



Operationally Agile but Strategically Lacking: NATO's Bruising Years in Afghanistan

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

For more than twenty years, NATO engaged in security assistance in Afghanistan. The engagement represented a colossal politico-military investment in regime renewal. The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 defines a defeat for NATO, we argue. Defeat followed in part from NATO's strategy deficit: the alliance did not adequately focus on Afghanistan's political fundamentals; it committed to a 'comprehensive approach' campaign blueprint that defied reality; and its decision-making process was too cumbersome and too loaded with political interests to correct course. We also argue that part of the reason for failure resides outside of NATO and with the multiple other actors involved in the conflict. Faced with such complexity, NATO in fact proved operationally agile and resilient. We find that NATO is aware of this challenge of 'operational agility but strategic deficit' but that there is no quick fix to what is, essentially, a leadership issue. NATO will improve only if key allies do more to lead *in* NATO and not *for* NATO.

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KEYWORDS:

NATO; Afghanistan; alliance;
crisis management;
comprehensive approach;
United Nations; Taliban;
strategy; consultations;
adaption

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Rynning S, Hilde PS.
Operationally Agile but
Strategically Lacking: NATO's
Bruising Years in Afghanistan.
LSE Public Policy Review. 2022;
2(3): 8, pp. 1–11. DOI: [https://
doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.55](https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.55)

Some six months following its unexpected and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, NATO found itself confronted with state-on-state war in Europe where Russia invaded Ukraine and, incredulously, pinned the blame on NATO. The war for Ukraine commanded attention to the point where NATO's Afghan years appeared a distant memory. Yet the timing of the Ukraine war suggests that NATO adversaries such as Russia took stock of NATO's Afghan experience and sensed an opportunity. It is thus critical for every security analyst and official to revisit NATO's mission in Afghanistan and derive lessons [1].

We argue in this article that NATO experienced a defeat in Afghanistan and that Afghan-related politico-strategic learning in NATO does not run deep and will likely have a limited impact on NATO's main policy dossiers in the future. In this respect, Afghanistan represents failure for NATO. Over the course of almost two decades of expeditionary operations in Afghanistan, at an immense cost to both Afghan and NATO member societies, little has been achieved. We have seen an inability to coordinate more closely and effectively with other key stakeholders in the Afghan game; the marginalization of the Alliance in the final years of diplomatic outreach to the Taliban; and the sudden collapse of the training mission in August 2021 followed by the return of the Taliban to Afghan government.

Further, we argue that the mission to rebuild Afghanistan post-2001 defies easy categorization and interpretation, and thus that one should be careful not to place NATO at the front and center of every dimension of the mission. To a large extent, the mission has been American.¹ The United States began Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 without taking up NATO's offer of collective defense involvement. Moreover, the United States maintained an enemy-centric counter-terrorist mission in parallel to NATO's mission to stabilize the government and enable economic and social development. The United States dominated the military effort, but it has also been the biggest donor in the reconstruction and governance effort.

While US aid was more-or-less coordinated with the US military effort (though not necessarily NATO's), the United Nations (UN) and national development agencies that provided more than half of the total civilian aid were sometimes reluctant to coordinate with a politico-military alliance such as NATO.² The humanitarian agencies of the UN were among the most principled eschewers. Coordination has also been lacking with the Afghan parties, including the political elite that formed around President Karzai, who was in office from 2002–2014. Rather than build national institutions, they have funneled public money into private networks and ventures. Finally, Pakistan, India, Iran, China, and Russia have pursued interests that sometimes conflicted with the UN-mandated institution-building to which NATO was tied.

As well as noting where NATO has struggled, it should be noted that it has been hugely resilient while navigating a sea of significant geopolitical complexity. This resilience has included an ability to adapt to changing and challenging conditions on the ground and, to a considerable extent, a willingness to put its money where its mouth is. We shall explore this resiliency in section one of the article.

