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AFGHANISTAN'S LESSONS: PART I

NATO's Lessons

Seth A. Johnston

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ABSTRACT: This article identifies the importance of NATO's role as a facilitator of multinational collaboration. The Alliance's established processes and standards worked well, enabling countries whose available resources might otherwise prohibit their participation to fully-contribute to the mission in Afghanistan.

Today's North Atlantic Treaty Organization is no Cold War alliance. Few developments illustrate NATO's capacity for adaptation more than its 21st century role in Afghanistan.¹ NATO allies invoked the collective defense provision—Article 5—of its founding treaty for the first and only time just one day after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.² Few present at the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 could have imagined it would be invoked by European countries and Canada seeking to support the United States or that the Alliance's largest and longest military operation would occur in central Asia. Fewer still might have predicted NATO allies would agree to the mission so soon after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a crisis the then US ambassador to NATO described as a “near death experience” for the Alliance.³ Yet NATO assumed control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003 and has remained in Afghanistan for the better part of two decades.

As the United States has begun negotiating a political settlement to the Afghanistan conflict with a view to the eventual withdrawal of international forces there, an assessment from the overall NATO perspective will complement the national initiatives.⁴ This effort will also support ongoing efforts to reassess NATO's priorities in the face of other security challenges.⁵

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1 Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 1–15, 40–42.

2 The September 12, 2001 decision was contingent on evidence that the attacks originated from a foreign source. When US officials confirmed this condition to the North Atlantic Council early in October 2001, invocation of Article 5 became official. “Statement by the North Atlantic Council,” Press Release (2001) 124, NATO, September 12, 2001; and George Robertson, “Statement by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson,” NATO, October 2, 2001.

3 R. Nicholas Burns, “NATO Has Adapted: An Alliance with a New Mission,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2003.

4 Afghanistan: Lessons Learned (conference, University of St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland, February 11–13, 2019).

5 For a recent official summary of NATO's agenda on current challenges, see “Brussels Summit Declaration,” Press Release (2018) 074, NATO, July 11, 2018.

Although NATO has undertaken formal studies of its activities in Afghanistan, recent scholarship by Heidi Hardt, Jörg Noll, and Sebastiaan Rietjens cast doubt on the efficacy of formal lessons learned processes in international organizations generally and in NATO specifically.⁶ This article offers an external and an unofficial assessment of the Alliance's efforts and provides initial suppositions. In sum, NATO's impact in Afghanistan may not have been enough to mitigate national shortcomings or to achieve victory on its own, but it was significant and positive. The Alliance's adaptability and highly institutionalized character are at the root of these contributions.

Moreover, the mission in Afghanistan affected NATO in ways that promoted allied political cohesion, organizational effectiveness, and military interoperability. The chief implications of these findings are that while national political leadership and strategy formulation remain paramount in war, NATO remains a proven and effective instrument of organizing and implementing coordinated multinational efforts. The most important lesson learned from NATO in Afghanistan may therefore be about NATO's more general value to the United States and other members.

NATO: Alliance and International Organization

In contrast to national assessments, this analysis focuses on the formal institutions of the Alliance. NATO is unique among alliances in that it is not only a treaty-based agreement among member states, but also an international organization—and a highly institutionalized one at that. Since its early years, NATO has been comprised of a permanently staffed formal political headquarters supported by a network of military and civilian organizations. Particularly noteworthy is NATO's integrated joint multinational military structure, a unique innovation without equivalent among other alliances or international organizations.

This integration, capped by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Belgium, extends through various echelons and included the ISAF headquarters and other NATO structures in Afghanistan.⁷ Thus, for this article, "NATO" refers to the various formal institutions and not the group of allied countries. Likewise, the focus is on the collaborative conduct and not that of the United States, other allies or partners, the government of Afghanistan, or other regional actors. Nor does the article address the efficacy of counter-insurgency warfare.

International relations theory would emphasize the formal institutions of NATO have very weak independent power and agency.

6 Heidi Hardt, *NATO's Lessons in Crisis: Institutional Memory in International Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jörg Noll and Sebastiaan Rietjens, "Learning the Hard Way: NATO's Civil-Military Cooperation," in *Theorising NATO: New Perspectives on the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. Mark Webber and Adrian Hyde-Price (New York: Routledge, 2016).

7 NATO's integrated military command structure technically boasts two strategic commands of officially equivalent status: Allied Command Transformation, based in Norfolk, Virginia, and Allied Command Operations at SHAPE.

