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## Contribution Warfare: Sweden's Lessons from the War in Afghanistan

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Jan Ångström

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**ABSTRACT:** Contribution warfare removed the influence of Sweden's politics from the Afghanistan War (2001–14) and created learning conditions favoring case-specific, tactical lessons over the strategic ones. This article applies the concept of “contribution warfare” to analyze the lessons from Sweden's involvement in the war. The inconsistent application of this knowledge resulted largely from the political and operational realities of a small nation contributing to an alliance dominated by a single actor.

While Sweden was participating in the Afghanistan War (2001–14), the country's elite strategists who advise the government on whether to commit troops and resources to combat and who direct the execution of military tasks identified and learned many lessons. Unfortunately the parliament, which decides whether to use force internationally, and the government, which proposes the use of force and controls the armed forces, has not applied the information consistently.

During the mission in Afghanistan, Sweden's armed forces quickly institutionalized a new section in their headquarters to identify and disseminate lessons learned. This effort identified the lack of a clear political aim for participation in the war in Afghanistan as a shortcoming. But Sweden's participation in the United Nations (UN) intervention in Mali, which similarly lacked a clear political aim that could provide strategic guidance for the use of force, provides a telling example of a lesson Sweden identified but did not quite learn. Tactical-level involvement, however, continuously yields reasons to improve and case-specific lessons Sweden's strategists can share throughout the armed forces.

Contemporary research often intertwines innovation and learning and roundly criticizes military organizations for failures in both areas.<sup>1</sup> Explanations of innovation failure in the military vary from bureaucratic inertia, a mismatch of conceptions of military virtue, and the particular nature of innovations. Explanations of learning failure include a lack of

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1. Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, eds., *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001); Richard Lock-Pullan, *US Intervention Policy and Army Innovation: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2006); Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29, no. 5 (2006): 905–34; and Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

processes within the structure of the armed forces that support learning.<sup>2</sup> Explanations of the relationship between organizational culture and outcomes in learning processes are also likely true.<sup>3</sup>

Although culture explains inertia well, in the short term, it is a constant that does not explain inconsistency, especially in learning processes. Moreover, attributing the inconsistency between tactical and strategic lessons from the Afghanistan War to the culture of the Swedish armed forces does not explain the government's decisions. Hence, this article considers the actions of Sweden's strategic elites.

These strategists experienced inconsistencies in the organizational learning of the Swedish armed forces that can be explained by the inherent difficulties smaller partners encounter when making their voices heard in coalitions dominated by a single actor. In this structure, smaller partners cede the establishment of the coalition's political aims to the dominant partner. When that occurs, smaller partners make participation their main task in the coalition's war, thus conflating the ends, means, and ways of strategy. In such instances of "contribution warfare," smaller coalition members do not allow political direction to influence their roles in war.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the proposition that wars are directed from the strategic perspective becomes flawed and strategic lessons can be neglected. If participation is the only aim, then no strategic lessons that can be applied to conventional wars of self defense can be learned.

Thus, the contribution of this article to the literature is twofold. First, it provides an empirical analysis of the lessons-learned processes of the Swedish armed forces beyond the typical examination of international interventions prior to the Afghanistan War. The most common situation, arguably, is the Congo crisis in the early 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Second, rather than focusing on organizational culture—and, as many studies do, on tactical lessons learned—this article focuses on strategic lessons.

## Organizational Learning and Coalition Warfare

The traditional, rationalist model of organizational learning presumes military organizations, through experiential feedback loops, can identify shortcomings, acquire support for proposed solutions, and provide solutions in documents such as doctrine or standard operating

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2. Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Andrew Hill, "Military Innovation and Military Culture," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (2015): 85–98; John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); Robert T. Foley, "Dumb Donkeys or Cunning Foxes? Learning in the British and German Armies during the Great War," *International Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March 2014): 279–98; and Benjamin M. Jensen, *Forging the Sword: Doctrinal Change in the US Army* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

3. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons*.

4. J. H. Vance, "Tactics without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign," in *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives, Context and Concepts*, ed. Allan English et al. (Kingston: Canadian Defense Academy Press, 2005), 280–81.

