

NATO and Counter-insurgency: Strategic Liability or Tactical Asset?

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Introduction

This article demonstrates that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has a limited role to play in counter-insurgency (COIN). The analysis focuses on the strategic relevance of NATO for counter-insurgency and describes its contributions in the Balkans. It then applies this framework to the war in Afghanistan. The assessment shows that NATO's strategic value is undermined by its own institutional rules and procedures. Moreover, while NATO has adapted considerably to the post-Cold War environment, it has not focused serious attention on tactical assets needed for counter-insurgency. Consequently, when NATO assumed control of military operations in Afghanistan in 2006, expectations of success were not realistic. Lessons can be gathered from NATO's experience, so in theory further adaptation might be considered. However, this article shows that in reality, NATO's primary COIN function is limited to operating under a narrow remit to defuse the conditions from which insurgency grows – and that a willingness among the NATO members to undertake such engagements is rare.

NATO, Counter-insurgency, and Strategic Liabilities

Historically, NATO has not had a primary COIN function. This represents a serious problem since global, regional, and local insurgency movements using terrorism as a tactic are a major component of modern warfare. NATO does, however, provide one of the most commonly cited definitions of counter-insurgency: 'those military, paramilitary, political, economical, psychological, and civic actions taken to defeat an insurgency.'¹ Modern insurgency has evolved to include geographically dispersed and culturally diverse cell-driven networks that maintain secrecy; terror used to foster insecurity among a population that would drive them toward the insurgents for protection; and attacks against government facilities to weaken confidence in that government or produce policy changes.² NATO has no historical experience of or capacity for directly engaging such movements, although by summer 2006 it had been placed at the centre of COIN operations in Afghanistan. To the extent that COIN had existed previously in NATO planning, it was for combating the spread of communism.³ The early part of the 21st century has fundamentally changed the demands for security provision well beyond what was initially envisioned for NATO after the Cold War. On 12 September 2001, NATO declared the terrorist attacks on the United States to be an attack on all of its members. Yet the

ability to do anything in response was limited. The Belgian and Dutch governments asserted that this was a political show of solidarity, not an operational commitment. Other European allies agreed to this declaration in part to be consulted on American decision-making and to influence it to their advantage.⁴

NATO's first strategic dilemma is inherent to its decision-making process, which requires consensus among all 26 members before action is taken. This process can make NATO unattractive for its members to work within during crises. The US and its allies discovered this during the 1999 Kosovo conflict – often referred to derisively as a 'war by committee'.⁵ The consensus process provides opportunities for an enemy to get inside the NATO decision loop by selectively targeting individual allies with violence or diplomatic overtures, seeking to affect public opinion.⁶ This dynamic is tied to the question of whether members will assume risks if approving operations with rules of engagement that make them vulnerable as targets. NATO has particularly struggled with a question of sufficient capabilities for 'out-of-area' operations.⁷ As one observer commented regarding Afghanistan: 'NATO is putting its future on the line . . . And it is not yet clear that the European governments who are committing to this mission know what they are getting into or have the political will and support to see it through.'⁸

In the event that NATO approves any military operation, it is up to the member states to generate the necessary force commitments, which are then integrated into NATO command and control structures. Yet there is no mechanism to guarantee that this will occur. Members might agree to authorize an operation politically but not participate. In November 2004, NATO authorized deployment of 300 military instructors to Iraq – but only 16 of the 26 members participated in the mission. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General James Jones, called this trend 'disturbing' and said that once NATO decides on a mission it is essential that 'all allies support it . . . When nine, ten, or 11 countries in the alliance will not send forces the burden falls on the other 14'.⁹ In other cases, troops are offered but national command arrangements place 'caveats' on what they are allowed to do in a particular NATO mission. Often, the troops offered are too few to be of anything but symbolic value. Large coalitions with small individual troop concentrations, with restrictions on their rules of engagement, can create confusion in the military chain of command. Illustrating the immediacy of the problem, Lieutenant General David Richards, who commanded all NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2006, noted that for 18 months, NATO military command had endorsed a 1,000-person reserve force for the Afghan theatre. This military request for a 'hard-hitting reserve of about 1,000 people that I can use wherever I need to use it throughout Afghanistan' had 'never been met' according to Richards.¹⁰ In September 2006, NATO military planners made clear that the troop numbers for COIN in Afghanistan were insufficient, and requested an additional 2,500. However, all NATO could do was take note of the request, depending on member states to offer forces. When officials held a force generation meeting to consider the request on 13 September 2006, no members stepped up to offer additional troops.¹¹ Warnings from senior NATO officials that the alliance's future was on the line in Afghanistan failed to produce serious interest in additional force generation for counter-insurgency combat operations.

