

Non-Subscriber Extract

A viewpoint on Afghanistan

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"How would history judge us if Canada walked away from Afghanistan?" asked Canadian Minister of Defence Peter MacKay on 26 February as he urged his country's parliament to extend Canada's military mission to Afghanistan until 2011.

As well as reflecting domestic deliberations, MacKay's question highlights the current debate in NATO regarding members contributing troops to operations in Afghanistan and, more specifically, troops prepared to engage in combat. This issue has raised questions not just over the future of NATO operations in Afghanistan, but also of the alliance's future ability to conduct extra-regional operations.

US Army Lieutenant General (retired) David Barno, the commander of more than 20,000 US troops in Afghanistan between October 2003 and May 2005, believes key changes in approach are needed to counter shortcomings in NATO operations.

When talking about the contribution of NATO member states to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, Lt Gen Barno states: "The real issue is the lack of perception by some NATO member countries and populations of the threat emanating from Afghanistan and the little political willpower to accept sending more troops to fighting zones."

He tells Jane's until the populations of these countries realise the threat that failure in Afghanistan would represent, and how it could affect them, the likelihood of troop augmentation in Regional Command South, where the bulk of counter-insurgency operations are occurring, will remain problematic.

Lt Gen Barno says a long-term roadmap is needed to draw landmarks for disengagement and to ultimately pass the PRT's responsibilities over to Afghan National Security Forces and civilian institutions. He adds: "NATO, as a military alliance, is conducting a counter-insurgency operation without being willing to take a truly substantial role in the 80 per cent political, social and economic part of it." He emphasises the need for a holistic approach and for NATO to re-assess its roles outside the purely military sphere.

FORECAST

The US may have to take up any shortfall in troops, leading to an increasing Americanisation of the ISAF mission and country development. Although this will have beneficial effects at the tactical level, it will also damage NATO's credibility.