We then turn to shortcomings that touch directly on NATO in section two. There we explore the complexity of the overall Afghan mission and NATO's stubborn adherence to coordination—its so-called 'Comprehensive Approach'. In theory, NATO should run security assistance, other organizations should run governance and development, and all of them should coordinate. In reality, NATO's operational footprint grew so large that the responsibility for Afghanistan's political settlement fell in large parts to NATO, but allies shied away from this reality [4]. In section three we turn to NATO in-house consultations, or the lack thereof that help explain this lack of strategic pragmatism. We can identify several instances of significant allied input into the campaign, but over time alliance decision-making grew disjointed and, by the time of the Trump presidency (2017–2021), distinctively limited on the core issue of political settlement.

¹ Perhaps fittingly, there are only three index references to NATO in the main text of Carter Malkasian's *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* where NATO is brought into the history to 'make up for [a US] shortfall' [2 p130]. The US Army's account of the war is differently replete with references to NATO but also how its entry into Afghanistan was 'disjointed,' came with 'fundamental flaws,' and was hampered by the shift of US strategic attention to Iraq [3 p80,84,181].

² Based on multiple interviews conducted in Brussels, Washington DC, and New York in the context of the Norwegian Afghanistan Commission, 2015–2016 [17], in which both authors participated.

Carl von Clausewitz wrote that war is ‘not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse,’ where war is the means and the ‘political object’ the goal [5 Book 1, chapter 1, section 24]. Herein lies the greatest lesson of Afghanistan for NATO: that to master war, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, it must first and foremost invest in the coordinated and coherent political purpose that any war is supposed to serve.

RESILIENT NATO

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were a shock to NATO. They were both unexpected and lethal. Further, they also elicited a separate US response, with the US invading Afghanistan with a coalition force, rather than through NATO. NATO, having invoked its sacrosanct collective defense clause, Article V, on September 12, was marginalized from the outset. To become relevant in Afghanistan, it had to pass through a number of ‘transformation’ efforts, unmooring NATO from its regional confines and making the alliance fit for purpose in an age of global wars on terror [6 paragraph 4].

At the beginning of the war on terror, NATO had little in the way of a concrete role.

Instead, it was aiding individual allies, such as Britain, Germany, and Turkey, which ran the early International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that followed from a UN mandate to support an Afghan political settlement [7]. NATO’s collective operational entry into Afghanistan therefore first involved a decision in April 2003 to take command of ISAF, then a decision in December to expand ISAF from Kabul to the Afghan regions—in accordance with a new UN mandate and in respect of military conditions.

This first phase of NATO resilience thus involves a political-military effort to engineer NATO’s advance from a position of irrelevance to ISAF command. It represented a hard-fought compromise inside NATO where France remained skeptical of any NATO command outside the Euro-Atlantic area. The United States had no clear vision of what would come next in Afghanistan because its strategic focus had moved to Iraq. Britain was somewhat favorable to a broader NATO role but also transitioning out of Afghanistan after having taken the first ISAF lead, while Germany, Canada, and the Netherlands, set to invest in ISAF, sought NATO’s help. In short, the decision of April 2003 to take ISAF command represented a collective decision to reaffirm NATO’s security relevance.

This leap into relevance inevitably sowed the seeds of new challenges, though. First, the expectations of the political class were for an intervention that went beyond Kabul’s borders, while having little appetite for providing the troop numbers needed for a national campaign. This left NATO in a position where it had to commit to a large functional expansion across Afghanistan’s geography but with small force numbers: large because it foresaw the expansion of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) across Afghanistan; small because NATO foresaw a need for limited military protection elements for each PRT.

Secondly, where military orthodoxy calls for ‘unity of command,’ the assistance mission and the expected predominance of civilian reconstruction and development inside the PRTs meant that NATO did not seek this type of command. Instead, it offered an umbrella of protection under ISAF, which it commanded, and then sought partnership with reconstruction and development agencies along the loose and ephemeral principle of ‘unity of effort.’

