

## **NATO'S LITMUS TEST: PRIORITIZING AFGHANISTAN**

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### **Introduction**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has weathered a series of transatlantic storms throughout its history. In fact, despite the periodic transatlantic spats and occasional divergence of interests between Europe and America, NATO has continued to astonish its critics by its survival and ability to adapt to a series of changing global realities. Based on the common values of democracy, individual liberties and the rule of law, the Alliance's "essential and enduring purpose" as set out in the Washington Treaty of April 4, 1949, was according to its preamble "to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization" of its member states by political and military means. Although it was not specifically stated in the Treaty, the threat until 1990 was clearly defined – an attack by the Soviet Union and the countries of the Warsaw Pact. In Article 5, the signatory Nations agreed that an armed attack against one or more of them "shall be considered an attack against them all." The area to be defended was well understood, and set out in Article 6.<sup>1</sup>

50 years later this clearly defined and incontrovertible role for NATO has become a thing of the past. The specific rationale which served as the bedrock of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance became obsolete the moment Soviet tanks retreated to their Russian homeland. Unlike the Soviet Union which rapidly began its transformation to the Russian Federation, NATO was left with a historic strategic purpose and political

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<sup>1</sup> Metreveli, Mamuka. "Legal Aspects of NATO's Involvement in the Out-of-Area Peace Support Operations" *NATO-EAPC Research Project Final Report* 2003.

structure appropriate for the Cold War, with no common agreement on its future direction or transformation. NATO has since undergone a series of “redefinitions” and “transformations” which have allowed its member-states to adjust accordingly. The polemic debates over NATO’s continued relevance or irrelevance have predictably surfaced before every major NATO Summit in which official communiqués and reports propose a variety of new projects and solutions to combat NATO’s vocal critics. While this year’s NATO summit in Riga, Latvia promises to offer more of the same, a new sense of urgency can be felt from both sides of the Atlantic concerning NATO’s historic undertaking in Afghanistan.

While events in Iraq continue to receive greater media attention and exacerbate the still healing transatlantic rifts three years after President Bush’s decision to eliminate Saddam Hussein with his “coalition of the willing,” Afghanistan has quietly become NATO’s most important mission. Afghanistan is the first out-of-Europe deployment operation for NATO in its entire history. Thus success in Afghanistan is not only crucial for any future hopes of a globally engaged and active NATO, but for the very existence and credibility of NATO.

This article is an attempt to place NATO’s mission in Afghanistan within the transatlantic framework and focus on the importance of prioritizing and succeeding in Afghanistan for NATO. This article does not attempt to deal extensively with the particulars on the ground in Afghanistan nor with the specifics of the tactics needed for success in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> These are largely irrelevant when looking at NATO’s own self-described mission in Afghanistan, which it can always seek to refocus or minimize.

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent article on specific strategies and particulars see Seth Jones. “Averting Failure in Afghanistan” in *Survival* 48/1 Spring 2006.

Rather it will argue that Afghanistan, from a largely symbolic perspective, has become NATO's primary mission and the place in which NATO's future as an organization will be most decidedly determined. In other words, Afghanistan has become NATO's litmus test in a post-9/11 environment. A success guarantees NATO's continued relevance to both the US and Europe, while a failure would force a re-thinking of basics that could prove NATO to be no better than a "political talking shop" as its critics have often charged.

### **NATO in a Post - 9/11 Environment**

In the new post-9/11 global environment dominated by security concerns from non-state actors and nations bent on acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) the US and Europe have a surprisingly similar view of their mutual strategic interests. While there has been a significant divergence over the ways in which the US, in particular, unilaterally acted in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the unprecedented invoking of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty by NATO members, policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic have continued to express the centrality of NATO to their respective foreign policies. Simply put, there seems to be no better alternative to NATO for either American or European policymakers who hope to work constructively together towards combating the common threat of global terrorism. While the original architects of NATO could never have foreseen the exact challenges facing the transatlantic community today, they created something that has become more than simply a defensive alliance.

