



## The Moment for Soul-Searching NATO and the Retreat from Afghanistan

---

Jean-Loup Samaan

## Series Introduction

---

### The Afghanistan Crisis: Anxieties and Trigger Points

---

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a geopolitical free-for-all situation in the country, with regional, if not, extra-regional implications. It ceded the country swiftly to Taliban control, with China, Russia, and Iran all poised to forge close relationships with the new Afghan government.

International players like Qatar, Turkey and Pakistan, which have had functional relations with the Taliban, have sought constructive engagement with the new government, to the extent of opening a pathway for them into the international system. Others, particularly the Central Asian states, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, are disquieted by security concerns, terrorism-related or otherwise. In Europe, the immediate impact of events in Afghanistan is having to manage a massive refugee crisis.

This series of *Insights* examines the implications of the US disengagement from Afghanistan, ranging from strategic openings in interstate relations to ground-level anxieties.

*Cover photo: Brigadier General Ansgar Meyer, the last commander of the German Bundeswehr (armed forces) in Afghanistan, seen on 30 June 2021, saluting in front of a cargo plane at a military air base in northern Germany upon completion of the German troop pullout from Afghanistan. Hauke-Christian Dittrich/POOL/AFP.*

# The Moment for Soul-Searching NATO and the Retreat from Afghanistan

Jean-Loup Samaan\*

For the past two decades, the political agenda of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was shaped in many ways by its operations in Afghanistan. During that period, Afghanistan became an object of mobilisation among NATO member states as well as with the organisation's partners in the Middle East, South and Central Asia. Although much of the media coverage of the past several months was focused on the impact of the retreat for the United States, NATO was no less deeply affected by its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Internally, NATO intervention in Afghanistan had become a key indicator to measure transatlantic solidarity in action. Each operational crisis for NATO troops was the cause or the consequence of political tensions among allies at the organisation's headquarters in Brussels. Externally, Afghanistan reflected the evolution of NATO after the end of the Cold War and the desire of its leadership to extend the scope of its interventions way beyond the borders of its members. In the post-Cold War security environment, NATO was to be actively involved in military cooperation with partners in distant areas, from the Gulf to Central or South Asia.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David Yost, *NATO Transformed: The Alliance's New Roles in International Security*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998.

Now, both assumptions behind the Afghanistan intervention — the demonstration of transatlantic solidarity and NATO military cooperation outside of its traditional sphere — have been shattered by the calamitous withdrawal of allied forces in 2021. The resulting existential crisis that NATO is experiencing is not unprecedented and there is no reason to believe it will challenge (at least not by itself) the *raison d'être* of the organisation. But the fallout from NATO's departure from Afghanistan signals the end of an era. It highlights the shortcomings of Western military interventions in the broader Middle East in the past two decades. Meanwhile, the lessons currently processed by decision-makers in Washington as well as in European capitals will shape the scope of NATO's future engagements, be it in the Middle East or in Asia.

## **“In Together, Out Together”: The Erosion of Transatlantic Solidarity**

NATO's presence in Afghanistan was initially supposed to reflect the vitality of transatlantic military cooperation, but it soon became the most obvious manifestation of disputes between both sides of the Atlantic. From the outset, the US administration of George W. Bush was not convinced of the need for NATO involvement in a country as distant from continental Europe as Afghanistan.

Within 24 hours of the attacks of September 2001, the allies invoked, for the first time in their history, Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty — a solidarity clause positing that an attack against one member state is an attack against them all. Article 5 was historically conceived to reassure the Europeans of American resolve to intervene in case of an attack from the Soviet Union. Noticeably, the article does not

automatically call for military action; instead, it cautiously states that each party will take “individually and in concert with the other parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force”.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the US Department of Defense under the mandate of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued against a NATO contribution to operation “Enduring Freedom” launched in October 2001 to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The US government’s concerns were based on scepticism over the efficiency of NATO’s command structure and that of the European national armed forces as well as a desire to avoid having US troops constrained by a multilateral setting. This initial reluctance of the Bush administration foreshadowed future transatlantic disagreements over the purpose of a NATO presence in Afghanistan.

