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## Learning Lessons from Afghanistan: Two Imperatives

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Hew Strachan

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**O**n October 7, 2001, the United States began bombing Taliban communications and air defenses (such as they were). So began a commitment to the security of Afghanistan that continues to this day. Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan was designed to use only a light footprint, leaving the bulk of the fighting to the mujahideen whom the United States had supported in their fight against the Soviet Union. In March 2002, after its quick success in toppling the Taliban, Washington turned its attention to Saddam Hussein. Between 2002 and 2009, Iraq, not Afghanistan, dominated American counsels. Here too initial operations were rewarded with quick success, largely characterized in terms of state-of-the-art conventional warfare. Signs of guerrilla warfare and irregular resistance were dismissed, and it was often junior commanders who detected the changing character of the war they were fighting. The standard assumption of the late 1980s, shaped by the Cold War, persisted: an army that prepared for operations at scale against a peer enemy could adjust to “low-intensity war” against an enemy lacking in discipline, organization, and sophisticated weaponry.

By 2005, it had become clear the received wisdom was not working, and that its hold was preventing soldiers from fully understanding the sort of conflict in which they were engaged. The experience of Iraq prompted the US Army to reshape its doctrine for what it increasingly described as counterinsurgency campaigns. The Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth began work in earnest in October 2005, when Lieutenant General David Petraeus took over its command after his second tour in Iraq. Petraeus turned to his West Point classmate, Conrad Crane, to oversee the development of new doctrine, or in some respects the recovery of old but neglected knowledge. Crane drew on inputs from both theaters of war, Afghanistan as well as Iraq, and on the US Marine Corps as well as the Army. Field Manual 3-24, also branded as Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, was ready by December 2006.

In 2007, Petraeus was back in Iraq, masterminding the surge. A war that the United States had been losing was turned around, at least for the time being. The success in Iraq in 2007 made counterinsurgency the most obvious lesson learned from the post-9/11 wars, and when the US Army returned its attention to a now much more dangerous situation in Afghanistan it took the message of counterinsurgency with it. Field Manual 3-24 was itself commercially published, and a raft of books and articles on irregular war both preceded and followed its appearance.

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In the United Kingdom, the epiphany was both slower and less dramatic. Britain thought it knew about “small wars” from its experience of imperial conquest and colonial settlement, and about counterinsurgency specifically from the “success” of its post-1945 withdrawal from the empire. That phase of its history ended, comparatively ignominiously, in the withdrawal from Aden in 1967 and with the decision to close British bases east of Suez in the following year. The 30-year conflict in Northern Ireland, which followed almost immediately, began badly: counterinsurgency principles applied in a colonial context had to be rethought for use closer to home. But the lessons of Northern Ireland proved a false friend when its units deployed to Iraq in 2003. Many officers had only seen the tail end of a campaign, which by then they were winning: conditions were much more favorable in the 1990s than they had been in the 1970s, and by then the army had the upper hand in intelligence, tactical know-how, and public support.

Basra was in every way a tougher operating environment than Belfast, the troop-to-population ratio was much less favorable, and language, religion, and culture all presented unfamiliar challenges. By 2006, humiliated in southern Iraq and confronting fierce fighting in southern Afghanistan, the British Army began to realize the need to revisit its background in counterinsurgency. However, it did so reluctantly and late. Only in October 2009 did the British Army publish an updated doctrine, and in the same year, the British Ministry of Defense produced Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, on stabilization operations.

During the crisis years of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, especially 2006 to 2009, the soldiers of American and British armies, as they convened conferences and workshops that addressed these themes, referred with regret to their own absentmindedness and that of their predecessors. After the Vietnam War, the US Army had opted not to learn its lessons, but to treat the experience as an aberration, or so the prevailing narrative ran. Its doctrinal response, Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, particularly in its 1982 edition, focused on the conventional level of war, and prepared American soldiers to defend the inner German border against the Soviet Union. The British narrative was not dissimilar. Those units who fought in Northern Ireland were “double-hatted,” their principal strategic function being, as for their American allies, the defense of western Europe against the Soviet Union.

