NATO´S COUNTERINSURGENCY CAMPAIGN IN AFGHANISTAN: ARE CLASSICAL DOCTRINES SUITABLE FOR ALLIANCES?

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Abstract:

The focus of this article is on one overall question: can an alliance conduct a classical counterinsurgency campaign in the absence of clear leadership? The article will reveal the painful internal problems that NATO and its member states have faced in their current mission to Afghanistan. Our main argument is that, in the absence of unambiguous leadership, conducting traditional counterinsurgency by alliance is intrinsically problematic. Without a clearly discernible leading nation, a collective actor seeking to employ a classical counterinsurgency recipe is destined to be faced with all sorts of collective action problems including free-riding, inconsistent threat perceptions, and difficulties of coordination. Eight years after the toppling of the Taliban regime, the insurgency in Afghanistan seems stronger than ever, while at the same time public support for the campaign is steadily eroding in several western capitals. To be sure, prevailing against a weak but determined irregular opponent in an ill-defined conflict is no easy feat for any actor. The NATO-led campaign has shown that there is a clear lack of unity within the mission and that the only solution to the challenge seems to be the emerging US takeover that is currently underway.

Keywords: Counterinsurgency, Afghanistan, NATO, ISAF, Unity of efforts and command.

Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es obtener una respuesta a una pregunta de carácter general: ¿puede una alianza dirigir una campaña clásica de contrainsurgencia en ausencia de un liderazgo claro? El artículo revela los difíciles problemas internos con los que la OTAN y sus estados miembros han estado enfrentándose en su actual misión en Afganistán. El principal argumento es que en ausencia de un liderazgo sin ambigüedades, dirigir operaciones clásicas de contrainsurgencia a través de una alianza es intrínsecamente problemático. Sin un país claramente en posición de liderazgo, un actor colectivo que intente poner en práctica recetas tradicionales en el campo de la contrainsurgencia estará abocado a enfrentarse con todo tipo de dilemas propios de la acción colectiva, incluyendo "free-riding", percepciones de amenaza inconsistentes y diversas dificultades de coordinación. Ocho años después del derrocamiento del régimen talibán, la insurgencia en Afganistán parece estar más fuerte que nunca, a la par que el apoyo público hacia la campaña está progresivamente erosionándose en las capitales de Europa Occidental. Se puede decir con certeza que prevalecer sobre un enemigo débil e irregular, pero con determinación en un conflicto mal definido no es ni mucho menos una hazaña fácil. La campaña dirigida por la OTAN ha demostrado que se carece de unidad en el seno de la misión y que la única solución para este desafío parece ser el despliegue de los EEUU que está en marcha.

Palabras clave: Contrainsurgencia, Afganistán, OTAN, ISAF, unidad de mando y unidad de esfuerzos.

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1. Introduction

Can an alliance conduct a classical counterinsurgency campaign in the absence of clear leadership? Since Western forces became embroiled in irregular warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq, the politico-military art of countering insurgencies has once again moved to the forefront of strategic studies. To a large extent, however, what has recently been preached by scholars and practitioners alike is little more than a rediscovery of classic counterinsurgency principles originally formulated in response to national liberation movements in the decades following World War II. Classic doctrines and theorists have been retrieved from the dustbin of history, but little new has been added to our understanding of how to prevail in so-called small wars. In effect, classic counterinsurgency constitutes the dominant paradigm guiding contemporary thinking about the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In response to the rediscovery of traditional approaches, practitioners and scholars have rightly warned that applying time-honoured ideas to current insurgencies might be a mistake. Today's insurgencies, as David Kilcullen has noted among others, differ markedly from those of earlier eras, "possibly requiring fundamental re-appraisals of conventional wisdom".[3] What has been mostly ignored, however, are the challenges arising from the changes pertaining to the other side of the equation: not only have the insurgents changed, so have the counterinsurgents.[4] Whereas campaigns to quell anti-colonial, nationalist or communist rebellions have historically been led by single nation states, or less often – as, for instance, in Iraq and Vietnam – by a single dominant lead nation with minor contributions from its coalition partners, today's counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan is much more collective and multilateral in character. Although the United States is providing more troops to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) than any other single country – and is increasingly taking on a leadership role – the bulk of the forces operating under NATO command were still non-American until mid 2009. Accordingly, the conflict in Afghanistan is characterized by a fundamentally new constellation of adversaries.

This, of course, begs the question as to whether the classic counterinsurgency paradigm that emerged in the 1950s is suitable for a multinational contingent consisting of military and civilian contributions from a wide range of countries with different interests, threat perceptions, strategic cultures, capabilities, national experiences and objectives. Do traditional counterinsurgency strategies, doctrines and techniques that were originally tailored by single states for the use of single states form a fitting conceptual framework for an alliance or a group of countries that is struggling to subdue an armed rebellion? This is the guiding question of the present article.

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[3] Kilcullen, David: "Counter-insurgency *Redux*", *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2006/2007), pp. 111-130. See also Kilcullen, David (2009): *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting a Small War in the Midst of a Big One*, London, Hurst & Company; Sewall, Sarah: "Introduction to the University of Chicago Press Edition: A Radical Field Manual", in The US Army & Marine Corps (2007): *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, p. xlii; Metz, Steven: "New Challenges and Old Concepts: Understanding 21st Century Insurgency", *Parameters,* vol. 37, no. 4 (Winter 2007-08), pp. 20-32; Fitzsimmons, Michael: "Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3 (June 2008), pp. 337-365; Barno, David W.: "Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency", *Parameters,* vol. 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006); Cassidy, Robert M. (2006): *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War*, Westport, Praeger Security International.

[4] Notable exceptions are Kay, Sean and Khan, Sahar: "NATO and Counter-insurgency: Strategic Liability or Tactical Asset?", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 28, no. 1 (April 2007), pp. 163-181; Coker, Christopher: "Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Multinational Co-operation, Afghanistan and Strategic Culture", *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 151, no. 5, pp. 14-19.

Our main argument is that, in the absence of unambiguous leadership, conducting traditional counterinsurgency by alliance is intrinsically problematic. Without a clearly discernible lead nation, a collective actor seeking to employ a classical counterinsurgency recipe is destined to confront all sorts of collective action problems, including free-riding, inconsistent threat perceptions, and difficulties of coordination. NATO's rather unsuccessful attempts to subdue the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan testify to this conclusion. As the mission in Afghanistan is being increasingly dominated the United States, the Alliance is likely to become more effective, while at the same time to some extent becoming reduced to being a provider of legitimacy to a United States-led campaign.

The article is divided into three main sections. In the first section, we briefly take stock of what are currently understood as the main tenets of the classic counterinsurgency paradigm. We also examine how this paradigm has evolved over time and how it dominates today's thinking about irregular warfare. The second and third sections identify some of the challenges facing an alliance that is trying to employ the classic paradigm against an irregular and elusive opponent. Using NATO's mission to Afghanistan as a case study, the second section focuses on the strategic level, while the third section investigates the operational and tactical level.

