



INTRODUCTION

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1. Introduction

The war in Afghanistan that began in October 2001 was never straightforward for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), although the rationale for an early and strong engagement was overpowering. NATO responded to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 with an Article 5 declaration that laid the ground for the activation of collective self-defense. Alas, as NATO stood on the brink of going to war, the W. Bush administration sent its Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, to Brussels to argue before NATO that this war would be fought differently, not by collective alliance but an ad hoc coalition. NATO's engagement in Afghanistan came about nonetheless, although only in 2003-2004, as the United Nations International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) needed capable operational agents, and as individual NATO allies realized that they simply could not rotate in and out of Afghanistan and merely coordinate moves in NATO's Belgian headquarters – in Brussels and Mons. NATO was needed on the Afghan ground as a permanent command and control and support infrastructure. Such was the relief in NATO that the Alliance had proved able to take on this mission at a time when the Iraq war had nearly fractured it, that it agreed to expand ISAF in a counter-clockwise move to cover all of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan was now also NATO's war, although the hope was that NATO could do mere "security assistance" as the ISAF initials indicated. Those initials had been penned in Bonn in December 2001, however, and reality on the ground had evolved considerably by the time NATO moved into Pashtun regions by 2006. The insurgency blew up in NATO's face, and NATO had to fight a war that was maybe not conventional but certainly as ruthless and difficult as any war. It was a real war, in other words, and arguably NATO's first real war. Compounding this challenge was the geographical spread of NATO forces that resulted in the skewed sharing of burdens and, inevitably, disputes over the nature of the mission. Was NATO there to fight or rebuild? NATO slowly realized that the Taliban insurgency could be met only with a "comprehensive approach" bringing together a whole network of security, development, and governance organizations but the realization offered little relief. A network of vastly different actors could hardly be expected to provide the "unity of mission" that had proved beyond NATO's capacity, and comprehensiveness raised new and fundamental questions about the nature of the Alliance that infested operational debates.

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The Alliance managed to pull itself together for the April 2008 Bucharest summit and provide a strategic vision for its Afghan engagement. This vision had been lacking, as the Alliance hitherto had trusted the “vision thing” to the Afghan government and the UN. The 2008 NATO vision, which was adopted by all ISAF contributors and thus became “ISAF’s Strategic Vision,” was anchored inside the Alliance in a comprehensive action plan for Afghanistan that ties together distinct lines of operations and focuses their energy on particular issues that the allies deem of critical importance in the evolving Afghan context: securing an election or building a training capacity. Revealingly, this strategic effort has taken place while the United States increasingly has taken the lead – both within the Alliance but also in parallel to it. Americanization, is the appropriate label. The United States now provides more troops than ISAF contributors combined, and it occupies virtually all key posts in the beefed up ISAF command structure. The ISAF commander, General McChrystal, is still formally reporting to the North Atlantic Council but not only, of course, because he is also a US commander and therefore reports directly to the US Secretary of Defense. Americanization helps us see the rock bottom of NATO – the transatlantic bargain – and it raises the question of what Afghanistan represents and portends for the Alliance.

In this special issue we take stock of NATO’s Afghan engagement and provide an assessment. At one point, perhaps most clearly in 2007-2008 when NATO had gotten a war on its hands and went in search for a strategy, it became commonplace to argue that NATO cannot survive failure in Afghanistan. The articles in this special issue caution restraint in this anticipation of doom. All contributors find fault in NATO’s organization and doings, for sure. Martin Smith observes a lack of transformation prior to Afghanistan in the context of Balkan out-of-area operations; Stanley Sloan finds poorly coordinated policies on the Afghan ground; Jens Ringsmose and Peter Dahl Thruelsen caution that an alliance may be inherently incapable of fighting a counterinsurgency campaign; Peter Viggo Jakobsen tells us that NATO has been too slow in putting the comprehensive approach into practice as far as Afghanistan goes; Rebecca Moore takes note of a partnership concept that is in need of fundamental rethinking; and James Goldgeier observes, finally, an Alliance that is unable or unwilling to make a difference in the context of US strategy.

