NATO's Comprehensive Approach in Afghanistan: Origins, Development, and Outcome

The international effort in Afghanistan has been plagued by the presence of too many intervening actors with different interests and approaches going about their specific tasks without proper coordination with each other. This has made the combined international effort in Afghanistan ineffectual at providing security, development and governance. NATO, in recognizing that this lack of coordination was a problem and in trying to solve it, adopted the so-called 'Comprehensive Approach' (CA). The CA entails that political, civilian and military instruments are necessary for effective crisis management, and that NATO (which has primarily been focused on the military dimension) needs to work closer with political and civilian actors, and even develop civilian capabilities of its own.

This essay is structured as follows. In the first chapter, I explain the origins of the CA. In the second chapter, I analyze how the CA has been implemented and developed. In doing so, I will examine implementation of the CA at the national level through PRTs and the Danish military's experiences of civil-military cooperation. I will also examine implementation at the NATO level by analyzing NATO-EU and NATO-UN cooperation in Afghanistan. In the third chapter, I gauge whether the CA has been successful. I conclude the essay by summarizing the major findings and presenting possible implications for the future of NATO.

CHAPTER ONE – The Origins of the 'Comprehensive Approach'

The traditional problems of coalition warfare—caveats, divergent interests, veto players and resentment (Auerswald and Saideman 2014, 2-3)—has made it difficult enough for NATO to act efficiently as one unit in Afghanistan. This principal-agent problem is made even more severe by the fact that the international effort in Afghanistan relies on the efforts of several bureaucracies (with their own internal problems, interests and goals), countless civilian actors, and numerous informal Afghan power structures. Without leadership or a formal strategy of coordination for the international effort, the peacebuilding project quickly ran into problems. A "random network" emerged in Afghanistan with NATO, the UN, the EU, NGOs and local actors tackling a wide range of issues either independently of each other or through impromptu cooperation (Williams 2011, 139). What was lacking was a framework whereby the diverse international effort could be synchronized. Without such coordination, attempts at providing security, governance and development would be severely constrained.

Building on its experiences from the peacebuilding missions in the Balkans in the 1990s (Wendling 2010, 19-20) and those of its early engagement in Afghanistan, Denmark took the initiative in pushing for greater peacebuilding coordination within NATO (Tardy 2013, 104). The Danes neither tried to turn NATO into a coordinator of the international effort in Afghanistan nor push it to develop its own civilian capabilities. They simply tried to change NATO's organizational culture, improve existing capabilities and encourage it to work with other organizations (Petersen et al. 2010, 78-79). The response to the Danish initiative was mixed (Petersen et al. 2010, 79).

The Danish idea was, however, put on the agenda at the Riga Summit in 2006. The Riga Summit Declaration noted that "today's challenges require a comprehensive approach by the international community involving a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments" (NATO 2006, ¶10). To that end NATO leaders tasked NATO "to improve coherent application of NATO's own crisis management instruments" and strengthen practical coordination with

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relevant international organizations (NATO 2006, ¶10). Some member states resisted anything broader than that. Germany feared that the civilian aspects of the Afghan mission would be militarized (Larsen 2013, 37). France worried that NATO's broader scope might, in effect, displace the EU's niche security role (Jakobsen 2011, 86; Rynning 2012, 98-99). International organizations were also skeptical of a broader NATO mandate in conflict zones (Rynning 2012, 131).

At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, these fears had been assuaged. NATO respected the mandates of existing institutions, which comforted the many organizations and skeptical states that were present at this 'big tent' summit (Rynning 2013, 59). NATO noted that "the international community needs to work more closely together and take a comprehensive approach to address successfully the security challenges of today and tomorrow. Effective implementation of a comprehensive approach requires the cooperation and contribution of all major actors… To this end, it is essential… to act in a coordinated way and to apply a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments in a concerted effort" (NATO 2008, ¶11). An Action Plan was endorsed which called for the development of the CA (Petersen et al. 2010, 82-85).

In-between the Bucharest Summit and the Lisbon Summit, NATO was revitalized by Obama's election. Obama's emphasis on Afghanistan; his Afghan surge; his diplomatic offensive towards NATO; and highlighting of civil-military integration, created a focal point for cooperation and a drive to reform NATO's Afghan mission (Rynning 2012, 176-180). The US was, at last, seen as fully committed to Afghanistan and it gave NATO the 'informal' leader that it had previously lacked. In 2009, NATO also appointed a new 'formal' leader; Anders Fogh Rasmussen as its Secretary-General and tasked him to draft a new Strategic Concept. His appointment was seen as a way to strengthen NATO by expanding its executive capacity (Rynning 2012, 183-184). Rasmussen was chosen by consensus at the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit in 2009, a summit where NATO reaffirmed its commitment to the CA (NATO 2009, ¶18).