2. The Reinvention of the Classic Counterinsurgency Paradigm

The basic tenets of classic counterinsurgency strategy are clearly discernible in current thinking about irregular warfare. Therefore an essentially indirect, or population-centric approach to irregular warfare has been recommended by Western strategists and military analysts since it was acknowledged that the US and its partners were faced with an insurgency in Iraq. Consider, for instance, the following observations made by David Kilcullen, one of the chief architects behind the current US strategy in Iraq and elsewhere:

"In essence, effective counterinsurgency is a matter of good governance, backed by solid population security and economic development measures, resting on a firm foundation of energetic IO [Information Operations, JR & PDT], which unifies and drives all other activity. Security, political, (governance and institution-building), and economic measures are built in parallel to gain control over the environment. The government must de-energize the insurgency and break its hold on the population, rather than seeking solely to kill insurgents…as the classical counterinsurgency theorist Bernhard B. Fall pointed out, a government that is losing to an insurgency is not being outfought, it is being outgoverned."[5]

Kilcullen's observations are indeed representative of present-day authoritative conceptions of counterinsurgency in the West.[6] The main canons of yesteryear's major

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[5] Kilcullen "The Accidental Guerrilla…", *op. cit*., p. 60. A similar view is to be found in the US Government's *Counterinsurgency Guide*: "Best practice COIN integrates and synchronizes political, security, economic, and informational components that reinforce governmental legitimacy and effectiveness while reducing insurgent influence over the population. COIN strategies should be designed to strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of government institutions to govern responsibly and marginalize insurgents politically, socially, and economically.": "Counterinsurgency Guide: United States Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative", *US Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs*, Washington (January 2009), p. 12, at http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf.

[6] See, for instance, The US Army & Marine Corps (2007): *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Chicago, Chicago University Press; *Australian Army Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2008). Sarah Sewall places the new US counterinsurgency doctrine squarely within the classic paradigm: "The new US doctrine heartily embraces a

paradigm are evidently being reproduced today, and military commanders and policy-makers in most NATO countries have been quick to find merit in these revived principles.

One clear illustration of the reappearance of the classic counterinsurgency paradigm is the latest US counterinsurgency manual, *Field Manual 3-24*. Tellingly, the publication's annotated bibliography mostly lists books and articles from the 1960s and the 1970s. Another indication is the frequent references to traditional counterinsurgency theory made by NATO commanders: just before he was approved by the US Congress as NATO's commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal stated that he would focus on classic counterinsurgency techniques; similarly, General Sir David Richards, Head of the British Army and former commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), has repeatedly expressed his support for traditional counterinsurgency principles.[7] Moreover, both the so-called surge in Iraq and the new American strategy for Afghanistan are clearly built on a classic template. In both cases, US officials and commanders have identified securing the population as the main objective – a population-centric strategy as opposed to an enemy-centric one.[8]

What has been currently rediscovered began to evolve slowly by the end of the nineteenth century. Arguably, the first example of doctrinal work to cover embryonic aspects of today's dominant counterinsurgency paradigm can be traced back to 1896, when the British War Office published a much celebrated manual (*Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*) written by army officer, Charles Callwell.[9] What set both Callwell's thinking and some of the contemporaneous campaigns against guerrilla forces apart from most of the nineteenth century's "small wars" and imperial policing was an incipient acknowledgement of the need to separate the insurgents from the wider population. The counterinsurgent was not only to target rebel groups in the field (a direct, enemy-centric approach), but also to loosen the bonds between the local population and the rebels, thus denying the insurgents both material and political support (an indirect, population-centric approach). This emphasis on marginalising the guerrillas was to become a defining feature of the classic counterinsurgency paradigm. The tools and methods employed to cut off the insurgency from its sources of support, however, have changed markedly since the publishing of *Small Wars*. Simplifying somewhat, the trend leading to the present-day Western concept of counterinsurgency is in many ways a story of less coercion and more persuasion.

Well into the twentieth century, Western powers involved in anti-guerrilla campaigns more often than not sought to force the local population to give up support for the insurgents.

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traditional – some would argue atavistic – British method of fighting insurgency…" Sewall, *op. cit*., p. xxiv. Not all military analysts and scholars have embraced the reintroduction of the classic paradigm. For opposing views, see Luttwak, Edward: "Dead End: Counterinsurgency as Military Malpractice", *Harper´s Magazine* (February 2007), pp. 33-42; Creveld, Martin Van (2008): *The Changing Face of War: Combat from the Marne to Iraq*, New York, Ballantine, pp. 268-269; Peters, Ralph: "Progress and Peril: New Counterinsurgency Manual Cheats on the History Exams", *Armed Forces Journal* (February 2007), at http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/02/2456854/.

[7] Shanker, Thom and Schmitt, Eric: "U.S. Commander in Afghanistan is Given More Leeway", *New York Times*, 10 June 2009; Smyth, Chris and Evans, Michael: "General Sir David Richards, Advocate of an Afghanistan 'surge', is new Head of the Army", *The Times*, 18 October 2008. For a depiction of Field Manual 3-24 as "derived from classic counterinsurgency texts of the 1960s", see Kalyvas, Stathis: "Review Symposium: Counterinsurgency Manual", *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2008), pp. 351-353.

[8] This distinction was made clear in the "ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance" *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* (NATO), *ISAF Headquarters*, Kabul, Afghanistan (Fall 2009), at http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf.

[9] Beckett, Ian F. W. (2001): *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*, London, Routledge, pp. 32-37.

Both sticks and carrots – or "attraction and chastisement", as the Americans dubbed their strategy during the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902)[10] – were employed to isolate the rebels, but usually the more heavy handed methods played the decisive part. This was certainly true for the Portuguese in Africa, the British in Kenya and South Africa, and the French in Morocco and Algeria. The coercive side of the new population-centric approach was perhaps most vividly reflected in the widespread use of resettlement camps.[11] Even during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), which is often considered the quintessential example of a benevolent "hearts and minds" campaign, the British authorities forced about 400,000 primarily Chinese peasants, or ten percent of the entire population, into guarded camps euphemistically labelled "new villages".[12] Similarly, the Dutch military, which is sometimes considered to be the architect of a particularly benign, Dutch approach to counterinsurgency, resorted to extraordinarily brutal measures and imposed collective punishment on entire communities when policing its colonies prior to World War II.[13]

The more gentle and at the time much less influential side of the population-centric approach to counterinsurgency was aimed at building legitimacy and the non-combatant population's allegiance through good governance, protection, socio-economic development and public work projects. The counterinsurgents, in other words, sought co-operation and consent by persuasion.[14] The essence of this more benign approach was put into words by US President William McKinley just weeks before the Filipino insurgency erupted:

"It should be the earnest and paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines…and by proving to them that the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation, substituting the mild sway of justice and right for arbitrary rule."[15]

Yet it was not until the late 1940s and the Wars of National Liberation and decolonization that recognition of the need for a more benevolent approach began to translate into more substantial principles, manuals and practice. Partly spurred by Western democracies' waning acceptance of excessive carnage and bloodshed in non-existential conflicts with weaker opponents, a modified and less coercive framework began to take shape.[16] During the 1960s and the 1970s, such prominent counterinsurgency experts as Sir

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[10] Deady, Timothy K.: "Lessons from a Successful Counterinsurgency: The Philippines, 1899-1902", *Parameters* vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring 2005).

[11] Beckett, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-38. See also Joes, Anthony James (2004): *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, pp. 106-113.

[12] Stubbs, Richard (2004): *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960*, Singapore, Eastern University Press, pp. 100-135; Strachan, Hew: "British Counter-insurgency from Malaya to Iraq", *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 152, no. 6 (December 2007), pp. 8-11.

[13] Zaalberg, Thijs W. Brocades: "The Roots of Dutch Counterinsurgency: Balancing and Integrating Military and Civilian Efforts from Aceh to Uruzgan", in Davis, Richard G. (ed.) (2008): *The U.S. Army and Irregular Warfare 1775-2007: Selected Papers from the 2007 Conference of Army Historians*, Washington, Department of the Army.