But although NATO consists of such formal institutions, the Alliance remains an alliance among states. All decisions at NATO Headquarters are taken by consensus among member states (which will soon number 30). Politics among those countries happens, and the relative influence of individual member states is closely associated with their power. NATO's institutions matter chiefly because of how they facilitate and structure the relations among the states. Like any other international organization, states may derive value from such institutions because they provide benefits such as establishing predictable structures and routines for decision-making; increasing information sharing; improving efficiency and reducing transaction costs; and defining roles, status, and identity. The most important questions for NATO in the context of assessing its role in the Afghanistan conflict is whether and how well it has performed these functions.

An important theme in the assessment of NATO's role in Afghanistan regards the reciprocal impact of the Alliance and Afghanistan, as Alexander Mattelaer and others have noted.⁸ Thus, one kind of lesson relates to NATO's effect on the mission and the implications for future coalition expeditionary warfare; another, the future of the transatlantic Alliance.

NATO and Strategy in Afghanistan

The causes of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan appear logical: an international terrorist group based in Afghanistan attacked the United States. Citing the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO allies declared the attack on the United States as an attack on all allies. The participation of allied countries or the whole-of-NATO in a US-led response in Afghanistan seemed straightforward. How NATO became involved in Afghanistan was in fact murkier. The United States initially preferred not to involve established alliances after 9/11. As then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld memorably explained, "The mission determines the coalition, and the coalition must not determine the mission."⁹ When the United Nations authorized the ISAF in 2001, with a limited functional and geographic mandate around Kabul, the lead countries of the ISAF coincidentally tended to be members of NATO.

In planning for an ISAF rotation in 2003, the lead nations realized they could achieve some capability enhancements and cost savings by applying NATO resources. Still struggling meaningfully to demonstrate the consequences of its post-9/11 invocation of Article 5 and searching for a way to reconcile allies divided over the Iraq War, NATO saw an opportunity: supporting or participating in the Afghanistan campaign could reinvigorate the Alliance; encourage rapprochement between the United States and those (mostly western European) allies opposed to

⁸ Alexander Mattelaer, "How Afghanistan Has Strengthened NATO," *Survival* 53, no. 6 (December 2011–January 2012): 127–40; and senior NATO official 2, interview by the author, February 8, 2019.

⁹ Donald Rumsfeld, "Text: Rumsfeld's Pentagon News Conference," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2001.

the Iraq War; and offer others (mostly newer eastern European allies, NATO aspirants, and global partners) an occasion to cultivate even more positive relations with the United States and NATO.¹⁰

For its part, the United States warmed to the idea of greater allied involvement in Afghanistan as the cost of the Iraq War increased. For the allied institution, therefore, the initial entry into Afghanistan had broad politico-diplomatic benefits for transatlantic relations as well as some small practical advantages for some countries. But it occurred without much clear debate or unified strategic ends in Afghanistan. Tellingly, the North Atlantic Council, NATO's top political decision-making body, did not issue an "initiating directive" with guidance for the development of military plans for Afghanistan. This decision may be understandable insofar as NATO deferred thinking about those ends to the United States, and the UN authorization of ISAF, which NATO was taking over. But Afghanistan itself may have been a secondary concern. Evidence suggests at least some NATO countries explicitly expressed reservations about the purpose of the Alliance's involvement in Afghanistan but supported it anyway.¹¹

Such early inattention to strategy in Afghanistan caused at least two major problems. The first concerned time. As the years passed, NATO was drawn incrementally further into the conflict and the lack of clear and agreed strategic ends at the institutional level became increasingly troublesome. Expanding the ISAF from an organization with a predominantly noncombat and geographically limited mandate around Kabul to one responsible for conducting a full range of military operations throughout Afghanistan by the end of 2006 elevated the prominence of this issue. The confusion over NATO's strategic ends became most apparent in southern Afghanistan where the insurgency raged but different ISAF countries acted almost autonomously within their respective areas of responsibility, with greatly varying priorities in counterterrorism, local security, development, security force and governance assistance, counternarcotics, and other aspects of the counterinsurgency approach that had gained currency in US military circles by this time but were not widely shared among NATO allies.¹² Short tour lengths and frequent changes in commanders compounded

10 Afghanistan: Lessons Learned; Ryan C. Hendrickson, *Diplomacy and War at NATO: The Secretary General and Military Action after the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 120; and Seth A. Johnston, *No Longer Obsolete: How NATO Endures in the Twenty-First Century* (West Point, NY: Modern War Institute, 2017), 14–17.

