

Ahead of NATO meeting: New US reports warn of failure in Afghanistan

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The latest US assessments of the war in Afghanistan, authored by the Afghanistan Study Group and the Atlantic Council, paint a similar picture of crisis and failure as did major studies published last year.

The Study Group, which was co-chaired by former marine general James L. Jones and former ambassador Thomas Pickering, issued a report on January 30 entitled “Revitalising our Efforts: Rethinking our Strategies”. The Atlantic Council—which Jones also chairs—released a parallel report titled “Saving Afghanistan: An Appeal and Plan for Urgent Action”.

The Atlantic Council document bluntly began: “Make no mistake, NATO is not winning in Afghanistan. Unless this reality is understood and action is taken promptly, the future of Afghanistan is bleak, with regional and global impact.”

Both reports made similar estimates. After more than six years of occupation, the US and its NATO allies have failed to significantly improve the lives of ordinary Afghans or create a functioning national government that enjoys popular support. The population has been left in terrible poverty and at the mercy of corrupt and brutal despots and officials.

The Study Group report admits that many of the top figures in the US-backed regime in Kabul “are considered serial human rights abusers by large segments of the population”. Millions of people are dependent on the opium/heroin trade to survive—either growing poppies or working for the warlords and trafficking networks that are flooding the world’s streets with the drug.

The anti-occupation insurgency is growing, with US and NATO forces suffering their heaviest losses of the war in 2007. Allied military operations, particularly air strikes, routinely inflict civilian casualties and are fueling the already deep reservoir of hatred for the

foreign military presence that is encouraging thousands of Afghans to join the insurgents.

With less than 60,000 troops in the country, NATO is incapable of preventing guerillas operating in large swathes of southern Afghanistan. The region of ethnic Pashtun tribes, which straddles the Pakistan and Afghanistan border, is effectively under Taliban control. Its forces are conducting an increasingly successful war against the Pakistani military regime, as well as attacking NATO troops over the frontier.

Of even greater concern to the US thinktanks is the extent of popular opposition to the Afghan war within NATO countries. The Atlantic Council bewailed the fact that “publics, especially in Europe, regard Afghanistan as part of the highly unpopular war in Iraq”. Opinion polls show that a majority in all NATO countries apart from the US and Britain favour the withdrawal of troops. As a result of this antiwar sentiment, the governments in a number of NATO states have maintained strict caveats that prevent their soldiers in Afghanistan being used in overt combat roles.

While not explicitly stated, the Study Group is obviously concerned that if the US is abandoned by its NATO allies, it may ultimately be compelled to withdraw its forces as well. The result would be a humiliating setback for US strategic interests in the region and internationally.

“If international forces pulled out of Afghanistan,” the Study Group document declared, “the fragile Afghan government would likely fall apart, again becoming a failed state while the Taliban and other warlords would gain control of various areas and eventually fight each other ... Not only would failure to stabilise Afghanistan pave the way for a revival of an Al Qaeda safe haven in that country, it would also

likely have a blowback effect in Pakistan, where local Taliban and other extremist groups would be inspired to step up their efforts to destabilise the Pakistani regime, with the hope of one day installing fundamentalist, theocratic rule”.

The reports dovetail with increasingly strident diplomacy by the US and its allies fighting in southern Afghanistan, including Canada, Britain and Australia, directed against the refusal of other European powers to send additional troops or allow their forces to be moved from the relatively safer northern and western areas of Afghanistan. The European stance compelled the Bush administration to announce the dispatch of an additional 3,200 American troops last month.

US State department official Richard Boucher told a Senate hearing last week: “The greatest threat to Afghanistan’s future is abandonment by the international community.... Too few of our allies have combat troops fighting the insurgents, especially in the south.... We expect more from our NATO allies.”

Britain’s international development secretary Douglas Alexander declared on Sunday: “We’ve made clear to our NATO partners that we do want to see appropriate burden sharing, not simply in terms of the number of troops on the ground, but where those troops are committed within Afghanistan.”

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued two ultimatums last week threatening to withdraw his country’s entire contribution to the NATO force, unless the alliance deployed an additional 1,000 combat troops to reinforce the 2,500-strong Canadian force in Kandahar. Throughout 2007, Canadian troops bore the brunt of the fighting and casualties in the former heartland of the Taliban movement, losing 30 dead and dozens more wounded.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is in Britain this week for talks with the Brown government over Afghanistan. On February 7 and 8, a meeting of NATO defence ministers is scheduled to take place in Lithuania, where the conduct of the Afghan war and the demands for additional troops will be high on the agenda.

The likely tenor of the discussion is indicated by the Atlantic Council’s warning that the European powers risk a rupture with Washington unless they provide the troops and finances needed to subjugate Afghanistan. Under a heading “The consequences of failure,” the

thinktank commented: “If the Afghanistan effort fails, NATO’s cohesion, effectiveness and credibility will be shaken and the rationale for NATO’s expeditionary, out of area, role will be undermined.... This could lead to a moribund alliance, which could find itself reduced to geopolitical irrelevancy and marginalisation.”

Thus far, US demands have had little impact. The German government last month rejected a reportedly “direct and stern” letter from US Defense Secretary Robert Gates insisting that it deploy thousands of extra troops, including paratroopers and assault helicopters. The French government reportedly received a similar request and responded in the same fashion as Berlin. Germany has 3,100 troops and France 1,600, mainly operating in and around Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul. Major NATO states such as Italy and Turkey have also refused to send more forces.

A security analyst told Canadian television that additional troops were only “likely to come from the Australians”. The Labor government in Australia has issued several hints that it would be prepared to boost its military commitment in Afghanistan in order to cement its relations with Washington. The Australian army, however, would be stretched to provide 1,000 more combat troops.



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