5. Lars Ericson Wolke, *Lessons Learned? Svenska operativa och taktiska erfarenheter från Kongokrigen, 1960–1964*, Krigsvetenskapliga forskningsrapporter nr. 15 (Stockholm: Försvarshögskolan, 2007).

procedures.<sup>6</sup> This idealized version of organizational learning indicates Sweden's learning process was compromised by inexperience with coalition warfare, including misunderstanding how Sweden would fit into modern coalition warfare.

The reality of contribution warfare effectively removed the influence of Sweden's politics from the war, short-circuited its strategy, and created learning conditions that favored case-specific, tactical lessons over the strategic ones. This reality is important to understanding Sweden's application of lessons learned from the campaigns in Afghanistan.

Following the traditional model of learning, it is possible to differentiate between two critical phases in organizational learning. First, the actor needs to recognize there is something to be learned, that is, there must be a process to identify lessons. Admittedly, strategists occasionally have incentives to be secretive regarding what they learn, therefore, this article may eschew some lessons. But there are also incentives to demonstrate that strategists lead a learning organization, which is, after all, an ideal in much of the current discourse.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the actor needs to act upon such identification to assess appropriately the lesson as learned. Hence, learning involves the use of "new knowledge or understanding gained from experience or study *to adjust* institutional norms, doctrine and procedures in ways designed to minimize previous gaps in performance."<sup>8</sup> Evidence of such learning can be identified by changes to military doctrine, force composition or force behavior, strategic goals, or decision-making processes.

In the processes of identification and learning, there are numerous pitfalls. When identifying something as a lesson, an actor may make flawed inferences about what should be learned from a militarized crisis or a war. As Elizabeth Kier demonstrated, Germany, France, and Britain drew completely different conclusions from the First World War, and arguably, the Germans got it right on the tactical level.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a risk that the actor will fail to identify any lessons at all. The British, for example, failed to identify the dangers of infantry line tactics and cavalry attacks from the American Civil War (1861–65), which resulted in tremendous loss of life during the early phases of the First World War. Moreover, bureaucratic inertia or misperceptions may result in lessons learned too slowly, even if they are rapidly identified—for example, British intelligence did not update its estimate of the Japanese preference for surprise attacks after Pearl Harbor, and thus failed to prepare the defenses of Singapore, which surrendered to Japanese assault a few months after Pearl Harbor.

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6. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons*, 6.

7. Hans Hasselbladh and Karl Ydén, "Why Military Organizations Are Cautious about Learning?" *Armed Forces & Society* (March 17, 2019).

8. Richard Downie, quoted in Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons*, 6 (emphasis added).

9. Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

## An Asymmetrical Learning Environment

Peculiar circumstances created when small actors participate within asymmetrical coalitions dominated by a considerably more powerful military actor might also create inconsistencies between learning and applying lessons learned from warfare. A common assumption in most research on coalition warfare involves bargaining within the coalition. Although this bargaining does not occur on equal terms, all actors are at least equally interested in discussing the same things.<sup>10</sup>

This bargaining process, in turn, should lead to a situation in which resources are used more efficiently and according to the participating states' caveats.<sup>11</sup> But this ideal image of coalition warfare seemingly ignores the reality that actors within coalitions have different resources and different interests at stake. Consequently, small actors within asymmetrical coalitions realize the huge imbalance between their resources and the political aims of the war. Thus, they effectively cede space for political aims to more powerful actors in the coalition. Rather than employing force for political purposes, as the concept of strategy implies, they become force providers.<sup>12</sup>

As the process of ceding political aims to the powerful members of the coalition occurs, small coalition partners neglect the politics of war. The task becomes one of providing, not directing, force. In the absence of political aims, participation becomes both means and ends, thus short-circuiting the ends, means, and ways of strategy. For small partner nations, coalition wars effectively become contributory, rather than wars fought with unity of effort and with clear, jointly agreed upon, political goals. Notably, this scenario held true for member and nonmember states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alike during the Afghanistan War.<sup>13</sup>

This dynamic does not mean instrumentality is completely lost for the small coalition partners. It is, however, severely restricted and compromised. In fact, contribution warfare entails, and is reinforced by, the idea small coalition partners seek to acquire a reputation as a good ally to gain advantages from the dominating coalition partner in other areas.<sup>14</sup> This concept suggests small partners contribute for political

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10. Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002); and Kelly Grieco, "Fighting and Learning in the Great War: Four Lessons in Coalition Warfare," *Parameters* 48, no. 3 (2018): 27–36.

11. Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Stephen M. Saideman and David P. Auerswald, "Comparing Caveats: Understanding the Sources of National Restrictions upon NATO's Mission in Afghanistan," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 67–84.

12. Vance, "Tactics without Strategy," 271–92.

13. Benjamin Schreer, "The Evolution of NATO's Strategy in Afghanistan," in *Pursuing Strategy: NATO Operations from the Gulf War to Gaddafi*, ed. Håkan Edström and Dennis Gyllensporre (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 139–56.

14. Peter Viggo Jakobsen, Jens Ringsmose, and Håkon Lunde Saxi, "Prestige-Seeking Small States: Danish and Norwegian Military Contributions to US-led Operations," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (June 2018): 256–77; and Ida Maria Oma and Magnus Petersson, "Exploring the Role of Dependence in Influencing Small States' Alliance Contributions: A Reputation Mechanism Argument and Assessment," *European Security* 28, no. 1 (2019): 105–26.

purposes, and thus use force strategically. But most notably, the political purpose of appearing to be a good ally does not in any way direct the means or the ways of strategy. Hence, you can be a good ally regardless of what you contribute and regardless of how you operate: force is not directed by a political aim.

In the case of the conflict in Afghanistan, politics did not guide and direct the use of force. As a result, strategic elites of smaller coalition actors failed to learn strategic lessons from that conflict. Even if smaller coalition partners still have strategic choices to make, relinquishing the political aim of the war means operations lack strategic direction. The great variation of military behavior in Afghanistan or Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden proves this point.<sup>15</sup> War, and the continuous learning and adaptation in war, becomes a military rather than political matter. Following the logic of smaller powers in asymmetric coalitions, we can now formulate some empirical expectations.

Above all else, if politics does not guide the use of force, we must expect only comfortable, fitting lessons drawn in ways that conform to a clear distinction between the learned tactical lessons and the unlearned strategic lessons. We can also expect the lessons learned will be case-specific, compartmentalized lessons, because only in cases of asymmetric coalitions and the resulting contribution warfare, do smaller coalition partners lack the political aims that influence the use of force.

Although other tasks for the armed forces of smaller coalition partners may very well be directed with clear political aims, the stakes associated with the lowly ambition of participating in a coalition make recognizing strategic lessons from that participation less important; doing so would suggest the war in question was important. Furthermore, we can expect meta-learning, that is institutionalized improvements in learning processes, only in such cases where the mandate or discretion of the new command or headquarters were limited to case-specific, tactical lessons.

### Lessons Identified and Learned

The Swedish intervention in the Afghanistan War started in January 2002 with a small special forces unit in Kabul. The early entry into the war can be understood as a lesson learned from the Kosovo conflict when Sweden was late deciding to join the Kosovo Force. The delay in joining the NATO peace enforcement mission was a source of embarrassment for the government. Thus, Sweden was determined to avoid a similar delay after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States.<sup>16</sup>

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15. Jan Ångström and Jan Willem Honig, "Regaining Strategy: Small Powers, Strategic Culture, and Escalation in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 5 (2012): 663–87.

16. Lars Wikman, "Don't Mention the War: Forging a Foreign Policy Consensus: The Case of Swedish Military Contributions to Afghanistan" (PhD diss., Department of Government, Uppsala University, forthcoming); and Wilhelm Agrell, *Ett krig här och nu* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2013).

In 2006 when Sweden took control of the provincial reconstruction team in Mazār-e Sharīf in northern Afghanistan, the force consisted of lightly equipped infantry. But there were sizeable reinforcements, and just over 500 soldiers were present at any given time. But among the teams in northern Afghanistan, the Swedish armed forces unit eventually stood out due to its high percentage of combat-ready troops. The increased mechanization occurred as a tactical adaptation to a gradually deteriorating security situation and increasing insurgent activity in the Swedish area of responsibility around 2008–9. This approach resulted from a lesson learned in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1994 when a company of Danish main battle tanks joined a Swedish battalion. “Walk softly but carry a big stick” was one of the lessons the Swedish armed forces learned from the wars in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>17</sup>

On the tactical level, the Swedish armed forces quickly identified risks to units and were equally proficient at finding institutional solutions to the challenges. Consistent with theoretical expectations, these learned lessons have not been applied in the context of conventional wars of self-defense. The lessons have been applied, however, in the context of international missions. Moreover, some tactical lessons learned have been identified as applicable only to operations in Afghanistan.

