

Why Afghanistan is Important to NATO

By Ambassador Carol van Voorst

The 26 nations that make up NATO are currently engaged in the Alliance's toughest test: its first ground war. Our efforts in Afghanistan are dramatically different than anything NATO has done before. However, we are acting squarely within the traditional bounds of the Alliance's core purpose: to defend the security interests and values of the transatlantic community to which Iceland and the United States belong.

Some question whether NATO truly belongs in Afghanistan and are asking what this action has to do with European and transatlantic security, and whether this mission is worth the lives of our children. So, why is NATO in Afghanistan? Why have all 26 Allies repeatedly voiced their support for the mission there since 2001?

NATO countries are in Afghanistan because the security and well-being of our societies - of all of us in the transatlantic community - depends on our efforts in Afghanistan. Many people may not comprehend the magnitude of the direct threat to our security. The threat posed by violent Islamic extremism is real -- and it is not going away. Terrorists are looking increasingly to Europe for opportunities to attack. With our economies dependent on a healthy international financial sector, modern transport links and globalization, threats are borderless. September 11th was a galvanizing event that opened the eyes of the American public to the dangers from distant lands. Europeans know all too well about the attacks in Madrid and London. But there have also been multiple smaller attacks in Istanbul, Amsterdam, Paris and Glasgow, and numerous cells and plots have been disrupted in recent years in countries as close as Denmark. We cannot allow Afghanistan to become a base for this kind of terrorism again as it was under the Taliban.

It is already the base for another threat to all of us. Afghanistan is the number one supplier of opium and heroin to Europe. As the opium production has risen in Afghanistan, it increasingly impacts the young people of Europe, sowing addiction, disease and death and draining Europe's economic resources. Drug traffic to Europe -- including Iceland -- continues to increase.

There are tasks for all NATO members in Afghanistan. We have learned that the war in the 21st century does not have stark divisions between civilian and military components. It is a continuous scale that slides from combat operations to economic development, governance and reconstruction -- frequently at the same time. In the real world, security has economic, political and social dimensions and vice versa. Iceland has no military forces, but its contribution of air traffic controllers, mobile liaison and observation teams, midwives, and financial and development support are greatly appreciated. The work Iceland's highly capable civilians are doing in Afghanistan's difficult environment materially contributes to overall NATO goals in the country and the well-being of the Afghan population. I hope your country will continue to contribute generously to this effort.

From our present-day vantage point, victory in the Cold War now seems almost preordained. But as we prepare to celebrate NATO's 60th anniversary next year, we must find the resolve to confront together a new set of challenges and recommit ourselves to the common ideals that bind us together. We are again facing a threat to peace and to our liberty squarely and courageously as we help a war devastated people nourish the seeds of freedom and foster peaceful, productive societies. That mission drew us together in 1948 and keeps us together today, even in a country that seems so far away from our daily lives.