Modern insurgents can be aware of these dynamics feeding into asymmetrical tactics to get inside a country's decision-making loop. Add 26 countries together in a consensus-driven decision-making process, and NATO becomes an inverse force multiplier, providing an expanded target base for insurgents. Combatants have adopted this asymmetric tactic at both a national and multinational level. When insurgents killed and displayed on television dead American troops deployed to Somalia in 1993, the United States withdrew.¹² Before NATO ground forces intervened in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, Serb forces tied United Nations (UN) peacekeepers to likely targets of NATO airpower, which quickly disrupted and delayed NATO decision-making.¹³ Though not a NATO mission, the US-led coalition in Iraq factored into the thinking of terrorists supporting al-Qaeda, which carried out attacks in Madrid and London. In the case of Madrid, the terrorists' plan was published on the Internet months before the attacks: 'Withdrawal of Spanish or Italian forces would put immense pressure on the British presence in a way that Tony Blair might not be able to bear . . . In this way the dominoes will begin to fall quickly.'¹⁴ The attacks on commuter trains in Madrid killed 191 people. A week later, a pro-American government was ousted and Spain withdrew from Iraq. Insurgents in Afghanistan adapted their strategy when NATO increased its role in 2006, focusing lethal attacks to sap public support in allied countries. As NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer indicated: 'The Taliban are simply testing Canadian public opinion, Dutch public opinion, UK public opinion, Australian public opinion.'¹⁵

A second strategic dilemma for NATO results from the experience in COIN among individual members – from which they often draw very different lessons. Many of the European members have colonial legacies that recall high costs of external entanglement with insurgencies. At NATO's founding, the US ensured that European colonial interests would not be covered in NATO's security guarantees. While there were numerous military engagements with insurgent forces during the Cold War (the French in Indochina and Algeria, Americans in Vietnam, and the British in Northern Ireland), none of these operations involved NATO and no common doctrine emerged.¹⁶ It is unlikely that NATO members would agree to harsh COIN tactics that jeopardize respect for international legal norms. When the Netherlands began a national parliamentary debate over its role in Afghanistan in late 2005, key members of the government's ruling coalition questioned whether NATO was needed for the mission. They insisted that all prisoners of war be handed over to Afghan authorities and not the US, which was largely viewed in the Netherlands, and throughout Europe, as having mistreated detainees in Afghanistan and elsewhere.¹⁷

A third strategic liability for NATO is that many members conclude that the best approach to a potential insurgency environment is to avoid that situation altogether. A leading NATO official commented, in the aftermath of the victorious war in Kosovo, that the key lesson of Kosovo was that we 'never do something like this again'.¹⁸ The US was highly reluctant to put its troops on the ground in the middle of civil conflict in the Balkans until a lasting settlement had been negotiated. Meanwhile, few key European governments supported the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and even fewer sustained troop deployments thereafter. Many NATO members appeared to

follow the guidance that 'sometimes the best way to win is not to play at all'.¹⁹ Also, once NATO has agreed to intervene in a conflict situation, its members often limit their individual military mission to avoid casualties. As retired US General Barry McCaffrey concluded following a tour of Afghanistan in August 2005: 'NATO forces are in most cases going to be thin gruel compared to the US [forces] they will replace'.²⁰ Thus, taken together, these significant strategic liabilities make NATO an unlikely tool for major COIN operations. Nevertheless, NATO was called on to undertake just this sort of operation in Afghanistan in 2006 – a mission for which it had serious strategic limitations and minimal tactical experience.

NATO as a Tactical Asset

To the extent that NATO can be said to have acted as a major COIN asset, it is in the rare circumstance in which a major military intervention was undertaken in a way that prevented an insurgency movement from developing in the first place. In particular, successful efforts to provide security and development for local populations in conflict and post-conflict areas can be an important means of diffusing nascent insurgency campaigns.²¹ NATO provided a model for defusing conditions in which insurgency could have developed via its 1995 intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This kind of peace support operation can expose NATO's strategic vulnerabilities and mission sustainability can be challenged. Thus, getting the model right in the early stages is crucial for success. Even then, precise conditions are necessary for successful operations. Furthermore, there is nothing inherent in the NATO operations that suggest they can work in all places at all times. When NATO intervened in Bosnia-Herzegovina in late 1995, some key conditions did, however, make any prospective insurgency difficult to mount. First, the conflicting parties – Muslims, Serbs, and Croats – had strong incentives to negotiate an end to fighting. A major Croat–Muslim ground offensive combined with a limited application of NATO air power facilitated the conditions for a diplomatic settlement. Second, a major international conference was held in Dayton, Ohio, sponsored by a 'Contact Group' of the United States, Russia, Britain, Germany, and France, under the auspices of the UN, which consolidated diplomacy and provided legitimacy for a NATO intervention. Third, NATO was available to intervene, having been training and exercising for such a deployment since 1993.

Central to NATO's successful intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina was the size of the force – 60,000 – of which half were American. The size of this deployment was essential for consolidating the investment in peace that the local leaders were making. The size of the NATO force and the length of its deployment would, over time, defuse the capacity of remaining irregular fighters to organize and gain popular support. As General William Nash (who led the NATO deployment into Bosnia) reflects, in such nation-building deployments, 'The highest levels of casualties have occurred in operations with the lowest levels of US troops, while post-conflict operations undertaken with adequate force levels have triggered far less resistance . . . This is a lesson for every future operation.'²² NATO troops had force-protection mandates permitting them to be the 'toughest dog on the block', as it was often described. NATO's

inclusion of partners from Central and Eastern Europe also served as a force multiplier, contributing 10,000 additional troops. NATO facilitated the rapid integration of a multinational force and provided integrated infrastructure, logistics, intelligence, and a command and control structure. Quick deployment was especially vital for the Bosnian Muslims, who feared that the Dayton accords might be a Serb ploy to buy time, regroup, and fight again.

