NATO's 'Mission' in Afghanistan Is Failing

by Ramtanu Maitra

NATO's efforts to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, were the centerpiece of a June 14 meeting in Brussels of the organization's defense ministers. From all available reports, it is evident that NATO's Afghanistan mission is heading towards failure. If the rag-tag Afghan insurgents, some of whom are orthodox Islamists, can bring NATO to its knees, this relic of the "Cold War," which acts as the cat's paw of the Western powers, will surely meet its long overdue demise.

Last February, at a security meeting in Munich, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also expressed his apprehensions about NATO's failure. "Going forward," he said, "it is vitally important that the success Afghanistan has achieved not be allowed to slip away through neglect or lack of political will or resolve. All allies agree we need a comprehensive strategy—combining muscular military effort with effective support for governance, economic development, and counternarcotics."

NATO's impending failure in Afghanistan is not so much a military issue, but rather, a failure to define what the mission is all about. One reason that NATO leadership misses the point is because Brussels is too often the tool of the neo-con permanent-war party in Washington, which is promoting a "clash of civilizations" policy. In this context, the EU and Brussels accepted the Bush-Cheney cabal's "war on terror" mantra, which is to wage a war of an indefinite period to "stabilize" Afghanistan; while annihilating the orthodox Islamists, known as the Taliban. There was little understanding then, and even now, that the process they have unleashed has created more mortal enemies than reliable friends.

Humanitarian Situation Worsened

On June 12, almost five and a half years after the Taliban were ousted from power militarily by the U.S. occupying forces and their Afghan allies, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) director of operations Pierre Kraehenbuehl issued a statement saying that the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan "is worse now than it was a year ago.... Civilians suffer horribly from mounting threats to their security, such as increasing numbers of roadside bombs and suicide attacks, and regular aerial bombing raids. They also lack access to basic services. It is incredibly difficult for ordinary Afghans to lead a normal life."

The report also pointed out that the conflict pitting Afghan and international forces against the armed opposition

DOD/Sgt 1st Class Dexter D. Clouden

Five and a half years after the Taliban were ousted from power in Afghanistan, the humanitarian situation is horrific, and the Taliban are still very much in evidence. In this photo, U.S. forces patrol in Bagram.

has "significantly intensified" since last year in the South and East of the country, and is spreading to the North and West. The result has been a growing number of civilian casualties.

A report released in April 2007, by the New York-based Human Rights Watch, said insurgent bombings in Afghanistan doubled from 2005 to 2006, and estimated that some 700 civilians died in bombings and other attacks during that period. While the report said the Taliban militants are increasingly targeting specific groups of civilians, military operations by the Afghan government and international forces have caused many civilian casualties. It said those casualties did not appear to be intentional, but that there were many cases in which international forces failed to prevent harm to civilians.

Civilian Casualties

The civilian casualty issue is one of a number of issues that has darkened the image of the U.S. and NATO forces to the Afghan civilians. In early May, following the reported deaths of about 50 civilians in fighting between U.S.-led troops and "suspected" militants in western Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai summoned foreign military commanders to tell them that his people's patience was wearing thin. What was even more disturbing was the fact that the U.S.-led coalition of occupying forces tried to cover up the incident by claiming it had no reports of any civilian casualties, and had taken "every precaution to prevent injury to innocent Afghan civilians." But Afghan police who visited the area found that 51 civilians had been killed in the fighting, Herat provincial spokesman Akramudin Yawar said.

"The figures I have so far of the civilians killed in the three-day operation in Shindand is that 51 civilians were killed, including 18 women and a number of children.... I don't have the exact figures for children," Yawar told Agence France-Presse.

However, nothing much has changed since then. Although NATO said in January, that its biggest mistake in 2006 had been the killing of innocent people, reports continue to pour in about strafing of schoolhouses by NATO aircraft, and deaths of women and children in the southern Afghan provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, where the insurgents are strong and NATO and U.S.-led forces continue to seek a "military victory."

Colonialists in Disguise?

The civilian deaths are not only unacceptable to the Afghans, but give credence to the view of some who say that Western forces do not care about Afghan lives when attacking the Taliban fighters. While the non-Muslim occupying forces have identified Muslims in general as the enemy, Afghans see the Western forces, as well as those from the earlier Soviet occupation, as children of old colonialist powers whose aims were to occupy foreign lands and set up empires. Therefore, it is written in Afghanistan's stones that the occupying forces must be resisted at all costs and forever.

This hardening of relations between the Afghan civilians and the occupying forces, who posed as their "liberators" from the oppressive Dark Age forces known as the Taliban in 2001, is no longer debatable. Reto Stocker, head of the Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), told the IRIN news agency in Kabul on June 14 that delivering humanitarian aid and monitoring the situation of civilians in Afghanistan has become increasingly difficult. "Up till late 2001, the ICRC had access to all conflict areas and was able to mediate in prisoner exchanges, the exchange of remains, and the delivery of humanitarian aid.... But now we do not have that access.... Afghans are daily faced with death, destruction, homelessness, and destitution," Stocker said.

