

Disjointed Incrementalism

NATO in Afghanistan

As the US-led coalition prepares to extricate itself from a combat role in Afghanistan, it is useful to look back and reflect on the policy dynamic of the original involvement. How did the coalition – and more specifically NATO – become so deeply enmeshed in an out-of-area conflict that proved so difficult and where victory was so elusive? Was the engagement the result of deliberate policy or the cumulative and unwilling outcome of a series of small decisions? At what point were exit strategies considered, if at all? And, what are the implications of this for future engagement of the alliance in out-of-area conflicts? Taking a policy perspective as the point of departure, the author finds that the growing involvement in Afghanistan has been the result of a piecemeal decision-making process, self-perpetuating dynamics and a steady goal expansion that led the alliance into a protracted and controversial war.

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Three Perspectives

The literature on policy analysis offers three relevant frameworks for explanations.

In one perspective, policy is shaped by a fragmented decision-making process, where numerous smaller decisions add up to 'policy'. Each decision is taken in response to specific demands and pressures, but to varying degree in isolation from the broader policy context and without the benefit of an overarching strategy. Thus, low-level process rationalities prevail, particularly the perceived need to protect previous investments by investing more. The overall result is an unplanned, unforeseen and often unwanted course of action with limited possibilities for correction underway. In the language of public policy analysis, this is called 'disjointed incrementalism'; it is also known as a path to a quagmire. A second perspective claims that policymakers realize they are on an unplanned course of action with likely unwanted consequences; they are warned and offered alternatives. Nevertheless, they persist on the doomed course owing to hubris, personal ambition, overriding political considerations or plain 'wooden-headedness'. This is the 'march of folly' that Barbara Tuchman explores (and deplores) in her landmark book of that name.¹ In a third and quite different macro-perspective, policy can best be understood as a reflection of deeper historical and social forces that condition the response of nations or organizations. This is the approach in historical sociology, in its classic form as defined by Marx and Weber.

Keeping these perspectives in mind, let us go back to the autumn of 2001. The US military preferred and planned for a quick engagement in Afghanistan. The preference reflected the weight of institutional memories of the Vietnam War as well as the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. General Tommy Franks, head of the US Central Command, planned for a 'small foreign footprint.... We don't want to repeat the Soviets' mistakes.' For the post-conflict mopping-up operations, he envisioned 'a total of about 10,000 American soldiers, airmen, special operators, and helicopter air assault crews, along with robust in-country close air support'.² The response in other NATO countries was mixed. Several governments contributed to the invasion force (Operation Enduring Freedom), but among

the militaries there was no enthusiasm for the proposed multinational force to stabilize the post-invasion situation. The chief of the UK Defence Staff reportedly threatened to resign rather than accept British command of the first ISAF contingent deployed to Kabul; he only relented when Prime Minister Tony Blair promised that the commitment would be short-lived.³

Nevertheless, ten years later, the international footprint had become massive, and the engagement had become a major test of NATO's credibility in a 21st-century conflict.

General Forces of Involvement

NATO's institutional involvement, which started in March 2003 when the alliance took over command of ISAF, was part of a much larger process of growing international engagement in Afghanistan. Among the many reasons for this process, three stand out.

- National security objectives, framed as an international 'war on terror', had triggered the initial invasion and sustained the continued hunt for Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. When early attempts to defeat the militants failed and instead provoked what turned into a mounting insurgency, the increased troop commitments by the USA and its allies continued for several years to be justified with reference to the 'war on terror'. Only toward the end of the decade – when it became evident that a string of tactical victories did not add up to a decisive strategic advantage but rather disguised a costly stalemate – did the USA under President Barack Obama take the lead in redefining the national security objectives at stake. The result was a greater recognition of the Taliban as a force separate from Al-Qaeda, and some readiness to negotiate with the former while using special forces and airstrikes to deal with the latter.