First, when improvised explosive devices (IEDs) became a serious threat for units in northern Afghanistan, the Swedish armed forces were quick to recognize the dangers and began developing counter-IED practices. In 2009 the armed forces issued a new manual on countering IEDs and increased the protection level of the battalion vehicles. Notably, the manual explicitly refers to Afghanistan or other potential international missions, recognizing the tactics are not valid in the context of defending Sweden against foreign threats.

One report from the Swedish Defense Research Agency observes the time between detecting a particular threat and implementing new tactics and delivering new threat-mitigation equipment was as short as 12 months during the most intense and violent phase of the war.<sup>18</sup> Considering the rotation schedule required selecting and training soldiers more than a year prior to deployment, the 12-month development of a new capability is impressive.

Second, the armed forces introduced military observation team (MOT) Juliette, an all-female group of soldiers and officers created for intelligence purposes. This initiative arose from intelligence gathering being recognized as a critical activity in the Afghanistan War. When Colonel Bengt Sandstrom returned to Sweden from the conflict, he began to experiment with different solutions. After being selected to become the commander of the entire Swedish contingent, he built a consensus within the armed forces to improve intelligence by targeting Afghan women. Access to this population was easier for female than

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17. Ulf Henriesson, *När Balkan brann!* (Stockholm: Svenskt Militärhistoriskt Bibliotek, 2013).

18. Henric Roosberg and Anna Weibull, *Försvarsmakten efter ISAF: Lärdomar och påverkan på militärstrategisk nivå*, FOI-R--3914--SE (Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2014), 60.

male soldiers and MOT Juliette was launched in 2008, four years after its inception.<sup>19</sup>

A crucial aspect for the argument advanced here is the lessons regarding quick applications of forces and innovation were not applied to defending Sweden. Consistent with contribution warfare, what happened in Afghanistan stayed in Afghanistan. At home, the major reorganization of the armed forces in 2009–10 followed different logic that was further accentuated by the Russian interventions in Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than incorporating the effective counterinsurgency lessons from Afghanistan, the dominating tactical doctrine for Sweden's defense was based upon maneuver warfare with mechanized units. Case-specific lessons were stovepiped, ensuring neither all-female squads, nor counter-IED lessons were included in exercises or planning for national defense. Since the introduction of gender in the armed forces was couched in terms of intelligence purposes and efficiency in peace support operations, applicability to the defense of Sweden appeared irrelevant, despite a recent surge in inequality arguments within the armed forces.<sup>21</sup>

Third, at a more general, procedural level, when the security situation deteriorated in Afghanistan, the armed forces were relatively quick to institutionalize an organizational body to deal with lessons learned. During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the army command provisionally organized a lessons-learned function to provide incoming commanders and units with updated information. But this organization had no standard operating procedures and no formal role in the training processes or planning procedures before the missions. This involvement changed after a 2007 review that identified the provisional nature of lessons learned as a problem.

In 2010 the armed forces institutionalized the lessons-learned function as a section at the headquarters that became a node in the planning process.<sup>22</sup> In addition to requesting other reports from Afghanistan, the lessons-learned section ordered highly structured, reports from the units in Mazār-e Sharīf. These reports were then reworked and disseminated widely within the armed forces (rather than only to the incoming commander). Consequently, the lessons-learned section initiated and maintained a continuous tactical discussion

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19. Magnus Johnsson, "MOTs, Juliette and Omelettes: Temporary, Tactical Adaptations at the Postmodern, Inoperable Force Awaits the Anticipated Operation?," in *The Swedish Presence in Afghanistan: Security and Defence Transformation*, ed. Arita Holmberg and Jan Hallenberg (London: Routledge, 2017), 90–91.

20. Olof Kronvall and Magnus Petersson, *Svensk säkerhetspolitik i supermakternas skugga 1945–1991* (Stockholm: Santérus, 2005); and Håkan Edström and Dennis Gyllensporre, *Svensk försvarsdoktrin efter kalla kriget: Förlorade decennier eller vunna insikter?* (Stockholm: Santérus, 2014).

