NATO's mission in Afghanistan: The political strategy (27/07/2009)

LOCATION NATO Headquarters, Brussels

SPEAKER Foreign Secretary, David Miliband

EVENT 'NATO's mission in Afghanistan: The political strategy'

DATE 27/07/2009

Foreign Secretary David Miliband commented on the importance of the NATO mission in Afghanistan in defeating the Taliban to avoid the return of Al Qaida to the region and to help the Afghan government build the strength to keep them out permanently.

Read the speech

It is a pleasure to be back at NATO today, an organisation that for 60 years has worked for our shared security. NATO has always been an alliance of defence not aggression and an alliance of values. In each era, it has adapted to new threats with ingenuity and resolve. After centuries of bloody conflict, NATO helped build peace across Europe. Following the end of the Cold War, it helped unite a divided continent. Then six years ago, with the Alliance's collective security threatened by terrorism and terrorists along way from home, NATO launched its first operation outside Europe. It is telling that the only time in 60 years when NATO has invoked Article 5 was on September 12 2001.

The NATO operation in Afghanistan is part of a wider UN-mandated effort by the international community. It was sparked by a single overriding concern: in the words of our British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown in a statement to the House of Commons in December 2007, "denying Al Qaida a base from which to launch attacks on the world." It required, first, the removal of the Taliban regime that had provided shelter for Al Qaida, and second help for the Afghan government build the strength to keep them out permanently.

Today, while people in our countries accept the need to fight the Taliban to avoid the return of Al Qaida, they want to know whether and how we can succeed. That is what I want to address clearly today.

First, I pay tribute to the servicemen and women from 42 countries who have served in Afghanistan. On behalf of the British government I want to honour all those – international and Afghan - who have given their lives or been injured. Their bravery, their commitment and their sacrifice has been remarkable. Over 1,000 service personnel have been lost in ISAF or Operation Enduring Freedom. 189 members of the British armed services have died in Afghanistan. We owe them all a huge debt. Their bravery and courage, alongside the injured, will not be forgotten.

Today, in London the Ministry of Defence will give operational details on the progress of Operation Panther's Claw in Helmand province. This mission has taken a heavy toll. But it has also achieved significant gains, above all for the 80,000 Afghans who now, for the first time in years, are under the jurisdiction of legitimate Afghan authorities.

In recent weeks in Britain the debate about Afghanistan has centred on military tactics and military operations. People in Britain know why we all committed to this mission. They want to know that all of the members of our Alliance are ready to give it the priority and the commitment it deserves. Burden sharing is a founding principle of the Alliance: the solidarity on which it is built. It needs to be honoured in practice as well as in theory.

I am a Foreign Minister, not a General or a Defence Minister, and I have come to talk not about military operations but about politics. Because in Afghanistan we are fighting an insurgency. And the heart of NATO doctrine is that military force alone is never enough to achieve lasting success in counter-insurgency. Whether military breakthroughs are translated into strategic success will depend on the political strategy that is pursued and on the political coalition that is built -first by the Afghan Government, but also by NATO and the UN, and by Afghanistan's neighbours. That is my focus today.

The nature of the insurgency

It is vital that we start by understanding the nature of the enemy – the insurgency we face. It is easy to brand the insurgency under a single label: 'The Taliban'. The reality is more complex. And it requires our countries to work with Pakistan as well as Afghanistan.

There is no single authoritative leadership of the insurgency in either Afghanistan or Pakistan. Instead there are a range of diverse insurgent groups. They operate with varying degrees of autonomy in their own particular areas. Cooperation between them is opportunistic rather than strategic, and tactical above all.

In Afghanistan the southern insurgency is led by members of the former Taliban government. It has the largest number of fighters and the most hierarchical and well organised leadership under Mullah Omar. It is these people against whom British and American forces have been conducting major operations in the last few weeks.

In the east of the country, by contrast, a variety of other factions operate, including the Haqqani network, Hizb-e Islami and a range of smaller groups.

In Pakistan's tribal belt, leaders of the Afghan Taliban are focused on gaining power west of the border. Within Waziristan, the three leaders of the main insurgency – Baitullah Mehsud, Gul Bahadur and Maulvi Nazir – belong to different tribes and have different motivations. Each, though, has links both to Al Qaida, and to the Haqqani network.

