

NATO Objectives, National Objections or Whole of Government, Holes in NATO
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Abstract: This paper uses the Afghanistan experience to develop some general understandings of why any effort to develop a coherent “Comprehensive Approach” is always going to be doomed to fall short. Some of the challenges are due to how NATO is built and how it always operates. Some of the difficulties are due to the domestic political dynamics that are inherent in this kind of effort—multiplied by 28. Some problems are simply due to the nature of the enterprise—counter-insurgency is very hard. Finally, there are some natural impediments to learning that make it quite challenging for NATO and its members to improve their performance down the road. Having said that, I will conclude with some suggestions for doing precisely that—doing better the next time.

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¹ This paper is pretty rough, as I was asked to write it just a couple of weeks ago. I will not be making many references to the literature on these issues.

While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] had engaged in complex operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, Afghanistan was something entirely different—trying to build a self-sustaining government in a country that had little capacity after more than twenty years of war. Expectations should have been set on “low”, but that is quite difficult when trying to mobilize a sustained international effort. With so many obstacles to success, we should be careful about pointing fingers even as this situation reverses the usual dictum of success having a thousand fathers and failure being an orphan. In this case, we will find many efforts to target blame for whatever happens in Afghanistan.

Others will have far more data to assess the successes and failures of specific programs, the impact made by particular Provincial Reconstruction Teams [PRTs], and the progress made by the Afghan government. I am going to assume that things did not go that well. Instead, my role here is to discuss some of the dynamics that are inherent in the organization, in the domestic politics of these efforts, and in this kind of effort that made cooperation within and among governments very difficult. To be blunt, NATO is simply not built to be that coherent as its efforts to gain and maintain consensus cut against providing much unity of effort in the field. Similarly, countries are subject to a variety of cross-pressures that make “whole of government” an aspiration rather than a normal way of approaching complex tasks. To be sure, doing counter-insurgency [COIN] is very, very hard, so I will briefly examine a few key processes that made COIN especially difficult in this case. After addressing these dynamics, I will suggest why learning lessons from this experience will be so hard and then I will try to do so anyway.

Coordination Problems: Hard-Wired Into NATO

One of the positive consequences of the Afghanistan operation is outsiders now understand far better the organization’s limits. Scholars of international relations were among those who focused so much on “the attack upon one equals an attack upon” aspect of NATO’s Article V that they were blind to the rest of the clause, “as each deems necessary,” which makes it quite legitimate to opt out. This was all theoretical before September 11th, 2001, as Article V had never been invoked before. Immediately, it became quite relevant as some NATO members opted out of the very first Article V efforts—participating in the AWACS missions over American cities in late 2001 and early 2002.

This opt-out clause is not simply an inconvenience but a core element that makes NATO possible. If countries were actually required to respond to the decisions of the NAC, the NAC would make no decisions. Countries would break silence and oppose anything that might lead to requirements that they could find problematic. Providing exit options is crucial to gaining consensus. It also recognizes a basic reality—that NATO is an alliance of sovereign countries, and sovereign countries do not give up their sovereignty. They merely delegate authority to NATO commanders under specific conditions, and this delegation can be withdrawn at any time.

Indeed, as one officer at SHAPE put it to us when we (David Auerswald and I) were researching our book,² “force generation is begging.” That is, any contribution to a NATO effort is purely at the discretion of each member. Officials at SHAPE, including ultimately DSACEUR and SACEUR, have had to ask and re-ask members to contribute to the various NATO missions. When I served in the US Joint Staff in 2001-2002, the Stabilization Force’s Combined Joint Statement of Requirements [CJSOR] was still incomplete, six years after the start of a much less controversial and much less dangerous mission.

² Auerswald and Saideman, *Nato in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

The way NATO has managed these challenges is not to write limited rules of engagement that reflect the lowest common denominator but to develop rather broad rules that allow countries to pick and choose the missions and operations with which they are most comfortable. It seems that this was also the strategy for the rest of the effort: that countries were not limited to specific governance/development/defence policies as they engaged with the Afghan government. Instead, it was up to each country to develop a plan for its area of responsibility until COMISAF (McChrystal... any other?) tried to harmonize these efforts.