21. Robert Egnell, Petter Hojem, and Hannes Berts, *Gender, Military Effectiveness, and Organizational Change: The Swedish Model* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

22. Jan Frelin and Ann Ödlund, *Ett lärande försvar? Förutsättningar för Försvarsmaktens erfarenhetshandtering*, FOI-R--3420--SE (Stockholm: Försvarsanalys, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2012); and *Försvarsmakten, Erfarenheter Afghanistan* (Stockholm: Försvarsmakten, 2016).



throughout the armed forces. The section was also given an uncommonly open mandate to improve its own procedures.

Noteworthy, however, the mandate of the lessons-learned section was restricted to tactical improvements for international missions. Consequently, this stovepiping ensured tactical, technical, and conceptual lessons learned from Afghanistan would not enter the national domain and be treated as general lessons learned at the land warfare school in Skövde in southern Sweden, which develops the army's defensive tactics. Then Swedish Army Chief of Staff Major General Anders Brännström stated it would be a problem if lessons from Afghanistan were allowed to dominate army tactics in the years to come: "Battle experience from Afghanistan is not valid elsewhere."<sup>23</sup> He concluded, "It is not the same kind of combat needed to solve the main task: the defense of the nation."<sup>24</sup>

While the chief of staff may have had a point regarding specific tactics—in a war for national survival, Sweden would most likely not possess air superiority—this was not the first time Swedish tactics in international conflicts were ignored on the home front. Since veterans of the Congo crisis in the early 1960s were confronted with the same arguments upon returning to their regiments, something other than pure military rationalism seems to be at work here.

Fourth, the armed forces learned relatively quickly that they needed to become internationalized in a way the Cold War neutrality policy never had allowed. Over the course of the Afghanistan War, the number of Swedish officers embedded in international staffs and headquarters increased substantially. In 2001 there were only five Swedish officers in NATO staffs and headquarters. This presence quickly increased and peaked in 2011, reaching nearly 90 Swedish officers in NATO.<sup>25</sup> As the Afghanistan War unwound, this number quickly decreased to less than 30 officers in 2015.

Under the logic of contribution warfare, embedding officers can be expected. Sweden did not have input into the political aims of the intervention, which were determined by the United States. Therefore, it is to be expected Sweden would embed as many officers as possible at lower levels of war in order to be efficient and influential as a coalition partner. But the decreasing number of embedded officers as the war ended suggests Sweden understood the need for internationalization as strictly connected to the conflict.

Oddly, these lessons seem to be understood as case-specific, despite Sweden officially declaring it cannot defend itself alone. Since 2009, the government has maintained solidarity: "Sweden will not remain passive if another EU Member State or Nordic country suffers a disaster or an

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23. Quoted in Roosberg and Weibull, *Försvarsmakten efter ISAF*, 76.

24. Quoted in Roosberg and Weibull, *Försvarsmakten efter ISAF*, 75.

25. Jan Ångström and Erik Noreen, "Swedish Strategy and the Afghan Experience: From Neutrality to Ambiguity," in *The Swedish Presence in Afghanistan: Security and Defence Transformation*, ed. Arita Holmberg and Jan Hallenberg (London: Routledge, 2017), 44.

attack. We expect these countries to act in the same way if Sweden is affected. We must therefore be able both to give and receive support, civilian as well as military.”<sup>26</sup>

Fifth, the government, after much deliberation, instituted a Veterans Day in 2010 and a veterans policy in 2015.<sup>27</sup> This lesson was slow in coming considering Sweden has been providing forces to UN missions, occasionally violent ones, since 1956. Arguably, the veterans issue was delayed due to entanglement with vested bureaucratic interests. Specifically, the armed forces and the government struggled with whether or not officers were the only veterans or if soldiers ought to be included too.

Despite the definitional problems, perhaps the greatest challenge to the idea of veterans was its inherent logic. Being a veteran implies an individual has experienced war, at great personal cost. This concept was incompatible with the idea of Sweden being at peace for 200 years. This state of mind also fed the logic of contribution warfare. Since the war in Afghanistan was not motivated by Swedish political interests and the military effort was not directed by Sweden’s political aims, it became difficult to embrace the idea that those who served in Afghanistan were veterans.