At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, a revitalized NATO launched its new Strategic Concept (the official document outlining NATO's purpose, nature and approaches to security). The Strategic Concept recognized that crisis management depended on civilian instruments that NATO did not possess nor could create. Choosing only to "form an appropriate but modest civilian crisis management capability" (NATO 2010, ¶25), NATO called for "close cooperation and consultation" with the relevant actors, the training of "local forces in crisis zones", identifying and training "civilian specialists from member states", and broadening and intensifying consultations among NATO members (NATO 2010, ¶25-26). To facilitate cooperation with civilian and political actors, NATO "invited other actors to assume responsibility for overall coordination", "pledged not to compromise any organization's independence", "to respect the humanitarian space" and "pledged to refrain from developing civilian capacities" (Jakobsen 2011, 84). On the last point, NATO did actually develop civilian capacities of their own but only to interface with civilian actors and "plan, employ and coordinate civilian activities until conditions allow for the transfer of those responsibilities and tasks to other actors" (NATO 2010, ¶25).

CHAPTER TWO – The 'Comprehensive Approach' in Practice

Comprehensive approaches of sorts had been adopted by several NATO members concerning their own forces in Afghanistan prior to the Lisbon Summit and even the Riga Summit. Denmark implemented a CA in 2005, following its 2004 initiative, which meant that cooperation was to be improved between the Danish military and Danish humanitarian organizations. This turned out to be problematic though. Jakobsen (2014) notes that humanitarian organizations were reluctant to work under military protection, insisting that it compromised their neutrality, which disabled their access to civilians in need and prevented them entry into areas controlled by forces opposed to NATO. Furthermore, it made humanitarian organizations targets (Jakobsen 2014). Jakobsen (2014) also finds that humanitarian organizations were reluctant to comply fully with the Danish military's proposal, since it would have effectively confined them to the areas under Danish military control, preventing them from working elsewhere where needs might have been greater. When it comes to Danish civil-military cooperation, "considerable room for progress remains" (Jakobsen 2014).

A lot of the academic literature on the use of the CA in Afganistan has focused on Provincial Reconstruction Teams

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(PRT), referring to units that include military, civilian and diplomatic components. The aim of such units is to extend the reach of the central government, enhance security through security sector reform and reconstruction (Williams 2011, 106). Some authors (Williams 2011, 106-107) refer to three dominant models of PRTs in Afghanistan, illustrating the different approaches taken by different nations (see Table 1).

Table 1: PRT Models (Assembled from Williams (2011, 106-107))

PRT Model	Personnel	Civilian Component	Purpose	Working environment
US	80	3-5	Quick impact projects	Hostile areas
UK	100	30	Local capacity-building	Hostile and permissive areas
German	400	20	Long-term development	Permissive areas

The PRTs have been criticized for having too vague missions, vague roles and insufficient resources (McNerney 2005, 36). Different PRTs faced different problems. The coordination between civilian and military components proved the most difficult for US PRTs (Williams 2011, 107-108). The lessons of the British experience with PRTs is that they lacked the military and monetary resources to achieve their objectives (Williams 2011, 111, 114). PRTs were also criticized for compromising the overall humanitarian effort in Afghanistan, given that they blurred the distinction between humanitarian and military actors (Williams 2011, 108).

Cooperation between the EU and NATO has been poor in Afghanistan. The EU has been criticized for not doing enough and for failing to show any serious desire to engage with the problems in Afghanistan. For instance, no high ranking EU official visisted Afghanistan prior to 2008 and that was only due to lobbying by the UK (Williams 2011, 98-99). In 2008 and after considerable pressure, the EU created EUPOL Afghanistan, a mission to support and train Afghan police (Muscheidt 2011, 50). EUPOL has been characterized as a categorical failure. The EU failed to staff the program fully, the training was "poor" (Williams 2011, 99) and NATO-EU coordination was lacking. For instance, both of the organizations ran police training programs but these were not coordinated. EUPOL was also constrained in where it could do training missions due to security concerns. NATO could have provided security for EUPOL but coordination between the EU and NATO was once again lacking. Brattberg (2013, 14) finds that the EU and NATO have yet to develop joint solutions to problems regarding Afghan police training. NATO-EU cooperation is therefore left wanting despite the implementation of the CA.