- Liberal internationalism formed the ideological framework that justified the initial intervention and sustained it. As the 21st century opened, Western visions of liberal internationalism had been given concrete form through policy prescriptions for state-building, peacebuilding and post-conflict economic recovery. The UN had authorized a range of peace operations in the 1990s, and, some setbacks notwithstanding, belief in the ability of the international community to

create stability and progress in war-torn societies had steadily strengthened. Underpinning this belief was the parallel development of a powerful international regime of agencies, organizations and think-tanks that had special skills and vested interests in post-conflict reconstruction. This development peaked with the establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2005. From a peacebuilding perspective, Afghanistan was an obvious case. After nearly two decades of war and upheaval, culminating in the peculiar cruelties imposed by the Taliban regime, the country had huge and self-evident needs for reconstruction and assistance.

The two pillars of the international commitment – fighting 'terrorists' and building peace – interacted in a mutually supportive way to sustain the engagement. The international aid community first accepted as axiomatic that development and security were interdependent (although some insisted on a strict separation of functions). NATO formally endorsed the point with reference to Afghanistan at its Riga summit meeting in November 2006, when the alliance declared that 'there can be no security ... without development, and no development without security'.

- A third factor that expanded the international engagement over time was the assumption that 'more is more' – that is, that the problems that appeared and the slow progress were the result of *insufficient commitment*. In part, this stemmed from the commonly accepted 'lesson learnt' from other post-conflict situations, namely that early and decisive international presence was critical to stabilize the situation >. In this light, the initially cautious commitment of the international community in Afghanistan in 2002–03 appeared as a serious mistake. Subsequent large increases in troops, aid and international consultants were thus considered an essential correction of course. When they in turn did not solve the problem, more was added – with some twists of strategy that it was hoped would turn the situation around: bottom-up state-building rather than top-down, population-centric strategy rather than search-and-destroy missions, informal justice reform rather than formal justice, and so on.

Along the way, two well-known mechanisms of deepening involvement kicked in. Additional commitments were justified in part

with reference to what the international community already had invested in the country ('the investment trap') and – particularly after the insurgency gained force in 2006–07 – in terms of the need to protect the power and status of its main sponsors, above all the USA and NATO. With the stakes thus defined, additional investment seemed necessary (the 'rhetoric trap').

NATO's involvement

The US military had in 2001–02 opposed the formation of a multinational force for the post-invasion stabilization phase. Such a force, it was feared, would get in the way of its own mission to eliminate Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. US refusal to support ISAF initially with logistics and rescue operations effectively vetoed the expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul. Smaller allies were reluctant to sign up without US assistance particularly if the force would be deployed beyond Kabul.

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 changed the situation dramatically. Faced with the demands of the Iraqi theatre on US troops, as well as a still unsettled Afghan conflict, the US government now actively solicited allied contributions to Afghanistan. An expanded ISAF became the main vehicle for managing the enlarged force. Meanwhile, an array of aid agencies, NGOs and human rights activists, along with the UN mission (UNAMA) and the Karzai government, had mounted a veritable campaign to expand ISAF beyond Kabul in order to improve security and facilitate relief and reconstruction. As a result of these combined pressures the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1510 in October 2003, authorizing force expansion to 'areas of Afghanistan outside of Kabul'.

Meanwhile, the practical problems of finding a country able and willing to command ISAF on a six-month basis proved taxing. Even when ISAF was limited to Kabul, the rapid turnover in command meant uncertainty and lack of institutional memory that reduced its effectiveness. If it were to operate throughout the entire country, ISAF would need a command structure with a stronger institutional anchor and NATO was the obvious answer. In March 2003, the alliance formally took command over the force.

NATO's leadership under SACEUR, General

James Jones, immediately put the alliance's formidable planning capacity to work and produced a four-phased scheme for geographical expansion, with a regional command structure and a timetable. By the end of 2006, NATO's command structure formally extended to the entire country, and ISAF's website started producing maps of Afghanistan be-decked with a bewildering variety of national flags. By the end of the decade, 47 countries had troops serving under ISAF's flag.