NATO had been authorized by the UN to use whatever force was necessary to implement its mandate. Specific military tasks included: ensuring self-defence and freedom of movement; supervising the marking of boundaries and a Zone of Separation (ZOS) between the parties; monitoring and – if needed – enforcing the withdrawal of forces to their respective territories and the establishment of the ZOS; assuming control of the airspace and the movement of military traffic over key ground routes; and establishing joint Military Commissions to serve as the central bodies for all parties to the peace agreement.²³ In late 1995, NATO's Crisis Management Organization was activated as a coordination mechanism for operations, intelligence, logistics, systems divisions, and liaison elements integrated into one planning cell. From this infrastructure, the 60,000 troops on the ground were able to quickly establish a stable environment. By summer 1996, most of NATO's military tasks were completed. From this basis, other international institutions – including the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the European Union, the World Bank, and the Hague War Crimes Tribunal – could develop the civilian aspects of nation-building.

There were limits to what could be achieved without additional international institutions, as the security problem went considerably beyond NATO's military mandate. By summer 1996, there remained some six million land mines; 80 per cent of power generators were damaged or out of operation; 40 per cent of bridges were destroyed; and telecommunications were inoperable. Health care, schools, and housing were devastated and economic output was at five per cent of its pre-war levels. Eighty per cent of Bosnia's population was dependent on international humanitarian assistance.²⁴ NATO was thus one part of a broader package of international investment. It contributed to these broader efforts by facilitating a secure environment for the conduct of free and fair elections, assisting the safe transit of civilians from international agencies, and helping to clear minefields.²⁵ NATO representatives worked in conjunction with the World Bank and a variety of nongovernmental organizations to identify over 200 projects for infrastructure reconstruction. NATO also made direct use of its infrastructure programmes to build bridges, repair roads, and provide staff for similar projects such as power, natural gas, water, and telecommunications. By March 1996, 80 per cent of Bosnia's major roads had been reopened and NATO had restored access roads to Sarajevo airport.²⁶

NATO's tactical contributions were limited by a mandate that balanced a need to arrest war criminals against domestic pressures among its members to avoid casualties. NATO commanders on the ground adopted strict rules of engagement that avoided confrontation with key indicted war criminals. Several indicted Serbs were protected by sizeable paramilitary forces, which could be provoked into insurgent operations. NATO thus balanced a desire for justice with a need for stability.

Although no insurgency emerged following the Dayton peace accords, this outcome could have resulted from the mere exhaustion of the combatants. It is also possible that an insurgency failed to develop because NATO did not press the issue of war criminals as a combat operation. Indeed, insurgency based on renewed nationalism remains an ongoing possibility in the Balkans over ten years later. However, as one Dutch military officer suggests: 'Peace operations that are also supporting the government's efforts to maintain law and order, will obstruct the first stage of the insurgent's strategy . . . This is the case with preventive deployment, internal conflict resolution measures, assistance to an interim authority, guarantee/denial of movement, sanctions and high intensity operations.'²⁷ However, as John Mackinlay summarized: 'In this context, NATO is an asset provider but not a response leader.'²⁸ NATO's experience does demonstrate a capacity to affect the conditions that could lead to early stages of insurgency, when its members choose to use the institution to its full potential. Ironically, however, none of these conditions applied to the situation NATO would find when it engaged in major COIN activity in Afghanistan.

NATO and Afghanistan

During the initial years of coalition engagement in Afghanistan, the primary military activity was the American-led *Operation Enduring Freedom*. The US applied a combination of air power and covert operations working with local tribal leaders to oust the Taliban in fall 2001. In December 2001, the UN authorized the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a coalition of the willing independent from *Operation Enduring Freedom*. NATO was authorized to command ISAF in 2003, assuming operational duties that August. Early on, operations in Afghanistan therefore had two mandates – the American-led combat and COIN operations in *Operation Enduring Freedom* and the peace-support and nation-building activity of ISAF. This dual relationship allowed the US to act with those countries willing to commit to combat operations, particularly the British. It also, however, allowed European and other partners to commit to nation-building activity while avoiding (hopefully) being targeted by remaining Taliban or al-Qaeda fighters. By summer 2006, NATO agreed to assume expanded responsibility, adding to its existing mission the command of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, with the intent of covering all of Afghanistan by 2007, including combat operations. ISAF had three main strategic objectives: maintaining a secure environment for free and fair elections and the development of the rule of law; aiding in reconstruction; and supporting the development and training of Afghan security forces.²⁹ Whether a soft approach to such vital nation-building activity could be sustained in a climate of growing insurgency would be a central challenge for the evolving NATO mandate.

Winning Hearts and Minds?

ISAF was conceived as essential for building an environment that would prevent an insurgency from developing. This meant working with local authorities and the broader population, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations to improve life in Afghanistan, particularly in terms of education, health, water,

sanitation, internally displaced persons, and returned refugees; initiating and monitoring projects funded by national and international donors; supporting the remodelling and development of the defence and security sector; serving as a political-level link with Afghan authorities; and leading joint patrols with the Kabul City Police, the National Security Directorate, and the Afghan National Army in Kabul, and in the north and west provinces.³⁰ Five key deployed elements of ISAF supported these duties, including a headquarters that provided operational-level coordination with the UN, the Afghan government, and other involved organizations; a multinational brigade that provided tactical operational control for daily patrols and civil–military operations; and air management that assisted in civil aviation and in the management of the Kabul Afghan International Airport. NATO also handled air-space management, which operated an ISAF Combined Rescue Coordination Centre, and conducted medical evacuation operations.³¹