As noted by a variety of security experts, the North Atlantic Treaty provides a broad and flexible mandate through which to defend and promote allied interests and security. As a result, by preserving the positive attributes of a collective defense system, including an integrated command structure, vital defense planning process, and thoroughgoing political and military consultations which strengthens the organization's international credibility and legitimacy, NATO is uniquely posed to play new roles and assume new missions that respond to the post-Cold War challenges to the values and interests of its members. As such the North Atlantic Treaty itself was based on common values, identified no enemy, protected the sovereign decision making rights of all members and was written in sufficiently flexible language to facilitate adjustments to accommodate changing international circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Since the end of the Cold-War, NATO has transformed itself from the original Article 5-based collective defense alliance to a more robust forum for transatlantic cooperation. However, this cooperation has been strained by the divergent perceptions of what common US and European strategic interests represent in this day and age.

NATO's historic conceptualization of "out of area" operations changed and were apparent from 1989 onwards. However, the events of 9/11 and the US declared "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) altered international circumstances and accelerated the urgency of these changes. Since 9/11, the NATO allies led by the US have agreed that the organization must be prepared to expand its role beyond that of a traditional collective defense treaty. Additionally, it was decided that NATO must operate on the front lines of the world's crisis regions, outside of its historical mandate in Europe,

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<sup>3</sup> Sloan, Stanley. NATO, The European Union, and the Atlantic Community. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 5.

because this is where many of the challenges to world peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century originate from. However, when embracing NATO's November 2002 Prague summit decision to declare a GWOT, a fundamental divergence emerged between the US and its European allies on their collective strategic interests. NATO's insistence on unanimous approval and limited mission objectives from its members for any type of allied force intervention has historically worked well for the Alliance. Yet the US refused significant NATO help in the wake of 9/11 and instead asked for only symbolic help such as "backfilling" its forces and NATO airplanes to patrol US airspace. Instead of utilizing the full force of NATO the US chose to select its allies for its operations in Afghanistan, which has left a lasting imprint on NATO's involvement in this country.

### **Why Afghanistan?**

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Afghanistan became the target of America's first causal link and unilateral military operation. Utilizing the existing opposition forces of the Northern Alliance and superior American airpower, the US was able to quickly topple the Taliban in Afghanistan without involving its NATO allies who had invoked Article 5 hoping to help the US. Instead the US used NATO like a "toolbox" and selected specific NATO partners for its enterprises. Only after the military invasion was complete did the US call for international support in the rebuilding process. Thus while the US-led military actions in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan allowed for a convergence of interests for the NATO allies, this only temporarily provided a common cause to rally around. America's *Operation Enduring Freedom* enjoyed unprecedented international support because of the direct causal link that was drawn between the safe haven that

Afghanistan had become for terrorist networks and the 9/11 attacks. Utilizing existing NATO assets and mechanisms, the US was able to convince its allies of the need to mobilize for Afghanistan with a parallel mission.

After several months of negotiations involving NATO member-states and the United Nations, NATO unanimously agreed to take command and responsibility for the UN mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in August 2003 in Afghanistan. NATO took a lead role in Afghanistan freeing up US forces from Kabul and other “low risk” areas to begin their search for Osama Bin Laden and other al-Qaeda members. However, as commentators have been quick to point out, Washington’s operations in Afghanistan represented but one front of America’s war on terror. In contrast, NATO has placed its reputation and arguably its future on the line in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

### **NATO’s Involvement in Afghanistan**

Two and a half years have passed since NATO formally accepted security and peacekeeping responsibilities for Kabul and the country as a whole. While *Operation Enduring Freedom* was considered militarily successful in its two months of combat operations in 2001, the security situation in Afghanistan remains volatile. As evidenced by recent news reports, remnants of the ousted Taliban regime continue to launch attacks in southern Afghanistan from their bases on the northwestern provinces of Pakistan and their bases along the Afghanistan border.<sup>5</sup> As a result, analysts who had