But these are not doomsayers. The articles touch on many issues that will need clarification before a “NATO failure” can be identified. For instance, can and should NATO be held responsible for the strength and legitimacy of Afghanistan’s government? Moreover, while NATO provides security, other agents such as the UN must provide development and governance, but have they? Finally, NATO is more than Afghanistan – it has transatlantic, European, and increasingly global foundations – and Americanization may paradoxically provide relief. Americanization implies that NATO could not solve the Afghan problem on its own, which is bad, but it also implies that NATO now can retreat to offer less demanding support in Afghanistan and increase its activities in parallel domains – in relation to Russia and Middle Eastern diplomacy, for instance – where transatlantic security cooperation can reinvent itself, which of course is good for the Alliance.

The jury is still out. Collections of articles rarely make for a punchy argument, and this collection is no different. The articles share the conviction that NATO’s Afghan engagement is critically important to understand if we are to comprehend NATO and the transatlantic relationship it embodies. They are all conceptually informed assessments of world affairs, not tests of alliance theory. Finally, the articles share the hope that scholarly assessments such as these will help provoke new insightful thinking on what NATO means in light of all that is happening in Afghanistan.



2. The Logic of the Special Issue

Afghanistan is a difficult country to deploy into and in which to sustain forces. You need expeditionary forces organized in packages that include the full spectrum of combat support services; you need to be able to move and adapt once you are out there, and you need to be able to supply yourself. Had NATO prepared thoroughly for this kind of warfare through the 1990s, politically as well as militarily, Afghanistan would not have been so difficult. In other words, the Balkans provided an opportunity to begin this process of transformation, and this is also where the special issue begins with Martin Smith's article, "Afghanistan in Context: NATO Out-of-Area Debates in the 1990s." This overview of NATO's recent past is followed by another overview provided by Stanley Sloan in "NATO in Afghanistan."

Martin Smith finds a number of faults in NATO's approach as the Alliance responded to the out-of-area or out-of-business challenge of the 1990s. NATO, Smith concludes, was critical to organizing and implementing the Balkan operations – essentially in Bosnia and Kosovo – because it provided planning capacity, force generation mechanisms, and collective command and control systems. However, at the end of the day NATO did not change its outlook: it remained focused on high-end military operations that it could run autonomously, if needed, instead of the multifunctional peace support operations that the Balkans portended. NATO thus failed to change its doctrine and organization and remained wedded to the standard formula of going out-of-area on "a case-by-case basis" – hardly an urgent call for political reform.

The difficulties encountered by NATO on the Afghan ground therefore ought not to surprise us. Stanley Sloan highlights several of these. The dispersed organization and poor coordination of Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), the divided command and control structure, and the limited involvement in regional diplomacy, notably in the Afghan-Pakistan relationship. However, this does not necessarily detract from NATO's viability, Sloan concludes. NATO continuity is rooted in several issues in Sloan's analysis: the history and practice of transatlantic cooperation; the nature of new threats; the fact that no NATO ally escapes criticism in the Afghan affairs; and perhaps most importantly, the fact that the Alliance continues to inspire people's political imagination.

In these two overviews by Martin Smith and Stanley Sloan the reader will find food for thought in respect to big trends and NATO transformation. Smith and Sloan are essentially asking the reader whether NATO has become more transformable following the war in Afghanistan. Sloan is answering in the affirmative; Smith, not addressing the question directly, is reminding us to at least take a hard look at sources of Alliance inertia.

Three articles follow that address various critical aspects of the Afghan campaign. NATO could not limit itself to the provision of security assistance once it expanded ISAF beyond Kabul, as noted, and it has had to fight a counterinsurgency campaign. Jens Ringsmose and Peter Dahl Thruelsen, in "NATO's Counter-Insurgency Campaign in Afghanistan: Are the Classical Doctrines Suitable for Alliances?" deal with this issue. Counterinsurgency typically involves a broad faceted effort to provide governance, which in NATO language translates into a "comprehensive approach." This is the subject of Peter Viggo Jakobsen's "Right Strategy, Wrong Place: Why NATO's Comprehensive Approach Will Fail in Afghanistan." Finally, a key component of any comprehensive approach is



cooperation among many actors. Rebecca Moore's "NATO's Partners in Afghanistan: Impact and Purpose," examines this type of cooperation.