The mission expanded qualitatively as well. Resolution 1510 added three broad, enabling clauses to the original resolution (1386) that had authorized the deployment of the force in December 2001. First, the area of operation was expanded to 'all parts of the country'. Second, and in response to the concerns of the international aid agencies ISAF was to help create a secure environment for reconstruction and humanitarian efforts. Finally, the resolution had an omnibus clause. ISAF was to provide security assistance 'for the performance of other tasks in support of the Bonn Agreement'. A few items were specifically mentioned – UN programmes to disarm all Afghan armed factions, programmes to reconstitute the national armed forces and the police, and security sector reform broadly understood. The mandate was now sufficiently broad to include virtually any activity covered by the letter – and, if need be, the spirit – of the Bonn Agreement to end collective violence and lay the foundations for a peaceful new order. By the end of the decade, the official ISAF website listed stability and security operations, assistance to develop Afghan security forces, support for reconstruction, assistance to humanitarian and counter-narcotics operations, and assistance to disarm illegal armed groups among the force's activities.⁴

In this perspective, NATO's assuming institutional responsibility for ISAF appears as a gigantic mission creep: immediate, practical problems on the ground arising from a rotational command structure led to institutional commitments and – not so far down the line – the related need to protect the institution itself. In the process, a massive goal expansion occurred. The process resembled the dynamic described by Paddy Ashdown, the former international High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina who once had been proposed as a UN special envoy to Afghani-

stan >, with reference to the British policy: 'the government's answer to the fact that we are close to losing one war in Afghanistan is to fight lots more: a war against the Taliban; a war against drugs; a war against want; a war against Afghanistan's old traditional ways.'⁵

NATO's entry as an organization fundamentally changed the political dynamic of the engagement. Alliance members had an incentive to increase their commitments in order to maintain or strengthen their standing within the organization. Governments that hoped to become members or wanted to improve their relations with major NATO members contributed as well. Alliance solidarity was used as an argument to weed out 'free riders' and extract greater commitments. Most important, the institutional commitment of NATO increased the stakes by placing the credibility of the alliance on the line – not only in terms of dealing with unconventional threats of the 21st century but to some extent also as a relevant security organization on the global strategic scene. By publicly declaring that this was the test NATO faced in Afghanistan, NATO officials and member governments accentuated the point and fell into the 'rhetoric trap'. With stakes that high, disengagement became more difficult by requiring a favourable situation, if not outright victory, as a precondition for withdrawal.

The engagement itself yielded added value that helped sustain the commitment. Growing involvement in combat operations in Afghanistan gave NATO operational experience in dealing with unconventional threats. This was valuable to an organization that towards the end of the decade was developing a new strategic concept to guide it through the next ten years. Afghanistan-like challenges might well appear in the future, requiring 'a fit and flexible' response, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh-Rasmussen told member-states.⁶ Other NATO officials spoke approvingly of a 'transformational' experience.⁷

The military investment also created vested interests of a different sort. By 2011, the USA had developed a huge, modern base infrastructure in Afghanistan. Reluctant to leave it all behind, and at least recognizing the value of access to such bases in the new strategic picture in Southwest Asia, the US military was in mid-2011 negotiating with the Afghan government for a base presence after the

scheduled 2014 end date for withdrawal of combat forces. A search for bases was certainly not the reason for the US invasion in 2001, but once the USA and its allies were there, the future cost of maintaining access was small compared to the possible strategic benefits.

A Strategy for Entry or Exit?

The deepening military commitment appears less the product of a deliberate strategy than the result of a 'disjointed incrementalism' where sub-rationalities of organizational interests, vested interests and rhetoric traps are prominent. The engagement was framed by general objectives – to defeat international terrorism and develop a more stable, peaceful, prosperous and Western-friendly Afghanistan in line with a vision of liberal internationalism – but the strategy to this end developed in a topsy-turvy manner.

