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NATO's Landscape of the Mind – Stabilisation and Statebuilding in Afghanistan

Mats Berdal

Abstract

In 2003, NATO set out to support the establishment of “a self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government able to exercise its authority and to operate throughout Afghanistan.” The article examines why NATO’s attempt to bring stability to Afghanistan over the decade that followed failed to advance its initial and highly ambitious vision for the country. A fundamental inability to recognise and engage with the drivers and dynamics of conflict within Afghanistan provides an important part of the answer. Underlying divisions and tensions among key allies over strategic objectives in Afghanistan were also major sources of fragmentation and incoherence in NATO’s involvement. Above all, the failure to prioritise the search for an inclusive political settlement among parties to the conflict and to tailor operations on the ground to a realisable political objective ensured growing insecurity and instability over time. The experience holds important lessons for the theory and practice of stabilisation.

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NATO's Landscape of the Mind – Stabilisation and Statebuilding in Afghanistan

“If I had a chance to do it over again, I would spend more time ensuring that we really had pinned down what it was we were trying to achieve.”¹

Douglas Lute, White House “War Czar”, 2007-2009²

Introduction

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan – set up in the wake of the International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn in late 2001 and commanded by NATO from August 2003 onwards – formally completed its mission at the end of 2014. Marking the occasion at a meeting of the North Atlantic Council in December of that year, NATO’s Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, insisted that Afghanistan was now “more stable and prosperous than ever” (NATO, 2014). In view of the scale, cost and duration of ISAF’s deployment, an upbeat and rosy picture from NATO’s chief executive was perhaps only to be expected. Even as the ISAF flag was being lowered in Kabul, however, the claim that “stability” had been brought to the country looked distinctly unconvincing. Early developments following the departure of ISAF troops only reinforced the fear – widespread among long-standing observers of Afghan history, politics and society – that few of NATO’s achievements, however limited, were likely to prove sustainable. Little more than a year after ISAF’s withdrawal, mounting violence and deteriorating security, soaring unemployment and increased out-migration, acute aid dependency and endemic corruption, political instability in Kabul and no sign of progress in peace talks with the Taliban, prompted the outgoing head of the UN mission in Afghanistan to declare that “survival [would] be an achievement” for the government in 2016 (IISS, 2017, p.218). Since then, while the government may have survived and NATO’s follow-on “non-combat mission” (*Operation Resolute Force*) has grown to some 16,000 troops, violence and instability have only deepened throughout the country’s provinces (Ruttig, 2018; Clark, 2019). Indeed, the number of civilian deaths from armed conflict

¹ Lute, 2018, p.68.

² Douglas Lute was Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan from 2007 to 2009. He stayed on under President Obama, serving as Special Assistant and Senior Coordinator for Afghanistan and Pakistan before becoming US Ambassador to NATO in 2013.

in Afghanistan has risen steadily ever since UNAMA began collating and publishing data in 2008, with a grim new record of direct deaths from conflict set in 2018.³ In early 2019, the Afghan government also disclosed that a staggering 45,000 members of the Afghan security forces had been killed since ISAF ended its mission (BBC, 2019). As one long-time and distinguished analyst of the conflict concluded in early 2018, “it seems highly probable that only US airpower and special forces have saved the Kabul state from military collapse” (Lieven, 2019, p.2). Whatever other purposes involvement in Afghanistan may have served for the Alliance and individual allies since 2003, as an exercise in stabilisation and peacebuilding, the mission failed. Peace and stability in Afghanistan, NATO’s oft-stated objectives between 2003 and 2014, remain dishearteningly elusive.

Focus and Argument in Brief

A full and exhaustive discussion of the reasons behind this bleak picture is beyond the scope the present contribution, whose principal focus is confined to NATO’s attempt at stabilisation and state-building in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2014. It is concerned, in particular, with two key factors that help explain why NATO failed to meet what, back in 2003, had boldly been envisaged as ISAF’s desired end-state: “a self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government able to exercise its authority and to operate throughout Afghanistan.”⁴

The first of these was a fundamental inability to recognise and engage with the drivers and dynamics of conflict within the country, including the extent to which violence was often rooted in a distinctive political economy of conflict at the local level but also how NATO itself, through its stabilisation activities and counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign, contributed to growing insecurity and heightened levels of violence. That inability can be traced to the failure – on the part of

³ According to data released by UNAMA in February 2019, the number of civilians killed and injured as a direct result of armed conflict in Afghanistan in 2018 was 10,993. Compared to the previous reporting period, this amounted to a five per cent increase in overall casualties and an eleven per cent increase in civilian deaths. See <https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-deaths-afghan-conflict-2018-highest-recorded-level---un-report>. The *Costs of War Project* at Brown University estimates that 147,000 people – including nearly 40,000 civilians – have been killed during the war in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2018. See Neta Crawford, “Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and Need for Transparency”, November 2018. Retrieved from <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>.

⁴ “Longer-term strategy for NATO in its ISAF role in Afghanistan”, 8 October 2003, S/2003/970, p.3.

individuals to be sure, but also the decision-making machinery of coalition partners and NATO as a whole – to question the untested and flawed assumptions on which stabilisation and COIN were premised throughout the campaign. That failure in turn both reflected and reinforced a tendency for actions and operations on the ground to remain disconnected from larger and all-important questions of strategy and politics in relation to Afghanistan, including the vital need, as Douglas Lute candidly put it, to “pin down” what the international coalition was trying to *achieve* in Afghanistan.