[14] Although the measures entailed in the classic approach clearly paid more attention to marginalising the insurgents by persuasion, its benevolent character has often been overstated. The traditional paradigm was not a strategic formula for making friends with the local population. The counterinsurgents of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were above all striving for the reestablishment of authority – not appeasement. As the British military historian Hew Strachan noted: "When we talk about 'hearts and minds', we are not talking about being nice to the natives, but about giving them the firm smack of government", Strachan, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[15] See Deady, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

[16] Merom, Gil (2003): *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. See also Mack, Andrew: "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict", *World Politics*, vol. 27, no.

Robert Thompson, Frank Kitson, Bernhard Fall and David Galula thus articulated the need for an increased focus on attacking the political ties between the population and the insurgents by way of persuasion. Establishing a perception of legitimacy among the local population was deemed crucial. In the words of British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson, who served in Malaya and as head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam: "'Winning' the population can tritely be summed up as good government in all its aspects…such as improved health measures and clinics…new schools…and improved livelihood and standard of living".[17] Accordingly, it became even more important to redress the political, economic or social grievances fuelling the insurgency than to eradicate every last insurgent: counterinsurgency, so the adage went, was twenty percent military action and eighty percent political. By the end of the 1960s, this strategic conception of counterinsurgency came to be the conventional wisdom.[18] And it is this conventional wisdom that has been rediscovered in the last half decade.

According to the classic paradigm, a number of principles and tactical rules provide guideposts for forces engaged in the struggle to isolate and eradicate an irregular opponent. Most importantly, these include protecting the population, synchronizing – or even integrating – all civilian and military efforts involved in the campaign and thus creating a seamless unity of efforts, building robust national security forces, good intelligence, securing the borders, calibrating the use of firepower, patrolling with small units, initiating effective information campaigns, and establishing government structures that are perceived as legitimate. Although sometimes neglected in contemporary counterinsurgency literature, the development and employment of indigenous security forces often proved to be a particularly important aspect of the classic approach to irregular warfare. Besides increasing the number of boots on the ground, host-nation forces provided troops "whose knowledge of the terrain, culture, and language generally produced an even greater and exponential improvement in actionable intelligence".[19] Moreover, creating effective national security forces was seen as crucial to the establishment of a legitimate government able to uphold a legitimate monopoly of violence. In the end, strategic success rested on the local capacity to sustain the status quo.

Besides being less coercive, classic counterinsurgency tends to be protracted, labour-intensive and very costly in lives, treasure and political capital. It takes considerable stamina to pursue an indirect population-centric strategy, particularly when fighting an insurgency abroad. First, the approach requires the employment of a large number of forces to high-risk areas. Different classic scholars have recommended different force levels, but during previous campaigns, planners have usually assumed that the counter-insurgency requires a ratio of force of 10 to 20 between itself and the insurgents in order to prevail over the latter. Others have recommended the deployment of 20 to 25 counterinsurgents for every 1000 residents.[20] Secondly, the politically contested and prolonged character of counter-insurgency warfare makes significant demands on the policy-makers who are supporting and taking responsibility for the campaign. This holds particularly true for democratically elected governments

2 (January 1975), pp. 175-200; Metz, Steven (2007): *Rethinking Insurgency*, Carlisle, US Army War College, p. 6; Fitzsimmons, *op. cit.,* p. 339.

[17] Thompson, Sir Robert G.K. (1966): *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*, New York, Praeger, pp. 112-113.

[18] Galula, David (1964): *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Westport, Praeger Security International, p. 63. For a pointed critique of this classic counterinsurgency maxim, see Peters, Ralph: "COIN lies we love: dissecting the myth that the military has only a supporting role", *Armed Forces Journal* (April 2009), at http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/04/3978447/.

[19] Cassidy, *op. cit*., p. 127.

[20] See for instance, Joes, *op. cit*., pp.171-179.

confronted with a war-weary public. Thirdly, the major emphasis given to the tight coordination and unity of all national efforts (military and civilian) in the classic paradigm requires both the ability and the determination to synchronize every activity of all the actors involved in the conflict. Since unity of effort at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels is seen as so essential to the approach, any inability or unwillingness to harmonize civilian and military activities seriously reduces the chances of success.

Importantly for our purposes, the classic paradigm was originally articulated as a strategic and doctrinal formula for individual nation states engaged in irregular warfare. The hard-learned lessons that have informed the conventional wisdom were all drawn from conflicts pitching single nation states against an irregular opponent. The question then becomes: What challenges arise when an alliance or a group of states attempts to make use of a classic counterinsurgency recipe? In the following, we utilize NATO's ongoing campaign in Afghanistan to identify the pitfalls of conducting counterinsurgency by alliance.

3. Challenges at the Strategic Level

NATO's undertakings in Afghanistan did not commence until August 2003, when the Alliance agreed to take over responsibility for the UN-authorised ISAF. Since the signing of the Bonn Accord in late 2001, ISAF – a coalition of the willing operating independently of the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) – had been under the rotating command of different lead nations, but in response to growing operational demands and the need for permanent leadership, the allies agreed to assume collective responsibility for the mission. NATO had in fact offered to assist the United States much earlier. In response to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC, on 12 September 2001, for the first time in its existence, the Alliance invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. Washington, however, bluntly rejected any form of military assistance from NATO. In the eyes of the Bush administration, conducting "war by committee" – as experienced during the Kosovo conflict – was a trap to be avoided. Essentially, the message to the Europeans was one of "Don't call us, we'll call you". "In the future", Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld elaborated, "the mission will determine the coalition, and not the other way around".[21] Consequently, when American forces launched OEF against the Taliban regime on 7 October 2001, the only participating allied forces were British.[22]

Initially, ISAF's UN mandate was limited to providing security in and around Kabul. The rest of Afghanistan was left to the counterterrorist operations of the thinly stretched OEF. Based on a new UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1510) from October 2003, ISAF gradually began to expand its area of responsibility, beginning with the Northern provinces by the end of that year. By October 2004, ISAF had completed its expansion to the north. Symptomatic of NATO's fragmented political will and reluctance to commit the necessary materiel and human resources, it took yet another two years before ISAF had taken full responsibility for the entire country in accordance with the provisions of UNSCR 1510. Only in July and October 2006 did ISAF assume command of the military operations in the

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[21] Dobbins, James F. (2008): *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan*, Washington, pp. 39-50; Rynning, Sten (2005): *NATO Renewed: The Power and Purpose of Transatlantic Cooperation*, New York, Potomac Books, p. 120.

[22] Dobbins, *op. cit.*, p. 44. In 2002 several Western nations became involved in the operations in Afghanistan. Special Forces from, among other countries, Germany, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Australia, Canada and New Zealand took part in the efforts to defeat the remnants of the old regime.

southern and eastern provinces respectively. This is not to say that ISAF is anywhere near being in *control* of all provinces. Indeed, due primarily to the critical lack of resources troubling the mission, some Afghan provinces were still without any, or only a marginal ISAF, OEF or ANA (Afghan National Army) presence towards the end of 2009.[23]

NATO's experiences in the insurgent-infested country demonstrate that alliances that attempt to adhere to classic counterinsurgency principles will be faced with daunting challenges at the strategic level. Clearly, stabilising Afghanistan is no easy task for any kind of actor, but the evidence is more than enough to suggest that employing traditional counterinsurgency stratagems is even more testing for an alliance than for a single nation. One might, of course, argue that any kind of warfare will be particularly demanding for alliances due to problems of collective action and diverse threat perceptions among the allies. However, as insurgents rarely, if ever, pose a direct threat to the survival of the external powers struggling to subdue the rebels,[24] an alliance will be bereft of the unifying glue that tends to facilitate cooperation and burden-sharing when confronted with a strong conventional adversary. In other words, war against a weak, irregular opponent is always apt to test the political stamina of any external power – but this holds particularly true for alliances. NATO's experiences in Afghanistan reveal that an alliance conducting a counterinsurgency is faced with at least two major challenges at the strategic level of conflict: 1) making available sufficient resources; and 2) coordinating military and non-military activities. In the following, we address these challenges in turn.

