

The NATO Defence Ministerial in Bratislava: More Shovels for Afghanistan and Missile Defences for Europe

Dr. Ian Davis, Director, NATO Watch

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NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Bratislava on October 22-23 agreed a revised set of key priorities for Afghanistan over the next 18 months together with a new strategic concept for the transition to an Afghan lead for security "when the conditions are right". The four key NATO priorities are:

- to place the Afghan population at the core of NATO-ISAF's collective effort;
- an enhanced effort to build the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces;
- to work more closely and effectively with international and Afghan partners to promote better governance; and
- to engage effectively with Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Pakistan.

The question of how much of the Afghan population should fall under the direct protection of NATO-ISAF will be determined in Washington. President Obama is currently deciding how many more US troops should be sent, but the emerging consensus in the White House appears to be that the insurgency cannot be entirely eradicated in a nation where the Taliban is an indigenous force. Instead, the focus is likely to be on protecting population centres and preventing Al Qaeda from returning in strength while containing and weakening the Taliban long enough to build Afghan security forces to eventually take over the mission.

This accelerated training of Afghan troops and police is presumably at the heart of the 'Strategic Concept for Transition to Afghan Lead' approved by Ministers in Bratislava. However, a request to NATO HQ for a copy of the Strategic Concept has so far met with a stony silence. To paraphrase Madeleine Albright (see quote above), our people need to know what's going on, especially in relation to a 'train-and-equip' strategy that is [deeply flawed](#). The [exposure](#) of financial ties and a close working relationship between the CIA and Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of the Afghan president, also raise significant questions about US-NATO efforts to promote better governance.

Without greater transparency and openness about US and NATO war aims and strategy, popular support for the ISAF mission is likely to continue to ebb away. In his speech on 22 October, Secretary General Rasmussen did seek to justify the strategy: "Leaving Afghanistan behind would

once again turn the country into a training ground for Al Qaeda. The pressure on nuclear-armed Pakistan would be tremendous. Instability would spread throughout Central Asia. And it would only be a matter of time until we, here in Europe, would feel the consequences of all of this". But after eight years of fighting the security trends in both Afghanistan and Pakistan remain downward, and the [consequences](#) are already being felt in Europe.

A journalist embedded with the US Army's 501st Parachute Regiment captures the futility of the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan in [this](#) recent video report. When one of the US soldiers states that "[Afghans just want to be left alone](#)" he speaks with far greater wisdom than any of the assembled Ministers in Bratislava, whose key message appears to have been "*when in a hole, keep on digging*".

(photo credit: sunrise in Afghanistan, [The U.S. Army](#))



Missile defence was the other key issue discussed in Bratislava. And while the digging has now stopped in terms of the third site in Eastern Europe, the doggedness of the missile defence lobby shows little sign of abating. There was one small hiccup, when the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico announced during a joint press conference with the NATO Secretary General that he would not allow the stationing of any components of the US missile defence system in Slovakia. But back in the Ministerial debate, following a briefing by the US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, the assembled Defence Ministers confirmed their readiness to continue working towards a NATO missile defence system in preparation for the Lisbon summit next year.

As the Secretary General later said in his press conference: "*Ministers welcomed the fact the new US approach puts European missile defence more in a NATO context. That is good for the Alliance. It is good for solidarity. And to my mind, it is important for the defence of Europe that we are talking about rolling out a system within a couple of years that can provide European and*

North American citizens defence against a real and growing missile threat”.

Against the background of a challenging economic climate and hard budgetary choices, it will be interesting to see if the high-level group of MoD officials appointed by the Secretary General to review the prioritisation of resources within the Alliance – a decision also approved by the Defence Ministers in Bratislava – will reach the same conclusion. In the absence of any independent contribution to the group or peer review of the evidence for the “growing missile

threat”, I wouldn’t bet against it. Especially since these would be the same officials that, in Britain, have overseen a defence equipment programme described as “*an unaffordable fiction*”, and throughout Europe have failed to overhaul Cold War military structures that generate a paucity of deployable troops despite over 1.5 million soldiers under arms. Without root and branch reforms in procurement practice, and security thinking more generally, shovels are likely to remain high on NATO’s future wish list.