The second and closely related factor that helps explain NATO’s performance has to do with the politics and functioning of the alliance itself. While post-Cold War changes to NATO’s organisational structure, operational planning mechanisms and force generation procedures enabled the alliance to undertake and sustain complex multi-national military operations outside the North Atlantic treaty area, its overall effort in Afghanistan nonetheless remained deeply fragmented, reflecting underlying and never-reconciled divisions over objectives among allies.⁵ Put differently, NATO never functioned as an effective coalition of allies bound together by a common strategic vision and clarity of objectives in Afghanistan; it always remained less than the sum of its parts. At one level, this reality reflected differing views about the appropriate level of ambition for NATO in Afghanistan, with the US consistently sceptical of what was dismissively termed the “nation-building” ambitions of European allies (Gates, 2015, p.204). Many of those allies, in turn, deplored the dominant and overriding influence in US decision-making, especially within the Pentagon, CIA and the US military, of a much more narrow counter-terrorism perspective. Equally important in terms of explaining NATO’s fragmented approach, however, were the domestic political pressures and considerations, extraneous to Afghanistan itself and developments there, which shaped the commitments of individual allies to NATO’s mission.

Taken together, these factors not only doomed NATO’s state-building efforts between 2003 and 2014 to failure. More broadly, they also exposed the limitations and hubris inherent in the attempt to transplant Western-style institutions, good governance and modern statehood by force of arms to Afghanistan – a complex,

⁵ For a thoughtful analysis of the shift in NATO’s focus from collective defence towards so-called “crisis management” operations after the Cold War, see Nick Williams, “Crisis Management versus Collective Defence – The NATO Experience”, Center for War Studies Policy Paper 1, University of Southern Denmark, March 2018. Available at <https://misc.sam.sdu.dk/files/P.pdf>

proud, but also a deeply divided society, beset by meddling neighbours and distinguished, among other things, by a long history of resistance to foreign invasions.

To develop these arguments more fully the article proceeds in three parts. The first provides a brief analytical narrative of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, focusing on key decision points and their consequences in the period from late 2001 to the end of ISAF's mission in 2014. Drawing on this narrative, part two examines the sources of failure alluded to above, specifically the growing disconnect between the assumptions and practices of stabilisation and COIN on the one hand, and realities on the ground in Afghanistan on the other. The final section turns to the manner in which the politics and very functioning of the alliance influenced its deployment and stabilisation activities.

NATO's Afghanistan Mission, 2001-2014: An Analytical Narrative

2001-2003: Engaging Allies in "appropriately flexible ways"

Although NATO only assumed responsibility for ISAF in Kabul in 2003 and did not complete the gradual expansion of its mission to cover the whole of Afghanistan until October 2006, any attempt to understand the history of the alliance's mission must start with the strategic decisions taken by the US in response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

The shock, scale and horror of those attacks led to a near-universal outpouring of sympathy and support for the US, exemplified by the Security Council's prompt condemnation of the attacks as "threats to international peace and security" and its reaffirmation of the US' right of individual and collective self-defence.⁶ On the very day that the Security Council passed its resolution, the North Atlantic Council, for the first time in its history, invoked Article V of the Washington Treaty, its so-called "collective defence provision" stipulating that an "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all". Much was made at the time about this unprecedented move on the part of the Alliance and, to be sure, as a demonstration of solidarity with the US, the symbolism could not have been greater. And yet, the military and operational significance of the Article V invocation soon proved negligible. As preparations for military and covert

⁶ UN Security Council Res.1368, 12 September 2001.

actions in Afghanistan got under way in the weeks following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration had no desire to involve NATO directly in operations. Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Defence Secretary at the time, summed up the administration's view of NATO and its role on the eve of the attack on Afghanistan: "if we need collective action we'll ask for it. ... We need cooperation from many countries but we need to take it in appropriately flexible ways" (Wolfowitz, 2001). Wolfowitz's comments and the subsequent unfolding of the campaign in 2001 point to two aspects of US policy that influenced the dynamics of alliance relations for the *entire* period of NATO's involvement.

First, in taking the "battle to the terrorists, to their networks and to those states and organizations that harbor and assist terrorist networks" (Rumsfeldt, 2001), the US did not wish to be constrained. The Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed by the Congress on 14 September 2001, was open-ended both in terms of time and geographical scope, and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), formally launched with the attack on Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, was a counter-terrorism mission broadly conceived. Indeed, to US decision-makers it marked the beginning of what soon came to be referred to as a "Global War on Terrorism". Following the toppling of the Taliban regime and the inauguration of an interim Afghan government in late December 2001, thought gradually turned to how stability might be extended throughout the country. Even so, OEF's central focus on "disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al-Qaeda and Taliban" – fuelled by the desire for retribution and revenge following the events of 9/11 – remained a dominant strategic priority, and it did so throughout the period of NATO's engagement. The Bush administration's aversion to nation-building was, of course, well known before 9/11 (Rice, 2000), and explains why it successfully resisted calls for ISAF to be expanded outside Kabul before 2003. Scepticism about ambitious post-war objectives was widely shared, however, including, notably, by Robert Gates who, upon taking office as Secretary of Defence in 2006, was quick to conclude that "our efforts [in Afghanistan] were being significantly hampered by muddled and over-ambitious objectives..." (Gates, 2014, p.203). How to define the strategic objectives for Afghanistan set the US apart from many European NATO allies, and Gates himself, looking back, felt the divergence of views between European approaches "that looked a lot like nation-building" and much narrower US objectives, remained "an important and underlying source of friction and frustration" within NATO (Gates, 2014, p.203).