A key NATO contribution to ISAF has been the management of Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in the north and west of Afghanistan. Initially, these operated under *Operation Enduring Freedom* but were expanded and placed under NATO control when it assumed management of ISAF. NATO's engagement with the PRTs was intended to facilitate the conditions in which long-term stability would be achieved in Afghanistan. NATO thus had the potential to undermine the conditions for insurgency to develop. As the PRTs expanded, they engaged Regional Area Coordinators to organize civil–military activities under the operational control of ISAF. NATO also deployed Forward Support Bases to provide logistical support for medical services and to transport supplies to the PRTs of each region.³²

Assuming control of ISAF was the first time NATO had commanded ground forces outside the European theatre of operations. By the time NATO engaged, however, Afghanistan's stability was already in doubt. Although a general peace agreement for elections and governance in Afghanistan had been reached at an international conference held in Bonn in December 2001, by summer 2003 the country remained fundamentally undeveloped, the Taliban had not been destroyed, al-Qaeda leaders remained active (including Osama Bin Laden and his deputy Aymin Al-Zawahiri), and warlords were the main form of local governance in many parts of the country. Of Afghanistan's 32 provinces, 16 had high-risk areas for international assistance workers and five had seen serious factional fighting. Only eight were relatively secure, with the most successful operations limited to the capital of Kabul.³³

NATO's task was undermined by its limited mandate, which offered no plan for engaging a growing insurgency coalescing in Afghanistan. Additionally, NATO troops lacked situational awareness, given their lack of experience with Afghanistan's culture and geography. As one NATO spokesman said, Afghanistan is 'not visible on the collective radar' of the West.³⁴ By fall 2003, NATO received a mandate to venture beyond Kabul. However, the expanded mandate was not matched by an increased troop presence, which at the time was only 5,700 strong. An alliance with a total of 7,000 helicopters initially requested only 11 to cover an area the size of California.³⁵ NATO only received an initial six helicopters for Afghanistan, which were operated under strict national caveats. Nonetheless, NATO began in late 2003 to take over command of what had been a German-led PRT in Kunduz – another

comparatively stable area of Afghanistan.³⁶ By June 2004, the US administration was pushing NATO to assume even further responsibility for PRTs. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, it would be 'realistic for NATO to take over five PRTs' by summer since, 'they are not large, numbering 80–90 to a couple of hundred troops'.³⁷ NATO responded and its members agreed to establish four additional PRTs in Mazar-e-Sharif, Meymana, Feyzabad, and Baghlan.

By the end of 2004, approximately 3,600 square kilometres around Kabul and about 185,000 square kilometres covering nine northern provinces were under NATO command and control. NATO provided security and logistical support for the Constitutional Loya Jirga in December 2003 and for the 2004 presidential elections.³⁸ By 2005, NATO had expanded its operations to include the relatively stable western region of Afghanistan.³⁹ Nonetheless, its mandate precluded taking actions to engage directly in COIN operations. NATO's initial operations did not include the southern and southeastern areas where the US forces remained engaged in occasional but often intensive combat operations.

The US administration appeared to want to cede more responsibility in Afghanistan to its NATO allies. Yet, NATO already had serious limitations in enforcing even its existing mandate. To expand the mission to include COIN combat operations was more than the consensus process in NATO could handle. NATO eventually agreed in late 2005 to more assertive rules of engagement so that troops would not, for example, have to wait to be fired on before taking action against attackers. As NATO spokesman James Appathurai suggested: 'In essence, these expanded or updated rules of engagement make it clear to ISAF forces what they can do when they encounter challenges to their safety or their mission . . . And they make it very clear that ISAF forces will not be sent with one arm tied behind their backs.' He added that NATO forces could take offensive action in their own defence: 'If that means they see a threat looming in the hills, they do not have to wait to be attacked [and] to take casualties . . . They can take action to defend themselves – including, if necessary, preemptively.'⁴⁰ Nonetheless, how such rules of engagement would be interpreted in an environment where the enemy was increasingly targeting NATO troops with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs, and suicide bombers remained unclear.

While NATO members saw an eventual merger between its mission and that carried out by the US in *Operation Enduring Freedom*, the pace of political agreement was moving ahead of the ability, at the tactical and operational levels, to turn such agreement into success on the ground. France and Germany, in particular, argued that the two Afghanistan missions should remain separate. In 2004, they rejected an American proposal for a merger of the two separate missions under NATO's command authority.⁴¹ The Spanish Defence Minister, Jose Bono Martinez, stressed: 'These missions must remain separate with separate chains of command . . . The only thing they have in common is that they are in the same country.'⁴² However, the allies also acknowledged that as ISAF expanded into the southern regions of Afghanistan, there would have to be better coordination between NATO and the American-led COIN combat operations.⁴³ Insurgents were not likely to discriminate between American and NATO forces when selecting targets in Afghanistan, and neither were al-Qaeda sympathizers acting globally.

NATO, meanwhile, still lacked a capacity for combat operations in the context of counter-insurgency. US forces employed in *Operation Enduring Freedom* vital assets such as airlift, strategic intelligence, satellite surveillance, unmanned air vehicles, *Chinook* troop-carrying helicopters, *Apache* attack helicopters and experienced special operations forces, which Europeans either did not have or were unwilling to commit.⁴⁴ NATO had not deployed anything even resembling these kinds of integrated, rapidly deployable, and highly lethal forces.