As noted already, conducting a counterinsurgency campaign in the classic manner is a taxing endeavour. Isolating the insurgents from the wider population is often a long drawn out process, with considerable costs in life and treasure. On the face of things, therefore, one could be led to believe that an alliance or a multilateral coalition that brings together the resources of a number of countries would be particularly well-suited for counterinsurgency missions. Alas, this is not so. From their very beginning, the operations in Afghanistan suffered from a critical lack of resources. With the support of the United Nations and, in particular, the United States, the international community opted for a "light footprint" approach which basically translated into "doing nation building on the cheap". As NATO gradually took over responsibility for security and reconstruction in larger parts of the country – and as Washington shifted its attention towards the escalating conflict in Iraq – the gap between resources and requirements only deepened. The military, civilian and economic resources available were far too limited to create the tolerable environment that would have prevented the resurgence of the Taliban and other insurgent groups.[25]

Undoubtedly, several factors have contributed to the current lack of resources in Afghanistan: many Western countries are suffering from peacekeeping fatigue; the initial American rejection of NATO involvement in the campaign made the Europeans reluctant to

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[23] Two cases in point are the provinces of Nimroz, bordering Iran, and Day Kundi in central Afghanistan. In August 2009, Afghan officials considered 13 of Afghanistan's 398 districts to be "completely in enemy hands", and 133 as "highly dangerous"; Gebauer, Matthias: "Rasmussen Vows Renewed Efforts in Afghanistan", *Spiegel Online International*, 6 August 2009. During interviews conducted in Kandahar in May 2009 with a UNAMA representative, it was specified that 11 of the 13 "black districts" without any government presence were located in the south of the country.

[24] Mack, *op. cit*.

[25] Based on the US counterinsurgency doctrine, General Dan McNeill, commander of ISAF from February 2007 to June 2008, came to the conclusion that 400,000 troops would be required to conduct an effective counterinsurgency campaign in a country the size of Afghanistan. Susanne Koelbl, Interview with ISAF commander Dan McNeill: "The Taliban Kills more Civilians than NATO", *Spiegel International*, 24 September 2007.

contribute in the years following the intervention; the conflict in Iraq diverted attention away from Afghanistan at a critical moment; and in most cases the war has been unable to compete with other issues on the national agendas of the force-contributing countries. A more deep-seated reason, however, is linked to the enduring and inherent problems of collective action that have beleaguered NATO since its creation in 1949. In a nutshell, all the allies have a strong interest in the benefits of peace and security that the Alliance produces, but in the absence of a supranational taxation authority and clear leadership, most member states will seek to take advantage of the efforts of their brothers-in-arms. The well-known results are burden-shifting, free-riding, and the under-provision of armed forces.[26] Faced with what in terms of capabilities is a weak enemy that poses no existential threat to the allies, the incentives to cooperate and contribute the required resources will be even smaller than when alliance members are confronted with a clear-cut threat to their national security.[27] Moreover, in the absence of an easily identifiable and unambiguous threat, the strongest allies will have little leverage to cajole and pressurize some of the smaller allies into contributing more. These are dynamics that make it intrinsically difficult for an alliance to employ a cost-demanding classic counterinsurgency formula.

Perhaps most illustrative of the problems of collective action hampering NATO in Afghanistan is the acrimonious row within the Alliance about national caveats and force contributions to the south and the east of the country. While one group of countries – most notably Great Britain, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands and Denmark – has committed relatively high numbers of troops to combating the insurgency in the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan, another group of countries, including Germany, Italy and Spain, has placed narrow restrictions on, in the words of the columnist Roger Cohen, "when, why and where soldiers will fight and die rather than do the soft-power, school-building, Euro thing".[28] For a long time, the German government was even denying that the Bundeswehr was involved in a war: euphemistically, former Minister of Defence Franz Josef Jung labelled the mission among other things "eine risikobehaftete Einsatz".[29] This in turn has led United States Defence Secretary Robert Gates to warn about a "two-tiered alliance", with "some allies willing to fight and die to protect people's security and others who are not".[30] The gist of the matter is that conducting classic counterinsurgency by alliance is likely to produce problems of collective action that are less liable to bedevil single nation states when confronted with an armed insurgency.[31]

Besides being hampered by a woeful lack of manpower and equipment, NATO's performance in Afghanistan has also been strained by poor coordination of the inadequate resources that have actually been allocated. Until recently, no single nation provided the strategic leadership necessary to help ensure the synchronization of all the available instruments. A key tenet of the classic counterinsurgency paradigm is that "Unity of effort must be present at every echelon of a COIN operation. Otherwise, well-intentioned but uncoordinated actions can cancel each other or provide vulnerabilities for insurgents to

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[26] The seminal work on the problems of collective action and burden-sharing in NATO is Olson, Mancur and Zeckhauser, Richard: "An Economic Theory of Alliances", *Review of Economics and Statistics*, vol. 48, no. 3 (1966), pp. 266-79. For a more recent introduction to the literature on this topic, see Thies, Wallace (2003): *Friendly Rivals: Bargaining and Burden-Shifting in NATO*, New York, M.E. Sharpe.

[27] Lepgold, Joseph: "NATO's Post-Cold War Collective Action Problem", *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Summer, 1998), pp. 78-106.

[28] Roger Cohen, "The Long Haul in Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 28 February 2008.

[29] Ansgar Graw, "Jung will von einem Kriegszustand nicht wissen", *Welt-online*, 4 September 2008.

[30] "A Ray of Light in the Dark Defile: The State of NATO", *The Economist*, 29 March 2008.

[31] For a similar view, see Diehl, Paul F.: "Problems with NATO Peace Operations in Afghanistan", *Swords and Ploughshares,* vol. XVI, no. 2, (Summer 2008), pp. 10-13.

exploit".[32] Accordingly, all military and civilian organizations involved should act as "a single anti-bandit force".[33] However, instead of developing a comprehensive overall strategy effectively harmonizing high-intensity combat operations with stability and reconstruction efforts, the mission in Afghanistan has suffered from uncoordinated and ad hoc solutions. Even if all the actors involved agree that the synchronization of all military and civilian efforts is a *conditio sine qua non*, progress towards a comprehensive approach at the strategic level has been immensely slow and tortuous. At the heart of the matter stands the fact that NATO is impeded by strategic confusion. Nearly two decades after the end of the Cold War, the Alliance is still in internal disarray regarding its proper role in world politics.[34]

True, steps have been taken towards realizing an integrative approach – in NATO jargon, the Comprehensive Approach (CA). Originally put on NATO's agenda by Denmark in late 2004, the CA initiative gradually gathered momentum in 2005 and 2006 before being somewhat reluctantly endorsed by the allies at the Riga summit in November 2006.[35] Despite some member states being concerned that NATO would impinge on the European Union's evolving nation-building ambitions, CA was enshrined in the Comprehensive Political Guidance adopted by the allies at Riga. It was not until the Bucharest summit in April 2008, however, that an Action Plan on how to advance the adoption of the new concept was approved by the member states.[36]

Despite some allies' attempts to construe CA as a concept involving few or no combat operations, the approach is obviously very similar to today's notion of classic counterinsurgency as described above.[37] Indeed, the very essence of CA is to create stability and a secure environment by winning "hearts and minds" through the integrated use of civilian *and* military means. As with the traditional counterinsurgency paradigm, CA is basically a population-centred approach to insurgencies. While some of the Alliance members who are unwilling to deploy forces to the south and east of Afghanistan have argued that the still evolving concept should pay little attention to the kinetic side of the equation, experiences from the most unruly parts of the country suggest that civilian reconstruction, development and the highly restricted use of armed force are – at best – insufficient instruments of power.[38] In a post-Dayton Peace Agreement Balkan-style peace-keeping context, CA might imply a very limited use of military tools, but in an environment like Afghanistan any meaningful interpretation of a comprehensive approach must be very similar to the classic conception of counterinsurgency.

