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Analysing NATO's Role in Afghanistan

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Analysing NATO's Role in Afghanistan: What Have Been the Key Challenges for NATO in Undertaking Crisis Management Operations?

Assembled in Newport for the recent NATO Summit, alliance leaders spoke of their enduring commitment to Afghanistan and their determination to ensure that the state never again provides a safe-haven for terrorists.[1] This declaration comes at seminal moment in the history of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, given that 2014 is the year in which its combat operations in the country draw to a close. NATO's mission in Afghanistan, its first crisis management operation outside the Euro-Atlantic area, has been described as the Alliance's 'most ambitious and demanding task in its history.'[2] This essay will analyse NATO's crisis management operation in Afghanistan with the intent of identifying the key challenges that have faced the alliance throughout its endeavour. In doing so, it will discuss the contrasting motivations of NATO member states that led to their engagement in this operation, as well as the differing strategies employed by the troop contributing nations once deployed. It will then explore the perceived disparity between certain NATO allies with regards to the sharing of burdens and risks, both at the strategic and tactical level. Finally, it will consider the wider strategic context in an attempt to identify those issues lying beyond the realm of alliance-politics that have posed a challenge to NATO's operations in the state.

Following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 as a response to the September 2001 terrorist attacks upon the United States, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorised the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in December 2001. ISAF's initial remit was 'to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas'.[3] NATO's initial engagement with ISAF came in October 2002 when Germany and the Netherlands, then the nations-in-command of ISAF, requested the assistance of the alliance 'in the areas of Force Generation, Intelligence, Co-ordination and Information Sharing, and Communications.'[4] In August 2003, NATO assumed full command and control of ISAF, with a declared end-state objective of 'a self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government...able to exercise its authority and to operate throughout Afghanistan.'[5] From 2004, ISAF's operational role began to expand beyond the Kabul region and by 2006 it covered the entirety of Afghan territory.[6]

Alliance Cohesion? Motivations and Strategies

Though it appears that NATO began operations in Afghanistan with a clearly defined objective, it is difficult to conclude that every ally has contributed to the operation with similar motivations or strategies. For instance, it has been widely suggested that a number of allies have contributed simply to satisfy the United States, in an attempt to maintain healthy relations with NATO's most powerful member state. Alexander Mattelaer has suggested that 'Europeans, at least by their own calculations, have hardly anything at stake in Afghanistan, apart from providing the minimum required to satisfy American expectations.'[7] Joe Coelmont has gone as far as claiming that some European governments have 'set an upper and lower limit for their respective contributions, which differ widely, but are all based on the same premise of doing "the minimum necessary" to maintain "good relations" with the US.'[8] This assertion does, indeed, explain a number of issues internal to the alliance with regards to the contribution of troops and the wider debate over burden-sharing in Afghanistan, which will be discussed further below. The desire to maintain strong ties with the United States was especially pertinent for those allies that objected to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, such as Belgium, France, and Germany.[9] Though David Yost's claim that Poland and the

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Baltic states committed forces to the Afghan mission in the hope of building solidarity in NATO[10] may be more admirable, it nonetheless also has little to do with the security and prosperity of the Afghan state.

Given the competing motivations of those NATO members involved in operations in Afghanistan, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has also been a distinct lack of coherent strategy that has, arguably, hampered operational effectiveness. Fundamentally, there appears to be differing perceptions between allies as to the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan and the ways in which NATO should conduct its operations in response. More specifically, there is a debate within the alliance surrounding the apparent importance of counter-insurgency (COIN) for achieving ISAF's goals. Though the US, UK, Canada, and Australia believe COIN should be central to ISAF's role, states such as Germany believed that this provided an 'inadequate operational framework for ISAF since from the government's point of view it overstates the military dimension of the challenge provided in Afghanistan.'[11] The German government, for obvious historical reasons as well as public opinion at home, was far more reluctant to portray its role in Afghanistan as that of war-fighting, and so it believed that ISAF should focus its efforts on stabilization and reconstruction rather than a prolonged and perilous insurgency.[12] This strategic divide was intensified by the fact that Operation Enduring Freedom, the US-led mission in Afghanistan that focused on COIN and counter-terrorism operations, ran in parallel to the NATO ISAF mission. Consequently, 'the two operations became increasingly blurred, as the necessity of combating a growing Taliban/Al Qaeda insurgency forced ISAF troops into more combat roles.'[13] Once more, that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) working to provide security through reconstruction were developed and led on a nation-by nation basis 'stood in the way of any consistent NATO or ISAF design.'[14]

It appears evident, therefore, that divisions have existed within the alliance since the inception of NATO's Afghan mission. Lacking motivation and a clear commitment to Afghan security, some allies have committed forces to the operation primarily to validate their close political and military relations with the United States. To make matters worse, those allies who did contribute to operations were unable to agree on a coherent strategy to be implemented by all NATO forces in Afghanistan. The debate concerning the required balance between COIN and stabilization operations has been particularly damaging for both alliance cohesion and operational effectiveness. It was argued in 2007 that the then failure to achieve a satisfactory level of security in the country resulted from 'the coalition's failure to develop and implement jointly a coherent strategy for Afghanistan that integrates counter-insurgency, counterterrorism and stability and reconstruction operations.'[15] Clearly, motivations unconnected to the security situation in Afghanistan, combined with a number of competing strategies, have posed significant challenges to NATO in its conduct of this crisis management operation.

