

A Focused and Targeted Expansion of NATO and ISAF Involvement in Afghanistan Counternarcotics Operations

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Introduction

Three thousand one hundred and six days. Days spent fighting the Taliban, days used to rebuild crippled infrastructure, days spent training police, and days where NATO casualties continued to climb. With the Taliban regime overthrown and scattered in 2001, the major hurdle that faced Afghanistan and its international backers was restoring effective self-governance to the country and ensuring stability in both security and economy. Three thousand one hundred and six days later, this hurdle has yet to have been cleared- the Taliban have been able to recover and regroup as an effective and deadly insurgency, the Afghanistan economy is still severely underdeveloped and there is widespread corruption across all levels of government, police and military. Aside from all these serious challenges to Afghanistan's security and future development, there is one critical issue that may ultimately determine the success or failure of the NATO mission in Afghanistan: opium.

Since the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, opium poppy production in Afghanistan has exploded from 8,000 hectares to 193,000 hectares (2007 est.).¹ The production, processing and sale of poppies into the narcotic drugs opium and heroin have funded the Taliban insurgency, contributed to "warlordism", encouraged government corruption and weakened the rule of law. The Afghanistan opiate problem goes beyond simple eradication or

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *UN World Drug Report 2009*(Vienna: UNODC, 2009), 188

interdiction as the opiate industry has become central to the livelihoods of a large proportion of Afghan farmers.

In this essay, I would like to suggest that NATO's current involvement in counternarcotics operations is insufficient given the opiate industry's central contributory role to continued destabilization and violence in Afghanistan. Ideally, NATO counternarcotics operations should focus on public information campaigns, the interdiction of narcotics, the destruction of processing facilities and caches, rooting out corruption and maintaining regional stability. However, any NATO expansion in counternarcotics operations must take into account NATO's current operational limitations, whether the operations further the doctrine of "winning hearts and minds" and whether or not counternarcotics techniques would be feasible given Afghanistan's present security and developmental state. As President Karzai duly notes, "The question of drugs . . . is one that will determine Afghanistan's future. . . If we fail, we will fail as a state eventually, and we will fall back in the hands of terrorism."²

Historical Perspective and Current Trends

The growth of poppies and sale of opium goes back to the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. With widespread devastation and the destruction of the licit economy via Soviet 'scorched earth' tactics, the Mujahedeen turned to opium as the primary means of raising revenue to continue their war efforts.³ Even as the USSR invasion ended, the new Taliban government continued to utilize opiate sales as a means to generate tax revenue and evidence suggests that they actively encouraged narcotics production and trafficking.⁴ As a result, the opiate industry has had thirty years to deeply integrate itself into the Afghanistan economy and many Afghans have a vested interest in the status quo. With the ousting of the Taliban, opium

² Glaze, John A. *Opium and Afghanistan: Reassessing US Narcotics Policy*. (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 7

³ Duncan, Thomas A. *Opium- The Fuel of Instability in Afghanistan*. (Fort Leavenworth: United States Army Command and General Staff College, 2007), 8

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9

production has risen 657% from 2001 levels. This indicates that, even without a central government that actively promotes the opiate industry, farmers are still readily motivated to produce and sell opium poppies.

The economic incentives for poppy cultivation are obvious. The average income of a hectare of poppies can reach US \$4,600 per year while the average income for a hectare of wheat reaches only \$390 per year. It is estimated that the average poppy farmer stands to earn ten times more than a cereal or wheat farmer.⁵ ⁶In a country where 70% of the people participate in agriculture as a primary source of income, the allure of poppies over traditional crops is quite understandably overwhelming.⁷ To put the scope of the opiate industry into perspective, it is estimated that the export value of the 2007-2008 opium harvest was \$3.4 billion, or equal to 33% of the total licit GDP. Furthermore, 10% of Afghans are said to be involved in some manner with opium cultivation.⁸ ⁹Of even more concern is the development of a domestic opium and heroin processing industry which threatens to turn Afghanistan from a cultivation state into a full-capacity opiate processing state.¹⁰