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[32] "Counterinsurgency Field Manual…", *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[33] Nagl, John (2002): *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

[34] See, for instance, Ringsmose, Jens and Rynning, Sten: "Come Home, NATO?: The Atlantic Alliance's New Strategic Concept", Danish Institute for International Studies, *DIIS Report*, no. 4 (2009) .

[35] The initial Danish contribution was labelled "Concerted Planning and Action of Civil and Military Activities", or CPA; see Fischer, Kristian and Christensen, Jan Top: "Improving Civil-Military Cooperation the Danish Way", *NATO Review,* vol. 53, no. 2 (Summer 2005).

[36] The evolution of NATO's CA is thoroughly analysed in Jakobsen, Peter Viggo: "NATO's Comprehensive Approach to Crisis Response Operations: A Work in Slow Progress", Danish Institute for International Studies, *DIIS Report*, no. 15 (2008).

[37] In the eyes of some allies, CA is the equivalent of counterinsurgency: see, for instance, US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman: "A Comprehensive Approach to Insurgency: Afghanistan and Beyond", Keynote Address, *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* (NATO), *Conference on A Comprehensive Approach for Afghanistan*, Freising, Germany (27 March 2007).

[38] Jakobsen, *op. cit*.

NATO's apparent inability to craft an effective, multifaceted strategy for Afghanistan can first of all be attributed to the Alliance's very nature. To be sure, NATO's difficulties are also reflective of the lack of cooperation between individual member states' various branches of government and their generally underdeveloped deployable civilian capacities. But progress toward a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy has above all been stalled by NATO being what it is: an institutionalized cooperation between sovereign states. Being a group of states united only by overlapping interests and values, a common history and a sixty-year-old treaty unavoidably allows profound political and strategic differences to hamper the effective employment of scarce resources. This is particularly the case in an era that is characterized by a rather benign threat environment like the current one. During the Cold War, when they were faced with an unambiguous military threat, all the allies unconditionally subscribed to a common view of what NATO was for. However, once deprived of its unifying foe, the Alliance has become the victim of a divisive dispute over its very purpose: should the Alliance go global in conducting a broad range of crisis management and stability operations; or should it return to its original *raison d'être* as a provider of European collective defence? As a result, the Alliance has become different things to different member states. These differences have significantly hindered the successful development of an appropriate and comprehensive response to the Afghan insurgency at the strategic level. In the following to sections, we examine the challenges of conducting counterinsurgency by alliance at the operational and tactical level.

4. Challenges at the Operational and Tactical Level: Acting as a Unified Actor

The principle of unity within a military campaign originates from the time of the American Civil War and was later manifested during the allied nations' experiences of the Great War. The overall philosophy of unity – unity of effort and unity of command – is that the main actors within a campaign work, cooperate and allocate resources in accordance with an overall plan and a common goal. As Marshal Foch said to General Pershing's liaison officer in 1918: "I am the leader of an orchestra. Here are the English bassos, here the American barytones, and there the French tenors. When I raise my baton, every man must play, or else he must not come to my concert".[39] Foch thus emphasised that an overall, agreed-upon strategy should lead campaigns, not individual preferences or national agendas. Today, unity of effort and command is in theory a non-negotiable principle within NATO. NATO doctrine states that the resources and personnel allocated to a given mission should be under the command and control of the mission, and that everyone involved should work in accordance with an overall strategy.[40] Looking at cases of classic counterinsurgency, the mere fact that the majority of all historical campaigns have been implemented by a unitary actor has to a large extent eliminated the challenge of unity. However, in campaigns such as the first and second wars in Chechnya, the Russians had to work hard for unity of command in particular because of the different national security services involved in the campaign. The same can be said with reference to the US engagement in Vietnam, where true unity of command was probably never achieved either.[41]

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[39] Mott, Thomas Bentley (1979): *Twenty Years as Military Attaché*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 228.

[40] NATO Allied Joint Publication (2007): *Operations AJP-3(A)*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), pp. 1-2 and 2-1.

[41] Hope, Ian (2008): "Unity of command in Afghanistan: a forsaken principle of war", *Strategic Studies Institute* (November 2008), pp. 5-6, at http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB889.pdf.

4. 1. Caveats: National Impediments to United Leadership

Over time the lack of unity that materialises in ongoing missions has become known within NATO as caveats or national restrictions, terms used where the troop-contributing countries attach restrictions and boundaries regarding how and where the troops may be used. This is not a problem limited to counterinsurgencies or large-scale military campaigns such as the world wars: it has also been seen in different NATO peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions, such as those in Bosnia and Kosovo. In these missions caveats existed, but the NATO commanders could manoeuvre between them when necessary primarily due to the high number of troops present and the relatively benign environment. There is, however, no doubt that the use of caveats and correlated problems has never been as evident and explicit as in the Alliance's current counterinsurgency engagement in Afghanistan.[42] In 2006, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, US General James Jones, outlined the problem by calling national caveats "NATO's operational cancer" and "an impediment to success".[43] At the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006, the topic reached the agenda at the highest political level within NATO, but still with little effect on the mission.[44] This was precisely when ISAF was enlarging its area of operations to the south and east of Afghanistan, and when the campaign was changing markedly from more traditional peacekeeping to counterinsurgency. At that point, NATO tried to summon troops to participate in the enlargement and to find troops who were actually allocated to the mission, and not just deployed without a mandate to be used. According to high-level NATO sources, only 14 of the 40 countries participating in the mission in 2008 did not employ written restrictions on the use of their troops.[45] As for the remaining countries, more than 70 different caveats had been applied.[46] The many restrictions have a major impact at the different levels of command and are indeed seen as an impediment to success when ISAF commanders are trying to juggle the restrictions in trying to plan and implement complex counterinsurgency operations. Consequently, commanders at all levels of the mission need to bear the restrictions in mind to avoid involving troops in an operation who are not permitted to take on a certain task, so that other troops, without restrictions on their use, can replace them.