Finally, as Magnus Johnsson has demonstrated, three Swedish colonels took individual initiatives to institutionalize tactical lessons very informally between the component commanders. The *Troika*, as it became known, was in charge of the previous, present, and future Swedish force in Afghanistan. The group conceived the transition from mentoring and stability operations to counterinsurgency operations as a direct response to the increasingly hostile environment in northern Afghanistan in early 2009.<sup>28</sup> Hence, through the informal structure of the *Troika*, the commanders continuously updated one another, utilizing the individuals’ experiences, which were also case-specific and tactical.

## Lessons Identified and Not Learned

As we have seen, under the logic of contribution warfare, lessons learned from the Afghanistan War are necessarily case-specific, not relevant for the defense of Sweden, and consequently stovepiped. Tactical lessons identified but not learned also confirm institutionalized processes to apply lessons learned have a clear, but limited capability to influence army tactics in general. By examining the nature of the lessons

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26. Margot Wallström, “Statement of Government Policy,” Government of Sweden, February 13, 2019, 5.

27. Ralph Sundberg, “A Veteran at Last: The Afghan Experience and Swedish Veterans Policy,” in *The Swedish Presence in Afghanistan: Security and Defence Transformation*, ed. Arita Holmberg and Jan Hallenberg (London: Routledge, 2017), 160–81.

28. Magnus Johnsson, “Strategic Colonels: The Discretion of Swedish Force Commanders in Afghanistan 2006–2013” (PhD diss., Department of Government, Uppsala University, 2017), 211–19.

identified but not learned, we can see whether these can be accounted for by the particularities of contribution warfare.

At the strategic level, the ambivalence to learning from the Afghanistan War becomes quite clear. In particular, two biases derived from contribution warfare led Swedish strategic elites to learn effectively only the comfortable lessons, while merely identifying others: understanding of the problem scopes the learning as well as the legitimacy and appeal of solutions. First, learning occurs within the boundaries set by what is understood as the problem. This condition clearly aligns with contribution warfare acting as a screen through which world events are filtered.

In the Swedish case, tactical issues are understood as problems that can be solved. Strategic issues, however, are not understood to be major problems since strategy, the pursuit of political ends with military means, was never allowed to dictate the military effort. Moreover, the vague political aim of appearing to be a good ally does not provide clear political direction for the employment of military force.

A series of studies convey Sweden understands itself as an apolitical actor in international interventions.<sup>29</sup> When there is no political end other than participation—or too many, and sometimes even conflicting, political ends—devising a strategy becomes highly problematic.<sup>30</sup> In practice, strategy exists. But in the case of Afghanistan, the government and generals at the armed forces headquarters effectively withdrew from the process and left the conduct of the war to the colonels.<sup>31</sup> It was, in short, a decision made by a colonel whether or not “support the Afghan National Army (ANA)” ought to be translated into sitting at the camp waiting for the ANA to call for help or going out to do ANA’s work for them.<sup>32</sup>

Hence, force was not directed toward a political aim, but toward participation. Despite the fact that the government’s own major review of Afghanistan identified the lack of political aim as a problem—hence, the lesson is identified—Swedish forces in the later Mali operation had no concrete political goals to relate to other than simply repeating the UN mandate.<sup>33</sup> Again, consistent with contribution warfare, to deploy forces is more important than to employ force.

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29. Ångström and Honig, “Regaining Strategy.”

30. Wikman, “Don’t Mention”; and Ångström and Noreen, “Swedish Strategy,” 31–54.

31. Jan Willem Honig and Ilmari Käihkö, “Challenges of Command: The Rise of the ‘Strategic Colonel,’” in *Leadership in Challenging Situations*, ed. Harald Haas, Franz Kernic, and Andrea Plaschke (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 89–108; Jan Willem Honig and Ilmari Käihkö, “The Likely Lads: The Joint Swedish-Finnish PRT in Mazar-e Sharif,” in *From Venus to Mars? Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the European Military Experience in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, ed. Bernhard Chiari et al. (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag KG, 2014), 209–20; and Johnsson, “Strategic Colonels.”

32. Johnsson, “Strategic Colonels.”

33. Tone Tingsgård, Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014: *Betänkande av Afghanistanutredningen*, Statens Offentliga Utredningar (SOU) 2017:16 (Stockholm: Wolters Kluwers, 2017); and Svenskt deltagande i Förenta nationernas stabiliseringsinsats i Mali, Regeringens proposition 2018/19:69, 14–16.