By December 2003, NATO had its Operational Plan for the expanded ISAF (OPLAN 10302) in place, but this was just the beginning of a lengthy rollout of the now Afghanistan-wide national security assistance mission. The full rollout was not completed until late 2006, and was done with limited resources, in that ISAF consisted of a total of 35,000 dispersed troops. Simultaneously, the Taliban insurgency was gaining strength, notably in southern and eastern provinces adjacent to Pakistan.

NATO’s ability to withstand the early encounters with the insurgency, broadly over the years 2005–2008, speaks to its resilience. None of the allies had prepared for such an armed conflict at a strategic distance from Europe, and NATO and ISAF were generally wrongfooted through these years by an innovative and carefully planned insurgency.³ ISAF’s first overview of its

³ The insurgent offensive that NATO ran into in 2006–2007 was decided in 2003 by the newly formed Taliban leadership council, the Quetta Shura, and carefully prepared for southern Afghanistan in the intervening years by Mullah Dadullah Lang, a notorious experienced and hardline commander.

national campaign—so-called placemat—showed a coherent arrangement of five regional commands and 26 PRTs [8], but this coherence belied the reality, which was a struggle to define the type of war NATO had on its hands. ‘Stabilization’ in effect meant that counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (COIN) remained outside ISAF’s remit—ranging from black operations to the capture, detainment, and interrogation of enemy fighters to the training of local forces. Having organized for stabilization, moreover, ISAF had no strategic reserve capable of moving rapidly to flash points of fighting—which inhibited its efficacy and frustrated NATO’s most exposed allies, particularly in the southern and eastern provinces of the country.

NATO was able to overcome these years of frustration when the Obama administration from 2009 on made Afghanistan a key national security priority (the Bush surge in Iraq had terminated in 2008). The Obama surge created an influx of troops and civilian advisors as well as an adjusted strategic framework along counterinsurgency lines. NATO now accepted COIN as its strategic approach and broadened ISAF’s remit to include the training of Afghan security and defense forces. There were limits to this flexibility—prisons, interrogations, and black ops remained off limits—but ISAF’s operational blueprint changed, and NATO funneled more resources into it.

A final and significant phase of NATO resilience was visible at the off-ramping phase of the surge when NATO needed to upgrade its political approach to Afghanistan to allow for military de-escalation. In 2010, NATO and Afghanistan entered an Enduring Partnership, and NATO appointed a Senior Civilian Representative with enhanced staff to guide NATO in the transition to greater Afghan security responsibilities. The focus was to prepare NATO to move from ISAF to a scaled-down training mission. The latter, Resolute Support, began in January 2015 and lasted until its collapse in August 2021.

In hindsight, it is obvious that NATO’s transition effort from 2010, was inadequately attuned to the major political and institutional flaws in Afghanistan, and we shall address these shortly. However, it is worth underscoring the degree to which NATO sought to give substance to its long-term assistance programme, reflecting the Alliance’s 2010 decision to place crisis management on a par with collective defense in its new Strategic Concept [9].

At its November 2010 summit, NATO offered Afghanistan a policy package consisting of enhanced liaisons; a trust fund to support Afghan forces; a training mission (Resolute Support); and a wider Enduring Partnership program designed to reinforce a parallel US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement [10]. With these measures, NATO innovated its security practice. Still, it was clear that the supposedly conditions-based transition still conveyed the sense that allies were wanting out and that it struggled to give sufficient attention to the political preconditions needed for security transition.⁴ This raises questions about political ownership of the wider Afghan campaign and NATO’s ability to manage such ownership.

THE RELUCTANT OWNER

Once NATO committed to commanding and rolling ISAF out across Afghanistan and did so partly in a collective reply to the divisive war in Iraq, it was clear that the Alliance would be saddled with a heavy political responsibility. Yet, NATO resisted this. It was ready to offer security assistance, but unwilling to own the overarching campaign. Instead, NATO looked for leadership it could enable, as opposed to collectively offering. It first looked to the UN, before turning to US leadership. The resulting ‘enabling NATO’ came at the cost of ‘strategic NATO’ and, in effect, the Alliance’s collective ability to read and shape the battlefield of which it was a part.

Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer presciently captured the challenge NATO faced in undertaking comprehensive institutional collaboration, observing that ‘NATO cannot steer the process’ because ‘NATO is not a nation-builder.’ In contrast, the United Nations is, and the steering wheel should thus be in UN hands [4 p153]. But the UN could not build a nation that required such a massive combat mission as ISAF. The principle of ‘unity of effort’ and then the

⁴ Planning for transition was integral to the Obama surge and began early in 2010. See [11]. Within about a year, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates felt compelled to caution that ‘there is too much talk about leaving and not enough talk about getting the job done right’ [12].

so-called ‘comprehensive approach’ followed, but these principles hid a reality of dispersed efforts, inadequate coordination, and a marked deficit of campaign leadership.

In going along with this vain theory of nation-building, NATO incurred liabilities on a par with other international organizations, such as central UN bodies across UN agencies and national relief and development agencies. The question we must ask is why NATO did not react more forcefully once the discrepancy between its Afghan footprint and its theory significantly grew, and what this means for NATO as a politico-military alliance. Three points stand out.

First, it is important to note that by the time NATO expanded its presence in Afghanistan, institution-building was the common answer to how to cure the ills of so-called failed states. This was not a NATO policy expertise, but European allies were particularly eager to explore this method to bolster NATO’s ‘security assistance’ mission [2 p 84]. The allies did notably not seek ‘big ISAF’s’ fusion with the counterterrorist mission run by a US-led coalition, but rather its merger with the institution-building strategy advocated by a multitude of international actors, including the UN, the G8, and the EU. In early 2006, when NATO was preparing ISAF’s expansion into southern Afghanistan, the international community and the government of Afghanistan reached agreement on an ‘Afghanistan Compact’—a roadmap for supporting Afghan capacity building. In parallel, the Afghan government developed an ‘Afghan National Development Strategy’ for connecting the state to its citizens [13, 14]. Afghanistan thus gained the ‘double compact’—from government to international community, and from government to citizens—that the later Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, among others, held out as a prescription for state-building [15].

Second, NATO allies were aware of the need to infuse clear leadership into such a broad-based campaign. Streams of policy development ran through all allied capitals, but particularly noteworthy is the US National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD) 44 of December 2005. NSPD 44 set a course of action in that it called for greatly enhanced government-wide coordination for the purpose of stabilization assistance [16]. Moreover, it directly affected NATO, which began a search for its proper ‘comprehensive’ stabilization policy (which in 2006–2008 would become NATO’s Comprehensive Approach Action Plan, CAAP, and a tailored plan for Afghanistan, the Comprehensive Strategic Political-Military Plan, CSPMP).⁵ Simultaneously, leading allies, notably the United States and Britain, sought to fuse development and governance in a strengthened UN ‘special representative’ office. Here, the two governments put forward Paddy Ashdown, who had significant relevant experience from his time as a UN high representative in Bosnia.

Third, the fact that these measures often had limited effect was not NATO’s fault alone. The involvement of other nations, including in UN votes, meant that NATO had to compete with antagonistic players, like Russia, who could both shape UN mandates for ISAF and resist wider cooperation agreements between NATO and the UN. In 2006, when NATO sought such an agreement, the prospect of a Russian veto led the UN and NATO general secretaries to settle for a written declaration of intent entered by the organizations’ secretariats. Even so, Russia still protested this limited measure of rapprochement. Another player was Afghan president Karzai who in early 2008 effectively vetoed the idea of strengthening the UN special representative.