It is important to understand that people are drawn into the insurgency for different reasons, primarily pragmatic rather than ideological. There are the foot soldiers whom the Taliban pay $10 a day – more than a local policeman. There are poppy farmers who support the insurgents because they offer protection against eradication efforts. There are narco-traffickers who rely on them for safe passage of drugs. There are warlords and aspirant power-brokers who believe that the Taliban will win, and so position themselves for their own political advantage. And then – perhaps most crucially - there are the ordinary Afghans, people who, despite dreading the Taliban's return, worry about the capacity of the state to protect them, so hedge their bets. They may not give active support. But they acquiesce or turn a blind eye.

The nature of the insurgency gives it some advantages and it's important to be clear about them. The different groups can feed off and support each other - providing suicide bombers, training or equipment. The autonomy of local commanders makes their groups resilient, even when their superiors are killed or captured. And strong bonds of local and tribal loyalty make it easier for them to rally people against outsiders.

But as well as these advantages, it's important to recognise their disadvantages too. The insurgents' vulnerabilities are very clear.

The insurgency is a wide but shallow coalition of convenience: an amalgam of groups with different motivations and power centres. So they are divided.

The Taliban are the largest element of the insurgency but, because they exploit predominantly Pashtun communities and sentiment, their support base is limited to the Pashtun districts of the south and east, and to the Pashtun pockets in the north and west.

The insurgency remains deeply unpopular with ordinary Afghans, including in the south and east. Polling across Afghanistan shows that over 90% of the population do not want the Taliban back in power.

The Taliban can terrorise, but their military, technological and organisational inferiority to conventional forces means they cannot take and hold territory and power on a lasting basis. And when they do hold sway, and do put their values into practice, they appal the local population. Critically, this is what has happened in Pakistan in recent months, with a large swing in support to the government in revulsion, and I use that word advisedly following my fifth visit to Pakistan two weeks ago, at what the Taliban stand for.

Political Strategy

In the face of this enemy, our ultimate objective in 2001 holds true for 2009: to protect our citizens from terrorist attacks by preventing Al Qaida having a safe haven in the tribal belt –in either Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The role of military operations is to deny insurgents the space to operate. That is: to clear and hold towns and villages under insurgent control, so allowing Afghans to build basic governance and justice, to deliver welfare and dispense development assistance.

I have seen for myself how this can work in different parts of the country in the East as well as South. It is now being tested in real time in Helmand. British, Danish, Estonian and Afghan troops have pushed the Taliban out of Babaji. This has extended the writ of Afghan government, linking the provincial capital Lashkar Gar with the economic centre of Gereshk and bringing tens of thousands of people under Afghan government control. US troops have ventured further South, down along the Helmand River valley, driving the Taliban out of Khan Neshin and restoring government control.

As international troops go in, it is essential that they are followed by the Afghan National Army and Police. It is they who must guard key facilities, man checkpoints and protect the population from Taliban intimidation.

But let me be absolutely clear, what the test of success is. As General McChrystal has said "The measure of effectiveness will not be enemy killed; it will be the number of Afghans shielded from violence".

That shield today comes in military form from a partnership of international and Afghan forces. Over time, the military shield is going to have to be provided increasingly by Afghan combat troops.

But the shield must also be delivered by a clear political strategy, because strategic progress relies on undermining the insurgency through local politics. Three political challenges – that address the causes, not just the symptoms of the insurgency – will shape the future of Afghanistan.

First, a political strategy for dealing with the insurgency through reintegration and reconciliation. That means in the long term an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan, which draws away conservative Pashtun nationalists - separating those who want Islamic rule locally from those committed to violent jihad globally - and gives them a sufficient role in local politics that they leave the path of confrontation with their government.

Second, a political strategy for the wider population, through reassurance about their future. NATO needs to show the Afghan people that we will not abandon them to Taliban retribution; that our forces will stay until Afghan communities can protect themselves, but no longer than we are needed. And, as we transfer responsibility to Afghans and withdraw our troops from combat, the international community will continue to help Afghanistan – one of the poorest countries of earth - with aid and training.

Both of these tasks, the first two political challenges, depend on credible, clean local government at provincial and district level that works with the grain of tribal Afghan society.

And third, a political strategy towards the neighbours in the region – including Pakistan and Iran – to ensure that they accept that Afghanistan's future is not as a client of any, but as a secure country in its own right. Once again it should be the commercial and cultural crossroads of South West Asia. A country in which each of the neighbours and near neighbours has an open but responsible stake.

Let me address each in turn.

First, reintegrating and reconciling insurgents. As President Obama said, with clarity and conviction, at the end of March, "in a country with extreme poverty that's been at war for decades, there will also be no peace without reconciliation among former enemies…There is an uncompromising core of the Taliban. They must be met with force, and they must be defeated. But there are also those who've taken up arms because of coercion, or simply for a price. These Afghans must have the option to choose a different course." That is the right approach.