In both cases, preparation for war against a peer-competitor took priority over counterinsurgency. Economies of scale demanded flexibility. That seemed to be a reasonable expectation of two armies that were now regular and professional. If they could do the first, and implicitly harder, task, then—so the wisdom ran—they would be capable of dropping down a rung, to do the “lesser” work of small unit patrols, hearts and minds, and stabilization. The slowness of both armies’ adaptation after 2002, five years for the Americans and seven for the British (longer than either of their individual experiences of the Second World War), suggested those assumptions were wrong. An army is a big beast, its training protocols are reinforced by its hierarchy, and

it struggles to adapt quickly from one sort of war to another. For those thinking about lessons learned from 2005 to 2009, the conclusion was simple: do not do after these wars what they had done in the 1980s. They mocked the naivety of their predecessors of a quarter of a century before for their readiness to see war in only one dimension. Too much recent real war had proved “asymmetric” for conventional war to be the dominant paradigm, however much the latter might shape doctrine and theory. Experience was a more profound lesson, and their generation, that of the veterans of Al Anbar or Helmand, could not possibly forget that as those of the 1980s had done.

But many of them have forgotten, or at least they have to an extent that would surprise those reflecting on these issues a decade ago. In 2019, the debate is once again dominated by peer-competitors (China for the United States and Russia for its European allies), counterinsurgency has dropped out of fashion, and some well-informed commentators have persuasively argued that its principles have been overstated. A military tendency to look not back, but forward, to look to the next war not to be captured by the last, has been reinforced by policy.

In 2009, Barack Obama embraced a strategy that used airpower (including drones) in conjunction with special forces and local proxies, rather than “boots on the ground.” Armies conducting the counterinsurgency campaigns of the early twenty-first century incurred casualties, which made overseas interventions unpopular. So democratically accountable politicians have sought other ways to wage war. The new strategy, not unlike the old, has contained the problem for the time being. But it is too early to say whether it will produce lasting results. Soldiers argue presence on the ground, and in sufficient numbers to have effect, is the only way to implement a satisfactory and stable outcome. Moreover, the employment of drones and proxies raises legal, ethical, and political issues, which may not in the long run be compatible with the norms of democratic states.

So the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and America’s wider circle of allies are at an inflection point where it ill behoves them not to reflect on the lessons from Afghanistan and to incorporate them into their thinking for the future. This does not mean that wars like those fought in Afghanistan are necessarily a model for what will happen again. History does not repeat itself, but it certainly deepens understanding. For a start, allied forces are still in the country, although most of their publics seem unaware of the fact. Moreover, it would be rash to suggest that NATO is not going to find itself fighting another counterinsurgency in, say, the next 25 years. Lessons may be negative (that of Vietnam: “we certainly will not do that again”) as much as positive (that of Malaya: “this is a model for how to win the support of the local population”). The absence of debate and discussion is the worst possible outcome. It can leave preconceptions unchallenged, and it throws away the wisdom garnered through hard work, suffering and loss.

Neither the United States nor Britain has gone through the process of learning lessons from Afghanistan on a scale commensurate with the effort put into the war. In Washington, the political will has not been there, and in the Army, the views on counterinsurgency and its principal exponents have become too politicized, and in some respects personalized, for an avowedly apolitical army to collate them effectively. Thanks not least to the persistence of Raymond T. Odierno when, as the Army's Chief of Staff, a history of the US Army's role in the Iraq War was initiated. It provides a potentially rich foundation for the learning of lessons, but whether it will do so is yet to be seen. A similar project on Afghanistan will require a similar drive from the top.

Britain too has paid more attention to Iraq than Afghanistan. The British Army sidelined two internal studies on Iraq, before Prime Minister Gordon Brown, commissioned a government enquiry on the war in 2009. Since the Chilcot report was published in 2016, the Ministry of Defense has tackled the lessons to be learned from with commendable seriousness. However, the delays and costs incurred by the inquiry have removed any impetus for something similar on Afghanistan. Unlike the United States, Britain has lost the appetite for official histories: there is no enthusiasm for one on Operation Banner, the campaign in Northern Ireland, perhaps itself a reason for British officers applying the wrong lessons in Iraq. Nor has the Army revisited its counterinsurgency doctrine since 2009, thus forfeiting the opportunity to embody the lessons from the severe fighting in Helmand in 2009–13. The revision of Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 on stabilization operations, begun in the immediate aftermath of Libya in 2011, has floundered.

The United States and Britain possess the two NATO armies with the clearest sense of continuity in counterinsurgency operations, however discontinuous their attention to the subject has been in practice. Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, was an alliance undertaking. Common approaches to the conduct of operations, as well as agreed and standardized procedures, are the bedrock of NATO cohesion. Its members' armed forces speak to each other in terms that they all understand. Policy differences provide volatility, but they are offset by military commonalities.