“The NATO involvement was approved only after much resistance from member states, in particular, France.”

It was only in August 2003 that the organisation eventually became the key actor in the reconstruction of Afghanistan as it led the

---

<sup>2</sup> The complete text of the article states: “*The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.*” In “North Atlantic Treaty”, 4 April 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm)

UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This NATO involvement was however approved only after much resistance in Brussels from member states, in particular France, which questioned the ability of NATO to take responsibility for such an ambitious project. In fact, NATO's leadership of ISAF was more the result of lobbying by the NATO bureaucracy than the aspiration of its member states.<sup>3</sup>

ISAF quickly turned into a vast state-building enterprise involving 130,000 troops from 50 NATO and partner nations. Observers at that time optimistically argued that NATO's contribution in Afghanistan demonstrated the organisation's ability to adapt to the new security environment.<sup>4</sup>

**“NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan was the most obvious way to secure the relevance of an organisation that had been struggling to find itself a new cause since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.”**

It is worth remembering that by the mid-2000s, the global war on terror was the undisputed driver of Western defence policies. Prior to the war in Georgia of 2008, Russia was considered a partner in that endeavour and strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific arena had not taken centre stage yet. Against that backdrop, NATO's involvement in

---

<sup>3</sup> Philipp Münch, “Creating Common Sense: Getting NATO to Afghanistan”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 19, 2021, pp.138–166.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Mattelaer, “How Afghanistan Has Strengthened NATO”, *Survival* 53, No. 6, 2011, pp.127–140; David Richards, “NATO in Afghanistan: Transformation on the Front Line”, *RUSI Journal* 151, No. 4, 2006, pp.10–14.

ISAF was the most obvious way to secure the relevance of an organisation that had been struggling to find itself a new cause since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its dilemma was captured in an apt characterisation in the 1990s, namely, that the alliance had a choice between going out of area or out of business.<sup>5</sup>

“US forces lamented the numerous caveats that European governments imposed on the rules of engagement for their own troops .... This resentment fed into a bitter dispute over the Europeans’ failure to share the burden of defence expenditures.”

But if this narrative conveniently served NATO’s stakeholders for a brief period, its logic increasingly came under attack as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. The resurgence of the Taliban by the second half of the 2000s was unequally felt by NATO troops, which were deployed in different regions of the country and experienced different degrees of resistance (the Americans, the British and the Canadians suffered by far the biggest losses).<sup>6</sup> US forces lamented the numerous caveats that European governments imposed on the rules of engagement for their own troops, which in effect limited their ability to support US

---

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Winrow, “NATO and Out-of-area: A Post-Cold War Challenge”, *European Security*, 3, No. 4 (1994), p. 617–638.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro, *The Taliban’s Winning Strategy in Afghanistan*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009.

efforts.<sup>7</sup> This resentment fed into a bitter dispute over the Europeans' failure to share the burden of defence expenditures within an organisation where about 70% of the resources were provided by the United States. Afghanistan was meant to highlight the ability of NATO to act decisively in the name of the transatlantic community, but it was now turning into an embarrassing case of a multilateral intervention gone awry.

“Several other crises in the 2010s successively showed how Afghanistan had become a liability for NATO, displaying cracks in the very notion of transatlantic solidarity.”

These irritants explain why, throughout the war, the United States did not consult with NATO when it came to strategic decisions. The “surge” decided by the Obama presidency in December 2009 was the result of a debate in Washington involving the White House, the Department of State and Department of Defense. NATO only acquiesced to the final decision and eventually struggled to offer the additional troops from European member states that President Obama requested. Two years later, when the White House fired General Stanley McChrystal, commander of both US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and replaced him in less than 48 hours with David Petraeus,<sup>8</sup> the office

---

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Saideman, David Auerswald, “Comparing Caveats: Understanding the Sources of National Restrictions upon NATO’s Mission in Afghanistan”, *International Studies Quarterly* 56, No. 1 (2012), p. 67–84.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Hastings, “The Runaway General”, *Rolling Stone*, 22 June 2010.

of the secretary general of NATO learnt of this appointment only through newswires as the new commander was en route to Afghanistan.