All this left NATO in a contested field of institution-building by a novel comprehensive approach that key actors refused to play along with. By 2005–2007, when the first wave of insurgency hit its national ISAF footprint, NATO could have thought differently about its priorities. In particular, it could have sought to revisit and broaden the Afghan political bargain of Bonn (2001) to stabilize the political bedrock of the country’s institutions. Instead, it doubled down on building the institutions delineated in Bonn and doing so in an untested and loose comprehensive approach-network. The allies thus did not pay adequate attention to nature of the underlying Afghan political bargain that proved the Achilles’ heel of twenty years’ worth of stabilization effort:⁶

- The key competition inside Afghanistan was not one of nationhood (or identity) but of power. In this respect, Afghanistan differed greatly from Iraq.
- The establishment of a central government in 2002 entailed the empowering of the Northern Alliance, which moved into all key security and defense ministries and functions.

⁵ These documents are classified, but for a discussion see [4 p145–146].

⁶ These critical points emerge from the authors’ research in the context of the official Norwegian Afghanistan inquiry, 2015–16 [17], of which the authors were a part.

- The rejection of reconciliation initiatives from Taliban ranks in 2002–2003 implied both a failure of political inclusion and a bias of state power.
- The international and regional coalition that supported Afghan stabilization early on soon broke down, meaning neighbors such as Pakistan, India, and Iran emerged as critical power brokers and/or spoilers.

The bet of NATO and other organizations and agencies that the Afghan state could be reinforced to the point where it could ‘out-govern’ its opponents proved vain in the face of this political condition. NATO forces fought valiantly, but NATO governments did not come to grips with Afghanistan’s domestic and regional balance of power problem on which the country’s institutional development depended. NATO renounced taking on political ownership of the war effort: thus, as a collective whole, NATO did not adequately wrestle with the ‘political object’ that war serves.

THE TIMID ALLIANCE

It is not front-page news that the United States occupies the predominant position in NATO and did so throughout the Afghan campaign. More surprising is the timidity of NATO strategy, which at first was due to US political reluctance, then to the complexity of offering strategic leadership in both a national and, even more so, a multinational setting. As the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has emphasized: ‘The US government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve’ [18].

In order for NATO to be effective, there had to be foresight and early engagement. This was lacking in Afghanistan from the outset. The lesson for NATO is that campaign design is critically important. Once NATO is set on a course, the multinational setting of decision-making turns complex and resistant to change. Where individual governments with a single center of decision-making can more easily adjust course and adapt strategy, multinational political fatigue and operational wear and tear are formidable breaks on such adaptation. Caveats and operational reservations come to predominate instead of strategic counsel and adaptation. Limited campaign design and multinational complexity meant that NATO suffered for the remainder of the campaign.

In 2001–2002, much American reluctance was wound up in the fact that the Bush Administration did not envision taking a leading role in post-war Afghanistan. Consequently, they offered little guidance to NATO, nor assumed the traditional US leading role in NATO action. President Bush and, most explicitly, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld were not interested in being drawn into nation-building [19]. While the United States came to see the utility of leaving greater responsibility for Afghanistan to NATO and allies, its interest in designing and guiding the ISAF mission was limited.

This left room for allies, and they did step up. Canada, the Netherlands, and Germany drove the replacement of rotational ISAF leadership with NATO command [20]. Likewise, Germany greatly shaped the December 2003 decision to expand NATO-led ISAF [21]. Under pressure to do more, notably from Congress, the Bush administration enhanced its reconstruction efforts in winter 2002–2003 by establishing PRTs in Afghan regions.⁷ To follow suit, Germany wanted NATO as the framework, and in August 2003 took the initiative to expand ISAF and offer PRTs as ‘ISAF Islands’ of security [23].

These efforts by US allies to shape the campaign continued as ISAF expanded. Denmark played a lead role in the 2006 adoption of the Comprehensive Approach, as did Germany and Norway in 2007–2009 in respect to establishing a political dialogue with the Taliban. Apart from healing the transatlantic rift over Iraq, a key motive for this activism was that for European allies, Afghanistan was the ‘good war’ long before President Barack Obama coined the term. ISAF was not only legally and politically uncontroversial, but in 2002–2003, Karzai, the UN, and international aid organizations repeatedly requested its expansion and that NATO take charge.⁸

⁷ In December 2002, Congress passed the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, which stressed among other the need for ‘improving security throughout the country’ [22].