Still wanting to show that NATO could play an important role in global security, and under pressure from Washington to pick up slack as it focused further attention on Iraq, member-states agreed in December 2005 eventually to control all operations in Afghanistan. NATO also declared it would add 6,000 troops, making its total contribution approximately 18,500 by September 2006. The expanded NATO mission included command of ISAF in six provinces – Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Nimroz, Day Kundi, and Zabul – along with the establishment of four additional PRTs.⁴⁵ The latter were a primary focus of this expansion, serving as an important joint military–civilian model for ground operations. Each team is headed by a different country and deployed in selective provincial capitals.⁴⁶ However, with the military integration, there is potentially a greater degree of force protection for the military and civilians engaged in this important infrastructure work. The mission for the enhanced NATO deployment also included further mentoring and training of the Afghanistan National Army, with the goal of producing 70,000 trained troops by 2010.

The new NATO mandate continued to reflect two separate and not always complementary approaches to counter-insurgency. NATO members initially saw their mission mainly as providing the ‘soft side’ of winning hearts and minds while the US, operating with a few key allies, would manage combat operations via a coalition of the willing. As Major Andy Elmes of NATO asserted in December 2005: ‘The mandate and the mission of the ISAF troops when they operate in the south will be that of providing security assistance to the government ... and not of overt counter-insurgency or counter-terrorist operations.’⁴⁷ NATO leaders went out of their way to stress this point when relaying the nature and scope of their increased commitment to their national parliaments and publics.

Conflicting Mandates and Unity of Command

Even without an expanded mandate, NATO confronted serious challenges with its existing operations in ISAF. Many European countries had to be pressured by Washington to send troops and often those countries that did volunteer forces placed caveats on their military activity. Spanish troops, for example, generally would not leave their compounds; Germany reserved its helicopters for the transportation of its own troops. The national command of PRTs provided unit cohesion but this also meant different levels of development.⁴⁸ Additionally, there was an ongoing unfamiliarity with the terrain that worked to the enemy’s advantage. According to a US Army commander of *Task Force Nighthawk* (a helicopter task force), ‘our biggest threat is not Taliban or al-Qaeda shooting at us. It’s the weather and the terrain. It’s a rugged, unpredictable environment than an agile, adaptable enemy can exploit’.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, NATO allies and Afghan officials worried that American support for the NATO operation was intended to help Washington start withdrawing its troops, with an initial reduction of between 2,000 and 3,000.⁵⁰ Heightening these concerns, the US also indicated in early 2006 that it intended to cut the \$1 billion spent in 2005 for building highways, schools, and clinics across the country to just over \$600 million in 2006.⁵¹ To reassure its allies, the US offered to assume command of NATO troops in 2007.

Strategically aware of the vulnerabilities inherent in the change of emphasis towards NATO in Afghanistan, the residual Taliban insurgency accelerated and expanded operations during 2005 and 2006. This included the deployment of IEDs and suicide bombers in previously stable areas. The Taliban appeared to be seeking to weaken the resolve of the European and Canadian NATO members to engage in combat operations, thus leading them to limit their exposure in the field.⁵² The capacity of the Taliban to exert growing influence in Afghanistan prompted the launch of *Operation Mountain Thrust* in June 2006 by US, British, and Canadian forces, outside NATO command arrangements. The intention was to attack the Taliban in areas of southern Afghanistan where there had been no governmental authority for years.⁵³ This was followed by a NATO operation – *Operation Medusa* – in late summer 2006. These operations killed hundreds of insurgents but also exposed the reality that the Taliban had had five years to regroup and apply lessons learned from foreign fighters with experience of fighting in Iraq, who brought roadside bombs and suicide bombers into the Afghan theatre. As Radio Netherlands reported, the fact that such operations were taking place was a serious indicator that, up to that point, the tactics employed by *Operation Enduring Freedom* had ‘not had the desired effect’.⁵⁴ The Taliban were indifferent to the increased NATO presence, indicating that they intended to keep fighting, apparently with growing funding and increasing public support in some regions of Afghanistan. Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah had reflected the growing mood among the Taliban in late 2005, saying that: ‘The expansion of NATO operations in Afghanistan and increase in the number of NATO troops will make it easier for the Taliban to target and attack them.’⁵⁵

The Taliban also had time to retrain and to improve its financing, probably through continued support from al-Qaeda. Thus, the Taliban perceived a window of opportunity for an increase of insurgent activity and tightened its grip on the southern regions.⁵⁶ *Operation Mountain Thrust* was a major combat operation that drove deep into Taliban territory, killing scores of insurgent fighters. However, it was not a NATO operation. After August 2006, NATO would have no choice but to press on during *Operation Medusa* or risk having the Taliban disappear for the winter of 2006–2007 only to re-emerge even stronger the coming spring. Illustrating the dilemma, one of NATO’s spokesman conceded that: ‘We know full well that there are people in the south who don’t want to see peace and stability because they make profit and power out of not having peace and stability . . . We’re in effect challenging lawlessness and bringing in stabilization.’⁵⁷ As another observer concluded: ‘We’re fighting a war in southern Afghanistan. This is not an enhanced peace support operation.’⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the Europeans continued to view the NATO mission mainly in peacekeeping terms. Major Elmes, the British spokesman for NATO, drew the

analogy that: 'If you think of a policeman, who is armed but he doesn't go out looking for a fight, that's along the lines we're looking at.'⁵⁹ By 2006 there was a substantial disconnect between what NATO members thought they had committed to, what they were finding themselves having to do, and the level of resources committed relative to mission success.