Once units are contributed, each contingent is usually given an area of responsibility. This has generally been the way alliances fight—that each country commands specific sectors—as we see from the histories of the World Wars and elsewhere. This makes a great deal of sense as mixing units from different countries in any space raises many challenges including the risk of friendly fire. NATO may be interoperable, but that interoperability is far from perfect. Not only are their technical challenges, but there are political limits to interoperability—the caveats and other restrictions causing troops to vary in their rules of engagement.³ While giving specific members responsibilities for specific territories makes a great deal of sense for unity of command and coherence of effort in each of these spaces, it clearly makes it much harder to have a coherent effort across the country. Each member will engage in governance, development and defense efforts according to national styles, cultures and politically induced programs, which means that the country, Afghanistan in this case, becomes an uneven patchwork.

While there might be other ways organize allied efforts, spatial divisions of labor seem inevitable. This pattern of allocation of responsibility has many advantages, so we are likely to see this pattern repeated in the future, just as it characterized alliance efforts in the past. It means that the disadvantages—the challenge to coherence—will always be present, and that NATO officials who can see beyond the areas of responsibility of individual countries will have much work to do to try to improve the coherence of the effort.

Given the limitations of the contingents—that Germany and Italy had far more restrictions on their forces than other leaders of Regional Commands, the spatial division of labor made sense even if it had significant political implications. The functional division of labor made little sense at all. Countries were given lead nation status for a variety of efforts.⁴ Perhaps the most logical one was that the British were given the lead for the counter-narcotic effort as their area of responsibility, Helmand, produced much of the poppies. On the other hand, the least sensible allocation of responsibility was probably giving police mentoring to Germany. Why? Because Germany had significant restrictions on how its police could work with its armed forces, which meant the mentoring of Afghan police units would have to take place on German bases. Given that the challenges of policing on a German base were quite distinct from the realities of policing in an Afghan village or district, this allocation of functional responsibility is almost impossible to fathom. “I am totally ashamed of what we have not achieved regarding the police.”⁵ As I have time and space constraints, I will not go into the other questionable allocations, but as we can see from the German case, the ability to do the mission does not seem to correlate with which members received which responsibilities.⁶

³ See Auerswald and Saideman 2014 for a discussion of these restrictions and their origins.

⁴ For criticism of the functional division of responsibilities—lead nations, see Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires : America's War in Afghanistan*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009).

⁵ Member of Bundestag committee on Defense issues, interview in Berlin, June 2009. The Dutch police mission that started in 2011 was aimed in part to address the challenges the Germans faced—that the German military could work with the police of other countries, just not their own.

⁶ I would be curious how Italy's experience as lead nation for the Justice sector played out.

Lastly, any attempt to evaluate NATO's ability to do a whole of government effort must keep in mind that this was NATO's first attempt. In Bosnia and Kosovo, much of the heavy lifting of the governance/development efforts was handled by other organizations: the United Nations, the European Union, individual members, and so on. In Bosnia, the job of coordinating the effort was not NATO's but the High Representative. While the US had established PRTs in Iraq, such efforts were entirely new to NATO and to nearly all of the member states. There simply was no NATO playbook for the civilian side of the effort. Of course, even if there were such a playbook, it would be hard to get countries to follow it, as the various actors within each country were focused on the domestic game as much as the Afghanistan context.

Domestic Dynamics That Cannot Be Dodged

It is obvious that domestic politics matters in all of this—that each country's effort in Afghanistan was critically shaped by the interplay of parties and bureaucracies back home. What is less obvious is how domestic political processes tend to produce specific dynamics that need to be taken more seriously than just challenges of appealing to voters. Again, due to time and space constraints, I am only addressing a few key aspects that are probably likely to recur.

One of the hardest parts of the whole of government effort is to “synch” the bureaucracies so that they are moving and reacting at a similar pace and in response to the same events. Every bureaucracy has a different organizational culture with their own interests, habits, norms, and expectations. One often overlooked aspect is their comfort with delegation—how much discretion can be shifted further down the chain of command.⁷

In the Canadian case, it was quite clear that there were tremendous differences in delegation patterns. The Canadian Forces, having gone through a cultural revolution in a very short time span, was most willing to give much authority to the commander on the ground, embracing “mission command” as fervent converts far more perhaps than the originators of the concept (the U.S.).⁸ The Canadian International Development Agency was very much a top-down organization with the officials in Ottawa making all of the important decisions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs adapted over time, giving more authority to the senior civilian representative in Kandahar as the mission developed. While it would have been hard to get these three agencies working on the same page in any context, they varied so widely in where the decisions were made—in the field or back in the capital—making timely collaboration nearly impossible. The Canadian Forces were responding to the events of the day in Kandahar and considered six months out to be medium to long-range. CIDA was far more focused on the agency's future and on achieving development outcomes measured in years, if not decades.