With counter insurgency efforts being stepped up on either side of the Durand Line, Taliban commanders and foot soldiers face an increasingly debilitating struggle. From this position, we need to help the Afghan government exploit the opportunity, with a more coherent effort to fragment the various elements of the insurgency, and turn those who can be reconciled to live within the Afghan Constitution.

The basis for reconciliation and reintegration is a starker choice: bigger incentives to switch sides and stay out of trouble, alongside tougher action against those who refuse.

The Afghan government needs effective grass-roots initiatives to offer an alternative to fight or flight for the foot soldiers of the insurgency. Essentially this means a clear route for former insurgents to return to their villages and go back to farming the land, or a role for some of them within the legitimate Afghan security forces. Military pressure has an important role to play, it is complementary, not an alternative – these people must see the danger of remaining insurgents, but also believe that they will be protected from their former allies if they lay down their arms.

For higher-level commanders and their networks, we need to work with the Afghan government to separate the hard-line ideologues, who are essentially irreconcilable and violent and who must be pursued relentlessly, from those

who can be drawn into domestic political processes.

Afghan history sets an important precedent here. Blood enemies from the Soviet period and the civil war now work together in government. Former Talibs already sit in the Parliament. And Mullah Salam left the Taliban in late 2007 to become the district governor of Musa Qaleh. So there is no reason that many members of the current insurgency can not follow – if they are prepared to be part of a peaceful future and accept the Afghan constitution. The next Afghan government needs to make this clear, and work to establish a reintegration process across the country.

Let me turn secondly to reassuring the population and maintaining consent. It is only when the cooperation, passive and active, of ordinary Afghans is removed that the insurgency will be fatally undermined. The squeeze on the Taliban has to come from within as well as without.

The three biggest barriers to this happening more widely are: first, that Afghans fear that international forces will leave prematurely, leaving a state unable to protect them from the Taliban; second, the absence of clean and consistent local governance; and third the lack of economic opportunity and consequent unemployment. So what happens? People hedge their bets, turning a blind eye when they see insurgents laying IEDs or refusing to inform on insurgent infiltrators in their midst.

The further development of Afghan Security Forces is a vital part of this. By the end of 2011 we will have trained and equipped 134,000 members of the Afghan National Army, up from 90,000 today. Alongside them a large police force - nearly 100,000 - guarding key facilities and institutions, manning checkpoints and tackling civil unrest. These capacity-building efforts must continue; indeed they should be accelerated.

But, alongside security forces, Afghans look for the basics of authority. That means effective governors in each of the country's 34 provinces; and the appointment by them of credible leaders of the 364 districts. But also local governance that is credible, competent and clean, properly resourced and supported from Kabul, and works with the grain of tribal structures and history. I honestly believe it is not possible to overstate the importance of these 400 (34 province and 364 district) appointments.

The National Solidarity Program has empowered over 20,000 development shuras right across Afghanistan to decide for themselves how international assistance should be spent in their communities. We need to see those district governors - the uluswals - once again empowered to govern, working with shuras of the local elders whom the Taliban have undermined and in some cases removed. Such shuras would be the focus of political decision-making, but also deal with security and development issues. This is what we are already doing in Helmand to provide a single platform for Afghan Social Outreach, for Public Protection and for the National Solidarity Programmes.

The third part of the offer to local people is development. We are not in Afghanistan militarily because girls were not allowed to go to school. But helping them do so is an important down-payment to Afghans desperate for a better future for their children. Ditto health care. Ditto jobs. That is why in Helmand, to take as an example, British, American, Danish and Estonian civilian and military staff are working to help build schools, provide clean water and electricity, surface roads and support agriculture.

It is why the UK Department for International Development is spending about half a billion pounds in development assistance over the next four years. It is why other allies and partners, working with UNAMA, are doing the same across the rest of Afghanistan. I was pleased to read the latest figures, that the European Commission and EU member states are spending more than 900 million Euros a year.

Third, regional stability. The final challenge is Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours.

The neighbour with the greatest influence on Afghanistan's stability is of course Pakistan. Militants move with comparative ease across the 1600 mile Durand Line, and the insurgencies in the south and east of Afghanistan are directed partly from Quetta and Peshawar in Pakistan.