Ringsmose and Thruelsen rightfully remind us that counterinsurgency is more than benevolent "hearts and minds" operations. It can be very coercive – the classical case of British counterinsurgency in Malaya involved the forced encampment of 400,000 ethnic Chinese, they recall – and is always protracted, labor-intensive, and costly. Their article then skillfully works its way through the strategic, operational and tactical problems this type of campaign has raised for NATO. Their conclusion is that if NATO is to do this, it must happen with clear and overwhelming American leadership. Jakobsen tells us that the outcome will not be shaped by the "comprehensive approach" as adopted by NATO. NATO has simply been too slow in agreeing to it, in organizing it, and in working with partners to make it happen. Jakobsen's discussion of these shortcomings draws on great insight into NATO's organization, insights that sustain the argument that the CA is the right policy for the Alliance in the long run. Moore asks us to travel with her around the world as she examines the full scope of NATO's partnerships. In a masterful overview, Moore asks us to zoom in on an underlying question: NATO has traditionally organized partnerships by geography – in order to secure the approaches to Europe – but Afghanistan demands functional partnerships. If it is not the geographical location but functional capacity of a partner that counts, must NATO not then simply go global? This question bedevils NATO as it strives to provide coherence to its partnership policy and back this policy with a real capacity for partnership interaction.

Combined the three articles tell us about NATO's limited ability to provide solutions to some of the concrete problems with which it is faced in Afghanistan – how to fight, how to plan, and how to partner. Ringsmose and Thruelsen suggest that a short term solution lies in American leadership; Jakobsen suggests that NATO in the long run should be capable of comprehensive action. These suggestions may dovetail to the extent that American leadership transforms itself into collective organization and capacity. But will it? Moore's assessment of the partnership issue and her observation that Europeans tend to prefer the good old-fashioned geographical partnerships is food for thought. A collective organization and capacity presupposes a collective purpose that is not threatened by erosion. Moore calls attention to the Strategic Concept that is under review and due for presentation at the Lisbon summit in late 2010, and this exercise will notably indicate the strength of the transatlantic partnership that must carry the Alliance forward.

There is no question that the United States is the first among equals, and this is where the special issue ends. James Goldgeier, in "Making a Difference? Evaluating the Impact of President Barack Obama," asks us to look beyond the facile assumption that transatlanticism prevails once again simply because of an election that replaced W. Bush with Obama. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, NATO has been quick to endorse Obama's Afghan strategy – first in April and then in December 2009. However, Obama's strategy contains contradictions and its main purpose may be, as Goldgeier suggests, to simply kicking the can down the road. Obama refers to the Afghan war as a "war of necessity" and a vital American interest, yet there is no all-out engagement in it. There is a surge, but it is severely limited in duration. There is a desire to focus the fight against Al Qaeda, yet the United States is drawn into Afghan nation-building.

In this sharp and critical dissection of the Obama strategy Goldgeier concludes that NATO figures among Obama's problems, not solutions. NATO provides too few troops and lacks the political willingness to make a difference. Goldgeier's transatlantic forecast is overcast at best. It is an assessment that ties in with Smith's observation of inertia, Jakobsen's



of tardiness, and Moore's of political division. However, Goldgeier's article is also all about an American president striving to provide leadership, which was Ringsmose and Thruelsen's recipe for Alliance strength, and which ties in with Sloan's argument that in the Atlantic arena none are perfect yet all are driven to face the same set of threats.

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in December 2009, President Obama foresaw a globalizing world where peace in parts depends on the legitimate and resolute use of military force. "I understand why war is not popular, but I also know this: The belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it. Peace requires responsibility. Peace entails sacrifice. That's why NATO continues to be indispensable."² Inspired by this collection of articles one might continue the President's train of thoughts by adding that the belief that NATO is indispensable rarely has been enough to make it desirable. Much will depend on the politics of the Afghan war treated in this issue.

² Obama, Barack: "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize", Oslo, Norway (10 December 2009), at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.