NATO's Engagement in Afghanistan and Current Role in Counter-Narcotic Operations

In the wake of the ousting of the Taliban by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the United Nations created the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with a mandate to act in a peace support and nation building role alongside the continued combat

⁵ Belkin, Paul, and Vincent Morelli. *NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance*. (Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 10

⁶ Staff, CADS. *Opium in Afghanistan: Lawlessness Thrives on Narcotic Trade*. (Washington, D.C.: Center for Advanced Defense Studies, 2006), 1

⁷ Glaze, *Opium*, 2

⁸ Blanchard, Christopher M. *Afghanistan: Narcotics and US Policy*. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 3

⁹ Glaze, *Opium*, 5

¹⁰ Staff, *Opium*, 2-3

operations of OEF.¹¹ The main strategic objectives of the ISAF were to maintain security and rule of law, aid in reconstruction efforts and provide training and support for Afghan police and military forces.¹² In 2003, NATO took command of the ISAF and then in 2007, it took over all military operations in Afghanistan.¹³ As of December 2008, the total strength of the ISAF was 51,000 troops from 40 different countries, with a majority of the troops from NATO member states.¹⁴ Along with command over the ISAF, NATO also received command of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) that had been sent into provinces to assist in rebuilding and security efforts. NATO's mission in Afghanistan is its first mission outside of Europe and has also become NATO's first full scale counter-insurgency operation.

NATO's mandate in regards to counternarcotics operations can be found in ISAF Operation Plan 10302, which notes ISAF can support the Afghan government counternarcotics effort because "facilitating Afghan institutions and security forces in a long-term national counter-narcotics strategy is consistent with ISAF's role to support the Afghan government extend its authority across the country."¹⁵ However, ISAF has no authorization to directly participate in counter-narcotic operations and its involvement with counter-narcotics is limited to logistical support, intelligence sharing, and training of Afghan police forces.¹⁶ It was not until October 2008 was the ISAF authorized to take direct military action against insurgency-linked narcotic targets, such as traffickers and processing facilities.¹⁷ Domestically, the Afghanistan government has attempted to combat the narcotic industry with the establishment of the

¹¹ Kay, Sean, and Sahar Khan. "NATO and Counter-insurgency: Strategic Liability or Tactical Asset?" (*Contemporary Security Policy*, 2007), 168

¹² Kay and Khan, *NATO*, 168

¹³ *Ibid.*, 168

¹⁴ Belkin and Morelli, *NATO*, 11

¹⁵ Thruelsen, Peter Dahl. *NATO in Afghanistan- What lessons are we learning and are we willing to adjust?* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2007), 27

¹⁶ Kay and Khan, *NATO*, 174

¹⁷ Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 43

Ministry of Counternarcotics (MCD) which has coordinated direct eradication and interdiction campaigns while the campaigns were enforced by the Ministry of the Interior.¹⁸ However, the effectiveness of such campaigns has been criticized alongside corruption of counternarcotics officials.¹⁹

Problems Arising From the Opiate Industry

There are two main challenges to the NATO mission that arise from the Afghan opiate industry. First, the Taliban collects a significant amount of its revenues from the opiate industry with some suggesting that 70% of current Taliban revenues come from opiate protection money and sales.²⁰ It is highly probable that the renewed Taliban insurgency is being fuelled by this profitable source of funding and can use opiate revenues to buy weapons, ammunition and hire fighters. 2008 saw a 30% increase in violence over 2007, which was previously the mission's deadliest year in terms of NATO casualties since the initial invasion.²¹ How an eight year old insurgency could continue to escalate the level and scale of its attacks without increases in funding is unclear. As the Taliban becomes better equipped and funded through the opiate industry, stabilization will become increasingly difficult and casualties will continue to rise for NATO, Afghan civilians, police and military.