However, the written restrictions are only the tip of the iceberg. A former deputy commander of ISAF stated that: "in fact all countries have caveats on the use of their soldiers". By this he meant that unwritten restrictions only appear when operations are about to be executed. Often when operations are in the final planning stage, the different national commanders need to obtain approval for the operation from their capitals. If approval is withheld, the force commander has to find other troops to include in the operation or else must change it or cancel it altogether. As opposed to the written restrictions, which commanders can to a large extent take into account in their operational planning, the non-written restrictions impose a major challenge for operational success. The authorisation

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[42] Jones, Seth G. (2008): *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, pp. 104-106.
[43] Rashid, Ahmed: "A Taliban Comeback", *Global Politician,* 24 May 2006, at http://www.globalpolitician.com/21796-afghanistan-taliban .
[44] See the "Riga Summit Declaration", *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO), *Riga Summit,* Riga, Latvia (29 November 2006), at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_37920.htm?selectedLocale=en and the" NATO Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 336 on Reducing National Caveats", *NATO Parliamentary Assembly* (NATO), Copenhagen, Denmark (15 November 2005), at www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=828.
[45] Interview conducted at ISAF headquarter October 2008 in Kabul, Afghanistan.
[46] Thruelsen, Peter Dahl: "NATO in Afghanistan: what lessons are we learning and are we willing to adjust?", Danish Institute for International Studies, *DIIS Report 14* (2007), pp. 19-20.

processes involving national governments and the possibility of a refusal to allow national troop contingents to participate can delay operations, remove the initiative in conducting them and increase considerably the burden on the remaining forces. Thus, apart from being a burden on the commander, this also creates mistrust and despondency both among Alliance members and within the mission.[47]

The problem with both written and non-written caveats is quite visible in both ISAF headquarters and the regional commands.[48] Often it is necessary to look all the way down the command structure to the taskforce level within the different provinces to find a unity of effort and command implemented with an understanding of cooperation and equal burden-sharing. At ISAF headquarters in Kabul, where the overall control and management of the mission is supposed to take place, the frustrations over national restrictions are quite explicit. As one senior ISAF headquarters staff officer remarked, "Nobody listens to the headquarters; they don't even report to headquarters but directly to the national capitals".[49] ISAF headquarters (ISAF HQ and ISAF Joint Command, IJC) is in charge of the overall campaign design and in managing it down the chain of command through the regional commands to the task forces. But often plans are blocked because of conflicting national interests.

4.2. Waving the Bilateral Flag

The impediments caused by the lack of unity and by national caveats within the Alliance's counterinsurgency efforts are perhaps best illustrated by the Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRT) that have been deployed in provinces across the country.[50] The PRT concept was introduced by the US in 2002 at a time when the mission was changing from the initial counter-terrorism focus to a phase of stabilisation. At this time the unity part of the mission was not very high on the agenda because of the more benign environment and the US focus on having a light-footprint in the different provinces rather than on implementing a centrally controlled concept. "PRT Working Principles" was issued in February 2003 to identify the main activities (focusing on unity of effort) for the PRT to build on, but as early as 2004 the concept had mutated into very different models being implemented in a variety of ways.[51] Nothing genuine was done to streamline the PRTs or to strengthen the command structure other than issuing a number of PRT Handbooks as inspiration for the national-led teams.

Therefore the PRTs have remained under national as opposed to ISAF control and are mostly seen to be pursuing national interests led by national agendas and principles.[52] For example, the development and reconstruction funds assigned to PRTs for use in their

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[47] "Eighth Report; Global Security: Afghanistan and Pakistan, part 2", *UK House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee* (21 July 2009), at http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmfaff/302/30202.htm.

[48] At the top of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan is the higher operational headquarters, ISAF HQ commanded by General Stanley A. McChrystal (USA). Subordinated is an intermediate headquarters, ISAF Joint Command (IJC) commanded by Lieutenant General David M. Rodriguez (USA), both HQ being located in Kabul. Under the command of the IJC are five regional commands located in Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar and Bagram. For more on the ISAF chain of command, see www.nato.int/isaf.

[49] Interview conducted at ISAF headquarters on 04 June 2009 in Kabul, Afghanistan.

[50] NATO has defined PRTs as "a joint military-civilian organisation, staffed and supported by ISAF member countries, operating within the Provinces of Afghanistan. […]" The Mission for PRTs is "To assist GoA to extend its authority in order to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operations, and enable SSR and the reconstruction effort."; ISAF (2006): *Provincial Reconstruction Team Handbook*, version 6 (July 2006).

[51] Jakobsen, Peter Viggo: "PRTs in Afghanistan: Successful but not Sufficient", Danish Institute of International Studies, *DIIS Report* no. *6* (2005), pp. 11-28.

[52] *Ibid.,* pp. 23-24.

particular areas are allocated directly to them, with no means of control or involvement from ISAF headquarters. As a consequence, the 26 PRTs currently in operation in Afghanistan, led by 14 different states, have produced 14 different solutions for how to organise, implement and especially prioritise the tasks at hand, which are often not in agreement with the overall strategy. Concomitantly, the quantities of human and economic resources assigned to different national-led PRTs differ markedly. Thus, for ISAF headquarters and the other non-state actors, such as the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) or the European Union Police mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan), to interact with, supervise, cooperate with or merely understand the different PRTs is a great challenge. In addition, the lack of unity within the PRT concept also challenges interactions with the Afghan government and local populations who have to cope with these dissimilar approaches.[53] All these aspects undermine the classic focus of the counterinsurgency campaign as implemented by the Alliance.

A key question is, of course, whether anything could have been done? The short answer is no. Probably nothing could have been done because of the minimal international focus on Afghanistan and because the different governments saw the PRT concept as an excellent opportunity for them to plant a "bilateral-flag" distinguishing their individual (low-risk) commitments to the country. Today it will probably be impossible to create unity, and the new efforts in Kabul to strengthen the leadership of the ISAF mission and amongst others to focus on the above problem of unity will not have much effect on the PRTs.[54]

4.3. A Coalition of the Willing within ISAF

At the regional commands, experiences with unity of effort and command seem to reflect those at the headquarters level. In Regional Command South, which covers six southern provinces, eight of the 42 troop-contributing countries are conducting operations on a permanent basis.[55] The Alliance's activities here can be regarded as a mini "coalition of the willing" within the overall NATO mission. None of the countries deployed to the south is restricted by written caveats,[56] and, taking the non-written restrictions into account, they can all be employed more or less anywhere in all types of operation, ranging from large-scale combat operations to the training of the national security forces and reconstruction work. The headquarters of Regional Command South can to a large extent rely on the willingness of the contributing states to agree to the deployment of its forces, but it is also fully aware of the fact that the other, more than thirty countries present in the other parts of the country cannot be counted on. This was painfully demonstrated during Operation Medusa in September 2006 in the Panjwayi District of Kandahar Province, when Regional Command South requested assistance from troops stationed in other parts of the country. During the operation, it was felt that additional troops would be needed in the aftermath of the operation to support de-mining and rebuilding efforts. This request was, however, turned down because of national caveats

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[53] Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Sippi et al. (2008) "Afghan hearts, Afghan minds: exploring Afghan perceptions of civil-military relations", Research conducted for the European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan (ENNA) and the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG), pp. 4-8, 43-50.

[54] The US has decided to divide ISAF headquarters into a higher operational headquarters and an ISAF joint command (IJC).This was agreed by the NATO allies on 3 August 2009. The motivation was the development of the mission since the last adjustment of the command structures in summer 2006 which required a separation of the strategic functions from the day-to-day operational leadership of the mission.

[55] As of October 2009: http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf.