It is not inevitable that all militaries will be more disposed to delegation to the field, nor that all aid agencies will have their decisions made in their home capitals. But it might be inevitable that this key dynamic—whether the various government agencies delegate in compatible ways or not—is ignored. For those given the job of coordinating the whole of

⁷ In our book on NATO and Afghanistan, David Auerswald and I focused solely on the military side of things—how much discretion did each contingent have. In the course of the work, we had many meetings with those engaged in the civilian side of the effort, so we got some glimpses of the delegation patterns on that side.

⁸ See my chapter on Canada in Farrell, Osinga, and Russell, *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

government effort in their country, significant attention needs to be paid not just to how decision are made but where they are made.

The Canadian case also reveals a key dilemma: how do you measure progress? In the aftermath of the 2008 decision to extend the mission until 2011, the Canadian government set up a series of priorities and benchmarks. From that point until the Canadians left Kandahar, reports were issued quarterly to evaluate progress compared to these benchmarks. The problem? That the situation on the ground changed, with NATO seeking to have greater input and coordination and with the number of troops on the ground increasing. The clearest illustration: that the map of 50 schools to be built was seen by those in Ottawa as fixed, even as the Canadian Forces concentrated on specific districts (the model village program). Additional schools built in these districts did not count against the 50 schools that were one of Canada's "Signature" projects.

The individual selected to coordinate Canada's whole of government event, David Mulroney, argued that the benchmarks could not be altered for two reasons.⁹ They served to discipline the various government agencies who had to stick to these priorities and projects AND any movement away from these would be seen by opposition parties as "moving the goalposts." That is, progress had to be tied to very specific benchmarks so that the government would be less exposed to criticism from opposition parties. This may be quite a natural and smartly strategic approach to winning domestic political battles, but is problematic in a dynamic counter-insurgency campaign.

This leads to a third problem—the need to demonstrate that a country is making a difference. It is natural that the public and the media want to see what their country is contributing to such a costly (in lives and dollars) effort in a place so very far away. Despite recommendations to the contrary,¹⁰ Canadian officials decided to focus on three "signature" projects: rehabilitating the Dahla dam, the aforementioned fifty schools, and polio vaccinations. While the Canadians did not put a real Maple Leaf flag on each of these efforts, the effect was the same—to make it appear to all that these were Canadian projects rather than Afghan efforts. Not only did this limit the progress in improving Afghan capacity, it make these efforts more attractive targets for the Taliban. I am not sure if each country had an "insert province/district name" Action Plan, but it certainly seemed to be the case. Each country's whole of government team had to be clear to its public about what its contribution to the effort was—a Helmand Plan, a Kandahar Plan, and on and on. This exacerbated the spatial distribution of responsibility addressed earlier, as each country tended to feel ownership over a small slice of the country and then resisted NATO efforts to coordinate.

The fourth challenge is simply that most participants had little experience in doing something like this. While most countries had deployed their militaries to somewhat or very risky endeavors, few had sent civilians into harm's way. Perhaps only France and the UK had much experience with civilians engaged in governance and development while under fire. As a result, many countries did not have adequate training or policies in place to prepare their civilian workers. The best example of this is that in more than a few countries, the civilians lacked insurance policies that would cover them and their families in case they were hurt or killed on a battlefield. It was also hard to engage in much pre-deployment training since most civilian agencies did not have enough personnel that they could afford to release personnel from their "day jobs" for lengthy training exercises before they were sent into the field.

⁹ Phone interview with David Mulroney, July 18th, 2013.

¹⁰ Panel, "Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan," (Ottawa2008).