In May 2006, the Taliban had signalled their intent to turn Afghanistan into a 'river of blood' and that: 'Our activity will increase day by day . . . we now have the confidence to fight face-to-face and we have all the ammunition we need.'⁶⁰ That same month, an accidental collision of an American convoy with civilian vehicles near Kabul erupted into a major public security crisis in which an estimated 2,000 rioters attacked police stations, hotels, restaurants, and shops – as a statement of frustration with foreign forces and with the Afghanistan government. In one week that May, Afghan and coalition forces killed 400 insurgents in 12 separate provinces while suicide bombers attacked in Kabul. Militants attacked a convoy in Helmand that carried the region's deputy governor and chief of police. Coalition troops and Taliban fought near the capital of Uruzgan province and the International Organization for Migration reported that 3,000 Afghans had fled their villages and taken refuge in Kandahar city.⁶¹

By the end of summer 2006, NATO officials were publicly expressing surprise at the degree to which the Taliban had been able to regroup. Large numbers of Taliban were killed in part because they were increasingly willing and capable of taking on NATO forces with direct fire, and not only terrorist tactics. The result was that, increasingly, NATO troops had to be constantly prepared to defend areas they had taken, leaving little or no opportunity for the rebuilding that was essential to defeating the insurgency. Some of these NATO forces were organized in small forward positions, forcing them often to call in air support from large American bombers or British *Apache* helicopters – which risked killing not only Taliban but also civilians, which could serve to increase popular support for the insurgency.⁶² Summarizing the trends in late summer 2006, NATO General Ed Butler noted in an interview that his troops in southern Afghanistan were being attacked up to a dozen times a day, sometimes facing hand-to-hand combat, and that: 'the intensity and ferocity of the fighting is far greater than in Iraq on a daily basis'.⁶³ Captain Leo Docherty put the problem succinctly: 'Now the ground has been lost and all we're doing in places like Sangin is surviving.'⁶⁴

Not NATO's Job: Drugs, Money, and Pakistan

NATO was conflicted regarding the drug trade from Afghanistan, which re-emerged among the world's largest exporters of heroin by 2006. According to the UN, the Afghan opium harvest (for producing heroin) grew by 50 per cent from 2005 to 2006, producing 92 per cent of the world's annual opium supply and exceeding global consumption by 30 per cent.⁶⁵ Drug smugglers and cartels in the ungoverned southern region managed to provide an improved assortment of poppy seeds and their cultivation, along with fertilizers, banking, and loan facilities.⁶⁶ This illegal trade had become a major source of local income and employment, and was also a source of funding for insurgent fighters and of corruption in the Afghan government. NATO

explicitly rejected engagement in anti-drug operations, even though the drug trade was a critical component of the instability on which the insurgents sought to capitalize. Alliance decision-makers apparently feared that destroying crops would further alienate the local population and perhaps deepen local support for insurgent fighters. NATO could engage in killing farmers and might win a tactical objective in reducing drug production, but this also could lead to a strategic defeat by alienating the population.⁶⁷ Realistically, to eradicate and replace the economic productivity provided by the drug trade in Afghanistan would have required an entirely new economic model derived from billions of dollars of investment that was simply not available.⁶⁸ Consequently, NATO's contribution to this essential component of counter-insurgency was limited to enhanced intelligence sharing, logistical support to local Afghan governmental efforts, and contributing to counter-narcotics information campaigns.⁶⁹ The end result was that, according to the Executive Director of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, 'The southern part of Afghanistan was displaying the ominous hallmarks of incipient collapse, with large-scale drug cultivation and trafficking, insurgency and terrorism, crime and corruption,' and 'We are seeing a very strong connection between the increase in the insurgency on the one hand and the increase in cultivation on the other hand.'⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the challenge was exacerbated in 2006 by the fact that, in Afghanistan, a police officer was paid about \$2.00 per day and an Afghan army soldier about \$4.00 a day, while the Taliban was paying its fighters about \$8.00 a day.⁷¹

Five years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the country was still insecure, unstable, and suffering from conditions ripe for exploitation by insurgents. NATO did not deploy with a large enough force, and instead sought, during the middle of a growing insurgency, to find more countries willing to deploy resources into an inhospitable environment. Ironically, if NATO increased troops, the greater the risk of rising frustration among local residents with the external military presence. Recognizing this dilemma, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said in June 2006: 'I'll be blunt: more resources are urgently needed for reconstruction and development'. He noted particularly a need for an increased role for the UN, the European Union, the Group of Eight wealthy countries, and other capable parties. Speaking alongside Scheffer, Afghan Defence Minister, Abdul Rahim Wardak, stressed the fundamental point that 'increased prosperity and security ... will marginalize the extremists'.⁷² Given this environment, the commander of Canadian expeditionary troops in Afghanistan said in early 2006 that the build up of NATO forces in the country was the alliance's 'biggest operational and perhaps strategic, challenge, in years, if not decades' and that it would need to be in Afghanistan for 'years and years'.⁷³

Even before the Taliban had regrouped in 2006, General James L. Jones, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, had identified the central challenge: 'We are fighting an insurgency ... We are fighting against different factions who have some military capability to psychologically demoralize us, but it will not prevent us militarily from being successful.'⁷⁴ The dilemma is that counter-insurgency cannot be defeated mainly by military tactics but rather by local populations turning on insurgents and either eliminating them, or working to defuse their grievances politically. In this

context, President Hamid Karzai warned, in June 2006, that the international community needed to reassess its tactics: 'I have systematically, consistently and on a daily basis warned the international community of what was developing in Afghanistan . . . and of a change in approach by the international community in this regard.'⁷⁵ Who was supposed to change was unclear, given the two completely different military missions operating in his country. Meanwhile, NATO representatives began to show cracks in their confidence in the Afghanistan mission. After Karzai's comments, a Western diplomat said: 'There is an awful feeling that everything is lurching downward. Nearly five years on, there is no rule of law, no accountability. The Afghans know it is all a charade, and they see us as not only complicit but actively involved. You cannot fight a terror war and build a weak state at the same time, and it was a terrible mistake to think that we could.'⁷⁶