The second problem is that the opiate industry inhibits the development of a strong central government in Kabul. It empowers regional warlords by leading to regional accumulations of political party which in turn encourages corruption and disruptions of the legitimate political process. With many areas of Afghanistan still under the auspices of regional warlords, warlords can also benefit financially through opiate cultivation and trafficking.²² With the revenues from their participation in the opiate industry, warlords can

¹⁸ Ibid., 37

¹⁹ Ibid., 37

²⁰ Glaze, *Opium*, 7

²¹ Belkin and Morelli, *NATO*, 2

²² Belkin and Morelli, *NATO*, 10

use the money to raise militias that undermine government security efforts, bribe local government officials or even attaining political power through vote-buying.²³ Narcotic-induced corruption is particularly prevalent at provincial and district levels of government where the central government's ability to exercise oversight is weak. It has been noted that, "high government officials, police commanders, governors are involved" in the drug trade with, "former commanders and warlords who are still in power serving as district chiefs and local police".²⁴

Enlarging NATO's Role

In considering an expansion of NATO involvement in counternarcotics operations, one must realize that the opiate problem is not an issue separate from other obstacles toward peace and stability in Afghanistan. The mandate of the NATO-led ISAF is peace support and nation building; two tasks that would be impossible to accomplish with the sustained violence caused by the opium-funded insurgency and opium-induced corruption. In an economic study, it was discovered that narcotics production in Afghanistan is conflict-induced. This suggests a vicious cycle in which the opiate industry increases the power of the Taliban and warlords, which in turn weakens the central government and diminishes its ability to stem opiate production and suppress the insurgency. NATO's ability to stabilize and secure the country also becomes compromised, which further enables an expansion of the opiate industry, thus continuing the cycle.²⁵ The linkages of the opiate industry to the Taliban, corruption, Afghan government and security are further illustrated in the following diagram.²⁶ If NATO and the ISAF wish to succeed in Afghanistan, they must take a central role in

²³ Brown-Felbab, Vanda. *Opium Licensing in Afghanistan and its Desirability and Feasibility*. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2007), 2

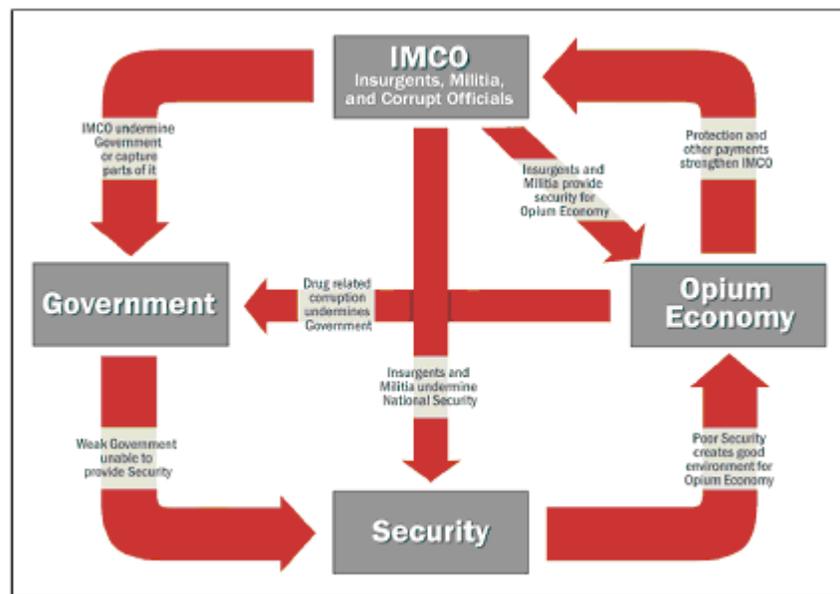
²⁴ Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 24-25

²⁵ Lind, Jo Thori, Karl Ove Moene, and Fredrik Willumsen. *Opium for the Masses? Conflict-Induced Narcotics Production in Afghanistan*. (Working Paper, Oslo: CESIFO, 2009), 27

²⁶ Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 12

providing substantive support to ongoing counternarcotics operations and to formulate a counternarcotics strategy that work towards the ISAF mandate of winning “hearts and minds”.

Figure 1. Narcotics, Corruption, and Security in Afghanistan



Source: Adapted and updated by CRS from World Bank, Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty, Country Economic Report No. 29551-AF September 9, 2004, p. 87.