11 Judy Dempsey, "France Bars Moves for Greater Alliance Role," *Financial Times*, February 10, 2003.

12 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 (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 144–45.

these problems, as new personnel naturally applied their own priorities and interpretations of strategic ends.¹³

NATO had embarked on a security assistance mission but ended up in a war without much discussion of war aims. The Alliance ultimately confronted this problem and, by 2008, had achieved consensus on a clear and detailed strategy.¹⁴ But this occurred five years after NATO's initial involvement in Afghanistan and seven years into the conflict. The duration of the war was becoming a significant political concern by this point, and following the entrance of a new US presidential administration in 2009, the United States soon adopted a new strategy that called for large troop increases and a goal of starting troop withdrawals by 2011.¹⁵ The international mission was thereafter extended only incrementally two or three years at a time, reflecting tension between the domestic political reality among allies and the ambition of the strategy and its counterinsurgency approach.

The second, related problem with NATO strategic ends concerned their suitability in Afghanistan. The agreed strategic goals depended on the creation of effective and sustainable Afghan government and security institutions. The 2009 Afghan presidential election debacle underscored the difficulty of such a goal. ISAF commander General Stanley McChrystal rightly recognized this difficulty in describing the capability of the Afghan government and the Taliban as obstacles to victory.¹⁶

Proponents of counterinsurgency in general may conclude the Afghan government's troubles in this case were so great that a strategy may have required resources beyond what NATO and ISAF member countries would be able to give. Those more skeptical about the general efficacy of counterinsurgency may conclude Afghanistan is yet another case demonstrating the inherent limitations of foreign powers to reshape other nations. Either way, the lesson for NATO's strategic ends recalls the idea from Carl von Clausewitz that policy ought not ask of strategy that which its chosen means cannot deliver.¹⁷ Admittedly, this question may be less about NATO specifically and more about counterinsurgency and other such missions in general. Yet this question has resonance not only because of Afghanistan but also because of the demand for NATO

13 Theo Farrell and Sten Rynning, "NATO's Transformation Gaps: Transatlantic Differences and the War in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 5 (October 2010): 673–99; 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 (March 2012): 67–84.

14 The confidential *Comprehensive Strategic Political-Military Plan* was announced publicly at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest. "ISAF's Strategic Vision," Press Release (2008) 052, NATO, April 3, 2008.

15 Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (speech, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009).

16 Stanley McChrystal, *Commander's Initial Assessment* (Kabul, Afghanistan: International Security Assistance Force, August 30, 2009).

17 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

involvement in similar situations. In Kosovo, for example, the Alliance has maintained a peacekeeping force and imperfect relationship with local government for 20 years after the 1999 intervention. Allied countries also grapple with such questions and the prospect of similar calls arising from elsewhere. Thus, the Alliance has a stake in the debate.¹⁸

A ready critique of the conflict in Afghanistan is that resources were either too small or too slowly applied to bring about the desired strategic ends. This critique might point out NATO's original 2003 involvement in the ISAF was motivated by short-term cost savings on the part of a few allies; the expansion of ISAF under NATO leadership was a tacit acknowledgment that the United States chose to economize its commitments in Afghanistan as an effort to address the concurrent deteriorating situation in Iraq; and the buildup of US forces in 2009–10 may have been too little, too late—unpersuasive to a Taliban adversary that viewed the time-limited withdrawal intentions as its own plausible path to victory. But this critique of means has less to do with NATO than with the impracticality of matching means to uncertain ends, as described above. Moreover, the provision of means to any allied initiative or strategy depends less on the Alliance and more on the will of participating countries. National responsibility for resources is the essence of the burden-sharing issue not just for Afghanistan but for all NATO activities.

The Alliance's main role in resourcing a strategy is therefore to clarify and organize what countries provide. NATO deserves credit for its positive contributions in this respect. The Alliance's overarching NATO defense planning process (NDPP) and the mission-specific combined joint statement of requirements (CJSOR) for Afghanistan are well-organized processes for identifying and communicating requirements as well as integrating resources provided.¹⁹ Even when nations did not always fully resource every requirement in the CJSOR, which was usually the case, the process helped serve as an assessment tool and benchmark for intra-alliance politics and negotiations.²⁰ The United States, for example, has used information from the CJSOR to tailor specific requests to other countries in bilateral diplomacy with a view to filling out the comprehensive statement of means. Moreover, NATO offered common doctrine, standards, and even some training to facilitate interoperability for allies and nonmember partners participating in the coalition. This architecture facilitated the integration of forces

18 Official 2, interview. As in Afghanistan, local actors in Kosovo have frustrated NATO efforts to achieve its strategic goals for lasting peace and stability. Kosovo's assertion of national independence through its intention to create an army has enflamed relations with Serbia and occurred despite NATO's protest, to cite a recent example.