Counterinsurgency doctrine is a major exception to this generalization: NATO collectively does not have one, nor do most of its individual members. For the states of continental Europe, irregular and guerrilla warfare is linked historically to major war in ways that do not apply to Britain and the United States, who are both secured by the natural defenses provided by the sea. Such forms of war were the only option left to the states that were overrun and then occupied by Germany between 1940 and 1942. And the same might have applied during the Cold War if the Soviet Union had launched an invasion. Partisan war was an option to be exercised at home because conventional war was no longer possible: it was politically destabilizing and its conduct was ruthless. It bore little relationship to the idealized if somewhat fanciful ideas of counterinsurgency in the Anglophone world, applied at a distance

in wars that could be characterized as “limited.” For America’s and Britain’s partners in Afghanistan, overseas operations were associated with peacekeeping and policing, and were conducted under a resolution of the United Nations Security Council.

As the United States and the United Kingdom reembraced and rethought their counterinsurgency doctrines, they opened a divide between themselves and their European allies, which they struggled to comprehend. They could not understand why the Germans, Norwegians, or Poles did not also develop and adopt comparable solutions. In particular, they failed to understand how the other NATO member with a clear inheritance in counterinsurgency, France, interpreted the war in Afghanistan. France, like Britain, had conquered and pacified an empire in the nineteenth century, and then had lost it after 1945—in fighting that proved far more politically divisive and existentially defining than had Britain’s campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, or Cyprus. Successful counterinsurgency itself carried revolutionary implications for France: it had done so after 1792 and 1870 within metropolitan France, and it redivided the “nation in arms,” shattered in 1940, in Indochina and Algeria in the 1950s. Americans understood this experience through an atypical lens, David Galula’s report for RAND, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–58*, which became a core text at the operational level but was not set in its political context: the end of France’s Fourth Republic and the establishment of the Fifth Republic.

Galula was not translated into French until 2009. Vincent Desportes, then responsible for defense doctrine, set out to link France’s contribution to NATO in Afghanistan by drawing the attention of its soldiers to their colonial inheritance, citing the examples of Joseph-Simon Gallieni in Indochina and Madagascar and Louis-Hubert-Gonzalve Lyautey in Morocco. In reality, he might have done better to go even further back, to Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, duke d’Isly in Algeria. The pattern of colonial conquest that he promoted put battle at its heart (as—it is worth pointing out—did Charles Callwell in his textbook, *Small Wars*, adopted by the British Army in 1896), not winning over the local population by “hearts and minds.” Afghanistan was France’s first major NATO operation following its decision to rejoin the military alliance, and so it saw it less as a commitment to a “small war” than as its reentry to the big league. As subsequent operations in Mali and elsewhere have shown, students of the American and British armies should not see France’s approach to counterinsurgency and irregular war as more of the same or as corroboration of what they do.

Learning lessons from Afghanistan, therefore, has two imperatives. The first is that of the needs of coalition warfare. At its peak over 50 states contributed to the war in Afghanistan, making this probably the most impressive alliance effort in military history. That achievement has been overshadowed by the tokenism of many of the contingents sent into theater, by national caveats surrounding their employment, and by the part played by domestic politics in the timing of their withdrawals. The focus on these dysfunctions has been reinforced

by Washington's constant reprimand, voiced as much by the Obama administration as by that of Donald Trump, that NATO member states are failing to contribute two percent of their gross domestic product to defense. The United States was reluctant to accept the support of its allies in the direct aftermath of 9/11, when NATO immediately invoked Article 5, and has been reluctant to give thanks for their readiness to serve outside NATO's core area, in a country in which none of them had a direct national interest, in war waged on behalf of the United States. If the United States anticipates fighting future wars with allies, it needs NATO collectively as well as individually to draw lessons from Afghanistan, and to do so in ways that reflect the full range of what the member states experienced.

The second imperative follows from the first. This search for lessons must not just be in pursuit of commonalities. Such an exercise is in danger of looking at and recognizing the experience of others through the prism of the United States, and so ignoring differences—like that of France—which may themselves be instructive. Just because the US Army may deem something not to have been “invented here” does not mean that it is therefore unworthy of consideration. After all, that too-ready dismissal of others' experiences and of their possible applicability was a major source of exactly the problems the US Army confronted from 2002 to 2004.

The challenge inherent in that statement should not be exaggerated. The overwhelming conclusion in the forum that follows is the power the United States exercises over its allies.