UN-NATO cooperation is of the utmost importance given that the two organizations are perceived as respective leaders of the military and civilian efforts in Afghanistan. Cooperation between the two organizations has been difficult though. UN officials have been ambivalent about working closely with a military alliance like NATO. Illustrating the different norms of the organizations, the UN officials that have cooperated with NATO have been criticized for it (Williams 2011, 97-98). NATO has also been dismayed by the UN's low prioritization of Afghanistan. This low prioritization was underscored by a report by the UN Secretary-General on the UN's top ten priorities which failed to mention Afghanistan (Williams 2011, 98). On the ground, the UN failed to lead civilian efforts, mostly due to chronic understaffing (Biermann 2014, 226). UN-NATO dialogue was also hindered by bureaucratic turf wars and pesonality clashes (Williams 2011, 98; Rynning 2012).

CHAPTER THREE – Prospects for Afghanistan

Given the aforementioned problems, the implementation of the CA has come under a lot of criticism. For M. J. Williams (2011) and Sten Rynning (2012), who provide two detailed accounts of NATO in Afghanistan, it is not so much that the CA is unimplementable or a flawed concept, but rather its seemingly random implementation process. Despite optimism for greater coordination, the CA only energized those into action that wanted greater civil-military integration and coordination, while leaving those that were more comfortable with the status quo continuing in their settled ways. This speaks to the problems of implementing a strategy on the ground in a conflict where bureaucracies have already entrenched themselves and modus operandi have been developed. Williams (2011, 97), for instance, writes that "if there was progress on the ground, it was only due to personalities". Jakobsen (2011, 89) argues that the effectiveness of the CA depends on each member state's willingness to implement it. Despite the implementation of the CA, the cultural barrier between military and civilian actors has not been fully traversed, as the experience with the PRTs shows. Principal-agent problem still plague NATO-EU and NATO-UN relations, as competing interests and

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seemingly oppositional cultures persist in the aftermath of the CA's implementation. However, the CA has still inspired greater synchronization, even if it has often been up to the individual leaders on the ground.

It is difficult to find any quantitative data to back up the effectiveness of the CA. On a purely logical level though, the CA makes sense. After all, many would blame the failures in Afghanistan on the failure to implement proper nation-building after the initial invasion (Paris 2013, 539) and the uncontrolled escalation of civilian and military efforts (Paris 2013, 540). This indicates that the proper implementation of the CA early on could have solved many of the entrenched problems that are now being fought in Afghanistan.

Is NATO any closer to achieving its prime objective in Afghanistan, which "is to enable the Afghan authorities to provide effective security across the country and ensure that the country can never again be a safe haven for terrorists" (NATO 2014)? The answer to this question is a clear and resounding 'no'. First, a peace agreement has not been reached with the Taliban nor have they been defeated, which means that the civil war continues. The new Afghan government seems more willing to engage the Taliban in peace talks but these efforts have not borne fruit yet (DW 2014). Second, the new national unity government seems very frail and prone to disunity. Accusations of electoral fraud and months-long deadlock threatened to plunge the country into political chaos and ethnic conflict before an agreement was reached in late September (Washington Post 2014).

Third, while Afghan forces do appear to be improving, measured in personnel levels (Livingston and O'Hanlon 2014, 6) and missions that they take on without ISAF assistance (Department of Defense 2014, 10.), the Afghan government is still far from achieving a monopoly on violence in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of NATO troops can be dangerous since it creates uncertainty about the relative strength of the Afghan government and its opponents. Research on conflict resolution suggests that the unclear perception of the strength of the Afghan government makes peace talks with the Taliban more difficult. Finding a middle-ground becomes more difficult as actors can not tell how strong the other is (Fearon 1995, 2004, 396-397; Walter 1997). It also increases commitment problems, referring to fears on both sides that the other will renege on an agreement (Fearon 1995, 2004, Walter 1997). A promise by NATO to keep a total of about 12,000 NATO forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014 (BBC News 2014) should alleviate some of these concerns and also signal that the international community is not going to let Afghanistan regress without a response.