According to the ICRC, the hardening of views among the warring parties, and the intensification of the conflict have reduced the space in which humanitarian workers can operate. "There is a lack of will among different groups in the conflict

to try to seek dialogue, and it has become very difficult to negotiate," Stocker added.

The Reluctant Warriors

It is widely acknowledged that most of the NATO member nations have sent their warriors to Afghanistan, primarily to please the Cheney-Bush Administration in Washington. In this situation, the two main allies of the NATO coalition, the United States and Britain, are at the forefront of the military action.

What, however, is not widely known, is the European Union's reluctance to meet NATO's requirements. NATO has repeatedly asked the EU for more civilian and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, particularly since both organizations claim that security cannot be attained without economic development and jobs. But the European Commission has refused.

"The Commission put its foot down largely because of opposition from some of the member states," Daniel Keohane, a defense analyst at the Center for European Reform in London, said. These included Belgium, France, Greece, and Spain, EU diplomats said.

Moreover, the EU has no military budget, but rather relies on its 25 member states for funding. When it fields a mission, participating countries carry the costs. A similar situation prevails in NATO, which has 26 members. What this means is that the amount European countries collectively spend on defense—180 billion euros, or $235 billion, a year—has to be divvied up between the EU and NATO, which are effectively competing for the same funds.

It is no secret that differing perspectives have further weakened NATO's capability to effectively counter the insurgency and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Consider the following incident: Last March, Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo was seized by the Taliban in Helmand province. NATO command was unwilling to strike any deal which would benefit the Taliban. But the Italian ambassador in Kabul approached President Karzai in Kabul, and made clear to him that if Mastrogiacomo were killed, it would be such a serious problem in Italy that Rome would be forced to pull out its 2,000 NATO troops from Afghanistan.

As a result, the Italian Embassy was allowed to carry out negotiations with the Taliban through back channels, and eventually a deal was worked out, whereby the Taliban agreed to swap the Italian journalist for five Taliban prisoners in the custody of the occupying forces. In addition, the Taliban were also apparently paid 20 million afghani (about US$405,000) to sweeten the deal. According to reports, the Italian ambassador personally went to the prison where the Taliban were held and made sure they were released.

False 'Victories'

In early May this year, with the advent of Spring in Afghanistan, NATO troops unleashed Operation Achilles in the drug-and-insurgent-infested Helmand province in the South. Although reports issued by the occupying forces indicate that NATO forces have met with significant success, the reality is likely altogether different.

Take for instance Operation Baaz Tsuka, launched in December 2006, in the troubled districts of Panjwai and Zhari outside the City of Kandahar. The objective of the operation was to clear the Taliban fighters from the villages, which are strong bastions of Taliban power. Throughout its ten-year stay inside Afghanistan, the Red Army was never able take these villages.

In January 2007, NATO forces announced "victory." But now the area is as thick with insurgents as ever. Earlier, in September, NATO's Canadian troops launched a similar campaign in the same area, code-named Operation Medusa. What the NATO troops found to their dismay, is that the Taliban insurgents, who earlier would melt away when facing advancing troops, now held their ground and refused to budge. Within two weeks, NATO troops declared victory. But the launching of the Operation Baaz Tsuka three months later in the same area, indicates how ephemeral that "victory" was, if in fact, it had been a victory at all.

What actually happened is that, while NATO officials claimed they had broken the Taliban's ability to fight and regroup, it was evident from reports in the Afghan press that the Taliban's ability to strike in other provinces remained unaffected. As Medusa raged in one corner of the country, the Taliban mounted separate attacks in Farah and Khost provinces, each involving a hundred fighters. Furthermore, the insurgents were able to capture districts in Nimruz, Zabul, and Helmand provinces.

After the fighting in Panjwai eased, allowing journalists access to the area, the Toronto *Globe & Mail*'s Graeme Smith uncovered a story which reveals a great deal. Smith said he talked to local villagers, who described a situation which is sharply at odds with the version of events given to the media by NATO. The Afghans told Smith that the Taliban had taken up residence in the area at the invitation of many locals who sought their help in expelling corrupt and brutal police officials appointed by the Karzai government. The villagers described police shakedowns at checkpoints, and said that although they feared the Taliban's swift and brutal justice, insurgents never stole property, making their rule preferable to the "random thievery and beatings meted out by the Afghan police."

The head of the United Nations mission in southern Afghanistan, Talatbek Masadykov, supported the villagers' claims, affirming that today's police behave "like jihadi commanders in the past." Masadykov estimated that perhaps half of the insurgents in the area are in fact local farmers who had taken up arms to free themselves from tyrannical authorities. Meanwhile, with the expulsion of the Taliban, "police in the area have resumed the abusive tactics that originally ignited local anger," according to Smith.