NORTH AMERICAN REGIONAL MEETING
OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA, NOVEMBER 21-23, 2008

NATO IN AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS OF A FAILED STATE

Victoria Nuland

Now, for something completely different after the uplifting and optimistic conversations that we had yesterday on the economy, on the energy situation, on the global expectations of President-Elect Obama, an even more optimistic subject: Afghanistan.

It is fitting that the one foreign policy issue we are talking about at this Trilateral Commission session is Afghanistan. I think it is fair to say that our host country for this meeting, Canada, is really setting an example for the NATO alliance for how each member state of that organization ought to contribute to global security in the 21st Century. Canada is punching well above its weight in Afghanistan, despite the difficulty of maintaining popular support for the mission at home

General Rick Hillier has been a hero of that play, both in terms of his contributions in Afghanistan to the International Security Assistance Force mission but, equally importantly, in refitting the Canadian military for expeditionary and counterinsurgency efforts. Here in Canada, when the debate really heated up about whether Canadian troops were going to pull out about year and a half ago, Rick also played a key role in making the case to Canadians that this was not only a noble mission but an absolutely essential mission for Canadian national security and for the health of the NATO alliance. I am pleased to be here with him.

Of course, for our own nation, President-Elect Obama ran on a platform of deepening and strengthening America’s investment in Afghanistan and leading the alliance and the global community to do more. Expectations are enormously high that we and others will do more militarily, politically, economically, and President Obama put allies on notice in July that he will be expecting more from them. When you think about those campaign promises in the context of the conversation we had here yesterday about the economic challenges we are all going to have, some balancing will have to be done there.

In the meantime, the picture from the region gets more and more complicated. We have an active insurgency not only in Afghanistan but obviously in Pakistan, and a problem that has to be looked at regionally. It is enabled by weak governments on both sides of the border, ungoverned spaces, lack of development, lack of security and services.

On the Afghanistan side, we are just starting to really build an Afghan military that can be a full partner with us in fighting the insurgency, but we are well behind in the second leg of security, the police forces, which are necessary in any clear, hold, and build strategy. Meanwhile, the twin country killers of
corruption and narcotics rage across the country, but the narcotics trade in particular correlates almost completely with the areas where the insurgency is strongest.

One of the first political challenges for President-Elect Obama will be the electoral situation in Afghanistan itself, presidential elections in late 2009. How will we posture ourselves, vis-à-vis President Karzai’s bid for reelection, not only the United States but all of the allies, because that election will very much be a referendum one for Karzai?

On the Pakistan side, you know the issues well. We have the Pakistan military that was constituted to fight India, not to counter an insurgency, and which had enabled instability in Afghanistan for much of its history. We have a new government, but it is focused on its internal machinations and on survival. And we have an American-Pakistani relationship that has gone up and down since September 11th with the United States increasingly taking its own measures over the Hindu Kush in the absence of stronger Pakistani leadership, causing new tensions.

And then, of course, just to complete the picture of doom I am painting here, a NATO alliance that is fighting its first real ground war in its history. Twenty-eight thousand non-U.S. troops in Afghanistan is not nothing, representing all allies plus some ten additional global partners working with us, including Australia. But, as you all know, the mission has been plagued by an uneven effort among allies — would that all fought at the level of Canada — and uneven contribution of economic and political resources to match the soldiers that we send across Afghanistan, plus enormous international coordination problems. NATO itself is a political military organization that has no development, governance, police, rule of law capabilities, so it needs partners, whether they are the UN, the EU, the World Bank, or the IMF. This requires a seamless relationship among these organizations, which has also been difficult to build.

***

I think it is fair to say that John Deutch is that rare American who has really been thinking about the dangers, challenges, and risks that emanate from this part of the world for 40 years, beginning in the ’70s, working in the Carter administration and then throughout his career. During his tenure in the Clinton administration, both at Defense and at the CIA, he was deeply involved in this part of the world and rang the alarm bell loudly about what we were seeing and what we could see, and he has continued to stay involved.

Victoria Nuland is a member of the faculty of the National Defense University and former U.S. permanent representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.