The disjointed effect was magnified by the very large number of actors and organizations involved. Within NATO as well, different members pursued different strategies on the ground, as evidenced, for instance, by the different 'models' of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). The principal common feature of the entire engagement lay in its steadfastness: over almost a decade, the main response to mounting signs of lack of progress was to increase the commitment. On the military side, this in turn reflected the institutional entry of NATO. Once the initial problem of collective action had been overcome, the involvement of the alliance raised the stakes and made exit more difficult.

By 2011, NATO's involvement had reached a point that probably would have been resisted had it been foreseen in 2003. NATO would hardly have approved of a policy that entailed command over nearly 150,000 troops in an out-of-area conflict that had all the hallmarks

of a protracted insurgency that, as NATO officials by then readily admitted, could not be solved by military means alone.

When it invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the US military had a strategy for exiting. The staff of General Franks in CENTCOM envisaged a small and quick operation, as noted above – only some 10,000 troops were considered necessary for the post-combat stabilization phase, and most of those were expected to come from allied contributions. US military officials working in civil–military operations started already the following year to develop what became Provincial Reconstruction Teams on the explicit assumption that these would be taken over and reproduced by US allies in the stabilization phase.⁸ The PRTs, in other words, were to be a principal instrument of US exit strategy. As it turned out, they became instead a key instrument of a deepening involvement by both the USA and its allies. For some allies, contributing to a PRT was an apparently low-cost, low-risk way of demonstrating commitment to the USA or NATO in Afghanistan; for others, the PRTs were supported as a principal expression of NATO's 'comprehensive approach' adopted mid-decade as a way to defeat the insurgency.

NATO likewise had exit plans. Part of the planning process that accompanied NATO's institutional entry into the Afghan conflict in 2003 was a phased plan for functions. Accompanying the establishment of ISAF's regional command structure, the plan had five main components: assessment and preparation, expansion, stabilization, transition (of responsibility to Afghan forces) and redeployment (exit).⁹ Unlike the plan for rolling out the regional command structure, this plan had no timetable. Only at the Lisbon summit in 2010 did NATO formally set a date for transfer of security responsibility to Afghan forces.

Conclusions

While framed by national security objectives and a vision of liberal internationalism, NATO's growing involvement in Afghanistan has been the result of a piecemeal decision-making process, self-perpetuating dynamics and a steady goal expansion that led the alliance into a protracted and controversial war. The institutional entry of the alliance itself increased the stakes and raised the threshold for an acceptable exit. As members and would-be members were encouraged to contribute in the name of alliance solidarity, the international military presence expanded further.

These features of the intervention are not surprising given that it was a non-routinized response to a conflict unfolding in a complex environment and a first out-of-area engagement. Nevertheless, they appear as principal 'lessons' and a tale of caution for the alliance if it is committing itself to an operation, regardless of the formal designation and ideological framework of the operation. ■

¹ Tuchman, Barbara (1985) *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*. New York: Ballantine Books.

² Franks, Tommy (2004) *American Soldier*. New York: Regan Books (p. 324).

³ Dobbins, James F. (2008) *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books.

⁴ See <http://www.nato.int/isaf/topics/mandate/index.html> (accessed 10 November 2011).

⁵ Cited in House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, Global Security: Afghanistan and Pakistan, Eighth Report, sess. 2008–09 paras. 221–225.

⁶ See <http://andersfogh.info/2010/02/24/from-washington-a-flexible-nato-and-a-secure-afghanistan/>.

⁷ Palmer, Diego A. Ruiz (2005) Afghanistan's Transformational Challenge, *NATO Review*, Summer.

⁸ See Suhrke, Astri (2011) Defining the Mission: The US Engagement in Afghanistan. PRIO Paper. Oslo: PRIO.

⁹ Morelli, Vincent & Paul Belkin (2009) NATO in Afghanistan: A Test of the Transatlantic Alliance, Washington, DC, Congressional Research Service, 3 December.

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