[56] Two of the countries in Regional Command South do have some administrative caveats but there should be no formal operational caveats in the regional command. Email correspondence with a high-level staff member of Regional Command South headquarters December 2009.

applied by other states on the use of their troops. In interviews at Regional Command South, these types of problem are often mentioned.[57]

At the provincial level, where different taskforces and PRTs are conducting operations under the guidance of the regional commands, relations with respective national capitals back home are described as being closer than those with the next level of command within the mission. Often, the task forces and PRTs do not perceive the regional level as their closest point of reference. As one informant stated, "Regional command is no more than a two-star post office".[58] The regional command is thus perceived as quite weak, which leaves considerable room for manoeuvre to a strong task force following national agendas. A former task-force commander in the south described the relationship with the regional command as frustrating. He emphasised that the regional command did not understand the fight in terms of counterinsurgency and that it did not "do the flanks" as he expected the regional level to do.[59]

In Regional Command South, Canada (with the US in a supporting role), The Netherlands (with Australia as a partner), the United Kingdom (with the US in a substantially supporting role, soon to be a shared responsibility) and the United States, are each in charge of a province,[60] and they implement their counterinsurgency campaign according to an equal number of national counterinsurgency doctrines, all largely in accordance with the classical principles of counterinsurgency, but with differences in priority and implementation. During the training and preparation of the UK division that took command of Regional Command South in November 2009, issues over operational procedures and doctrine were explicit. The Dutch within the regional multinational staff wanted to implement the counterinsurgency campaign according to NATO doctrine, the US wanted to use their new doctrine, and the British wanted to use UK doctrine.[61] As the region is currently under British command there is a clear tendency to lean towards British doctrine, but with the large influx of US forces and civilian resources it would appear likely that the emphasis over the next 12 months will significantly shift towards the new US doctrine. This is already now a tendency seen in the doctrines applied e.g. by the newly arrived (summer 2009) US forces where substantial emphasis is attached to force delivery of humanitarian operations and social services like access to medical treatment and delivery of winterization humanitarian aid directly by US forces. By way of contrast the British emphasis is more on facilitating and supporting the delivery of such functions by the national afghan security forces.

During a high level interview with a representative from Regional Command South the doctrinal differences was explained as 'the Americans simply being more advanced in their basic understanding of COIN [counterinsurgency]'. The US has fully integrated their civilian capacities, whereas the other representatives of Regional Command South still see security operations as a precondition for the access of civilian agencies. Because of these difficulties and Alliance members' national agendas, the US has intimated that, if the current UK command of Regional Command South (November 2009–November 2010) does not deliver a well-thought-out, strongly led and coherent counterinsurgency campaign, the US will take

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[57] Numerous interviews conducted during several field visits to Regional Command South in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009.

[58] Interview conducted in Regional Command South on 31 May 2009 in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

[59] High-level briefing received in United Kingdom on 13 May 2009.

[60] As of summer 2009, Canada in Kandahar, the Netherlands in Oruzgan, the UK in Helmand and the US in Zabul.

[61] Interviews conducted during summer 2009 with a high-level staff member of the UK multinational division headquarters who participated in the training and preparations.

over command of Regional Command South in November 2010 and keep the command on a permanent basis.[62]

It seems that, for NATO to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign with all the participating actors following the same overall strategy, a fast decision-making procedure is needed, as well as an actor at the end of the table with the power to take decisions and support their implementation – a capacity that only a very few actors within NATO have. Many informants stressed that only the US can create a strong and coherent regional command level which can overrule or harmonise these national agendas. Thus, even within Regional Command South, where a mini "coalition of the willing" can be said to have materialized, a strong leadership is still needed to create unity within the campaign.

Tellingly, the problems with cooperation that are hampering Regional Command South are much less significant in the eastern parts of Afghanistan. Here the US heads ten of the thirteen PRTs in the provinces and is also in overall regional command.[63] Thus, all the US task forces and PRTs operate within the same command and control structure and are therefore not affected by the same problems as in the south. If operations are planned by the regional command headquarters, the US troops there can implement them without needing to seek national approval or to follow other doctrines. The downside, however, is that in their turn the US forces do not seem to listen to branches of ISAF headquarters other than their own.[64] This tendency was described by a number of informants in Kandahar. Some of the sections within the ISAF regional headquarters were being copied by US parallel reporting if the US did not agree on the set up or priority of the ISAF-led section in question. Parallel reporting was seen already in early summer 2009, bypassing ISAF lines of communications.

To sum up, the national and regional level within the mission is frequently acting as a point of contact for the respective national capital more than as the implementer of a coherent NATO mission strategy – guided by national agendas more than by mission unity. Most actors are tied down by national restrictions and focuses that make them loath to follow commonly agreed strategies and goals. Unity of effort and command can be found at the provincial PRTs and task-force level in cases where one actor is resourced and staffed to control the environment and has command over the lower levels. However, only a few NATO members have the resources to assume this role at the regional and national mission levels. That is why the US seems to be an essential partner for the Alliance when conducting a counterinsurgency campaign. As noted by one ISAF general: "The US is the only show in town".[65] This illustrates one of the clearest disparities between the classic and current counterinsurgency approaches. As noted above, the classic campaigns were conducted by a single state acting predominantly as a single actor – even the Iraqi campaign seems to fall under this category. The campaign in Afghanistan has been focused more on achieving equality and a political balance than on operational efficiency. In an interview at Regional Command South in Kandahar, the regional command level was characterised as being structured more by national and political necessities than by operational needs.[66] During visits to Regional Command South in all of the years 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009, the change of

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[62] High-level briefing received in United Kingdom on 12 May 2009, and interviews conducted in Regional Command South on 30 and 31 May 2009 in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

[63] Regional Command East comprise the following provinces: Nuristan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Bamyan, Ghazni, Kapisa, Laghman, Paktiya, Wardak, Logar, Khost, Paktika, Parwan and Panjshir.

[64] Interviews conducted at ISAF headquarters on 28 May and 4 June 2009 in Kabul, Afghanistan.

[65] High-level briefing received in United Kingdom on 12 May 2009.

[66] Interview conducted in Regional Command South Headquarters, Kandahar, on 30 May 2009 with a high-level NATO officer.

command[67] and the subsequent change in focus were obvious, and the work within some of the headquarters sections was characterised more by cutting and pasting information received by the province task forces and PRTs than by operational planning.

4.4. Testing Unity: Building National Security Forces

As in most counterinsurgency campaigns throughout modern history, the establishment of efficient national security forces has been central to the Afghan campaign. The (re)establishment of both police and military as crucial elements in the counterinsurgency efforts played an important role in classic campaigns such as the British-led police programme in Malaya and the build up of the host-nation's military by the US in Vietnam. The emphasis on national security forces has recently been reproduced in some of the newest doctrine, such as the US Counterinsurgency Manuel FM 3-24, which stresses that "Developing effective HN [Host Nation] security forces—including military, police, and paramilitary forces—is one of the highest priority COIN tasks".[68] The latter continues by emphasising that local police forces should have priority because, "In COIN operations, military forces defeat enemies to establish civil security; then, having done so, these same forces preserve it until host-nation (HN) police forces can assume responsibility for maintaining the civil order".[69] Several empirical lessons based on classic counterinsurgency campaigns support this point, as Marcus Skinner has observed. First, the establishment of security and the rule of law to win the support of the local population are crucial. Secondly, the national security forces, and especially the police, "provide a vital connection to the people….".[70] Finally, the provision of security is a precondition for the state's survival.[71] Thus, the importance of incorporating this focus into the campaign plan early in the engagement is emphasised.

In the Afghan case, the lessons of earlier campaigns were more clearly reflected in the overall political strategies that emerged in 2002 than in their actual implementation by the US and the Alliance. Shortly after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, the international community agreed a division of labour in establishing a new army and a police force in the country. Germany became the lead nation for the police reform programme and the US for the rebuilding of the military.[72] At this early stage of the engagement, no one talked about producing national security forces to be part of a counterinsurgency campaign, but merely to build them up as part of the overall goal of the mission, namely to ensure that the Afghan state could maintain a monopoly of power within the country.

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[67] In Regional Command South, since 2006 the command has been rotated every six months between UK, the Netherlands and Canada. Cooperation has not been easy, and the different commanders have had quite different ideas of how the operation is to be implemented, thus failing to create the sort of continuity that a counterinsurgency mission optimally needs.

[68] "Counterinsurgency Field Manual…", *op. cit*., pp. 6-22.