Several other crises in the 2010s successively showed how Afghanistan had become a liability for NATO, displaying cracks in the very notion of transatlantic solidarity. The US decision to undertake a complete withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan — a decision made during the presidency of Donald Trump but carried out by the Biden administration — was just the final episode in the long series of disagreements among the Western allies regarding the fundamental purpose of their mission in Afghanistan.

## **Projecting Stability or Confusion?**

NATO's presence in Afghanistan was not only a contentious topic within the Atlantic alliance but also outside it. After the official completion of the ISAF mission in 2014, NATO launched the “Resolute Support” Mission (RSM) with the goal of training, advising and assisting Afghan security forces. RSM relied on a headquarters in Kabul and four smaller deployments in Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, Kandahar and Laghman. Its tasks involved support to the Afghans in all the major areas of defence planning: force generation, training and budgeting. The total number of NATO troops deployed in support of RSM varied between 13,000 and 16,000.

The scope of RSM was less ambitious, less expensive, and seemingly more realistic than that of ISAF. In fact, by 2021, most NATO assessments considered the engagement sustainable, given its relatively affordable cost for the alliance and the fact that no NATO

soldier had been killed for a year and a half before the withdrawal in August 2021.<sup>9</sup>

RSM was also supposed to exemplify NATO's new posture. Its emphasis was on training partners to help them take ownership of their security environment. This view was heavily influenced by the US inclination since the early 2010s to redirect its regional commitments towards security assistance rather than direct security provision. In the words of former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the mission was now about "helping others defend themselves".<sup>10</sup>

**“The Atlantic organisation’s logic was: if NATO’s neighbours are more stable, NATO is more secure.”**

During the past decade, NATO built on this new orientation to become a major provider of security assistance in the broader Middle East. RSM was one of many items on the agenda of the alliance that included training activities with partners from the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.<sup>11</sup> By the second half of the 2010s, NATO headquarters had developed the concept of “projecting stability”, which was to guide its activities in the “southern

---

<sup>9</sup> Jamie Shea, “NATO Withdraws from Afghanistan: Short-term and Long-term Consequences for the Western Alliance”, *Friends of Europe*, 3 September 2021, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/nato-withdraws-from-afghanistan-short-term-and-long-term-consequences-for-the-western-alliance/>

<sup>10</sup> Robert Gates, “Helping Others Defend Themselves”, *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The Mediterranean Dialogue involves dialogue between NATO and Israel, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan. NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative involves the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar.

flank” — the designation for the broader Middle East in NATO parlance. The logic was: “if NATO’s neighbours are more stable, NATO is more secure”. It provided political legitimacy to the extension of missions such as RSM.<sup>12</sup> However, the contrast between the upbeat assessments that filled NATO briefings on RSM and the state of Afghanistan’s security forces revealed a crude disconnect between talking points written in Brussels and the reality on the ground.

“NATO training programmes such as Resolute Support Mission relied primarily on models that aimed to mould foreign armed forces to NATO standards.”

NATO training programmes such as RSM relied primarily on models that aimed to mould foreign armed forces to NATO standards. Political and cultural considerations were usually dismissed, either because they were assessed irrelevant for purposes of military effectiveness or because they were too sensitive to be addressed between NATO and its Afghan counterparts.<sup>13</sup> As a result, NATO barely helped to reform Afghanistan’s pre-existing and dysfunctional military structures, which eventually unravelled in the face of the Taliban offensive in August 2021.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ruben Diaz-Plaja, “Projecting Stability: An Agenda for Action”, *NATO Review*, 13 March 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Loup Samaan, “The Limitations of a NATO-Middle East Military Cooperation”, Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 May 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/81740>