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this subject see Richard E. Rupp, “Afghanistan Today: NATO’s Last Hurrah” Chapter 5 *NATO After 9/11: An Alliance in Decline* New York, Palgrave, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> In particular Waziristan and North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan appear in the press as evident in Richard Holbrooke’s recent Op-Ed, “Afghanistan: The Long Road Ahead” *Washington Post*: 2 April 2006: B07.

lauded America's deft strategy to leave a small "footprint" in Afghanistan have begun to question the appallingly low troop numbers throughout the country. Perhaps most disturbingly Osama Bin-Laden and top al-Qaida leaders remain at large. The result of the operation has been a series of obstacles and challenges to post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan.

However despite these hurdles and setbacks Afghanistan has made significant progress in the past three years and NATO has been one of the primary contributors to these positive developments. NATO's recent decision to assume responsibility for security over all Afghanistan by the time of its meeting in Riga in November 2006 is thus a welcomed development. By effectively absorbing US troops already deployed in the country's volatile eastern and southern region, NATO will effectively combine the parallel US and ISAF missions which have been running side-by-side for the past three years. Despite the Dutch parliaments' initial hesitation to increasing its own troop commitments and fear for its soldiers safety as it assumes the lead of ISAF, NATO's increased role in Afghanistan should be a clear signal that Europe is willing to face an era of new threats that lie beyond Europe's borders and that could require military casualties.

As US General James Jones noted "It is arguably NATO's most ambitious operation, perhaps in its history; certainly a strategic distance that is very impressive."<sup>6</sup> Thus the stage has been set for NATO in Afghanistan as it takes over a 21,000 man force from 36 different nations. NATO's move will shift responsibility for overall security in Afghanistan from the United States, while at the same time keeping a smaller US

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<sup>6</sup>"NATO will complete Afghan expansion by November, absorbing US troops: General" *Agence France Presse-English*: 6 March, 2006.

force in the country for counter-terrorism missions. The immediate concern, of course, is that the US will use this opportunity to pull most of its troops out of Afghanistan at an accelerated rate. However this would be a catastrophic mistake on the part of US policy makers. Rather than rushing out of Afghanistan and viewing the NATO decision as cover for an exit strategy currently unavailable in Iraq, the US should view this for what it is: a unique and historic opportunity for America and Europe to prioritize and guarantee the future security and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

In the face of daily setbacks in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration has sought to soften its tone and image in Western Europe. As evidenced by President Bush's visit to France following his re-election in 2004, ostensibly to win back a level of civility that has been sorely lacking in transatlantic relations, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's emphasis on "transformational" diplomacy to mend fences with America's European allies, there appears to be a new willingness to work through transatlantic issues. Viewed in this context, NATO appears to be inching out of its defense-only cold-war mind-set, awakening to challenges outside its immediate geography. Currently it has around 20,000 peacekeepers in the Balkans, and its presence in Afghanistan is a historic forward deployment. In addition, NATO's Rapid Response Force of 17,000 troops is a symbolic acknowledgment of its potential global security role. Set to be fully deployable right before its summit in Riga, this force could theoretically be deployable anywhere in the world to handle evacuations, disasters, and counter-terrorism operations like those sorely need in Afghanistan. However, to date, NATO's rhetoric and pronouncements have not matched the organization's actual accomplishments.



This has been a particular problem in Afghanistan where NATO continues to paint an overly optimistic picture with few tangible results. As Richard Rupp has outlined in his recent writings on Afghanistan, from the outset NATO has moved at a snail's pace in grappling with Afghanistan's known problems.

