

**Eurasia Insight:****AFGHANISTAN: NATO ALLIES EXPERIENCING "BATTLE FATIGUE"**

Richard Weitz: 5/19/08

A EurasiaNet Commentary

In early April, NATO allies reaffirmed their commitment to Afghanistan's democratization process, issuing a statement that proclaimed the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul to be the alliance's "top priority." Nevertheless, a growing number of Afghans, Europeans, and Americans involved in counter-insurgency operations privately profess that they are war-weary. This dichotomy is raising the possibility that many foreign actors involved in Afghanistan are willing to scale back reconstruction objectives in order to end the fighting, declare victory, and leave.

Speculation is rising that both President Hamid Karzai's administration and the Western allies, who shoulder the burden of fighting Islamic radical insurgents, are entertaining notions of a negotiated settlement. For Karzai, the yearning for such a settlement is nothing new. He's been probing for one for the past several years. In 2007, for example, Karzai repeatedly offered to negotiate with a variety of opponents, including; "moderate" Taliban leaders; renegade warlord commanders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who has been designated a terrorist by the US State Department; and other elements. Karzai's single condition for talks is that his interlocutor(s) agree to end armed operations and embrace the basic tenets of the Afghan constitution. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

If "they would want a position in the government," Karzai said during a September 2007 news conference, referring to his armed enemies, "I will give them a position." Observers speculate that Karzai might be interested in securing a peace agreement with the Taliban to bolster his flagging support before Afghanistan's upcoming presidential elections.

It's only been in recent months that the negotiating interest of Western allies appears to have picked up. And even then, many Western states seem conflicted about the idea of talking to Islamic insurgents. This point was illustrated clearly in late April and early May, when reports began circulation that Canadian officers in southern Kandahar Province, a Taliban hotspot, were reportedly opening channels of communication with the insurgents. Those reports were swiftly denied, however, by Canadian Defense Minister Peter MacKay.

Thus far, Taliban leaders have insisted on wide-ranging government concessions as a pre-condition for negotiations, including political control over 10 southern provinces, the withdrawal of all foreign troops backing the Karzai government, and the release of Taliban prisoners. Such steep demands are, for now, precluding the possibility of substantive discussions.

In Pakistan, government officials have actively engaged Islamic militant elements in the hopes of stabilizing the country's volatile

tribal areas, located along the border with Afghanistan. Islamabad has suggested that a truce with the militants would help pacify Afghanistan, but NATO leaders have argued the opposite; that allowing the Taliban to secure their rear areas would lead to an increase in operations inside Afghanistan.

The wide gulf separating Karzai's administration from the militants has led some experts to endorse pursuing a network of local settlements, rather than a single national coalition government that would have to include both Karzai and his diverse opponents. These analysts believe that granting some local warlords and Taliban leaders formal or de facto control of Afghanistan's most unstable provinces would recognize the reality of the limited powers of the Karzai government – which U.S. intelligence believes controls only 30 percent of the country. Such a solution also could satisfy the many Taliban who are believed to be fighting mainly for money, influence, or other non-ideological/theological reasons.

Skeptics of de facto political regionalization argue that the experience in 2007 with a short-lived Taliban administration in the southern Afghan city of Musa Qala demonstrates that even major concessions will not moderate Taliban demands. After hard-pressed British commanders accepted the Taliban's de facto occupation of the town, the group began to implement in Musa Qala the kinds of extremist social and political policies that had marked Taliban rule before September 2001.

After Afghan and foreign troops recaptured Musa Qala, the Afghan government selected a former Taliban commander who had switched sides before the battle as its senior envoy there. Mullah Abdul Salaam, the new district chief of Musa Qala, argues that his appointment would encourage further Taliban defections.

Opponents of formal regional settlements note the problems that Pakistani authorities have encountered while negotiating with militants in South Waziristan and other unstable regions along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Recurring difficulties have included differing interpretations of agreed terms, the refusal of all insurgent groups to embrace a settlement and the reluctance of extremists to curtail insurgent use of their territory for cross-border operations into Afghanistan.

Another problem in Pakistan, which would also bedevil any Afghan settlement, is how to deal with groups professing allegiance to al-Qaeda. Afghan, Pakistani, and Western officials still consider the organization an irreconcilable and unacceptable negotiating partner, but its elements retain support among many Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Determining an appropriate Eurasian regional framework in which to address the Afghan conflict also remains a contentious issue. American and European counterinsurgency experts have long recognized the need to work with Pakistan to curtail the movement of insurgents across the Afghan-Pakistan border. They are also eager to expand the role of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions that could contribute to Afghanistan's economic reconstruction.

Yet, when Kai Eide, the newly appointed UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, was asked last month at a presentation at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington: "Is there any chance of a possible future to see NATO troops replace by UN troops?" Eide replied that, "I think the answer to that is no" because the United Nations lacks NATO's unique command structure and force generation system.

Eide also argued that any political settlement should preserve the civil rights Afghans have achieved since 2001, including female education and other developments opposed by the Taliban. The 2001 Bonn Agreement, the 2006 London Compact, and NATO's April 2008 Bucharest Declaration list a range of political, economic, and social objectives for Afghanistan that stand in direct conflict with Taliban policies.

While perhaps hoping for an early exit from Afghanistan, NATO nevertheless continues to plan for a protracted stay. In an effort to achieve a significant reduction in the cost of reconstruction, the Atlantic alliance is pressing ahead with an inter-continental rail link that would enhance the movement of reconstruction assistance from Europe to Afghanistan. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Editor's Note: Richard Weitz is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC.

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