In all fairness, NATO is not the sole organisation to be blamed for this failure. The United States was far more heavily invested in the same mission without getting better outcomes. In this sense, NATO's training debacle in Afghanistan is a cautionary tale on the value attached to security assistance to foreign armed forces. Although security assistance is sometimes perceived as a convenient half-measure for Western decision-makers not willing to commit to a military intervention, history shows that without greater involvement at the political level, any initiatives involving security assistance are merely a waste of resources.<sup>14</sup>

## Where to Now?

Both the calamitous withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the realisation that the alliance has been unable to truly support the development of Afghan forces mean that a greater role for the organisation in the Middle East and Central Asia is unlikely. Given the impact of the Afghan war on NATO, both internally and externally, the organisation now confronts a painful soul-searching moment. This crisis point had already been in the making for several years, as witnessed by French President Macron's description of NATO as "brain-dead" back in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, No. 1 (2018), pp. 89–142; Mara Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-dead", *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

NATO entered Afghanistan, in 2003, when officials in Brussels feared that the “war on terror” would render the organisation irrelevant for the new global environment. Since then, great power competition has come back to the forefront of Western strategic debates. Russia’s military interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) revived the anxieties of NATO’s East European members, who considered Afghanistan a side-show distracting the alliance from its core mission, namely the security of continental Europe vis-a-vis Russia.

“In November 2020, NATO released a report that emphasised for the first time the centrality of the US-China rivalry for the future of global affairs.”

In the meantime, US-China political relations have greatly deteriorated and led administrations in Washington not only to prioritise the Indo-Pacific theatre but to call on their NATO allies to invest bigger resources to address challenges there. It is yet unclear if and how NATO can play a significant role alongside the United States in its competition with China. In November 2020, NATO released a report in the name of the secretary general titled *NATO 2030*, which emphasised for the first time the centrality of the US-China rivalry for the future of global affairs. Calling Beijing a “systemic rival” on par with Moscow, the document reflected the desire of the organisation to mirror the US rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>16</sup> Since then, the organisation has been

---

<sup>16</sup> “NATO 2030: United for a New Era”, Report by the Reflection Group appointed by the NATO Secretary General, 25 November 2020, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf)

in the process of rewriting its “Strategic Concept” (the NATO equivalent of the US National Security Strategy) and pundits are increasingly pushing for a NATO contribution in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>17</sup>

## “NATO’s push for political and military relevance in the Indo-Pacific is questionable.”

Noticeably, this push towards the Indo-Pacific mirrors the way the organisation searched for a role in the war on terror two decades ago. NATO’s tilt towards the great power competition in Asia may be a quasi-natural move for an organisation that was initially designed in a Cold War context. It is also convenient arena to rapidly move into following the withdrawal from Afghanistan. But NATO’s political and military relevance in the Indo-Pacific is questionable.

In South Asia, there is no sign of any appetite for greater involvement with NATO. NATO’s relations with Pakistan were mainly defined by the war efforts in Afghanistan. If Islamabad was formally considered a “partner across the globe” (another NATO designation), military cooperation with it was limited, apart from the logistical arrangements it provided for ISAF and RSM. Relations were also not immune to occasional crises, as was the case in 2011, when a NATO air raid on two sites on the Pakistani side of the border with Afghanistan

---

<sup>17</sup> Roula Khalaf, Henry Foy, “NATO to expand focus to counter rising China”, *Financial Times*, 18 October 2021.

accidentally killed 28 Pakistani soldiers, prompting Islamabad to shut down NATO supply routes into Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

The difficult relationship between NATO and Pakistan does not mean that NATO's relations with India have been much better. Although there have been political exchanges between Brussels and Delhi, these were constrained by India's reluctance to engage with an organisation whose mission goes against its non-alignment principle. India is also sceptical about NATO's approach to multilateral defence cooperation. Overall, this means that NATO's footprint in South Asia is unlikely to grow bigger. In fact, reservations from these local players may only feed the desire in Brussels to move away from the region.

**“Another major unknown in the organisation's departure from Afghanistan is the impact it will have on NATO's ongoing training programmes in the Middle East.”**

Putting aside the relevance of NATO in the Indo-Pacific, another major unknown in the organisation's departure from Afghanistan is the impact it will have on NATO's ongoing training programmes in the Middle East. Specifically, all eyes are turned now onto Iraq, where NATO relaunched a training mission in recent years.