Second, Wolfowitz' remarks made it clear that while the US welcomed the support of individual allies in its "war on terrorism", NATO as an alliance – with its limited collective assets, well-established planning procedures and consultative mechanisms – was more likely to complicate, even restrict, US' freedom to respond as it saw fit. The prevailing view held by American officials of NATO's Kosovo operation in 1999, especially in the Pentagon and within the military, only reinforced this sentiment. Now, in the post-9/11 world, the mission would always, as Rumsfeld made clear from the outset, "determine the coalition" (Rumsfeldt, 2001).

Over time, as security deteriorated and challenges mounted in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the importance and uses of allies to the US became more apparent: they could help legitimise the need for continuing involvement internally vis-à-vis Congress which controlled the purse strings; they could assume the burden of unpopular nation-building tasks; and some allies might even provide useful assets, notably intelligence support and Special Operations Forces (Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan, 2016, p.14). At the end of the day, however, NATO *per se* was of limited use and interest (Dorrnsoro, 2005, p.318).

There is a final and critical aspect to the early phase of operations in Afghanistan and the strategic choices then made by the US, which crucially shaped the context of NATO's expanding involvement and, in particular, its stabilisation and state-building activities from 2003 onwards. What was soon dubbed the "Afghan Model" (Biddle, 2003) of operations – that is, a very light conventional foot-print, relying instead on Special Forces, precision weapons and local allies in the form of the Northern alliance to overthrow the Taliban regime – combined with a rejection of nation-building and, crucially, an unwillingness to invest in the search for a broader and more inclusive political settlement following the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, had very important long-term consequences. "Hardly anyone in Washington", as Steve Coll would later observe, "reflected on the Taliban's political fate or how the movement's exclusion from the country's new politics might later create a backlash" (Coll, 2018, pp.101-102). This, in spite of the fact that "credible Taliban leaders continued to reach out to both Karzai and the United States despite the rejections they had received in late 2001" (Coll, 2018,p.140). As one perceptive study would later put it, the Bush administration's post-war plan "seems to have been to pass control of the country as quickly as possible to local proxies who had assisted international forces and thereafter to retain a residual counter-terrorism mission" (WPR1322, 2015,p.11).

In the process of doing so, US forces entered into alliances with local and regional strongmen and warlords, men like Mohammed Fahim, the Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ismail Kahn, and Gul Aga Sherzai, many of whom had risen to prominence during the horrific civil war that had engulfed the country after 1992. This development and the dynamic set in motion by cultivating relations with corrupt, illegitimate and predatory warlords set the stage for renewed conflict (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012, p.254; Kuehn, 2018; Bijlert, 2009, pp.158-60). Crucially, bringing warlords and their tribally-based militias and patronage networks into positions of power at the local and district level also gave rise to a distinctive political economy of conflict that would continue to confound NATO's attempts, starting in 2003, to stabilise the country through aid, reconstruction and development assistance.

2003-2009: Expanding mission, growing insurgency

NATO assumed command of ISAF in August 2003 and, soon thereafter, was authorised by the UN Security Council under Chapter VII to expand ISAF's presence outside Kabul with the aim of establishing security and extending the writ of the government to "all parts of Afghanistan".⁷ NATO duly embarked upon its "stabilisation" mission. By October 2006, following a gradual expansion – starting in the north in 2004 and ending with a "surge" in the south and east in 2006 – ISAF's area of responsibility covered the whole of the country. Accompanying the process was the creation of a complex and top-heavy structure of regional command headquarters, contributing to making NATO forces "high on tail and low on teeth". Formally under ISAF's command, by late 2006 were also some 25 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) operating from local bases. These were multinational teams, combining civilian and military elements and each led by individual nations, whose role was to "deliver a 'stabilisation effect'" by facilitating "reconstruction, security, governance, aid and development" (WPR1322, 2015, p.5).⁸ As such, the PRTs were critical to NATO's stated ambition of "extending the influence of the central government" (De Hoop Scheffer, 2004).

⁷ UN Security Council Res. 1510, 13 October 2003.

⁸ In a few cases, PRTs were run by a group of two or three nations.

The expansion of NATO's role after 2003 requires explanation.⁹ After all, the Taliban had been toppled, its foot-soldiers had scattered and al-Qaeda was, if not defeated, weakened and without a safe haven in the country.

A combination of three factors drove NATO's growing involvement. The first was a strong, if confused and strategically inchoate, sense among allies that the Alliance needed to carve out a more clearly defined role for itself in the "post-9/11 security landscape". To this end, the Prague meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government, held in November 2002 and dubbed the transformation summit, famously signalled NATO's readiness to go out-of-area in order to take on new and global challenges. Through its operations in Afghanistan, as the ISAF Commander at the time put it 2006, "NATO [was] seeking to prove its relevance as a military force for the future" (Richards, 2006, p.10).