Since clear political aims were not involved and political guidance from the capital was absent, save the direction to participate, there were no strategic lessons to be learned: the Afghanistan War was never a political problem for small coalition partners. Ignoring strategy, however, has several negative consequences. Avoiding to think of the intervention as inherently strategic, that is, denying the action ought to result in a desired end state, creates a situation in which the effects on Afghan society are irrelevant. Thus, the important ends are to participate and to bring Swedish forces home, preferably unscathed.

Also, leaving strategy to be shaped by midlevel military officers implies a potential democratic deficit.<sup>34</sup> It slowly dissolves the coherence of the strategic narrative of the military intervention. In these cases, if the government cannot clearly communicate why soldiers are put in harm's way far from Sweden, it gradually undermines support for the intervention. In Sweden, for example, the support for international military interventions among the general population dropped from nearly 80 percent in the mid-1990s to just over 50 percent by the end of the war in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup>

The absence of politics directing the use of force also means there is hardly any reason for strong rivalries among the political parties in parliament.<sup>36</sup> Consensus implies there is no danger of losing future political debates. Hence, rather than becoming politically active on the subject of Swedish participation in coalition wars, Swedish strategic elites learned to be inactive. Donald Rumsfeld learned from the initial stages of the Afghanistan War that toppling a government only required high-altitude, precision-guided bombing in combination with Special Forces. This rationale was then used as an argument for troop-size reductions in Iraq War planning. Meanwhile, in Sweden, elites learned to avoid political ends.

Second, contribution warfare narrows what actors understand as legitimate solutions to problems and, by implication, suggests which solutions ought to be pursued. In the case of Sweden in Afghanistan, this situation meant there was no reason for self-criticism to improve strategic decision making. The government review did suggest a special decision-making body be installed within the government to coordinate strategy and avoid suboptimal outcomes such as stovepiping development aid and the military effort in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

Such a national strategic council would be a completely new thing in Sweden. Yet since the proposal in 2017, there have been no attempts to create one. Again, the absence of political aims directing the use of force in contribution warfare can explain the lack of industry in trying

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34. Johnsson, "Strategic Colonels," 245–46.

35. Erik Noreen and Jan Ångström, "A Catch-All Strategic Narrative: Target Audiences and Swedish Troop Contributions to ISAF in Afghanistan," in *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, ed. Beatrice de Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose (London: Routledge, 2015), 295.

36. Wikman, "Don't Mention."

37. Tingsgård, *Sverige i Afghanistan*, 201–4.

to improve strategic decision making. Since strategic elites did not direct warfare in Afghanistan, they did not have any incentives to create rival decision-making bodies either.

### **Conclusion**

Most case-specific, tactical lessons from Sweden's intervention in Afghanistan were quickly identified and learned, but general and strategic lessons were equally quickly ignored. Within the context of contribution warfare, this inconsistency can be best explained by Swedish strategic elites being uneasy and inexperienced with the demands of coalition warfare.

Sweden's armed forces have been quite successful in learning tactical lessons. But these lessons have been curtailed and limited to operations in Afghanistan. Congruent with the logic of contribution warfare, tactical lessons have not been transmitted to the national domain to influence doctrine and tactics for the defense of Sweden. Meanwhile, strategic lessons were identified, but never learned—for example, even though the official governmental reviews after Afghanistan concluded Swedish international interventions should have political ends that effectively direct the use of force, the ongoing mission in Mali still lacks one. But the aims set out in the UN Security Council Resolution have been repeated.

It is important to recognize the logic of contribution warfare is not limited to lessons-learned processes. It also influences the planning for and conduct of wars. It is not limited to non-NATO members partaking in NATO-led operations, although problems for small, non-NATO members such as Sweden may be accentuated in comparison with Norway or Denmark. It should also be pointed out the structural condition of asymmetric coalitions is probably not the only reason for the emergence of contribution warfare.

The idea feeds into, and appears rational for, increasingly bureaucratic military organizations as well as political leaders who are more worried about appearances than results. Since only the United States has the capability to launch major military interventions in the foreseeable future, contribution warfare is likely here to stay.