

How To Turn The Tide In Afghanistan

International Herald Tribune - 12/10/2006

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KABUL NATO will fail to combat the growing insurgency in Afghanistan unless it shows the flexibility and determination to deal with three major problems simultaneously - all of which are the legacy of the American failure in Afghanistan over the past five years.

A few days ago NATO took over all military operations in Afghanistan from the Americans. But ordinary people in Kabul are fearful that the Taliban are on their way back to power and the international community does not have the power or desire to stop them.

To turn the tide in Afghanistan, NATO will have to act not just as a military alliance, but also as a political, economic and diplomatic alliance - something it has never done before.

Since the spring when 10,000 NATO forces took over in southern Afghanistan from U.S. forces, they have suffered three times the casualty rate of American soldiers, as a result of well-planned offensives by the Taliban.

Although NATO forces have killed hundreds of Taliban, there is no quick end to the insurgency in sight as the Taliban move skillfully from mass frontal attacks on NATO positions to one-man suicide attacks in Afghan cities.

Not surprisingly the public, Parliaments and news media in many NATO countries whose soldiers are dying in Afghanistan are up in arms, and demanding that their governments recall their troops.

In the past few days, Prime Ministers Tony Blair of Britain and Stephen Harper of Canada have said their forces will get the best equipment and support available (Canadian troops have suffered the heaviest casualties). But their people want answers to more obvious questions: Why are the Taliban back, when the United States repeatedly said they were finished? Why has Pakistan's military regime continued to allow Taliban leaders to live on its soil? Can NATO actually succeed?

Since 2001, the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan has failed to deploy enough peacekeeping troops, resources and reconstruction aid. NATO is only now rectifying that, spreading troops out to key areas in the south that have been hit by the insurgency and developing a more clear-headed reconstruction policy.

But NATO members have been slow to come up with the necessary financial aid and military equipment. Major reconstruction has yet to take place. Even in Kabul there is less electricity today than there was under the Communists in the 1980s.

In the long term, NATO forces in the south can only win if they are prepared to come in with enough aid and reconstruction to win over the alienated Pashtun tribes. NATO's military successes must become an economic lever that pries more money out of the European Union, the United States and the Muslim world.

The second problem is the Afghan government led by President Hamid Karzai, which has failed to come up with speedy and decisive decisions, promote good governance and clamp down on corruption and drug trafficking among its own ministers and officials.

As Afghans have become more and more critical of their own government, the Taliban find they can recruit extensively among disaffected people inside Afghanistan for the first time since 2001.

NATO has to play a critical political role in resuscitating the Afghan government and giving it the confidence to perform better.

Third, NATO has to play a diplomatic role in convincing Pakistan to stop pursuing a dual-track policy of supporting the war on terrorism when it comes to capturing Qaeda leaders, but declining to do the same when it comes to the Taliban. Washington has tolerated this dichotomy for the past five years because it placed little importance on restraining the Taliban, but NATO cannot afford to do the same.

In a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Sept. 21, General James Jones, NATO's supreme commander, testified that the Taliban headquarters was in Quetta, Pakistan. Yet President George W. Bush did not even bring up Quetta when he hosted a dinner recently for Karzai and President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan.

The UN secretary general's latest report to the Security Council on Afghanistan says the Taliban leadership "relies heavily on cross-border fighters, many of whom are Afghans drawn from nearby refugee camps and radical seminaries in Pakistan." It lists five leadership centers for the insurgency. U.S. and NATO intelligence officials reportedly believe that at least three of those centers are based in Pakistan.

America's refusal to address this issue has convinced Afghans that the West is not serious about ending the Taliban insurgency and securing Afghanistan. NATO has to change this public perception if it is to succeed.