As I saw for myself a few weeks ago, we now have mutually reinforcing strategies on both sides of the border, with extra troops deployed in southern Afghanistan, across the border from Pakistan's military's preparatory operations in Waziristan. The unity across political and military parts of the Pakistani state, and the support of the Pakistani population for the efforts in the North West Frontier province, is striking.

The path to success on the Pakistani side of the insurgency requires a number of steps:

First, military operations need over time to address all militants who shelter Al Qaida, as well as those who threaten the

Pakistan state.

Second, any future peace deals to reconcile militants should have
clear red lines: they need to be prepared to shut out Al Qaida, and not use violence against troops or citizens in Afghanistan.

Third, the areas that have already been subject to military operations – in
Swat and the Malakand Division – need to be reconstructed quickly and internally displaced persons resettled, so that immediate military success does not give way to longer term civilian disaffection.

Fourth, the people of FATA need a clear roadmap towards proper inclusion in the Pakistani state, with the same rights – and responsibilities –as other citizens. The lack of governance and justice in FATA (inherited from British rule and not addressed for 60 years) – and in parts of North West Frontier Province – created the vacuum which insurgents exploited. Once again, political problems require political solutions.

All this needs international economic, political and security support. The new group Friends of Democratic Pakistan, which brings together a range of countries represented here, provides a basis to offer that.

History has taught, however, that Afghanistan's stability does not depend just on its eastern neighbour. The country has long been a geo-political chessboard upon which the struggles of others have been played out. The reality is that in each case it is the Afghan people who have suffered. The country's neighbours need to realise that it is in their interests for Afghanistan to be a stable, neutral state - a friend to all, and a client of none. There is not time to go into it here, but Secretary Clinton's initiative at The Hague Conference was an important signal of intent, and needs to be followed up.

Priorities over the Next Six Months

Let me conclude, we are at an important point in Afghanistan's history and NATO's work there, and a testing point. The elections on 20 August need to be both credible and inclusive. These will be the first Afghan-led elections since the 1970s. We are doing all we can to help ensure that the process is as credible and fair as possible: deploying additional troops so people can vote safely, and through the EU and OSCE despatching over 100 election observers to foster confidence in the overall process.

Ultimately, though, what will determine whether these elections mark a turning point is whether the candidates not just present clear manifestos but whether those are then implemented. We talk often about burden sharing between members of our alliance, rightly in my view. But the biggest shift must now be towards the Afghan state taking more responsibility.

Because it is only if the political will is there that a meaningful package of incentives and sanctions can be developed to support reconciliation and reintegration. It is only with political will that genuine progress will be made in rooting out corrupt and incompetent Ministers at all levels of government; and that district by district, province by province, the Afghan Security Forces take on responsibility for security. And it is only with political will that the Afghan Government will succeed in deepening their cooperation with the Pakistani Authorities.

In Pakistan too, the international community needs to forge a new relationship. It must be characterised by clear principles: a partnership that is sustained and long-term. A partnership focused on backing civilian institutions and democratic government, not particular individuals. A partnership that covers the breadth of Pakistan's interests – jobs, education, agriculture, as well as security. This breadth must be reflected in the investment we provide in civilian aid; and in a partnership based on a two-way dialogue about each other's concerns and interests, rather than what I would call a transactional relationship about how Pakistan can serve our interests. The first EU/Pakistan summit with its focus on constitutional reform, governance and trade, as well as security, was an important step in this direction.

Conclusion

NATO was born in the shadow of the Cold War, but we have all had to change our thinking as our troops confront insurgents rather than military machines like our own. The mental models of 20th century mass warfare are clearly not fit for 21st century counter-insurgency.

That is why my argument today has been about the centrality of politics. People like quoting Clausewitz that warfare is the continuation of politics by other means. But in Afghanistan, we need politics to become the continuation of warfare by other means.

We will not force the Taliban to surrender just through the force of arms and overwhelming might. Nor will we convert them to our point of view through force of argument and ideological conviction. But by challenging the insurgency, by dividing the different groups, by convincing the Afghans that we will not desert them to Taliban retribution, and by building legitimate governance especially at the local level with the grain of Afghan society, the Afghan government, with our support, can prevail.

We in NATO have a long, hard military campaign ahead of us. We explain to our public recent advances, as we will in London today, though we know recent sacrifices will not be the last, and we also explain the seriousness of the security situation in Afghanistan. Our enemies should never doubt our determination to accomplish this mission, because we know the very high cost of failure. Just as our friends should know that they can truly count on us, because we know that our own security depends on it.

For that, we need politics to succeed in Afghanistan. Today, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have explained how it can do so.

Thank you very much indeed.

Back to newsroom