Five Pillars: Costs and Benefits

With the need for NATO expansion in counternarcotics operations established, the question that follows is what strategies NATO should pursue to ensure that said expansion will have its desired effects on security and stability. In evaluating possible NATO approaches to the opiate problem, I turn to the current Five Pillars US counternarcotics policy that has been adopted by the Afghanistan government as part of its National Drug Control Strategy.²⁷ The Five Pillars consists of eradication, alternative development, interdiction,

²⁷ Ibid., 39

public information, and judicial reform.²⁸ With a more thorough understanding of the effectiveness of current strategies employed in the area, we can then see if such policies can be implemented by NATO, given its own operational constraints.

Eradication has been at the focus of Afghan counternarcotics operations, which essentially entails the forced destruction of opium poppy crops by Afghan security forces. As the primary strategy in combating the opiate problem however, evidence indicates that eradication has failed to reduce opiate production levels and has had backlash effects on the ISAF mission. Even as eradication reached a peak of 19,407 hectares in 2007, total cultivation in the country was at its highest point ever, totaling 193,000 hectares.²⁹ Due to the local and regional nature of eradication campaigns and government corruption, campaigns often fail to destroy a majority of their targets; with one survey indicating that 63% of poppies were left standing after a major operation.³⁰ The economic damage dealt to the Taliban through eradication is also suspect. In 2009, total eradication and interdiction efforts resulted in approximately \$1.7 million US denied to the Taliban, which is an insignificant figure given that the Taliban earned an estimated \$400 million in revenue from opium in that same year.³¹ Operational effectiveness aside, eradication also serves to seriously undermine public support in the ISAF and Afghan government given the heavy reliance on opium poppies as a source of revenue for Afghan farmers. Due to corruption or political considerations, large-scale, politically influential producers are usually not targeted in eradication campaigns and it is usually the most vulnerable segments of Afghan society, with little links to the Taliban insurgency who have their crops destroyed.³² With the destruction of their only means of sustenance, farmers become highly susceptible to

²⁸ Ibid., 39

²⁹ Ibid., 44

³⁰ Redden, Joshua C. *Popping the Afghan Opium Balloon*. (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air Command and Staff College, 2008), 9

³¹ Strategic Advisory Group. *Unclassified Metrics April 2009*. (NATO/ISAF, 2009), 13

³² Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 45

Taliban recruitment and support. Eradication also weakens support for the Afghan government and transfers legitimacy to the Taliban as the latter protects local crops from eradication campaigns.³³ From past US counternarcotics programs in Central America, eradication has had mixed results even when taken as part of a comprehensive strategy. In Columbia and Bolivia, gains made by eradication were met with crop growth in other areas while Peru experienced significant declines in coca production through a combined forced eradication and alternative development program.³⁴ While eradication should in theory be an effective means of controlling opiate production, there are currently too many drawbacks for its use as primary Afghanistan counternarcotics strategy.

The primary goal of alternative development is to provide economic alternatives to opium production. The key components of alternative development have been labor intensive projects designed to rebuild agricultural infrastructure and “comprehensive development” programs, which aim to diversify the agricultural economy, provide credit markets for farmers, raise investment in rural and urban areas and develop agricultural initiatives.³⁵ It past examples of US alternative development programs, agreements are made with farmers and communities to voluntarily eradicate drug crops in return for licit crop aid and also infrastructure improvements for the community.³⁶ However, there are unresolved issues involving farmer accountability, policing of participating farmers, cost effectiveness of alternative development campaigns and corruption throughout the process. The extent to which alternative development would be successful is also suspect given the wide disparities between the values of opium poppies and its alternative crops. It is questionable if agricultural support and licit crop subsidies would provide sufficient economic incentive for substitution when a poppy

³³ Ibid., 28

³⁴ Navarrette-Frias, Carolina, and Connie Veillette. *Drug Crop Eradication and Alternative Development in the Andes*. (Congressional Research Service, Congressional Research Service, 2005), 6

³⁵ Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 41-42

³⁶ Navarrette-Frias, *Drug*, 8

farmer stands to make ten times the revenue of a wheat farmer. In order for alternative development to have widespread success, it has been suggested that Afghanistan would require an entirely new business model, with billions in investment.³⁷ Observations from US counternarcotics programs in Central America suggest that alternative development alone will not tackle the core issue but requires a combination of “intelligent law enforcement, interdiction and community-based voluntary eradication.”³⁸ Before alternative development can be adopted as a primary strategy, there must be sufficient stability in the region to enforce alternative development partnerships and also to prevent a relapse from licit crops to drug crops.