19 "NATO Defence Planning Process," NATO, June 28, 2018; and NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations*, Allied joint publication (AJP)-5 (Brussels: NATO Standardization Agency, 2013).

20 John R. Deni, "Perfectly Flawed? The Evolution of NATO's Force Generation Process," in *NATO's Post-Cold War Politics: The Changing Provision of Security*, ed. Sebastian Mayer, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 176–93.

and capabilities from the more than 40 countries that participated in the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.²¹

The effect of the mission on the Alliance is a more positive story in several respects. First is the durable commitment of NATO and its allies to the campaign, which includes remaining in Afghanistan as long as the United States does. Non-US members of the coalition have suffered more than 1,000 combat fatalities, spent billions of dollars, and maintained this commitment for more than 15 years.²² This commitment is even more remarkable given the domestic political unpopularity of the conflict in many of the participating countries and the absence of a direct interest in Afghanistan for most of them. As one senior European official said to a group of Americans at a recent meeting of the NATO Military Committee, “My country had no direct security interest in going to Afghanistan. We did it for you [the United States].”²³ The maintenance of the allied cohesion on involvement in Afghanistan thus benefited the United States. It also says something larger about the convening and staying power of NATO in general. The allies’ commitment to an unpopular conflict that was at best tied only indirectly to most countries’ security interests is an indicator of the importance states attach to the Alliance in general.²⁴

Notwithstanding conclusions about the quality of the strategy for the Afghanistan conflict, NATO played a positive and useful role in offering a structured forum for the strategy-making process. The Alliance demonstrated the potential for aggregating this process—always complex and difficult, even for one nation—among all the allies and partners in the coalition. The institutions, including the various committees at NATO headquarters, as well as higher-level foreign and defense ministers meetings and summits, provided both a structure for deliberation and routine political accountability.²⁵ This structure facilitated the articulation of strategic ends as well as the iterative process of matching ways and means to those ends.

Compared to ad hoc multinational coalitions, the NATO structure encourages political cohesion and staying power because nations have a mechanism for their interests and concerns to be heard on a political as well as a military level.²⁶ Compare, for example, the NATO effort in Afghanistan with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria): all NATO allies and the institution are members of the coalition devised during the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales. And the military forces of the coalition are interoperable, to a great degree,

21 Official 2, interview. For an archival list of contributing countries to the NATO mission see “Meetings of NATO Ministers of Defence: Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures Placemat,” NATO, June 25, 2019.

22 Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, *NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2019), 2.

23 NATO Military Committee meeting, Washington, DC, March 14, 2019.

24 Afghanistan: Lessons Learned.

25 Nicholas Burns et al., “NATO’s Leadership Crisis” (seminar, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, September 18, 2018).

26 Official 2, interview.

because of the members' common NATO experiences. But there is no inherent mechanism for political consultation among the coalition's members. Arrangement of coalition meetings thus fell to the United States and other countries on a multilateral basis. A significant part of the rationale for NATO institutions joining the coalition was so the Alliance could host or convene meetings of the coalition, again often on the sidelines of a NATO-only meeting.²⁷

The Alliance extended this deliberative structure to include the participating nonmember partners in the Afghanistan mission.²⁸ The increased prominence of the office of an ambassador-level NATO senior civilian representative in Afghanistan after 2010 further institutionalized this political coordination. These derivative benefits of NATO's partnership program and longstanding tradition of civilian engagement and political dialog facilitated multinational contributions to the mission in Afghanistan. Even with the elusiveness of victory and the marginal significance of Afghanistan in the direct national security interests of coalition members, the longstanding commitment of allies to the NATO mission in Afghanistan reflects positively on the perceived value of the Alliance.

Organizing for Afghanistan

An advantage of NATO has been its role as a forum for coordinating decision-making and action among allies. Results depend mostly on what allies decide and do. But NATO institutions can assist countries in collective decisions and facilitate implementation. Though NATO's role in offering a process for strategy-making in Afghanistan has been positive, aspects of organization and implementation in the Afghanistan conflict, particularly in the military area, deserve closer examination.

Command authority is one such issue. The political reality of coalition warfare necessarily complicates military authority and gave rise to several challenges in Afghanistan. One prominent challenge concerned the caveats imposed by most troop contributing nations on the employment of their forces. Some limitations affected material capabilities, such as the range of vehicles or equipment to operate at night. Legal or political considerations, such as rules of engagement or the taking and treatment of prisoners also played a role. Many of these restrictions stemmed from the lack of consensus on strategy, especially during the first years of NATO involvement. National caveats, especially the previously unstated or those not specified in advance, were some of the clearest consequences of strategic differences and frustrated NATO

²⁷ Official 1, interview by the author, May 22, 2019; and "Meeting of the Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS" (US Department of State, Washington, DC, February 6, 2019).