Sharing Burdens and Sharing Risks

Alongside disagreements over strategy, NATO's mission in Afghanistan has been troubled by shortfalls during the force generation process. Troop contributing nations have experienced difficulty in meeting the requirements for the operation set by the alliance in its Combined Joint Statement of Requirements (CJSOR). This statement, comprised of a list of personnel and equipment necessary for the conduct of the operation, is produced by Allied Command Operations (ACO) and presented to NATO members and participating partners.[16] However, a US Department of Defense report presented to Congress stated that in September 2010, ISAF was operating below its CJSOR level by approximately 8900 forces.[17] General John Craddock, Supreme Allied Commander Europe 2006-09, has gone as far as to claim that 'since mission inception, NATO nations have *never* completely filled the *agreed* requirements for forces needed in Afghanistan.'[18] Indeed, the UK House of Commons Defence Select Committee expressed concern in 2007 that such shortfalls were 'undermining NATO's credibility and also ISAF operations.'[19] Specific capabilities have been particularly lacking from allied contributions, namely the shortage of helicopters available for use by ISAF forces. This issue was described in 2007 as the 'single biggest operational problem' facing the alliance in Afghanistan by a Canadian NATO official.[20] Given that this deficiency originated in an over-reliance on US helicopter capabilities, it is unsurprising that Robert Gates, then US Secretary of Defense, chided in 2007:

'the US extended its Aviation Bridging Force in Afghanistan...because the mightiest and wealthiest military alliance in the history of the world was unable to produce 16 helicopters needed by the ISAF commander.'[21]

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NATO allies have also encountered disparity over the sharing of risks at the tactical level. Operational restrictions placed on deployed forces by national capitals have arguably posed one of the biggest threats to alliance unity and operational success. Crucially, these 'caveats' have been described by a NATO commander as having 'the same practical effect as having fewer forces deployed.'^[22] Not only, therefore, has the Afghanistan mission been conducted with far fewer forces than the alliance has declared required, but the forces that have been deployed are of reduced utility to commanders. Caveats causing significant difficulty include those that:

'ban night-time operations, restrict the geographical mobility of national forces, require consultations with national capitals when making tactical decisions and exclude specific categories of activity.'^[23]

Despite being one of the largest troop contributors to the ISAF mission, Germany's caveats have caused considerable consternation within the alliance. Identified as operating under some of the most stringent restrictions in Afghanistan, German troops were at one stage 'required to go to great lengths to avoid confrontations with militants and are prohibited from initiating combat operations, authorised by the German government to fire only in self-defence.'^[24] The severity of such restrictions is easily explicable when one considers the lack of public support for operations in Afghanistan, yet another issue that has reduced the political will of the alliance. Polling in 2007 suggested that 57% of Germans wanted an immediate withdrawal of their nation's troops from Afghanistan, whilst polling in 2010 indicated this figure had risen to as much as 70%.^[25] Allied unease regarding the rigidity of Germany's caveats was amplified by the fact that the vast majority of German troops were stationed in the relatively stable North of the country, whilst other nations such as the UK, US, Canada, and Denmark had considerable deployments in ISAF Regional Commands South/Southwest and East, widely agreed to be the most unstable and volatile regions, resulting in significantly higher troop casualties and deaths.^[26] The effect of these so called 'casualty differentials' has been particularly straining for NATO, and Stanley Sloan suggests they could 'leave long-term scars on the alliance.'^[27]

The combination of NATO's apparent inability to generate the required forces and equipment for its Afghan mission, as well as the reduced operational value of those troops deployed with caveats, appear to be the two biggest challenges the alliance has faced in the undertaking of this crisis management operation. Fundamentally, that the alliance was unable to meet the requirements of the CJSOR raises grave questions about NATO's capacity to conduct expeditionary crisis management operations in an effective manner with sufficient forces and the necessary capabilities. There can be little doubt that the likelihood of mission success is considerably reduced if the forces deployed fall short of what the alliance itself has deemed necessary for the operation. This problem is complicated further by the number of caveats that have hindered the ability of ISAF commanders to fully utilise the (already inadequate) troops they have been assigned. Although the caveat situation improved in 2009,^[28] it nonetheless remained an issue, alongside that of the casualty differentials between the stable North and the unruly South. Regardless, NATO's operation in Afghanistan has illuminated serious force generation and risk-sharing issues within the alliance's response to crisis management operations.

