Afghanistan: NATO’s Last Hurrah?

In January 2004, NATO’s new secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, traveled to Washington, DC to deliver a speech at the National Defense University. The challenges confronting the Alliance and the new secretary general in early 2004 were considerable. Since 9/11, NATO had dramatically expanded its membership, increased its partner relationships, pledged to ameliorate the military capabilities gap, established a rapid reaction force, and committed to operations far from the inclusive borders of the Alliance’s member-states. Hopes of building upon this ambitious agenda were tempered by political divisions among members of the Alliance, particularly over Iraq. Indeed, as Scheffer approached his audience at the National Defense University, he was well aware that at no other time in the history of the Alliance had so many questioned the long-term effectiveness and viability of NATO.

Scheffer began his address stating, “I do not intend to mince words . . . I want to lay out for you my vision of NATO over the next coming months, and the coming years. I will set out my priorities as secretary general. I will identify what I believe to be the steps we must take to meet them.”1 After acknowledging the bruising effects of the Iraq War on the Alliance, Scheffer declared that it was “time to get back to business,” and outlined four priorities for the future. In order of importance, the secretary general identified Afghanistan, Iraq, military transformation, and cooperative relations among member-states as his priorities for the new year.

Scheffer was not alone in designating NATO’s mission in Afghanistan the organization’s top priority. Throughout 2004 and 2005, the message from diplomats, policymakers, and NATO-watchers was consistent: NATO’s status and prospects were inextricably linked to the successful execution of the Afghanistan operation. At the U.S.
State Department I was informed by an official with the Policy Planning Staff: “Afghanistan is where the future of NATO will be decided.”\textsuperscript{2} Along similar lines, Paul Gallis, with the U.S. Congressional Research Service, observed, “It’s an effort that cannot fail if NATO is going to succeed.”\textsuperscript{3} Europeans interviewed for this study shared the views of their American counterparts. After delineating his country’s contributions to NATO’s Afghan mission, a German diplomat stated, “Afghanistan is a fair test for NATO and we are meeting the challenge.”\textsuperscript{4}

For some, NATO’s operation in Afghanistan was a logical and appropriate move for an old alliance establishing a new identity in a changing world. Having committed the organization to out-of-area operations at Reykjavik in May 2002 and at Prague in November 2002, NATO’s supporters viewed Afghanistan as a bridge linking the Cold War NATO with the post–Cold War NATO and the war on terror. This sentiment was well captured by Amin Tarzi of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, whose reporting from Afghanistan has contributed greatly to the public debate:

It was Afghanistan, the last battlefield of the Cold War that led to the tragic events of 11 September 2001. NATO’s first challenge in the war on terrorism began in Afghanistan as well . . . As such, NATO’s shift of attention from the threat posed by the former Soviet Union to terrorism seems a natural and logical progression. A major question that remains unanswered, however, is whether or not NATO is facing the challenge with solid unity of purpose and action.\textsuperscript{5}

Over four years have passed since the United States toppled the Taliban government and two years since NATO formally accepted security and peacekeeping responsibilities for Kabul and the country as a whole. While Operation Enduring Freedom proved highly successful in fall/winter 2001, the postwar occupation has confronted many obstacles.

In the aftermath of major combat operations in early 2002, Washington and its NATO allies pledged to “get Afghanistan right.” Today, in addition to the reemergence of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces, Afghanistan contends with fighting among the country’s warlords, significant production and export of drug-related crops, a growing international criminal presence, and a recently elected Afghan government that struggles to maintain control over events in Kabul, let alone the country as a whole.\textsuperscript{6}