The second factor was related. With US attention and resources increasingly focused on Iraq and, soon after its invasion in 2003, fully absorbed by the catastrophic consequences of state collapse in that country, pressures for NATO allies to pick up the burden in Afghanistan mounted. The readiness to do so was aided by the deep divisions that existed over US actions in Iraq (by contrast to the emerging narrative of "a good war" in Afghanistan), but also the growing realisation among European allies that merely toppling the Taliban did not constitute "mission accomplished" in Afghanistan. And this was the third factor that drove NATO's deepening involvement: a sense, above all among European allies, that the "the interveners now had an obligation to deliver more than a government of warlords" (WPR1322, 2015, p.11). To meet that obligation, NATO, once it had assumed command of ISAF, developed and regularly updated its "Comprehensive Strategic Political Military Plan" for Afghanistan. Its vision and underlying idea, however, did not change. Succinctly summarised by Keating and Stapleton, it held that:

"... on the basis of reconstruction and development, the Afghan government would extend its legitimacy and authority countrywide, thereby enabling its international partners to help build a sustainable stability that would foster economic development. This 'end state' would allow a military exit with continued foreign assistance typical of other post-conflict fragile states" (Keating & Stapleton, 2015, p.4).

The script did not, however, pan out as envisaged. Instead, the period between 2006

⁹ Numbering some 5,000 and confined to Kabul in September 2003, NATO ISAF troop levels grew to 33,000 in 2006 and would eventually peak at more than 130,000 in July 2011.

and 2009 saw NATO confronted with a “growing and resilient insurgency” (ISAF, 2009). Even as troop and aid levels rose, and a so-called Comprehensive Approach, emphasising integrated working between the military and civilian arms of NATO’s effort, was formally adopted, the much vaunted “stability effect” proved ever-more elusive. As combat operations intensified, especially in the south of the country, security continued to deteriorate. Indeed, it is a striking fact, as Graeme Smith observed and which alone ought to have given pause for thought, that “every increase in troop numbers in southern Afghanistan brought a corresponding increase in violence” (Smith, 2015, p.169). Remarkably, even the intensive kill-or-capture campaign of 2009-11, which saw thousands of night raids and SOF operations aimed at breaking the back of the insurgency, did not result in “a significant downturn in violence or insurgent attacks” (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012, p.315).

2009-2014: COIN and transition to “Afghan lead for security”

By early 2009, with a new administration in power in Washington, an increasingly war-weary public and a president intellectually and emotionally committed to bringing America’s 9/11 wars to an end, the situation in Afghanistan was deemed to “demand urgent attention and swift action” (White House, 2009a). An immediate increase in US troops numbers of some 17,000 was ordered in March 2009, along with a reaffirmation of the central aim of US policy: “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future” (White House, 2009b). To this end, counter-terrorism operations emphasising kill-or-capture missions intensified, as the skills honed and methods developed in Iraq were transferred to Afghanistan.¹⁰ In July of 2009, Stanley McChrystal, shortly after assuming command of ISAF, was asked to conduct a “multidisciplinary assessment” of the situation in Afghanistan and present military options (ISAF, 2009,p.i). Faced with the prospect of “strategic defeat”, McChrystal concluded that a “significant change to our strategy and the way we think and operate” were needed (ISAF, 2009,p.1). He called for a “comprehensive counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign” focused on protecting the population, strengthening the Afghan National Security Forces and “improving governance at all levels” (ISAF, 2009,p.1

¹⁰ For an account of those methods as conceived and developed by Stanley McChrystal in Iraq, see Urban (2011). For SOF operations in Afghanistan, see also Naylor (2015), pp. 351-76.

and p.3). Following a protracted and deeply divisive internal debate about the way forward, Obama endorsed the new approach, though, reflecting his long-term desire to end US combat commitments and conscious of growing war-weariness among the public, he opted for a more limited troop surge of 30,000 while, at the same time, making it clear that the drawdown of US troops and transfer of responsibility for security to Afghan security forces would start no later than July 2011.

Where the US led NATO allies followed. In support of Obama's surge, NATO Ministers "offered broad support" for McChrystal's assessment and pledged to deploy another 7,000 troops (NATO, 2009). The shift in focus towards transition and eventual withdrawal was formally endorsed by NATO members at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, whence it was agreed that Afghan forces would assume "full responsibility for security across the whole of Afghanistan" by the end of 2014 (NATO, 2010). At the time, NATO Ministers insisted that the pace of transfer of responsibility to Afghan security forces would be "conditions-based, not calendar-driven", and that transition would not simply "equate to withdrawal of ISAF-troops" (NATO, 2010). Domestic political pressures and war weariness in NATO countries, however, ensured that the transitional process never stood much chance of being truly conditions-based. Indeed, the quip that Obama's strategy for the Afghan endgame was best summed up by "surge, bribe and run,"¹¹ proved uncomfortably close to the mark.

Explaining NATO's Record in Afghanistan: sources of failure

How do we explain the failure on the part of NATO and its partner nations to bring stability to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014? The history and pattern of involvement sketched above point to three sets of issues, which, though closely related, merit separate attention.

- the debilitating impact on alliance cohesion and unity of purpose of conflicting and competing objectives, most notably between the US and its European allies;
- the failure of individual allies operating within their geographic areas of responsibility, and of NATO as a whole, to appreciate and grapple with underlying sources of violence and conflict in Afghanistan;

¹¹ Brahma Chellaney quoted in Thakur (2015), p.220.

- the contradictions and inherent difficulties of applying NATO's approach to stabilisation and COIN to the distinctive historical context and political economy of Afghanistan.