Not all NATO's fault: The Wider Strategic Context

Though this essay has focussed primarily on the intra-alliance divisions and issues that have posed a challenge for NATO's operations in Afghanistan, it is important to consider the factors external to NATO that have complicated the alliance's mission. One such factor is the threat to Afghan security posed by Al Qaeda and Taliban operations in the border regions of Pakistan. On being appointed Commander ISAF, General Stanley A. McChrystal remarked in his initial assessment that Al Qaeda and associates in Pakistan 'channel foreign fighters, suicide bombers, and technical assistance into Afghanistan, and offer ideological motivation, training, and financial support.'^[29] McChrystal's claim that Al Qaeda and similarly aligned groups were receiving support from elements of Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)^[30] illustrates the magnitude of the threat lying on Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. Further to this, Stanley Kober pointed out in 2012 that 'Pakistan's border areas are not only a sanctuary for the Taliban, they are the route by which most supplies reach NATO forces in Afghanistan.'^[31] The ability of Pakistan's government to deal with this threat will, therefore, be a crucial factor in determining the long-term security and prosperity of the Afghan state, and a factor which, for obvious reasons, NATO as a military alliance, has little control over. The establishment of a Tripartite Commission allowing ISAF, the Afghan government, and Pakistan to discuss

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military and security issues, as well as the formation of the Joint Intelligence Operations Centre (JIOC) to ensure intelligence coordination, provide two examples of NATO's efforts to support Pakistan in its counter-terrorism efforts.[32]

The second major issue threatening the success of the ISAF mission, particularly its reconstruction and stabilization goals, has been corruption. Throughout NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, corruption within the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and other bodies has considerably endangered NATO's aim of a democratic Afghan government. General John R Allen, Commander ISAF 2011-13, has described corruption as 'the existential, strategic threat to Afghanistan', even more so than the previously discussed threat from Pakistan-based terrorist organisations.[33] As recently as May 2014, the NGO Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) found that corruption and bribery were on the rise, whilst reporting the view widely-held by Afghan's that 'corruption helps the expansion of the Taliban.'[34] This is despite various attempts by ISAF to tackle the issue of corruption, including the establishment of a US-led Task Force in 2010.[35] As the UK House of Commons International Development Committee noted in 2012, 'corruption is a growing threat not only to the effectiveness of international assistance but also the legitimacy of the state...and ultimately the long term viability of the Government.'[36] Given that NATO's success in Afghanistan will be evaluated by the enduring stability of Kabul's democratic institutions, it is no doubt concerning for the alliance that growing corruption has the potential to reverse the already precarious advances in security made by ISAF forces.

Conclusions on NATO's Afghan Mission

Though ISAF's combat operations are terminate at the end of 2014, this does not signify the end of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan. 12000 troops from NATO and partner nations will remain in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future as part of a 'train, advise, assist' mission to ensure that Afghan security institutions remain capable of delivering their own security and responding to the threat of terrorism. As of December 2014, force generation for this operation is underway.[37] It remains to be seen whether the alliance will meet the force generation requirements set out for this new operation. Though NATO's post-2014 mission in Afghanistan will not entail combat operations and so is difficult to compare to the ISAF operation, it is important to remember that the majority of the challenges posed by the Afghan crisis-management operation are by no means unique to this mission. The debate over burden sharing has existed for nearly as long as the alliance itself, initially regarding defence expenditure but more recently (in the post-Cold War era) concerning material-contributions to crisis management operations. Caveats are almost a fact of life in NATO operations, and featured most recently in Operation Unified Protector, the alliance's air campaign over Libya.[38]

Regardless of this fact, it is clear that these issues have posed significant challenges for NATO in Afghanistan, arguably more so than in any of the alliance's other crisis management operations. A number of allies contributed to the operation despite the fact that they were more motivated by alliance politics than a strong commitment to Afghan security. This, in turn, resulted in the alliance's inability to meet its force requirements for the operation, exacerbated by the restrictive nature of some alliance member's caveats. Put simply, NATO's Afghan operation suffered from a distinct lack of alliance cohesion. As Auerswald and Saideman put it, 'the alliance's behaviour reflected more a series of decisions by individual member states and less a coordinated design by a multilateral organisation.'[39] Lacking a cohesive strategy, the allies were unable to properly share the burdens or risks that the operation entailed. It is perhaps too soon to assess operational success, especially given the continuing threats posed by Pakistan-based terrorists and Afghan-wide corruption. Nonetheless, it is clear that NATO must learn from the mistakes made in Afghanistan to ensure that it is a capable actor in the realm of crisis management for the future.

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