⁸ On June 17, 2003, for instance, the International Rescue Committee and CARE International sent a statement to NATO signed by 80 NGOs calling for «the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond Kabul in Afghanistan under NATO’s leadership» [24].

The unexpected strength of the insurgency that met ISAF forces in Southern Afghanistan in 2006, did shake NATO's confidence, however, and eroded allied initiatives. There was agreement to support Comprehensive Approach strategy, leading to the CAAP and the CSPMP, but on the security side, and increasingly beyond it, the allies began looking to the United States for leadership.

President Obama offered renewed leadership when he put General Stanley McChrystal in charge of ISAF and US forces in Afghanistan in June 2009. Bursting with self-confidence, McChrystal's offered a way forward already in his initial assessment: COIN [25]. While COIN had been unpalatable to many allies until then, it now took just four months and essentially no debate for NATO defense ministers to adopt it as ISAF's new tailored strategy [26].

At the same time, NATO headquarters continued its work on the CAAP and CSPMP, but by 2009 these Comprehensive Approach policies had become bureaucratic processes of no real impact. Strategy had been Americanized: it was set either by the US commander in Kabul or by officials in Washington, D.C. The US commander of ISAF did answer to NATO, but the most important chain of command clearly was the one that ended with the US president.

US strategy did not stabilize, however. Its grand COIN strategy had a definite time limit: from 2011, the surge would subside, and Afghan authorities would gradually be put in charge. The initial condition-based transition thus became time-based. The US-led NATO strategy consequently morphed into one based on continued Afghan capacity-building in the Resolute Support Mission (RSM), combined with an active search for a political settlement. Under Obama, this strategy languished, while under President Trump, it was short-circuited with his February 2020 agreement with the Taliban to withdraw all foreign troops by May 1, 2021, more or less unconditionally. Even though he did not respect the May deadline, Trump's successor, President Biden upheld the decision to withdraw in 2021.

Sitting and former US decision-makers regularly argue in lessons-learned discussions that their allies are too timid; they should not only put forward their own ideas more forcefully, but also challenge those of the United States. However, to expect allies to be able to change a determined United States is to exaggerate their potential influence on US decision-making. Even when determined to work through NATO, the United States can be resistant to allied input on critical issues. There is plenty of evidence for this, with allies vainly protesting that US night raids, rendition and enhanced interrogation methods undermined the overall campaign, and that an unconditional, time-driven withdrawal was unwise, all to no effect. The United States, once it has settled on a strategy, does not usually let a multinational committee working in Brussels change it. But allies can have influence in other areas. Once a campaign gets off to a bad start, NATO's multinational character offers ample opportunity for allies to resist grand new leadership initiatives. The Obama surge is a case in point: it changed the overall campaign strategy, but allies (and partners) caveated their interpretation and implementation of the changes. Earlier, in 2008, the United States sought to expand ISAF's targeting of the narcotics trade that funded the insurgency, but ran into explicit and public opposition from Germany [27, 17 p188-189].

Two generic aspects thus seem to characterize the timid alliance: first, that the alliance got off to a bad start and so immediately sparked political frustrations, particularly given the lack of collectively agreed-to strategy; second, that later efforts to set things right, even where backed by heavy US investment, suffered from political reservations and operational caveats. When the US started to funnel great resources into the campaign from around 2008-2009, it distorted more than solved NATO's strategic challenge because Washington, DC, began short-circuiting collective strategy, and allies offered caveats in return. Prior to this point, NATO had two opportunities to put its engagement on proper collective tracks: in the fall of 2001, in crafting a response to the 9/11 attacks, and then in 2003-2005 when big ISAF rolled out. The first opportunity was lost on account of US reluctance; the second on account of the strategic pull of the Iraq war. NATO timidity in Afghanistan, even as ISAF grew and surged, followed.