After his troops engaged in intense combat with the Taliban in June 2006, a British battle group commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal noted that: 'We've had 50, 60 patrols where we've just gone out and drank tea with the locals . . . They are keen to see us and keen to know what our mission is . . . If every day we could go out and improve the lot of the Afghan people, that would have a far greater effect than killing Taliban.'⁷⁷ The gradual blending of NATO into the southern parts of Afghanistan could, in theory, have resulted in a more successful hearts and minds effort. In the ISAF areas at least, NATO forces were engaged at a community level with local Afghans, which might serve as a model for NATO's role in the southern provinces. According to Lieutenant General Richards, commander of ISAF, NATO hoped to spend more time talking to Afghans, listening to their needs, and helping more in reconstruction, rather than primarily hunting down insurgents. Nevertheless, Americans who had been in direct combat with the Taliban were sceptical. They asserted that the British approach would allow the Taliban to hide and buy time, as one US official put it: 'You cannot be, "We just want to win everybody's hearts and minds and be nice to everybody and go along, and by the way, we'll never do anything about drugs or this and that because it's not on our horizon, it's not on our screen". I'm like, "impossible".'⁷⁸ Nonetheless, General Richards saw the two separate Afghan missions as compatible:

We have what we in the military call a counter-insurgency role. But the intelligence-led, seek-and-destroy missions against high-value targets . . . al-Qaeda-type operatives, that is not something NATO will be engaging in . . . Our underpinning purpose is not a counter-terrorist mission, it is to extend and deepen the government of Afghanistan and to create the environment that they and the international community can build up economic development.⁷⁹

Richards hoped to move NATO toward areas of model development: 'We're looking at the creation of what one might call Zones of Security in carefully analyzed areas where we can create a much greater and genuine feeling of security, in which the international organizations and the government can much more freely do the things they all want to do, which is to start creating those improvements that are so important for success.'⁸⁰ Richards envisaged this as a five-year process.⁸¹

Dutch commander, Brigadier Ton van Loon, indicated after engaging the Taliban in combat operations in June 2006: 'We can't be effective if we don't get the populace on our side . . . And one of the problems in a country which has only known wars of various kinds for so long is that people simply have no trust left . . . So, we're going to have to restore it.'⁸² The Dutch officer summarized NATO's strategic and tactical dilemma: 'Depending on the situation, you may be more involved with security at one time and then, immediately afterwards in supporting aid organizations, governmental or non-governmental or non-governmental, national and international. Without security they cannot proceed with their projects . . . You can't separate security from reconstruction or reconstruction from security.'⁸³ The ability, or inability, to integrate these often conflicting requirements is perhaps the greatest question in determining the degree to which NATO will be a tactical asset or a strategic liability in effective counter-insurgency in Afghanistan or anywhere else. Yet, by fall 2006, it already appeared that NATO might not be able to meet this challenge, given the serious disconnect between the mission and resources, combined with the strategic liabilities that its institutional decision-making structures exacerbate.

There is a strong counter-argument to the conclusion that a very heavy troop deployment into Afghanistan would necessarily have pre-empted the resurgence of the Taliban. Too heavy a deployment could just as easily have alienated the Afghan population and further fuelled the insurgency. Some Americans with experience on the ground argue that their COIN efforts were more flexible because the lower troop numbers, 'forced us to take much more indirect approaches, and be much more culturally aware . . . It is an Afghan-centric approach to the challenges of working a counter-insurgency effort there. We may not have done that the same way with larger numbers of troops'.⁸⁴ Still, the scope of the challenge is captured by British Brigadier General Nick Pope who, on returning from patrol and meetings with local Afghan leaders said: 'Clearly, I don't have the money, the resources or the power to do development at the macro-level, build roads or whatever . . . But what I do have are an enormous amount of soldiers who are willing to put their life and soul into providing a little bit of betterment. So whether it's building a new school or getting a school furniture, a little bit of a tangible improvement like that actually goes a long way.'⁸⁵ Finally, perhaps most essentially, the centre of gravity in Afghanistan likely rested outside NATO's area of responsibility. As one American officer said, regarding the chaotic southern areas of Afghanistan, 'All the bad guys are coming from Waziristan . . . Because of the threat from Pakistan, there is not much civil-affairs stuff going on here.'⁸⁶ In a situation where Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters could move across the border into safety in Pakistan, initiative for resolving this problem was outside NATO's ability to control. This problem was exacerbated by a truce between Pakistani authorities and insurgents in the lawless province of Waziristan in late summer 2006, which gave insurgents a sanctuary from which they might freely make cross-border attacks into Afghanistan and, as necessary, retreat into Pakistan to resupply and to recruit additional fighters. By late 2006, it appeared that there was no agreement within NATO as to how to rectify these dilemmas in Afghanistan. When the allies met in Riga, Latvia, some minor caveats were lifted, but no major reinvestment in the mission, or reassessment was provided, as the allies could not agree on any