Interdiction focuses on capturing drug traffickers and drug barons, interception of narcotic shipments and destruction of drug processing and storage facilities. The results of Afghan interdiction campaigns have been mixed. Evidence suggests that it has had minimal effects on opium exports and government corruption has resulted in the prosecution of small and less influential individuals.³⁹ Interdiction has also created closer ties between criminal groups and the Taliban in order to gain protection from authorities.⁴⁰

Public information campaigns seek to inform Afghans of the ISAF and NATO’s role in counternarcotics operations and to raise public awareness of the negative nature of poppy cultivation. Appeals are made regarding how poppy cultivation is “un-Islamic”, the illegality of poppy cultivation, how the opiate industry contributes to the Taliban, and the health effects that opiates have on their users.⁴¹ Such information operations (IO) are targeted at local authorities or religious leaders, who then distribute the information to their communities. IO are also complemented by Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), which seeks to influence Afghan public

³⁷ Kay and Khan, *NATO*, 174

³⁸ Navarrette-Frias, *Drug*, 21

³⁹ Brown-Felbab, *Opium*, 4

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5

⁴¹ Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 40

values surrounding narcotics and counter anti-ISAF Taliban propaganda.⁴² Public information has proved to be successful in its implementation. A recent UNODC/MDC survey noted that, “Farmers across Afghanistan are well aware of the government’s ban on opium poppy cultivation and that in some areas farmers who have declined to cultivate opium poppy have done so because they fear incarceration or government eradication of their crops. UNODC/MCN surveys reported that Islamic prohibitions on involvement with narcotics also was influential among Afghans, particularly those that had not yet been involved with cultivation or trafficking.” (Blanchard 2009, 40)

There are still challenges to a successful public information campaign. These include misinformation spread by the Taliban regarding NATO and ISAF involvement in eradication campaigns, difficulties in communicating with the largely-illiterate Afghan population, and Taliban control of media sources in local or rural areas.⁴³

The final pillar is judicial reform, which is targeted at reducing corruption and creating the legal framework necessary for drug enforcement and prosecution. As corruption directly undermines any form of Afghan-directed counternarcotics operations, judicial reform is a crucial component for long-term success in narcotics control. Success in judicial reform has been mixed. Political considerations and corruption still determine which individuals are successfully prosecuted. High-profile arrests have been executed by direct US assistance or via the extradition of subjects to the United States and not directly by the Afghan government.⁴⁴

NATO’s Expanded Role: A Case for Targeted and Focused Efforts

An expansion of NATO and ISAF counternarcotics activities must ensure that the strategies adopted further the doctrine of “winning

⁴² Thruelsen, *NATO*, 28

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28

⁴⁴ Blanchard, *Afghanistan*, 41

hearts and minds” and actually work to reduce the Taliban’s capacity to destabilize the country. Thus, a coherent NATO counternarcotics expansion should focus heavily on IO and PSYOPS, increase the scale of current support provided to Afghan security forces, reduce reliance on eradication as an Afghan counternarcotics policy and ultimately fulfil the ISAF mandate of political and economic stability. IO and PSYOPS is by far the most critical component of any NATO expansion as maintaining the confidence and support of the Afghan people is the key to victory in Afghanistan. The importance is not so much as to what NATO is doing but what NATO is perceived to be doing in counternarcotics. If the Afghan people fear the Afghan government and ISAF for their perceived involvement in counternarcotics activities, they will be more inclined to support the Taliban insurgency. Thus, coherent and intense IO and PSYOPS campaigns are necessary to maintain public confidence in the ISAF, clarify ISAF’s role in counternarcotics and also to discourage narcotic activities.