Finally, it takes a great deal of effort and political heft to get different bureaucracies to work together. In the Canadian case, the creation of a cabinet committee and the empowering of a Deputy Minister were necessary but not sufficient for getting the military, the Foreign Affairs officials and the development agency to work together well. The Deputy Minister could only “crack heads” and push all of the agencies to be on the same page when he had the attention and support of the Prime Minister. The first Deputy Minister, David Mulroney, had the Prime Minister’s attention for about six months.¹¹ The second one never had an engaged Prime Minister supporting her efforts. Prime Minister Stephen Harper seemed to be engaged for much of 2008 and then not much beyond that. He quickly grew tired of President Karzai and of the effort to make the government agencies to cooperate. As little good news emanated out of Afghanistan, he pulled back and largely hid from the mission.

Perhaps not all politicians reacted in this way, but getting many government agencies to cooperate takes a great deal of work. Leaders have many items on their agenda, and Afghanistan was simply not the highest priority for most of them. Few countries had intrinsic interests in Afghanistan, and so their focus was usually elsewhere and especially so once the financial crisis hit in 2008.

Inherent In This Enterprise

When scholars research counter-insurgency, seeking to understand when it succeeds or fails, they often have a hard time coming up with examples of successes. Yes, the Malayan Emergency but what else? The reality is that counter-insurgencies do succeed, mostly when they are performed by the government of the country in which the insurgency takes place. Third party counter-insurgency has a much weaker record of success.¹² I am not going to go into the details of why counter-insurgency is so difficult, but will just suggest why it was particularly challenging this time.

One of the core tenets of counter-insurgency doctrine is that one must have enough troops/police on the ground so that the population always feels protected. Yet Afghanistan was always a mission defined by “how small of a force can one get away with.” Every contributor to RC-South, for instance, send as small a force as they could design and then had to reinforce again and again as the insufficiencies became clear. Budget constraints played a role, as did the size of many countries’ armies. Many contributors simply could not sustain a large enough force over the course of a few years. Canadian General Denis Thompson lectured a Montreal audience upon his return after his deployment about the numbers.¹³ He detailed quite clearly how the numbers of counter-insurgents were insufficient at the start of his tour and would only become sufficient towards the end if one counted the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police contingents, a dubious proposition in 2009.

It is not clear how much symbolic politics matters in counter-insurgency, but throughout the mission, key ISAF participants were most reluctant to call it a counter-insurgency. Germany and France both had legacies that made it impolitic to refer to the efforts in Afghanistan as

¹¹ Again, reported in his phone interview with me.

¹² Simpson, E. M. (2010). *The Perils of Third-Party Counterinsurgency Campaigns* (Doctoral Dissertation). Harvard University; MacDonald, P. K. (2013). “Retribution Must Succeed Rebellion”: The Colonial Origins of Counterinsurgency Failure. *International Organization*, 67(02), 253-286

¹³ Brigadier General Denis Thompson spoke at McGill University on March 24th, 2009, Montreal, Canada.

counter-insurgency.¹⁴ If countries cannot even talk about what they are doing, it is hard to see how they can actually coordinate their actual efforts.

One of the most important moves in recent social science on civil war is the realization that there are both macro- and micro-dynamics.¹⁵ Civil wars may seem to be characterized by a key divide or two, but that the conflicts at the local level may or may not have much to do with the master narratives at the national level. Conflict in Afghanistan has been compared to pick-up basketball or football—that the teams change every day, and one day you are wearing a shirt and the next you are shirtless (shirts vs. skins).¹⁶

The US and others employed anthropologists to figure out the tribal allegiances and divisions, highlighting that there was more going on than simply being pro- or anti-Taliban. With the flow of resources into the country, the stakes for the Afghans went up, with more competition and exclusion. The problem with Ahmed Wali Karzai, President Hamid Karzai's brother, was not that he was corrupt but that he was bad at clientelism. Instead of using the resources he was getting through a variety of sources (CIA bribes, rigging contracts, etc) to buy off potential opponents, Karzai seemed determined to exclude and alienate significant swaths of Kandahar's population, providing much more fertile ground for the Taliban.