substantial means of adaptation to achieve success against a resurgent Taliban in key parts of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Counter-insurgency highlights the profoundly complex relationship between tactical developments and their strategic implications. NATO is a useful tool for reflecting the political aspirations of its 26 members. However, the rules and procedures in NATO limit the effectiveness of its multinational military operations, thereby creating strategic liabilities and confusion over the unity of command and mission. Also, NATO provides insurgents, seeking to affect public opinion in NATO member countries, with a wider array of vulnerable targets. Nevertheless, if consensus to act and commit sufficient resources exists, it can play an important role in creating conditions in which insurgency is not likely to emerge. NATO's operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina after 1995 provide a functional model based on an effective international peace agreement, a speedy and sizeable deployment of forces, a clear mission, and contributions to a secure environment that allowed other institutions to engage in long-term nation-building.

In Afghanistan, the international community did not apply the Bosnia-Herzegovina model. First, unlike in Bosnia, an effective peace accord accepted by all the engaged parties was not achieved, thus allowing the possibility of a revisionist insurgency to emerge. Second, NATO was engaged late in Afghanistan, and with far too few troops. It is hard to know what would have been the 'optimal' number of troops, but in a permissive environment NATO fielded 60,000 troops for Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995. Between 6,000 and 18,500 troops (with only approximately 8,000 in the areas where intense combat was occurring) was insufficient for a country of Afghanistan's size, complexities, and strategic importance to global security. Third, the NATO consensus excluded combat and allowed for national caveats that hampered command and control authority. More countries meant more targets for a sustained war of attrition and a test of wills. Yet only a handful of NATO members had the will or capacity to wage war against the enemy that would be attacking them. Because of the lack of stability, the process of long-term nation-building by the international community was severely hampered. Afghanistan was, by 2006, slipping back into a chaotic environment with a weak government increasingly threatened by a resurgent Taliban, al-Qaeda, and local warlords.

In preparing for a 'long war' of global counter-insurgency in the 21st century, there will be a high demand for an integrated multinational capacity. For NATO to emerge as an important actor in global security, it must engage successfully with this challenge. NATO could become a global centre for the training of coalition and indigenous forces for a wide range of military and civilian COIN operations. It could provide educational and training opportunities not just for the military, but also for multinational police, the private sector, agencies involved in infrastructure-building, and non-governmental organizations all of which need the coordination that NATO can provide. NATO could also expand its information-gathering and analysis capacity, for example, by providing databases for geospatial mapping,

shared intelligence and analysis, demographic research, and public opinion survey data, which are essential for calibrating in-theatre tactics. A central part of that education mission could be a multinational centre for intensive language training and cultural study before out-of-area deployment. Meanwhile, indigenous forces could be trained in NATO-country languages. NATO will need sustained effective public information campaigns targeted both at audiences in a theatre of operations and towards home governments to maintain public support for dangerous operations. This public affairs task is particularly challenging. It is hard enough for national public relations spokespersons to speak on behalf of a government. In the case of NATO, an individual spokesperson must represent the position of 26 countries. However, such campaigns to win hearts and minds must be rooted in the hard realities on the ground, in particular so that public opinion in NATO countries is steered in advance for any tactical shocks that might come from its deployment of troops to engage in counter-insurgency. These would not be minor adaptations and in fact, would amount to a fundamental transformation of NATO.

Operationally, NATO made an important capabilities enhancement by creating a Rapid Response Force in 2002. Now deployable, this force can surge troop levels in key areas at important times, such as during elections or other political targets of opportunity for insurgents. However, this force is small, not sustainable for extended periods, and might face pressures for multiple deployments at a given period of time. Indeed, at the very time when NATO force levels came under scrutiny in mid-2006 for being too low, the European members of NATO were coming under significant international pressure to deploy sizeable forces to police southern Lebanon following the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The emphasis on the Rapid Response Force as a hallmark programme for NATO also served as a distraction from investing in force-generation models for peace support and stabilization operations among member states – which NATO had previously done well in the Balkans. NATO can also play an important role in crisis-response management in supporting civil response in the event of mass destruction terrorist events carried out as part of an insurgency campaign. Finally, NATO needs a much more integrated and complementary relationship with the European Union, given that, ultimately, the primary means of undermining insurgency will be political and civilian-oriented, supported by military capabilities.

NATO must undergo considerably more adaptation if it is to be a strategic contributor to counter-insurgency. It is, nevertheless, a means to an end, not an end in itself. It depends on the willingness of its members to utilize it and invest capabilities in it. If NATO fails in Afghanistan, and it well might, this would not necessarily be an institutional failure, but rather, because its members failed to engage with their fullest possible commitment or to work to attain a level of consensus sufficient to support the mission. If, however, it is the case that NATO is not up to the task in Afghanistan, then another mechanism for stabilizing that country will be necessary, given the strategic consequences of failure. For NATO to have lasting relevance it will have to reflect the reality of modern warfare – beginning by recognizing that, at the strategic level, the organization has significant liabilities. On the other hand, if it eventually succeeds in Afghanistan, the tactical support that it provided there would help to make a strong case for its further adaptation for the future. Nonetheless, as this article shows,

realism suggests that such future adaptations are unlikely. NATO might still have some important post-Cold War functions to play but it is essential to recognize that its role in COIN is likely to remain limited, at best, to very unusual circumstances, and in the worst case, could even be counterproductive.

NOTES

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