²⁸ The inclusion of non-NATO contributing partners in political deliberations at NATO Headquarters was not immediate. Australia, one of the larger non-NATO participants in the Afghanistan mission, made a particular point of advocating for the opening these discussions to partner nations. The effect of this effort has been significant, as nonmember partners are now routinely included in relevant NATO deliberations and information on a range of allied initiatives. Afghanistan: Lessons Learned.

commanders in the field.²⁹ Successful commanders made the most of the available resources, of course, but the caveats increased the burdens for planning staff, reduced commanders' flexibility, and negatively affected camaraderie and perceptions of fairness among the troops.³⁰ Yet they were the price of broad international participation and political cohesion. Stronger political agreement and strategic clarity may reduce the salience of caveats. But risk discouraged broad participation. Similar trade-offs will continue in Afghanistan and in future missions.

Another problem involved overlapping authorities. "Dual-hatting" is a common practice in NATO that can produce neutral if not positive effects. A prominent example is the role of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), who is customarily an American who also commands the US European Command. Although this officer must split time between the two responsibilities, each headquarters has its own staff and the authorities of each office tend to reinforce the other. The SACEUR can prioritize and lead NATO military efforts to reinforce US initiatives, and vice versa.

In Afghanistan, however, the greater number and types of hats placed on senior leaders did not always produce reinforcing effects. To take one example from the air domain, a single US Air Force general officer toward the end of the ISAF mission in 2014 was wearing at least five hats representing various command and staff duties in both national and multinational NATO contexts.³¹ Particularly when roles did not come with additional resources, such as the dual-hatting of entire staffs or organizations, the unavoidable practical effect was prioritizing some roles and inattention to others. This challenge especially affected US servicemembers who were relatively less familiar or experienced in NATO doctrine and standards compared to their counterparts from other countries in the Alliance.³²

A compounding factor in Afghanistan was the relatively distinct missions of the NATO-led ISAF and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, with the latter placing greater emphasis on counterterrorism.³³ The United States largely tolerated the separation between NATO and US missions until the approach approved by President Barack Obama in 2009 enabled General Stanley McChrystal to enforce a degree of

29 Official 1, interview; and Saideman and Auerswald, "Comparing Caveats," 67–84.

30 Official 4, correspondence with the author, February 9, 2019.

31 Kenneth S. Wilsbach and David J. Lyle, "NATO Air Command-Afghanistan: The Continuing Evolution of Airpower Command and Control," *Air & Space Power Journal* 28, no. 1 (January–February 2014): 12.

32 In the words of one (American) NATO commander, "The NATO country whose troops understand NATO the least is the United States." This difference in familiarity with NATO practices is an understandable consequence of the global nature of US military commitments; US servicemembers are more likely to serve in Asia or other non-NATO environments. But insofar as the learning curve for NATO leadership was steep compared with other national roles, the incentives to "go with what you know" did not favor the prioritization of NATO responsibilities for US leaders dual-hatted in NATO positions. Official 3, interview by author, June 6, 2018.

33 This distinction remains an issue in Afghanistan today as the NATO-led Resolute Support is a noncombat "train, advise, assist" mission while that of US Forces-Afghanistan has broader authorities. Many Resolute Support and US Forces-Afghanistan key leaders are dual-hatted.

previously unseen integration. This change was due in no small measure to McChrystal's credibility within the US special operations community as well as his understanding of the NATO mission and counterinsurgency approach.³⁴ But however commendable this integration was, one of the leading methods for achieving it was through dual-hatting.

The Alliance's organization and chain of command outside the theater further frustrated NATO's efforts in Afghanistan.³⁵ Formally, the chain of command ran from the commander of the ISAF through the Netherlands headquarters of NATO Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCBS) and then to SHAPE and SACEUR. Yet the commander of JFCBS had little practical authority and headquarters was not resourced to provide much support to the Afghan theater. By subordinating ISAF to an operational-level JFC headquarters, the NATO chain of command implied ISAF was tactical, a classification that made little sense even before the creation of the ISAF Joint Command in 2009 expressly facilitated the higher ISAF Headquarters' focus on operational and strategic matters.³⁶ Moreover, four-star US commanders in Afghanistan reported in their national capacity to the commander US Central Command, who could provide significant enabling resources and was a peer to the US European Command commander, the SACEUR. Bypassing JFCBS in the NATO chain of command may have seemed sensible or appropriate from a nationally oriented resource and protocol point of view, but the practice reflected negatively on the NATO command structure.³⁷