Fourth, the Afghan government and economy is highly reliant on aid. Many services in Afghanistan are based on aid contributions. The World Bank characterizes Afghanistan as an "extreme outlier" when it comes to aid dependency (World Bank 2012, 27, see also SIGAR 2014, 154). This assistance arguably strengthens stability in Afghanistan and pre-empts the grievances and greed that might otherwise increase the risk of political instability and civil conflict (Stewart 2002, Collier and Hoeffler 2004). The political stability of Afghanistan therefore hinges on future foreign assistance, which remains uncertain (Reuters 2014).

Given the underlying problems of Afghanistan, it is clear that NATO's objective was very ambitious. Prominent explanations for civil war, such as the security dilemma (Posen 1993), greed (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) and grievance (Stewart 2002), all seem deeply rooted in Afghanistan. Dixon's (2009) integration of the quantitative research on the factors associated with civil wars also shows Afghanistan to have many of the factors associated with civil war. The civil war literature finds that civil wars typically last long when there are factions with external support (Balch-Lindsay et al. 2008, 360-361), a multitude of veto players (Cunningham 2006, 879-880) and terrorists (Fortna *forthcoming*).

Stephen Krasner and Thomas Risse argue that the ability of external actors to enhance state capacity in areas of limited statehood depends on (i) the perceived legitimacy of external actors to locals, (ii) the complexity of the tasks taken on by the external actors, and (iii) the design of the governance structures that deliver the external actor's services (2014, 555). The authors single out the Afghan mission as particularly difficult when it comes to all three points (Krasner and Risse 2014, 552, 559).

Table 2: A Compilation of Several Indexes

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Index What it measures Afghanistan's ranking Human Development Index (UNDP 2014) Health, education and income 169/187 Gross National Income (The World Bank 2014) Income 146-147/169 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2013) Perceived levels of public sector corruption 175/177 Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders 2014) Press freedom 128/180 Freedom in the World (Freedom House 2014) Political rights and civil liberties Not free Global Peace Index (IEP 2014) Peacefulness 161/162 Global Terrorism Index (IEP 2012) Terrorist activity 3/159 Fragile States Index (Fund for Peace 2014) Social, economic and political problems 7/178

Conclusion

This essay revealed several things. First, regarding the origins of the CA, it showed how the peace operations of the 1990s, Danish initiative-taking, several NATO summits, and Obama's election were all factors that led to the adoption of the CA by NATO. Proposals for the CA also became more expansive from its initial proposal at the Riga Summit in 2006 to the Lisbon Summit in 2010. Initially hesitant to turn Afghanistan into a coordinator of the international effort in Afghanistan, it eventually had to shoulder broader leadership. Hesitant also to create civilian capabilities of its own, NATO later saw it as necessary.

Second, this essay examined the Danish implementation of the CA at the national level. It found that there was great reluctance by humanitarian organizations to work closely with the military, both for practical and ideological reasons. This essay also examined PRTs and presented criticism of PRTs in general but also three different models of PRTs. Implementation of the CA at the national level can therefore be improved. Implementation of the CA at the international level has, however, been even more difficult. NATO-EU and NATO-UN relations were constrained by different interests, goals, priorities and organizational cultures. Furthermore, the EU and UN fell short on the civilian efforts in Afghanistan, which had adverse consequences for NATO's broader mission. The CA has therefore not been as effective as many had hoped but it was unrealistic to expect the CA to be the magic pill to what had become the mother of all principal-agent problems.

Lastly, I made a tentative argument that the CA is more effective than the preceding strategies (or lack of them) in Afghanistan but noted that the CA still leaves a lot of room for improvement. I also argued that NATO will not achieve its prime objective in Afghanistan. NATO looks set to leave Afghanistan in a state of insecurity, weak governance and with many of the underlying factors behind conflict renewal and instability.

What does this mean for the future of NATO? Despite its painful experiences in Afghanistan, it seems as if those experiences and the adoption of the CA make NATO emerge stronger from Afghanistan, rather than weaker (see Mattelaer 2011, Farrell 2011, Strachan 2013, 84; Webber et al. 2014 for similar views). After "by far the largest and most challenging military operation NATO has faced to date" (Bailes and Cottey 2010, 150), the Strategic Concept signaled that the experiences in Afghanistan had not put NATO off going global but rather deepened its commitment. NATO affirmed that it was going to continue to engage in peacebuilding and that it had a strategy for coping with it. Beyond the institutional changes that leave NATO better equipped for future missions, NATO members now have a better understanding of the reality of war (Mattelaer 2011, 134) and the bonds between member states are now stronger due to their shared experience (Webber et al. 2014, 792). NATO consequently emerges stronger, rather than weaker from Afghanistan.

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