Speaking of Karzais, it is easy to blame President Hamid Karzai for what went wrong in Afghanistan. Just because it is easy does not mean it is not also true. That is, we have seen since August that the President of Afghanistan can make decisions, including hard ones that support the efforts of the counter-insurgents. These decisions challenge the argument that Karzai had little choice but to visibly oppose and not so visibly undermine ISAF. In the 2009 presidential campaign, it seemed as if Hamid Karzai was running against ISAF and not Abdullah. Instead of standing in front of the war effort, leading it within his country, Karzai seemed to oppose it at every opportunity. While there was certainly room to do better, it seemed as if Karzai only noticed the unintentional casualties caused by ISAF and not the intentional ones caused by the Taliban.

This might not have mattered so much if the international community had not designed such a centralized political system. Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes was to give the President of Afghanistan the power to select and remove leaders at the local levels. This might have "worked" if Karzai was motivated to support the building of institutions and of state capacity, but it certainly meant that local leaders cared far more about Kabul than about the concerns of their district or province.

Again, this speaks to the challenges of outsiders doing counter-insurgency. Who is supposed to coordinate the effort? In Bosnia, it was the High Representative. Karzai did not want a High Rep in Afghanistan since he saw this as his job. To be clear, this was not just Karzai's fault, as few of the outside actors seemed all that willing to cooperate with the Afghan government. How many PRTs shared information about their operations with the Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development? Maybe it got better as time went along.

Lesson Learning

What can we learn from Afghanistan? Well, the first concern is whether any learning will take place. The problem with learning lessons is that it requires actors to admit that mistakes

¹⁴ Reported in multiple interviews in Paris and Berlin, June 2009.

¹⁵ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

were made, and that can be politically painful. Countries varied in how they performed—can NATO officials acknowledge this in public? Can they name members and particular agencies of specific members that under-performed?

One of NATO's more recent initiatives, Smart Defense, seems to be blithely ignoring some of the lessons of Afghanistan.¹⁷ Among its components is the renewed effort to have members specialize so that there is less duplication across the alliance. This makes complete sense except that increased specialization means increased dependence on others, and one of the lessons of Afghanistan is that allies do not always show up when needed. So, NATO can call for members to become more specialized and more dependent, but the increased distrust of late suggests that countries are less likely to do so.

Canada provides perhaps a clearer example. As its participation in the Afghanistan effort was winding down, the government attempted to do a lessons learned exercise to assess the whole of government effort. Officials and officers in all of the relevant agencies were interviewed, and a report was compiled. It now sits on a shelf somewhere. It is slightly problematic that a scholar cannot access this report, as access to information requests were rejected. It is far more problematic that this report has not been shared within the government. Lessons learning requires research, analysis and then dissemination. This last step is not going to happen. Why? Because the report apparently admits that mistakes were made, and that is not something that this government wants to admit.

Given these obstacles to learning, what should we conclude that might be useful next time? First, we need to embrace humility. There is only so much that outsiders can do. That the structures of our international institutions and of our domestic politics are always going to cause state-building/nation-building/counter-insurgency efforts to be sub-optimal. Also, building a self-sustaining Afghan government was and remains incredibly ambitious. So, expect problems and expect failure. The question is not whether we created a small hunk of Europe in central Asia, but whether there was progress made and whether that progress can be sustained.

Second, we need to learn that our basic operating procedures create rather predictable problems—seeing the target country through many different straws, communications that are stove-piped, domestic audiences that are primed to see certain kinds of progress. Much of what we saw in Afghanistan existed in prior efforts, but the risks were far lower. These procedures are not just organizational processes but produced by politics—so that we cannot wish them away. We need to figure out how to deal with caveats and their equivalents, for instance.

Third and relatedly, we need to figure out how to create incentives so that politicians pay enough attention to get better whole of government cooperation. There are many dangers here as micro-management can be problematic, that playing to domestic audiences might mean resisting integrating efforts into NATO campaign plans, and that each country's civil-military relations is a different balancing act.

Finally, as the start of this conclusion indicated, we may be afraid to learn lessons when it means admitting mistakes. We need to do so anyway—that the costs of failure are rather high. It is tough to ask politicians of today to do the hard work that might be politically costly for the benefit of politicians of tomorrow when the next operation takes place. Squaring that particularly circle is crucial but complex. I hope this conference might help us figure it out.

¹⁷ Saideman, Auerswald, and Von Hlatky, "Smart Defense: A Good Idea Destined to Fail," *Available at SSRN* 2483879 (2014).

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