Competing Objectives

The central fault-line in terms of the overall political objective for NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, one that gave rise to conflicting priorities on the ground and a fragmentation of effort from the outset, remained the one between the US focus on counter terrorism broadly defined and a more ambitious set of state- and peace-building objectives held by coalition partners. The tension was not always easily gleaned from upbeat NATO communiqués that emphasized the alliance's "comprehensive approach to crisis management" and its delivery of "stabilisation and reconstruction effects" (NATO, 2010). But it was always there and given the dominant influence of the US in terms of decision-making power and resources, quite especially following the surge in 2009-10, the counterterrorism perspective would always trump other considerations, within the alliance as well as within internal US Administration debates on Afghan policy. Because the counterterrorism perspective remained premised on a broad and an permissive definition of terrorists and insurgents – one that never seriously questioned "the supposedly unbreakable link between the Taliban and al-Qaeda" (Linschoten & Kuehn, 2012, p. 326) – the scope for exploring a wider political settlement to end the war, as called for by Richard Holbrooke in the face of internal opposition in 2010, but also strongly favoured by European allies, was always limited and never won through at critical moments (Sanger, 2013, pp.116-19).

In terms of operations and activities, the tension between strategic priorities gave rise to, and were reflected in, a complicated and dysfunctional set of command and control arrangements that included multiple and separate chains of command, both within theatre and between capitals and theatre. Most obvious in this respect was the separation of OEF from NATO's ISAF mission, though it was evident at other levels too, notably in the deployment and semi-independent activities of US Special Forces, the US Marines during the surge and, significantly, in workings of the nationally-led PRTs. The variety of models and approaches adopted by different PRTs were, to a degree, a function of location, resources and national styles, as a

result of which they operated with a high degree of autonomy and only loose direction from ISAF regional headquarters. Adaptation to circumstances is in many contexts to be valued but, as Jackson and Gordon perceptively noted in 2007, for NATO states to extoll virtues of diversity was also “a ruse for justifying both national agendas and the absence of an effective strategic framework in which the PRTs could operate” (Jackson & Gordon, 2007, p.649). The bilateral provision of aid, reconstruction and security assistance by PRTs within their respective areas of responsibility created national bubbles, further undermining attempts at achieving strategic coherence overall.

Drivers of Violence and Insecurity: local context, political economy and nationalism

The contribution of NATO and partner nations to security and stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan – collectively and individually within their respective sectors of operations – was critically undermined from the outset of ISAF’s expansion outside Kabul, even more notably so from 2006 when combat operations intensified, by a persistent failure properly to grasp some of the key and underlying drivers of conflict. Two aspects of this deserve special attention.

The first was the way in which *local context* and the distinctive *political economies* of conflict within Afghanistan – the latter shaped by a complex of ethno-tribal grievances, local politics and power struggles, often with deep historical roots and all set within the patronage-based and nepotistic post-Taliban political order that emerged in 2001 and 2002 – drove violence and insecurity throughout the provinces.¹² This reality contrasted sharply with the dominant narrative through which NATO, led by the US (and within the US, led by the Pentagon and the military), understood and approached the Afghan conflict. Aptly termed the “insurgency narrative” by Mike Martin, this effectively reduced the struggle in Afghanistan to one between, on the one hand, a legitimate government seeking to build the foundations of a modern, democratic and liberal-looking State, supported in that endeavour by the West, and, on the other, a retrograde, ideologically driven Taliban insurgency, benefiting from sanctuaries in and support from Pakistan (Martin, 2014, p.195). While this view was not without some foundation in fact, it profoundly and fatally simplified

¹² For a detailed discussion of this in relation to the province of Faryab in northern Afghanistan, see Berdal & Suhrke (2017), pp.10-13. For the importance of local context and “small places” see also important work by Malkasian (2013).

conflict in the provinces, districts and villages where ISAF was operating. As one study of the British experience in Helmand perceptively emphasised:

“The localised nature of the insurgency and the local grievances and rivalries that shaped how different local actors aligned and realigned themselves in relation to the ‘government’ and ‘Taliban’ figures frequently had far less to do with the macro- dynamics of insurgency and counter-insurgency than they did with complex local political dynamics including the narco-economy and power relations between rival social groups” (WPR1322, 2015, p.4).

The insurgency narrative also, inevitably, failed to capture the complexity of the Taliban movement itself: its rootedness in Pashtun-dominated rural south of Afghanistan; its non-military sources of local legitimacy and strength; and the extent to which, as a movement, it expressed a distinctive Pashtun nationalism. As Douglas Lute, looking back, perceptively observed of the US military:

“... [they] seemed never to appreciate that the Taliban were embedded in the social fabric of Afghanistan. They [Taliban] were inherently not a force which was external to the areas where it fought and indeed, in some places in the south and east, they barely had a defined force structure distinct from the civilian population. In such parts of the country, by taking on a commitment to fight the Taliban, you were essentially lumbered with fighting against the Pashtun population” (Lute, 2018, p.69).

This failure to understand how the micro-dynamics of conflict interacted with patronage politics and struggles over power and resources at the centre, meant that the actions of NATO allies often played into and contributed to the entrenchment of violent and exploitative political economies. One of the more striking, and now well documented, examples of this are the effects of UK-led counter-narcotics policies, especially the initial attempts at eradication, pursued in Helmand where opium production and the narcotics industry was both the main source of livelihood to thousands of farmers and of power and profits to officials and strongmen both inside and outside the province (see Berry, 2003; Mansfield, 2015). SIGAR’s comprehensive and profoundly discouraging review of the US counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2018, released in 2018, similarly brings out the opium economy’s enmeshment in the wider the political economy of conflict and violence in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2018b). As discussed more fully below, this much more complex picture of the sources and dynamics of insecurity fundamentally

challenged the premises on which NATO's stabilisation, as well as its and American COIN efforts, were predicated.