Contrary to the Alliance's many public statements focusing on the importance of Afghanistan, Alliance members have not prioritized the mission and have been slow to deploy forces and tackle the readily identifiable issues that will determine NATO's success or failure in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Rupp's analysis is that NATO is likely to be in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future and that even after three years of ISAF leadership a picture has emerged that does not flatter NATO nor does it support the argument that the Alliance has transformed itself effectively to meet the challenges of the new era.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, in a recently published article in *Survival* Seth Jones argues that the number of attacks on civilians in Afghanistan has actually increased since NATO took over operations in the country. While this can certainly be attributed to a shift in strategy by the Taliban and other insurgency forces to target civilians as allied forces become more adept at defending themselves, this does not bode well for NATO's future in Afghanistan. According to Jones, "The current [US and NATO] strategy has failed to establish security in Afghanistan."<sup>9</sup> As every expert is in agreement on, establishing security is a precondition and the key to successful reconstruction in Afghanistan. However this is what NATO has been most hesitant to risk implementing and where US involvement is vitally necessary.

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<sup>7</sup> Rupp, 279.

<sup>8</sup> Rupp, 279.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, Seth. "Averting Failure in Afghanistan" *Survival* 48/1 Spring 2006, 119.

As articulated most recently by former US ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrook in a piece for the *Washington Post*, the dilemma in Afghanistan for the United States is huge. After a checkered history of great power meddling in Afghanistan, the Afghani people finally appear to be on the cusp of deciding their own independent future. Yet there is no chance that the training of the Afghan army and police will produce a military force able to defend itself single-handedly against a resurgent Taliban and conglomerate of jihadist terrorists, particularly when these forces have sanctuary in Pakistan. "The only viable choice is to stay, in order to deny most of the country to the enemy. That means an indefinite US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan for a very long time, much longer than we will remain in Iraq."<sup>10</sup>

The use of Pakistan by Taliban and jihadist forces has not escaped the attention of American leaders, however as a result of General Musharraf being a "strategic ally" of the US and NATO in the GWOT little real pressure has been applied on Pakistan. Particularly given Pakistan's historic sympathy for the Taliban it is difficult imagining Pakistan expelling these forces unless directly pressured to do so by the US and Europe. Meanwhile the Islamic Republic of Iran has been helping to stabilize western Afghanistan through modest economic aid. As Holbrooke points out the irony of this situation is that the US's "strategic ally" in Pakistan is giving sanctuary to the Taliban and al-Qaida in the east, while an "axis of evil" country is playing a stabilizing role in the west. Given the geo-strategic importance of keeping Afghanistan sovereign and defeating the insurgency elements throughout the country it is shocking that the US and its NATO allies have not stepped up their pressure on General Musharraf. It is politically impossible to imagine an Afghan force ever entering Pakistan in pursuit of insurgents,

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<sup>10</sup> Holbrooke.

whereas the US has been actively utilizing various “hot pursuit” agreements in the mountainous border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. As NATO takes over responsibilities for security throughout Afghanistan it must make containing the insurgent attacks a priority while the US must continue to work actively with its allies to defeat the insurgents wherever they may be coming from.

America as a result of NATO involvement in Afghanistan can not continue to look at Afghanistan as being somehow secondary to Iraq in its overall GWOT. America must take an active role both in NATO and on the ground in Afghanistan to ensure the success of NATO’s self-declared mission, or risk driving NATO right back to isolation in Europe. The US is still NATO’s most important member and leader. However in recent years in Afghanistan the US has begun to view NATO as somehow detached from itself and its own forces. NATO can not replace the US, rather it should seek to compliment and combine US and European interests in Afghanistan.

A success in Afghanistan clearly requires a revised strategy and the sufficient resources to implement it. As various security experts have cautioned, the first step to any successful strategy in Afghanistan is increasing the number and capability of international and Afghan forces. According to Jones there are roughly 18,000 American soldiers and 12,000 NATO soldiers in Afghanistan. Additionally there are approximately 55,000 Afghan National Police, 25,000 Afghan National Army soldiers and several thousand Afghan Militia Forces involved in internal security activities for a total of roughly 85,000.<sup>11</sup> “Based on per capita estimates of successful stability operations, the total number of international and indigenous police and other security forces should be

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, 119. This is an absolute maximum number of which how many are properly trained and capable of conducting serious operations is unknowable.

about 200,000.”<sup>12</sup> Thus there is a “security gap” of anywhere between 80,000 to 120,000 troops. This gap however does not appear to be narrowing and particularly in light of US interest in pulling more of its troops out of Afghanistan, it looks set to widen further in the coming year.