One non-US member of the NATO military structure who had a prominent supporting role for the Afghanistan mission was the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander (DSACEUR), customarily a British officer. The principal role for DSACEUR involved force generation, and specifically management of the CJSOR process, which to some extent, reflected the importance of the process to NATO's overall contribution to strategy in Afghanistan being procedural rather than substantive. But this trend may have created unintended consequences for the future capability or readiness of the DSACEUR office actually to command, as envisaged for example in the case of a European Union mission using NATO resources as agreed under the Berlin Plus agreement or successor arrangements.³⁸

Another component of NATO organization relevant to Afghanistan concerned training, doctrine, and lessons learned. Allied Command Transformation (ACT) plays a large role in the NATO exercise program

34 Official 1, interview. This distinction between US and NATO mission roles has reemerged since the end of ISAF and launch of the expressly noncombat NATO Resolute Support Mission after 2014.

35 Sten Rynning, "ISAF and NATO: Campaign Innovation and Organizational Adaptation," in *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan* ed. Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, and James A. Russell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

36 Schreer, "Evolution of NATO's Strategy," in Edström and Gyllensporre, *Pursuing Strategy*, 140.

37 Official 4, correspondence.

38 "Washington Summit Communiqué," Press Release NAC-S(99)64, NATO, April 24, 1999.

and maintains training institutions such as the Joint Warfare Centre in Stavanger, Norway, and the Joint Force Training Centre in Bydgoszcz, Poland. In theory, these resources can and do prepare allied forces. In practice, training is predominantly a national responsibility, and national commitment to NATO standards is often a more important factor in determining the readiness and interoperability of forces.

NATO established a Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) in Monsanto, Portugal, under the auspices of ACT in 2002. Originally intended to assess NATO exercises, the JALLC adapted to take stock of real operational lessons learned from Afghanistan and other places. But, as with training, the real impact of the lessons depends largely on national priorities.³⁹ Finally, formal changes to NATO doctrine and standards is often slow. The first edition of its doctrine for counterinsurgency, for example, Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 3.4.4, was not published until 2011, years after NATO had adopted such an approach in Afghanistan.⁴⁰

A final critique of NATO composition concerns the complexity of relationships with non-NATO organizations in Afghanistan. In the efforts to develop the Afghan government and its security forces, for example, allied and coalition organizations included the ISAF mission broadly, the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, the US-led Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan, the provincial reconstruction teams, and bespoke organizations such as the anticorruption Combined Joint Interagency Task Force Shafafiyat. Coordination with other non-NATO actors in the environment such as the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, nongovernmental organizations, third countries (such as Iran, Pakistan, India, China, and Russia), and above all, the Afghan government compounded the complexity.

The current NATO Resolute Support Mission focus on “train, advise, assist” is less ambitious and less complex, but also more reliant on the actions of non-NATO entities to achieve its goals. NATO acknowledged as much by greatly increasing its emphasis on external partnerships in its 2010 Strategic Concept, which was promulgated concurrent to that year’s Lisbon Summit decision to terminate the ISAF combat mission by 2014. NATO reaffirmed this emphasis through the establishment of the aforementioned office of the NATO Senior Civilian Representative and by the unprecedented step of inviting the governments of Afghanistan and ISAF countries to participate in its 2012 summit deliberations and declarations on Afghanistan in Chicago.

39 Tom Dyson, *Organisational Learning and the Modern Army: A New Model for Lessons-Learned Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2019); and Hardt, *NATO’s Lessons in Crisis*.

40 NATO, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Counterinsurgency (COIN)*, AJP-3.4.4 (Brussels: NATO Standardization Agency, February 4, 2011); and NATO, “Allied Joint Doctrine for Counter-Insurgency (COIN),” NATO Standardization Agreement 2611 (Brussels: NATO Standardization Agency, February 4, 2011).

Field Support Services

Some of the most significant developments of NATO's involvement in the Afghanistan conflict have been in the lesser-known areas of support and sustainment services. Logistics may be the most notable of these developments, particularly given the challenges of Afghanistan's rough and landlocked topography and the remoteness of central Asia from NATO's traditional geographic area. According to the principle of "costs lie where they fall," transportation and sustainment in NATO is a national responsibility. But few NATO nations possessed the capability to transport their forces to Afghanistan and to supply them once there. Yet NATO troops in Afghanistan have rarely suffered for want of fuel, ammunition, spare parts, food, water, or other supplies in Afghanistan. Successful diplomacy deserves credit for keeping supply lines open through neighboring countries that have not always had smooth relations with NATO and the mission in Afghanistan, including Pakistan and Russia. NATO's role in the allocation of common logistic services in Afghanistan is one of the clearest examples of how the Alliance can facilitate multinational cooperation.