The second aspect, more difficult to pin down and measure but no less important, was the role played by NATO and the Western-led intervention generally in stimulating Afghan nationalism and anti-foreign sentiment, especially in the Pashtun belt in the south. Familiarity with Afghan history should, but never seems to have, alerted outsiders to the likely importance of the innate resistance to foreign intrusion and control in the country (Martin, 2014, pp.159-60; Smith, 2015, chapter 8). It was a failure linked, perhaps, as Anatol Lieven has thoughtfully suggested, to the tendency to treat Afghanistan as a "landscape of the mind, onto which Westerns could project a variety of agendas and fantasies" (Lieven, 2010). This said, suspicion and resentment towards the international coalition, and certainly the intensity it acquired over time, were not given. Taliban's removal in 2001 was generally welcomed and hope appears to have been widespread (though, in the end, it also proved short-lived) that an extended period of civil war would finally come to an end and a more just political dispensation would emerge (Kuehn, 2018, p.38). Several factors soon served to undermine that hope.

Chief among these was the return to power and influence of the warlords and strongmen that had been so prominent during the deeply destructive civil war of 1992-96 (Coghlan, 2009, pp.125-126). The basic attitude taken towards these by the US was pithily summed up by Ahmed Rashid: "a cheap and beneficial way to retain US allies in the field who might even provide information about al Qaeda" (Rashid, 2008, p.129). By 2004, in many cases earlier, their abusive, predatory and corrupt behaviour was fuelling the Taliban revival and feeding into suspicion and conspiracy theories about the deeper motives of NATO's presence. What Coll has described as "the descent of American counterterrorism policy into black depths of systematic abuse" (Coll, 2018,p.159) only further deepened hostility to the foreign presence.

Local nationalisms and anti-foreign resistance were also powerfully stimulated by the conduct and fall-out of military operations, especially from 2006, the year in which the number of civilian casualties from NATO operations also began to rise steeply (Suhrke, 2011, pp.66-71). An authoritative study drawing upon surveys in five of Afghanistan's provinces - Helmand, Paktia, Uruzgan, Balkh and Faryab - conducted between 2008 and 2010, found that the behaviour of troops, especially in areas where levels of insecurity were high, was widely viewed as disrespectful of

“Afghan culture, religion, and traditions”, and became an significant “driver of insecurity” (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012, p.35). As an inevitable result, trust in NATO-ISAF declined. While the problem was recognised by many, attempts to address it remained half-hearted and the conduct of operations continued to cause resentment and “push people to join the insurgency” (Smith, 2015, p.205; see also Chandrasekaran, 2012, p.277). Recognising the plainly counterproductive effects on efforts to win hearts and minds of air strikes and night-raids generating ever-increasing number of civilian casualties, Stanley McChrystal, upon assuming command of ISAF in June 2009, temporarily tightened restrictions on the use of force, releasing a tactical directive that called on ISAF troops to display “more carefully controlled and disciplined employment of force”.¹³ These restrictions, however, were soon lifted by David Petraeus, who, having replaced McChrystal as Commander in July 2010, ordered a sharp increase in the number of SOF night-raids in an attempt to “decapitate” the insurgent leadership before the drawdown of troops began in earnest. As Douglas Porch has persuasively shown, however, these efforts proved politically and strategically deeply damaging for the same reasons that “decapitation operations” have historically proved counterproductive, including for the French against the FLN in Algeria were such operations had “narrowed political options, further radicalised the insurgency...[and] reduced the complex social, economic, racial, religious, and political underpinnings of dialogue, protest and resistance to a target list of bad guys whose elimination would restore societal harmony” (Porch, 2013, p.335). There can be little doubt that American SOF operatives engaged in “terrorist hunting” in Afghanistan - Coll’s apt description of how they understood their mission - had much the same effect, undermining the search for stability and attempts to win hearts and minds among the people.¹⁴ Suspicion and deep distrust of American motives in Afghanistan have persisted to the present day, with surveys conducted in 2019 clearly indicating that civilians view the very “presence of US forces as responsible for creating and perpetuating the conflict” (Jackson, 2019, p.8).

The Assumptions of Stabilisation and COIN

¹³ Subject: Tactical Directive, 6 July 2009, ISAF HQ (Kabul).

¹⁴ For widespread disregard among some US SOF units for the need to verify targets, apply the principles of distinction and proportionality and, generally, to minimise the risk of collateral damage during operations in Afghanistan, see the revealing account by Naylor, 2015, pp. 359-67.

The fundamental, though on closer inspection deeply problematic, assumption that governed the NATO mission in Afghanistan was that aid, development and reconstruction would progressively help stabilize insecure areas and, in so doing, would also serve to strengthen the legitimacy and authority of central government. The PRTs, focusing resources on development projects that would produce “quick wins” – roads, hospitals, wells and local infrastructure projects of different kinds – were the instruments through which the “stabilization effect” would be delivered. This belief, that aid and Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) could help win hearts and minds, also underpinned the COIN strategy explicitly adopted in 2009, and which saw astonishing amounts of money injected into local economies in support of reconstruction projects, in the US case through the so-called Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP). Overall, some \$2.3 billion were spent under the CERP programme in Afghanistan. As SIGAR later observed, the “military came to regard the spending of money itself as a ‘weapons system’” (SIGAR, 2018a, pp.93-95), and between 2009 and 2012 CERP was an integral part of its counterinsurgency operations aimed, in theory at any rate, at “separate[ing] insurgents from the centre of gravity – the people”.¹⁵