After the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, NATO deployed a force of about 60,000 troops to Bosnia to maintain peace and provide security. Afghanistan, a country nearly thirteen times the size, with a population of more than six times the size of Bosnia, received under half the number of troops.<sup>13</sup> Clearly there has been a disconnect between the realities on the ground in Afghanistan and NATO’s deployment. With so much at stake, it is surprising that NATO and the US administration have not made the monetary or military contributions necessary to ensure a success in Afghanistan. The US has been particularly egregious in this respect when it asked for a “pittance” (about \$40 million) for Afghan reconstruction in its recent supplemental request to Congress, after the State Department and the US Embassy asked for about 10 times as much. To compound matters Congress lowered the funding request by cutting the appropriation to \$4 million at a time in which Iraq has received over 100 times as much.<sup>14</sup>

### **Prioritizing Afghanistan**

In the months leading up to NATO heads of states’ meeting November 28-29 in Riga the rhetorical will throughout NATO’s capitals is apparent for an expanded role for

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<sup>12</sup> Jones, 119.

<sup>13</sup> Figures based on CIA World Fact Book data as of August 2005 that listed Afghanistan as 647,500 square kilometers vs. Bosnia as 51,129 square kilometers and 29.9 million in Afghanistan vs. 4.02 million in Bosnia. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>

<sup>14</sup> Holbrooke

NATO in Afghanistan. At the 2004 Istanbul Summit these same heads of states prioritized NATO's mission in Afghanistan, but little progress has been made since this time. Kurt Volker, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, speaking recently laid out America's interest succinctly. "Our first priority for Riga is to ensure that NATO succeeds in Afghanistan as it prepares to expand the ISAF to the south and thereafter to the east."<sup>15</sup> Despite official European communications to the contrary, it is interesting to note that most European governments do not portray Afghanistan as a matter of national interest while in America Afghanistan has been largely overshadowed by the situation in Iraq. As a result as one European scholar has noted, "The [Afghanistan] mission is regarded optional, meaning the decision to participate is based on circumstances -- and the circumstances are not good."<sup>16</sup> As indicated there appears to be two different rhetorics on Afghanistan, one for domestic and one for international consumption. Amid such concerns and doubts, the expansion of ISAF will not only test European military effectiveness but also the political will in its capitals to sustain the first major NATO mission launched outside its traditional Euro-Atlantic borders

Thus as a historic first for NATO, Europe and America have far more at stake in Afghanistan than their own national interests. While they can certainly disagree on Iraq, in Afghanistan, the undisputed spawning ground for the 9/11 attacks and the present-day GWOT, previous home to the Taliban, and primary heroin producer in the world, NATO leaders surely can set aside their differences. Afghans have just elected their first

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<sup>15</sup> "NATO Outlining Priorities for November Summit in Latvia" U.S. State Department Official Memo <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=March&x=20060330152430MVyelwarC5.457705e-02>; 30 March 2006.

<sup>16</sup> "NATO Treads Cautiously Into Afghan Quagmire" Turkish Daily News 29 January 2006.

parliament and internationally respected President Hamid Karzai whose government is directly threatened by the instability brought on by NATO and the US's reluctance to supply the necessary aid both economically and military. Securing Afghanistan's future is not only in NATO's strategic interest, it will determine the very future of the Alliance. A success re-affirms NATO's role as the primary military framework in which Europe and America can actively pursue their common security interests. While a failure in Afghanistan will tarnish NATO's role as a provider of peacekeeping forces and security missions throughout the globe, and seriously diminish the importance of NATO beyond its traditional Article 5 mission.