The current extent of NATO financial and material support for Afghan counternarcotics operations should be increased. NATO member states should contribute more effective intelligence and surveillance support (UAV, satellite imaging) to raise the effectiveness and scope of Afghan interdiction missions. Salaries of security and police forces should be raised to reduce corruption. Currently, an Afghan police officer receives \$70 per month while an insurgent can earn \$200 per month.⁴⁵ Finally, an increase in training and logistical support would increase the overall capabilities of Afghan security forces in both combating the insurgency and in counternarcotics operations.

There should be heavy political and economic pressure placed on the Afghan government to end eradication as a primary counternarcotics strategy. Strategic ISAF troop deployments to narcotic dependent regions or the withdrawal of military support during Afghan eradication operations can become disincentives for eradication policy. In Afghanistan’s current economic and political

⁴⁵ Glaze, *Opium*, 7

state, eradication is doomed to fail and the ISAF must be disassociated from Afghan led eradication campaigns in order to maintain the support of the Afghan people. NATO should rather support the interdiction of traffickers, the destruction of drug labs and the arrest of high profile drug barons or warlords- operations that do not undermine the support of the common Afghan people but still aim to disrupt the opiate supply chain.

Finally, the one greatest thing the ISAF and NATO can do to address the opiate problem is to counteract its root causes; political instability and economic necessity. As the mandate of the ISAF is primarily that of peace support and nation building, those tasks must be prioritized over counternarcotics efforts. ISAF funding and resources should be directed towards increasing the scope and effectiveness of PRT's, which have shown the potential to provide stabilization, infrastructure development and the creation of partnerships with local communities.⁴⁶ The key to success in NATO counternarcotics operations is to minimize the economic and social shocks on the common Afghan civilian while gradually tackling the key factors of narcotics production. Once Afghanistan has been stabilized and its economy properly developed, then strategies such as eradication coupled with alternative development can be utilized to directly raze the opiate industry and cut off insurgency funding.

Addressing Operational Limitations

The expansion of NATO responsibilities in counternarcotics must be focused and concise, as a result of the organization's operational limitations. It has been suggested that even at its current strength of 51,000 troops, the ISAF still lacks sufficient manpower to secure its primary objectives of stabilization and development.⁴⁷ As NATO OPLAN 10302 notes, "NATO forces must avoid becoming so entangled in CN [counternarcotics] activities that their ability to implement tasks are [sic.] undermined."⁴⁸ A NATO expansion into counternarcotics may stretch current resources too thin and would

⁴⁶ Belkin and Morelli, *NATO*, 27-28

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13

⁴⁸ Duncan, *Opium*, 34

require an intensified financial and political commitment from member states. In drafting NATO strategies, there are also political constraints in the form of national caveats placed on NATO troops. Many states are hesitant to authorize their troops to conduct high risk direct counternarcotics operations which results in reduced NATO counternarcotics operational capacity. By focusing the NATO expansion into the several key areas noted above, we can avoid member state disagreements, more readily secure support and draw from existing member state resources. As the suggested areas of focus do not include direct NATO engagement in counternarcotics or combat operations but rather an increase in logistical, intelligence and training for Afghan security forces, member states would be more willing to approve increases in support and funding for such efforts. The focus on IO and PSYOPS is also a motivator for member states as they can contribute troops to work on counternarcotics operations that are relatively of a relatively low combat intensity. Additionally, many NATO member states already have established PSYOPS units, which would be welcome additions to an IO and PSYOPS expansion in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the ability of NATO to successfully complete its mission in Afghanistan hinges not on the destruction of the Taliban, but on Afghan public support of the ISAF and central government. As NATO Supreme Allied Commander General James L. Jones notes, “we are fighting an insurgency . . . We are fighting against different factions who have some military capability to psychologically demoralize us, but it will not prevent us militarily from being successful.”⁴⁹ Keeping that in mind, an expansion of NATO counternarcotics activities is warranted given the cycle of violence of violence and instability that the opiate industry generates. However, NATO strategies should not alienate the Afghan population, but work to weaken Taliban support and move the country gradually

⁴⁹ Belkin and Morelli, *NATO*, 174

away from its opiate addiction. Many observers have noted that Afghanistan will be a test of NATO's resolve and future viability. Should NATO fail in its mission, deeper reflection into its international role and capabilities should be undertaken.

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