The assumption was problematic for at least two, closely connected reasons. In the first instance, it rested, or rather seemed to take for granted, the view that the government of Hamid Karzai enjoyed political legitimacy when, in fact, it was widely and increasingly seen by many as weak, corrupt and abusive. Following the toppling of the Taliban in 2001, Northern Alliance commanders quickly set about consolidating local power bases, using tribal networks and access to central government to seize the state apparatus in local districts and provinces. This in turn enabled them to capture and influence the distribution of aid and development funding. The upshot was to alienate those outside the patronage networks of corrupt and violent strongmen, and to further weaken the legitimacy of an already weak central government. This destabilising dynamic was acknowledged and highlighted by the review of US stabilisation activities in Afghanistan presented by SIGAR in 2018. Especially from 2010 onwards, it concluded, the “flood of money from coalition contracts and assistance, reinforced patronage systems through which the Afghan government served elites at the expense of other citizens” (SIGAR, 2018a,

¹⁵ Subject: Tactical Directive, ISAF HQ, Kabul, 6 July 2009.

p.64). “By fueling corruption and the population’s disillusionment with its government, the coalition undermined the very government it sought to legitimize and drove support for the insurgency” (SIGAR, 2018a, p.64). This helps explain why the aforementioned study of aid and reconstruction in five of Afghanistan’s provinces found so “little concrete evidence ... that aid projects were having more strategic level stabilization or security benefits such as winning populations away from insurgents, legitimizing the government, or reducing levels of violent conflict” (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012, p.3). Indeed, quite the opposite was the case, with “more evidence of the destabilizing rather than the stabilizing effects of aid, especially in insecure areas where the pressures to spend large amounts of money quickly were greatest” (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012, p.3).

The second factor flowed directly from this. NATO proceeded in Afghanistan on the assumption that insecurity and sources of instability emanated from a resurgent Taliban, *rather* than, as was plainly so often the case, a much more complex and multi-layered set of sources, including rapacious government officials, long-standing ethnic, tribal and local grievances, fuelled by an exploitative political economy. This reality also doomed a population-centred counterinsurgency campaign aimed at drawing the population away from insurgents and towards the government. As Karl Eikenberry, American Ambassador to Kabul from 2009 and 2011 and with two tours of military duty to Afghanistan before that, noted:

“‘Protect the population’ makes for a good bumper sticker, but it raises the question: Protect it from whom and against what? It certainly meant protecting the Afghan people from marauding Taliban insurgents. But what about criminal narco-traffickers, venal local police chiefs, or predatory government officials?’” (Eikenberry, 2013).

Although such candour earned him few friends among senior officers committed to COIN during the internal strategy debates, SIGAR’s 2018 lessons learned report powerfully echoed Eikenberry’s misgivings, noting, *inter alia*, that one of many assumptions underlying stabilisation that had “proved problematic” was the idea that “communities were unstable because of the government’s absence, rather than its behaviour when present” (SIGAR, 2108b, p.xi).

Underlying all of this and much of the discussion above was a deeper and more fateful failure: to appreciate the political nature and drivers of violent conflict, that is, the extent to which violence was driving the competition over power and

resources among elites.¹⁶ Recognition of this dynamic should also have encouraged the pursuit, with the same fervour and aggression as the military campaign, of a political strategy aimed at reconciliation and a more inclusive political settlement. The failure to do so began with the total political exclusion of the Taliban from the Bonn conference and the subsequent constitutional process – a fact recognised by Lakhdar Brahimi who, writing in 2008, lamented the failure to “reach out to those members of the Taliban potentially willing to join the political process” in 2001-2 when “it stood to reason that its [Taliban] intentions and strength would have a major bearing on the country’s future” (Brahimi, 2008). While it is true, as Semple notes, that “overt Taliban participation would have been unpalatable to Washington” in 2001, some form of representation or political engagement with the movement, had it been prioritised, would have been possible (Semple, 2019, pp.94-95). The fact that it was not prioritised helps explain Taliban’s subsequent resurgence and later success in harnessing the power of Pashtun nationalism in the struggle against “foreign infidels”.

The Politics and Functioning of the Alliance

The discussion above has focused on why an unprecedented amount of resources and effort on the part of NATO and partner countries, invested at great human cost over a period of thirteen years, produced results so much at variance with the declared objectives of bringing stability to Afghanistan. This question is not, however, precisely the same as asking how NATO actually functioned as an alliance and why the stabilisation mission unfolded in the way it did. To answer that, two additional drivers of institutional response need to be factored into the analysis.

In the first instance, NATO’s growing involvement in Afghanistan from 2003 onwards was linked to the perception, widespread in NATO capitals after 9/11, that the Western Alliance, in the interests of institutional survival, needed to demonstrate its continuing relevance in the face of new and global challenges, “in particular, those posed by terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction” (NATO, 2003, p.26). No longer held together by the unifying perception of a common Cold

¹⁶ A point also strongly emphasised by Fishstein and Wilder (2012), see pp.57-59. Overdue recognition of this fact, born of hard experience, helps explain the emphasis now given in the UK approach to stabilisation on placing “engagement with the politics of conflict at the heart of its stabilisation activity” (UK Stabilisation Unit, 2018, p.7)

War threat and, more recently, with a patchy record of operations in the Balkans to show for, NATO needed to prove its credibility. Assuming a greater role in Afghanistan came to be seen as the test of NATO's transformation in the face of changing security threats and risks that transcended the Euro-Atlantic area. As the then Commander of ISAF, David Richards, put it in July 2006: "the expansion of the ISAF mission into the South and East of Afghanistan in many ways embodies the principles and aims of NATO Transformation" (Richards, 2006, p.10). High-flown summit declarations notwithstanding, deep differences between the US and European allies about how best actually to "manage global security and risk" were difficult to conceal even as NATO decided to operate out-of-area. And, indeed, once deployed out of area those differences were only brought into sharper relief.