IS NATO LEARNING LESSONS?

At the November 2021 meeting of foreign ministers in Riga, NATO published a factsheet on its 'Afghanistan Lessons Learned Process.' Through seven meetings of the committee of deputy

national representatives, NATO conducted a ‘comprehensive review’ based on written input from the International Staff and oral contributions from 19 ‘experts providing historical, political, operational, and cultural perspectives on NATO’s involvement’ [28].⁹ The committee’s chair—the then Assistant Secretary General for Operations, John Manza—presented a chairman’s report that was ‘reviewed and discussed by the North Atlantic Council at Permanent Representatives and Foreign Ministers levels’ [28]. While the full report remains classified, its core findings and recommendations were subsequently published.

To some, the breadth of this review may seem inadequate in comparison to the work put into some national Afghanistan reviews.¹⁰ However, to our knowledge and NATO’s credit, NATO is the only international organization involved in Afghanistan that has conducted such a strategic review. Moreover, and more importantly, the Alliance’s published lessons do address some of the core issues and challenges it experienced in Afghanistan.

On a positive note, NATO’s lessons emphasize that the Alliance’s engagement had ‘demonstrated the immense strength of Allies working in pursuit of a common goal’ and strengthened ‘the political integration and military interoperability of Allied and Partner forces, thus increasing the Alliance’s overall political strength and combat capabilities.’ As we also argue above, the Afghanistan years have indeed demonstrated the Alliance’s adaptability and resilience.

On a critical note, the factsheet stresses the magnitude of the international engagement, which “went far beyond degrading terrorist safe havens.” While taking credit for “significant gains in the fight against terrorism”, it concludes that “the wider ambition of building a stable Afghanistan, while not without important gains, proved extremely challenging.” In “future operations,” the factsheet continues, “Allies should continuously assess strategic interests, [...] and seek to avoid taking on commitments that go well beyond assigned tasks. NATO should establish realistic and achievable goals and seek increased participation by other international actors who are better suited to deliver those non-military effects.”

The lessons learned report thus essentially remains committed to the core message of the Comprehensive Approach: namely, that NATO should support stabilization and institution-building by taking its share of responsibility within a loose unity-of-effort framework. This is not surprising, but as we underscored, the problem is the lack of a hand on the campaign steering wheel, which is especially unsettling when the campaign involves a significant military component. The UN cannot take control of such a campaign. The United States may try but will then run into the reality of entrenched political pluralism, such as they did inside ISAF’s campaign, where the 26 nationally run PRTs defied unity of command.

As noted in the introduction, allies seem tempted to draw a mainly unarticulated lesson from the stabilization operations in Afghanistan (and in Iraq): just don’t do it. However, the NATO lessons learned fact sheet explicitly warns against taking this lesson too far: In ‘a more dangerous and complex global security environment [...] crisis management should [...] remain a core Alliance task.’ Clearly, NATO is teeing itself up for continued crisis management engagement in its next Strategic Concept (to be adopted in June 2022). However, before NATO engages anew in ‘train, advise and assist missions,’ it needs to operationalize what it means to ‘carefully consider the political and cultural norms of the host nation and the ability of that society to absorb capacity building and training.’

Above all, NATO must anchor its engagement in collectively agreed campaign design from the very outset. Illusions of, or ambitions for, campaign leadership will not suffice. Collective leadership will not come easily, but the temptation to forego it and look to the alliance leader, the United States, carries significant risks. As SIGAR notes in a recent report: ‘The US government was simply not equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter the budget’ [18].

A further main lesson emphasized in the NATO lessons learned report partly mirrors our analysis: the lack of strategic consultations at NATO Headquarters. The factsheet notes that ‘[r]eporting from the field during the ISAF and Resolute Support eras was frequently delayed and

⁹ The second author participated as one of these experts at the third meeting, primarily to present the findings of the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan.