Particularly for countries with a light footprint in Afghanistan, the burden of establishing independent supply chains for a small national contingent may be prohibitive. But the ability to access a common logistics system relieves those concerns by lowering costs and increasing the potential for broad international participation. Benefits existed for larger countries as well. American and British logistics systems at the beginning of the conflict were, for example, initially incompatible with NATO systems but later reconciled.⁴¹

In 2009, the United States decided to rely on a NATO platform for fuel acquisition and distribution in Afghanistan, expanding access from large installations to forward operating bases. This measure increased both the amount of fuel delivered and the flexible capacity to sustain other allies and partners in those locations.⁴² The key NATO institution for organizing many of these logistic services is the NATO Support and Procurement Agency, which had its origins in Cold War era supply organizations but was reorganized in 2010 with a clearer focus on support to operations like Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the direct success of these efforts to keep NATO forces supplied, negative consequences included the distorting effect of foreign money and goods

41 Heidi Reisinger, *Not only "Containerspotting"—NATO's Redeployment from Landlocked Afghanistan*, NATO Defense College Research Paper No. 98 (Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College October 2013), 4.

42 Logistics and fuel in particular offered ample opportunity for fraud and corruption in Afghanistan. Official 1, interview; and Michael J. Evans and Stephen W. Masternak, "The Silent Revolution within NATO Logistics: A Study in Afghanistan Fuel and Future Applications" (master's thesis, US Naval Postgraduate School, December 2012), 120.

on the Afghan economy and the attendant potential for crime and corruption—a problem hardly unique to NATO.⁴³

Intelligence is another example of the potential for NATO to offer a process for multinational cooperation that also depends on national participation. NATO offered a system and the standards for classifying intelligence at the institutional and ISAF mission levels as well as an architecture for sharing that intelligence. The mixed results of this effort in Afghanistan likely occurred because the quality of such allied intelligence depends largely on input from each nation. Countries were usually willing to share low-level information related to force protection, but tended to guard higher-level intelligence and information that might reveal capabilities, sources, or methods. This reluctance is inherent in multinational environments, and there are often trade-offs between the number of countries participating in a mission and the willingness of those countries to share intelligence with the entire group.⁴⁴

NATO and ISAF experimented with several different models for facilitating intelligence sharing given these constraints. Models that were more likely to result in sharing involved a NATO or ISAF hub with spokes to national intelligence cells that shared what they could. The more common model of intelligence organization was housing the institution's intelligence function within a national structure. The latter model prevails at the highest echelons of the NATO mission in Afghanistan, where the NATO intelligence staff is dual-hatted with that of US Forces-Afghanistan.⁴⁵

Another lesson from Afghanistan involved communications, which further exemplifies some of the challenges identified above, including unity of command and intelligence sharing. Throughout the conflict in Afghanistan, headquarters personnel often monitored more than four communications and information technology systems representing various coalition groupings, classifications, and technical capabilities. This fragmented information environment was inefficient and taxed users, even though it created a redundancy that guaranteed a working communications channel. Early in the coalition expansion effort, NATO realized a single, secure network for missions would be necessary for NATO and non-NATO partners. Fielding of the network demonstrated NATO's capability as a process facilitator.

43 Furthermore, much of the NATO logistics work was contracted to private companies which were largely responsible for their own security. The profusion of armed private contractors was yet another challenge to unity of command and created at least the potential for violence or destabilizing effects that worked at cross purposes to NATO's overarching campaign objectives. See Elke Krahnmann, "NATO Contracting in Afghanistan: the Problem of Principal-Agent Networks," *International Affairs* 92, no. 6 (2016): 1401–26.

44 James Igoe Walsh, *The International Politics of Intelligence Sharing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Helge Arnli, "Intelligence Sharing with Host Nations in Multinational Operations: Hurdles and Dilemmas in Afghanistan" (master's thesis, Norwegian Defense Command and Staff College, Spring 2010); and James L. Mader, "Diplomat Soldiers: A Study of Military Counterintelligence Cooperation in NATO, 1951–1960" (dissertation, University of Utrecht, 2017).

45 Cleared US veterans of the Afghanistan campaign may recall the common but bizarre prevalence of "NATO" documents classified or processed on US systems labeled "Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals" (NOFORN).