The resilience of the transatlantic bargain is being put to the test far from its original Article 6 areas in the mountains of Central Asia. Afghanistan has defied every occupier throughout its history all the way back to Alexander the Great, therefore NATO must quickly establish itself as a peace-keeping force that can effectively support the Afghan government. To accomplish this task there must be a consensus and unanimous political will among NATO allies to prioritize Afghanistan. If NATO succeeds in Afghanistan it will demonstrate the continued usefulness and effectiveness of joint European and American actions in the face of a shared common threat. However a failure would spell the end of an era in which Western allies could, when united in common mission and purpose, face any threat. Soviet tanks no longer threaten continental Europe, in their place Islamic fundamentalists have directed their bombs and threats towards the United States and Europe. NATO has agreed on the importance of combating terrorism and has subsequently tied its response to a success in

Afghanistan. Thus a failure in Afghanistan for NATO would demonstrate the divisive nature of this new post-9/11 threat to the transatlantic community.

While many commentators have focused on Afghanistan being about the military capabilities gap between the US and Europe or about Europe's failure to develop power projection capabilities, as Rupp points out this situation demonstrates that despite public assertions that Afghanistan was NATO's "number one priority," the mission has not been prioritized by the member-states.<sup>17</sup> As Jolyon Howorth has argued in a recent article, "The problems of reaching consensual agreement, among no fewer than 26 allies, on issues connected with war and peace in areas both close to and remote from the European theatre, are considerable."<sup>18</sup> If NATO fails to produce a success in Afghanistan the US will have little incentive to work with its allies on any future operations. The US increasingly has little need for the military contribution of its NATO allies, but is more grateful for the political solidarity that NATO offers. Thus, if despite NATO's political solidarity, security and reconstruction prove elusive in Afghanistan, the rationale for NATO's involvement in any combat or peace-keeping operations outside of Europe will be forever tainted. NATO's mission in Bosnia demonstrated that where the transatlantic political will exists, success is possible. Additionally, it demonstrated the need for further integration and adaptation among NATO members and its partners.<sup>19</sup> Kosovo forced the alliance to realize the need for greater expansion and transformation, while serving as the catalyst for an independent European desire to take a lead role in

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<sup>17</sup> For a fuller argument of Rupp's position see his Chapter 5 "Afghanistan Today: NATO's Last Hurrah" in NATO After 9/11: An Alliance in Decline New York, Palgrave, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Howorth, Jolyon. "ESDP and NATO: Wedlock or Deadlock?" *Cooperation & Conflict*, 38/3, Sept. 2003, 252.

<sup>19</sup> For more on this see the NATO Secretary General's full speech talking about the lessons learned from Bosnia at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1997/s970424a.htm>

security.<sup>20</sup> Now in Afghanistan the lessons are still being learned. However if NATO is to remain the primary transatlantic link between Europe and America as security actors it will be in Afghanistan that this will be decided.

Europe remains heavily dependent on US military assets in order to be able to transform European military potential into operational capacity. For Europe the big question is whether they will elect to remain in a state of military dependency on the US, or whether the eventual logic of autonomy which gave rise to the European Security and Defense Project in the first place will result in Europe generating its own independent military capacity. To a large degree, this is already happening in Europe at a much faster pace than the US generally acknowledges. Many security experts believe this question of independent military capability will continue to be the focus of a political debate among the European allies over the next decade.<sup>21</sup> “Duplication, decoupling and autonomy are not simply slogans. They are also very real potential outcomes.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, the debate in Europe and the Atlantic community will continue to affect Afghanistan’s future prospects for success.