¹⁰ By comparison, the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan conducted 21 meetings covering about 50 days and interviewed more than 330 witnesses, ranging from President Ashraf Ghani to Norwegian Army privates.

encumbered by procedures, thus making it difficult for Allies to effectively evaluate and provide relevant direction for the mission.’ At issue here are principally the so-called Periodic Mission Reviews, which according to standard NATO procedures are submitted on biannual basis [29].¹¹

Beyond these mission reviews, the broader point is that NATO Headquarters got inadequate feedback from commanders and other representatives in the field. The tendency of commanders (as well as politicians and other leaders) to present upbeat accounts of the achievements of their own efforts is well known, and in many ways a result of political and institutional logics. To remedy the challenge of reporting, the factsheet proposes that ‘Allies should consider mechanisms to improve the timeliness and relevance of reporting from the field and for more interactive discussions in the Council.’

Interestingly, the report goes on to state the following: ‘Allies would have benefitted for [sic] more meaningful discussions on the negotiations of the US-Taliban agreement.’ Noting that ‘the consultations in February-March’ of 2021 ‘were open, sincere and clear,’ this open criticism of the Trump administration’s failure to consult with allies is arguably more important than the challenge of reporting. If the United States wants to maintain and build on its trust in NATO, it must lead *in* NATO, not *for* the Alliance.

It seems that the leadership at NATO headquarters, from the Secretary General downwards, has a particularly important role to play in improving the ways and means of information flows and situational awareness. Ultimately, these should stimulate more relevant political debates in the decision-making chamber, the NAC. It is well within the mandate of organizational leaders to prepare the grounds for such political debate and, if nations resist offering needed information, to set the NAC agenda in such a way that the lack of information, and thus the threat to the campaign, itself becomes a topic for debate.

CONCLUSION

We return to Clausewitz’s fundamental question of political purpose. As a regional security organization with a global footprint, NATO must invest in fundamental political discussions as to what the Alliance is and what it should strive to achieve. Twenty years of campaigning in Afghanistan underscore this point, as does the subsequent war in Ukraine initiated by Russia. Whether NATO is seeking to solve other countries’ crises or establish effective defense and deterrence, the Alliance must communicate clear ambitions and back these with credible diplomacy and defense muscle.

From Afghanistan emerges the lesson that NATO first and foremost must improve the ability of the NAC to become aware of and engage the stakes involved in campaign design; it must resist becoming a mere add-on to campaigns spearheaded by individual nations or coalition forces; and it must take responsibility for its political-military nature by dedicating greater leadership resources in pursuit of the political objectives that the use of armed force is intended to serve.

In Afghanistan, NATO proved operationally agile but strategically lacking. This combination led NATO to the defeat it and the international community suffered in August 2021 when the Taliban regained power. History teaches by analogy, and so Afghanistan and Vietnam are not identical cases, but books such as Max Hasting’s *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy* are striking for the similarities they conjure to the Afghan campaign [31]. The analogy reminds us that ‘never again’ will only last for so long. Moreover, it highlights the marked need for frank and honest (NATO) discussions of political purpose. A multinational campaign will always be pregnant with multiple purposes (defeating an adversary; building a new government; validating the alliance; securing related geopolitical gains, etc.), and so it is incumbent upon those in charge of it to prioritize among these purposes and align resources accordingly.

NATO is not closing the book on crisis management, as we saw. Nor is NATO beyond the business of state-on-state war, as Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and on the doorstep of NATO territory vividly reminds us. Thus, NATO leaders owe it to NATO publics and to NATO troops to fully digest the overriding lesson of Afghanistan: that it is their responsibility to offer a NATO strategy worth its name.

¹¹ NATO submitted a similar type of reports at regular intervals to the UN, based on the Security Council mandate of mission [See 30].

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Rynning S, Hilde PS.
Operationally Agile but
Strategically Lacking: NATO's
Bruising Years in Afghanistan.
LSE Public Policy Review. 2022;
2(3): 8, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.55>

Submitted: 12 January 2022

Accepted: 09 March 2022

Published: 02 May 2022

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