Best practices from NATO Europe, such as the creation of the Afghan Mission Network Operations Centre in Kabul, were implemented in theater. Countries or organizations that had built their own classified networks, such as the battlefield information collection and exploitation system [BICES], to NATO standards had interoperable field-ready systems, demonstrating the potential value of NATO standards and processes. But ISAF also relied on Afghanistan's civilian wireless communications backbone. The relative luxury of confronting an adversary that was not a significant cyberthreat, however, limits the application of any technical lessons learned from Afghanistan to contexts involving advanced cyber and electronic warfare capabilities.

NATO Is Not a Shooter

NATO's command of the International Security Assistance Force mission from 2003 to 2014 was the largest and longest running conflict the Alliance has faced in its 70-year history. That mission continues today under the more modest Resolute Support Mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan government and security institutions. This article offers a preliminary Alliance-wide assessment of NATO institutions as well as some initial suppositions that may complement national initiatives to learn from Afghanistan as well as efforts addressing future NATO adaptation.⁴⁶ In terms of strategy and organization, NATO's contributions to the international effort in Afghanistan were procedural rather than substantive. Its structures and processes facilitated multinational cooperation. But national actions mattered most. Although NATO's efforts did not entirely mitigate each nation's shortcomings, they were effective.

Perhaps the most significant example of NATO's value is the fact that allies remained cohesive and committed in Afghanistan over such a long period, and in spite of so many political and strategic obstacles. On an implementation level, NATO's involvement in Afghanistan both demonstrated and spurred further development of its field support services, especially logistics, which enabled many countries to participate and facilitated cost sharing. Furthermore, the mission in Afghanistan provided training and experience to the participating national militaries, promoted their interoperability, and led to the development of several NATO functions and common standards. The chief implications of these conclusions are that while national political leadership and strategy-making remain paramount in war, NATO remains a proven and effective instrument of organizing and implementing coordinated multinational efforts.

But will NATO ever attempt something like its Afghanistan mission again? The answer may be different for the territorial defense of a NATO

⁴⁶ For an up-to-date summary of challenges facing NATO, see Lute and Burns, *NATO at Seventy*. Significant for NATO not only because of the official end of the ISAF mission, 2014 also marked the rise of Islamic State terrorist attacks in Europe, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and Russian aggression against Ukraine. These events refocused the attention of NATO allies on security threats closer to NATO's traditional geographic area.

member state than for an expeditionary operation. Today the Alliance is understandably focused on threats closer to home, and its attention to future challenges will be increasingly motivated by technological changes and looming shifts in the global balance of power, such as the rise of China.⁴⁷ Variation in the capabilities and the investments of each nation's defenses is a contention within the Alliance. Yet nearly every source consulted or interviewed for this article judged that only two entities in the world are capable of running a large-scale multinational military campaign: the United States and NATO. This reality and recent history strongly suggest NATO will at least be considered when its European or North American members seek to undertake military action.

The cases of Libya in the Arab Spring, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, and even current attempts to provide maritime security in Strait of Hormuz demonstrate this lesson in different ways.⁴⁸ Many of the basic questions for evaluating the appropriateness of NATO involvement are political: does a mission require the participation of non-NATO countries or entities? If so, do the benefits of NATO's convening power and institutional capacities outweigh the costs of adapting NATO to something new? Does a consensus exist among allies to address the issue through NATO and to involve the necessary non-NATO partners?

Such questions are reasonable and would need to be addressed and decided based upon the merits of future cases. In many situations, the best answer may be no. But reflexive complaints about NATO bureaucracy or process are less well-founded. Some kind of process or method will be needed for any multinational activity. If not NATO, then the United States and other countries would need to establish something that offers many of the same features. In the likelihood that such a coalition would be composed substantially of NATO member countries or global partners, those countries would benefit from the interoperability of NATO's common standards. As the counter-ISIS campaign illustrates, even a well-developed multinational military coalition is unlikely to have the built-in political consultative mechanisms. And the often overlooked but essential logistics, communications, and field-support services that NATO developed and improved in Afghanistan facilitates countries' participation and cost sharing.

So, if NATO did not exist or was not involved, the United States and other allies would need to create it or something like it to carry out the mission. This all argues powerfully for the value of NATO in Afghanistan as well as future conflicts.

47 Lute and Burns, *NATO at Seventy*, 35–38.

48 "Statement by the NATO Spokesperson on the Seizure of Two Ships in the Strait of Hormuz," NATO, July 20, 2019; Benjamin Mueller, "U.K. Joins U.S.-Led Effort to Protect Ships in Strait of Hormuz," *New York Times*, August 5, 2019; and Jeffrey H. Michaels, "A Model Intervention? Reflections on NATO's Libya 'Success,'" in *NATO Beyond 9/11: The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti, and Ben Zyla (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). See also, Johnston, *How NATO Adapts*, 148–51, 166.