NATO's involvement in Iraq was in some ways similar to its involvement in Afghanistan, though at a lower scale. Initiated in 2004, it was primarily intended to support the training of Iraqi security and

---

<sup>18</sup> Shams Momand, “Pakistan stops NATO supplies after deadly raid”, Reuters, 26 November 2011.

military forces through a relatively cheap programme that in the late 2000s involved only a few hundred personnel. After the US withdrawal of December 2011, the NATO mission was officially terminated. However, in more recent years, Brussels and Baghdad decided not only to revive the programme but to expand it. Subsequently in February 2021, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the increase of personnel deployed to Baghdad from 500 to 4,000. Under this new mandate, NATO would be advising not only the Iraqi Ministry of Defence but other institutions as well such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Peshmerga and the Counter-terrorism Service.

“Just like in Afghanistan, the future of NATO’s efforts in Iraq is conditioned by both the US military presence and the stability of the local political system.”

The outcome of the NATO mission in Iraq was already questionable, given the way the Iraqi armed forces had unravelled in 2014 in the face of the Islamic State’s offensive on Mosul. Several former NATO advisers deployed to Baghdad shared doubts about the disconnect between the lofty ambitions formulated by political officials in Brussels and their operationalisation. They complained about limited resources, unclear guidance, and the fundamental inability of NATO to support Iraqi institutions that do not want to be merely restructured to look like NATO agencies.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Peter Dahl Thruelsen, “Misaligned in Mesopotamia: Conflicting Ambitions in NATO Mission Iraq”, *War on the Rocks*, 16 September 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/misaligned-in-mesopotamia-conflicting->

Just like in Afghanistan, the future of NATO's efforts in Iraq is conditioned by both the US military presence and the stability of the local political system. The government of Mustafa Al-Khadimi appears stronger than was the government of Ashraf Ghani in Kabul, and it does not face a similar challenge to its centrality — at least, as of today. However, the Biden administration has made clear its intention to withdraw the remnants of US military forces from Iraq by the end of 2021 — exactly 10 years after the “first” withdrawal decided by President Obama. It is unclear how move this will affect NATO's role in Baghdad. For the moment, NATO officials and Secretary General Stoltenberg have issued statements reaffirming NATO's commitment to the mission in Iraq.<sup>20</sup>

“The ultimate consequence of the Afghanistan episode might be to put an end to the belief that training its partners in the Middle East serves NATO's interest.”

In the end, the preservation of that training programme might turn into a litmus test of NATO's engagement in the Middle East:

---

[ambitions-in-nato-mission-iraq/](#); Paolo Napolitano, “What to Expect When You're Expecting NATO in Iraq”, *War on the Rocks*, 29 March 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/what-to-expect-when-youre-expecting-nato-in-iraq/>; Jean-Loup Samaan, “How NATO's Iraq expansion is a test for its Middle East plans”, *The National*, 24 February 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/how-nato-s-iraq-expansion-is-a-test-for-its-middle-east-plans-1.983686>

<sup>20</sup> NATO Press Release, “Secretary General reaffirms NATO's commitment to counter terrorism at a meeting of Defence Ministers from the Global Coalition against ISIS”, 22 October 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_187613.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_187613.htm)

scepticism regarding security assistance initiatives in general has only been growing since the debacle in Afghanistan, and in the context of the soul-searching moment the Atlantic alliance finds itself in, these activities can be perceived as distractions from the great power competition with Russia and China. All in all, the ultimate consequence of the Afghanistan episode might be to put an end to the belief, still strong within NATO command structures, that training its partners in the Middle East serves the interest of the alliance. ◆

\* ***Dr Jean-Loup Samaan** is Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore.*



29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Block B #06-06  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: +65 6516 2380; Fax: +65 6774 0458  
Email: [contact.mei@nus.edu.sg](mailto:contact.mei@nus.edu.sg)  
[www.mei.nus.edu.sg](http://www.mei.nus.edu.sg)