Given the current climate in Europe epitomized by the tight Dutch vote on increasing its NATO troop contribution for Afghanistan, things do not look especially promising. New rules proposed for ISAF’s expanded role by European allies will only allow NATO soldiers to shoot first against any threat to their security, while their primary tasks will remain the patrols and support of Afghan security forces, albeit in a more dangerous environment. Similar rules did not work in Bosnia, therefore NATO must ask

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<sup>20</sup> For more on this see the NATO Secretary General’s full speech talking about the lessons learned from Kosovo at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1999/s990621a.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Howorth, 252.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*



itself how it can adapt these rules successfully for a more difficult situation like Afghanistan. As demonstrated by America's experiences in Iraq, equipping and training indigenous forces are vitally important, but without a show of allied resolve these indigenous troops will crumble under pressure. Undoubtedly NATO's role is not to fight the Afghani's fight for them. Afghans must work together to overcome their history of tribal and civil wars. At the same time NATO has made a commitment in Afghanistan. In its own words NATO has committed to, "...creating a secure environment, developing Afghan security structures, identifying reconstruction needs, as well as training and building up future Afghan security forces."<sup>23</sup> Until this mission is fully completed and declared successful by both the Afghani government and NATO member states, the mission is decidedly unaccomplished.

Presently, it is the gap in common strategic purpose more so than the significant gap in military power that lies at the heart of current transatlantic difficulties. A refocused common strategic agenda and priorities would bring the US and Europe closer together. The challenges within Europe are increasingly being handled by Europeans themselves with limited American involvement. As a result of the transatlantic spat over Iraq, issues beyond the European continent, and especially in the Greater Middle East, where the most dangerous threats to common security lie and where US-European cooperation is essential, NATO allies remain divided and deeply distrustful of each other. A refocusing of US and European interests in the importance of NATO for the transatlantic relationship is paramount. NATO and its "out of area" operations which have in the past achieved positive ends is hanging in the balance in Afghanistan where NATO must

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<sup>23</sup> For the full-text of NATO self-declared mission in Afghanistan please see: [http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan\\_stage3/index.html](http://www.nato.int/issues/afghanistan_stage3/index.html)

succeed to continue to confront the challenges of a new century. Afghanistan must be viewed as a strategic priority for both the United States and its European allies. While this certainly presupposes a commonality of interest and purpose in the wider global context, NATO after all was founded on such a presupposition of common values.

## **Conclusion**

On April of 2004, NATO Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer was quoted in Berlin as saying, "Afghanistan is a top priority for NATO...Our security depends on Afghanistan's security . . . If we want to win the war against terrorism, we must first win the peace in Afghanistan."<sup>24</sup> Undoubtedly NATO is not the most effective instrument in waging the GWOT, however it is the primary framework in which Europe and America can work together where there is a convergence and commonality of interests. NATO has entered a critical stage of its history in Afghanistan. While the upcoming NATO summit in Riga will certainly offer a chance for the heads of states gathered to rhetorically affirm the Alliance, events in the mountains and villages of Afghanistan are ultimately where NATO's future will be affirmed. America's continued troop reductions and Europe's unwillingness to put its troops in the dangerous environments that currently require added security do not add up to the rhetorical "prioritizing of Afghanistan" echoing throughout public pronouncements from Brussels.

NATO throughout its history has been extraordinarily adept at adjusting and transforming itself to fit the needs of its member states. While some have already declared NATO's mission in Afghanistan a failure, I believe this to be premature in the same way that the reports of NATO's death have been greatly exaggerated in the past.

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<sup>24</sup> Cited from Paul Korning, "NATO Mission in Afghanistan Exposes Chink in Block's Armor." in Rupp, 292.

NATO's first out-of-Europe mission may well be its last if NATO does not get serious about prioritizing Afghanistan. However at the end of the day NATO is simply an institution predicated on the political will of its member-states, therefore the ultimate responsibility for NATO's future and success in Afghanistan can only be secured by a joint commitment from the US and Europe. NATO remains central to the transatlantic dialogue and with a success in Afghanistan it offers the most effective tool available to the Atlantic community to collectively influence and provide security wherever NATO's interests may be challenged. A failure in Afghanistan, meanwhile, could spell the end of NATO's ability to influence change beyond the border of its member states.