Speaking in September 2007, the then NATO Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, suggested that consensus was in fact emerging within the alliance about its future direction. Specifically, he argued, allies "all agree[d] that NATO must be prepared to address security challenges at their source, whenever and wherever they arise" (De Hoop Scheffer, 2007). It was a bold but, even at the time, unconvincing claim. In fact, NATO's fragmented approach and decidedly mixed record in Afghanistan only exposed the shallowness of the consensus on NATO's global role. The Prague "Transformation Summit" itself had been held against the backdrop of deep rifts among allies about US plans for Iraq, and reaching agreement on a strategic vision for NATO did not become any easier in the years that followed. The manifest difficulties of meeting objectives in Afghanistan, with allies increasingly drawn into a full-blown insurgency after 2006, added over time to the sense of that NATO might not, after all, be politically suited and structurally equipped to take on "security challenges at their source, whenever and wherever they arise".

The second internal driver of institutional response was more determinative of NATO's actual performance in Afghanistan, and it is one that underscores the inherent difficulties faced by inter-governmental organisations in developing strategic coherence and direction in areas of policy where such coherence is, indeed, critical to success. This was the range of domestic political pressures and interests held by alliance members, and which framed their contributions to operations in Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, national interests and perspectives on the mission were not *merely* – indeed, in most cases not even primarily – driven by developments and realities in Afghanistan itself. The choices made by NATO countries regarding their actual

deployments to Afghanistan – where to deploy, with what resources and under what caveats – reflected a complex mix of domestic political considerations and constraints, from electoral cycles, differing degrees of casualty aversion, constitutional checks and coalition politics, to financial constraints and growing war weariness among the populace.¹⁷ All of this contributed further, whether directly or indirectly, to strategic incoherence and the sense of fragmentation within the mission.¹⁸

For European allies, even though they might not share US campaign priorities, supporting US efforts, being seen as reliable ally, was often the decisive consideration in decision-making regarding Afghanistan. Such support was motivated in part by sentiments of solidarity, though, plainly, it also reflected more hard-headed calculations of political interest. The official inquiry into Norway’s role in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 concluded that “the first and most important objective throughout was the Alliance dimension: to support the US and safeguard NATO’s continued relevance” (Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan, 2016, p.11). Norway was, plainly, not alone among allies in the way it ordered its hierarchy of policy priorities (Cowper-Coles, 2015).

Concluding Thoughts

One consequence of the inability of the United Nations to meet the high expectations placed on the organisation in the aftermath of the Cold War, was to encourage analysts and governments to look elsewhere for more effective multilateral mechanisms and institutions to meet new post-Cold war security challenges. The search intensified notably following the peacekeeping disasters in Somalia, Rwanda and former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995. At the time, NATO was seen by many as a natural candidate to take on “crisis management and peacekeeping” tasks, given its capabilities, planning and tested decision-making structures. The view that NATO could step in where the “cumbersome, ineffective and under-resourced” UN had failed did, however, tend to ignore two characteristics common to both organisations, which crucially continue to influence their actual functioning. Although

¹⁷ For the Dutch domestic politics of involvement in Afghanistan, see Meulen & Mantas, 2012.

¹⁸ Philip Berry’s study of the UK’s ill-fated decision to assume responsibility for counter-narcotics in Afghanistan in 2002 offers valuable insights into the range of factors that influenced UK decision making towards policy in Afghanistan, including Tony Blair’s perceived need “to take on a role that was commensurate with its international stature”. See Berry, 2003, p.721.

profoundly different in many outwardly respects, they are both inter-governmental and deeply political institutions. As such, the range of interests held by their member states – reflecting different historical perspectives, values and understandings of threats and challenges to international peace and security – will always complicate the search for strategic coherence and unity of effort. Once NATO decided to go “out-of-area” and deploy to Afghanistan, the inter-governmental dynamics and political pressures bearing on decision-making intensified markedly, ensuring the alliance would always remain less than the sum of its parts.

There is a final and still more critical consideration, however, when it comes to the deeper sources of NATO’s failure to “stabilise” Afghanistan. Douglas Porch, in a searing critique of COIN “offered as a grand strategic formula for the future”, has forcefully and persuasively reasserted the central lesson from the history of insurgencies and efforts to combat them: “insurgencies are political events carried out with violence to achieve a goal. And it is on the political and strategic level, not the tactical, that counterinsurgencies are lost or won” (Porch, 2013, p.320). Crucially, he adds, “each insurgency is a contingent event in which doctrine, operations, and tactics must support a viable policy and strategy, not the other way round.” (Porch, 2013, pp.327-8). These insights apply equally to “stabilisation operations” which, as NATO communiqués and officials repeatedly emphasised, were also people-centric and about winning hearts and minds. As with COIN, however, when it comes to determining outcomes in stabilisation, no amount of tactical and doctrinal refinement can, in the final analysis, substitute for a focus on and engagement with strategy and politics. In terms explaining the record of Western-led involvement in Afghanistan, we are back to where we started with Lute’s recognition of the fundamental failure to have “pinned down what it was we were trying to achieve.”

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