploying against the Soviet missiles, the Alliance would also not meet its conventional defense requirements, and it squandered its resources. NATO insisted on relying on a dangerous "nuclear hair-trigger" tactic in the face of a conventional Soviet attack. In reaction, U.S. Senators spoke of withdrawing troops. This shocked NATO into embracing aggressive reform. With a talented new Secretary General Lord Peter Carrington, new Senate collaborators, and a few key European leaders such as German Defense Minister Manfred Wörner, we developed an ambitious new reform agenda and investment strategy. We also simultaneously covertly helped wavering countries navigate domestic political opposition to counter-deployments. This allowed us to rally

NATO and overcome the last crisis of the Cold War.

Fortunately, dramatic leadership on both sides of the Atlantic can remobilize the most successful Alliance in human history. Currently, NATO has 3.5 million members in its armed forces, and 45 percent of the world's GDP. If properly marshaled NATO can overcome the challenges in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the next year. A strong transatlantic bond can also weather the impact of increased Asian competition. Members of Congress should tell their European counterparts that if NATO fails in Afghanistan, it will be increasingly difficult to convince Americans of the need for NATO.

Unfortunately, at present, most of NATO's attention is centered on future restructuring for its new Strategic Concept to be released in late 2010. Though essential, this focus on the future is disconnected from the American and European rapidly ticking political clocks, where waning support for an eight-year-long war demands an immediate revitalization of NATO. This reform effort also overlooks the fatal blow that failure in Afghanistan could deliver to the transatlantic relationship. As General Craddock recently said, political leadership at NATO is AWOL. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the able chair of the new Strategic Concept, should exceed her mandate and call for the immediate revitalization of the Afghanistan effort. President Obama can help, but he must go beyond simply telling Europeans to pledge more—both the Bush and Obama Administrations failed using that tactic.

To save NATO, Europe needs Churchills, not Chamberlains. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen may be a Churchill, but other European leaders must also rise to the occasion. We already have innovative military leaders in Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, and President Obama has been steadfast on the danger of al-Qaeda and the Taliban but he needs political allies. We find that Congressional leaders are only too willing to bear the message to Europe, that urgent reform is needed. In my conversations with prominent Europeans, I have been told that a call for a reinvigorated alliance that comes from Washington yet looks to European interests would be well received in many European capitals. After this preparatory work is completed, a major political initiative is needed to turn around the Alliance as it was turned in the 1980s. President Obama, along with a few brave European leaders, must call an emergency Heads of Government meeting aimed at boosting commitment so that Afghans can be properly trained to assume responsibility for their own security. The jihadists have made Afghanistan the front line and is there where we must defeat them. In Afghanistan, NATO is fighting for its life—it better start acting like it. ♦