[69] *Ibid.,* pp. 7-5.

[70] Skinner, Marcus: "Counterinsurgency and State Building: An Assessment of the Role of the Afghan National Police", *Democracy and Security*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2008), pp. 290-311, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 292.

[71] *Ibid.*

[72] The set up of the security-sector reform program for Afghanistan was decided at a conference in Geneva in April 2002. For more details, see: Sedra, Mark: "Security Sector Transformation in Afghanistan", Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, *Working Paper,* no. 143 (2004), p. 3, and Hodes, Cyrus and Sedra, Mark: "Chapter Five: Security-Sector Reform", in Hodes, Cyrus and Sedra, Mark: "The search for security in post-Taliban Afghanistan", International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Adelphi Papers*, vol. 47, no. 391 (2007), pp. 51-93.

The German-led efforts focused almost entirely on building a strong officer corps and not on the lowest levels of the police. A smaller number of German police officers were assigned to the project of establishing a police academy in Kabul, where all Afghan police officers were to be educated.[73] The idea was to provide Afghan police officers with three years of education emphasising the principles of the rule of law, human rights and the role of the police in a democratic society. The lowest level of police officers were given merely a four- to eight-week training programme implemented by a US private contractor, DynCorp. The police building efforts were seen more as a reform programme, with the ministry and overall structures of the police to a large extent remaining the same, rather than as the rebuilding programme the US-led military programme was designed to be.

The US-led programme for the Afghan army, by contrast, was highly prioritised almost from the beginning. The US established a task force to be in charge of the programme and allocated some 2000 trainers and advisors to the project. Although the US focused on all levels of the new army, the first years' emphasis was to a large degree on getting soldiers into the field to assist mainly US forces in the "war against terror", particularly in the eastern regions of the country.[74] The programme was built on an initial fifteen-week training course for the new soldiers and on comprehensive education for officers, all taking place in Kabul.[75] As opposed to the German programme to reform the police, this programme embarked on a total rebuilding, thus not relying on old, ineffective and often corrupt structures. By 2006 it had become clear that the deteriorating security situation in the country demanded that both programmes – but especially the police programme – needed both restructuring and resources to be able to counter the challenges of a counterinsurgency campaign.[76]

At this time, ISAF had only a limited involvement in the two programmes, even though most contributors to the mission acknowledged the importance of national security forces in what was hastily becoming a classical counterinsurgency campaign.[77] By 2006, only about half of the approximately 62,000-strong police force was seen as capable of conducting the most basic police tasks,[78] and of the planned 70,000-man national army, only half had gone through basic training.[79] As a result, the US wanted to take over and strengthen the basic police programme and to engage ISAF fully in the training and mentoring of the Afghan army. As one informant stated, "there was no overall plan to build the Afghan national

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[73] The number of police officers that Germany actually deployed to Afghanistan has varied from between about forty and eighty officers. See, e.g., Skinner, *op. cit*.

[74] Interview conducted in Kabul in December 2004 with the director of an international think tank.

[75] The initial training programme has now been reduced to ten weeks. For more on the Afghan National Army, see Younossi, Obaid; Thruelsen, Peter Dahl et al. (2009): *The Long March: Building an Afghan National Army*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation.

[76] For more on the state of the Afghan National Police at this time, see Inspectors General: "Interagency Assessment of Afghanistan Police Training and Readiness", *US Departments of State and Defence*, Report, *ISP-IQO-07-07* (2006),

[77] The then British commander of ISAF, Lieutenant General David Richards, was the first ISAF commander to begin implementing a more classic counterinsurgency strategy for the mission. Among other things, he tried to implement an "ink spot" or "oil spot" strategy much inspired by earlier engagements in the 1950s and 1960s. Prior to Richards, US Lieutenant General David Barno (commander of the US-led operations in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005) had had a large impact in creating a more focused population-centred strategy for the US forces. For further details, see Marston, Daniel and Malkasian, Carter (eds.) (2008): *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, Wellingborough, Northants, United Kingdom, pp. 230-5.

[78] "Interagency Assessment of Afghanistan …", *op. cit*., p. 15.

[79] Younossi et al., *op. cit*., p. 31.

security forces", and such plans as did exist were not integrated into an overall strategy or aligned with each other.[80]

To restart the programmes, however, the US needed the Alliance's genuine commitment to the counterinsurgency campaign. Washington wanted to introduce police mentoring teams equal to the military ones, but for this to be possible, ISAF had to commit to the mentoring of the army to release US mentors for this new task. From the beginning of the military rebuilding programme, the US had introduced what it called Embedded Training Teams (ETT), which followed the national army units into the field to mentor and conduct "on the job training". To release the US ETTs for the much needed police mentoring, ISAF introduced an equivalent called the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), which was to be filled by ISAF soldiers stationed in the provinces. At first the participating countries within ISAF seem to support the idea, but when it came actually to allocating forces to the OMLTs, only a few NATO members signed up. By December 2008, only 42 of the 103 teams that ISAF were to substitute were operational, and even many of these were subject to national caveats.[81] Even in the parts of Afghanistan where the security situation was relatively calm, there was a great reluctance to participate in this extremely critical counterinsurgency task. Of the fifteen teams authorised in the north, only five were filled by January 2008, and of these two were "Tier II" OMLTs, meaning that restrictions were imposed on their use.[82] As a consequence, the US had to keep a large number of ETTs involved in the army programme on a permanent basis, thus reducing the greatly needed involvement with the police.

As well as the mentoring programme, the US introduced a new focused training programme for the police. The US Department of State hired DynCorp to undertake an eight-week training programme for the police, who were then to be supported by the mentoring teams that were to follow the newly trained police units into the field. Also, within this programme, the US tried to get ISAF to participate by sending police officers to the country to be included in the new Police Mentor Teams (PMT). Again, support for the programme came only slowly, and by late 2008 only about 25% of the more than 600 PMTs had been filled.[83] In this case, however, the US could not provide the absent teams because their ETTs were not being released by ISAF from their mentoring role with the army, with the negative effect that many police units are being left without oversight and mentoring.[84]

A striking example of the lack of unity hampering the creation and employment of effective Afghan security forces was revealed to us during interviews at Regional Command South in Kandahar. One high-level ISAF officer informed us about the decision to increase the Afghan police in the south and east with 10,000 personal.[85] The decision had been taking by the Afghan Ministry of Interior and the US Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A). Following the decision, CSTC-A communicated the news through

[80] Sedra, Mark: "Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan: The Slide Towards Expediency", in *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2007), pp. 106-07.
[81] "Progress towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan", Report in accordance with the 2008 National Defence Authorization Act (Section 1230, Public Law 110-181), *US Congress* (2009), p. 8, at http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/USDoD_ProgressTowardSecurityStability_Afghanistan_Jan2009.pdf.
[82] Younossi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
[83] "Progress towards Security …", *op. cit*., p. 44. The plan is that each ANP unit will have a PMT attached (with 365 districts, 46 city police precincts, 34 provinces, 5 regions, 20 ANCOP battalions, 33 ABP battalions and 135 ABP companies).
[84] The problem was mentioned by numerous informants during interviews and conversations conducted in Kabul, Kandahar and Helmand in May and June 2009.
[85] Cordesman, Anthony H. (2009): *Afghan National Security Forces: Shaping the Path to Victory*, Washington DC, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), pp. 27, 34.

US lines of communications down to the regional level.[86] CSTC-A at the regional level then initiated the planning and implementation process to support the police build-up with mentors and training. Being part of the ISAF structure, Regional Command South was not informed about the decision, even though it has a substantial role in the support of the Afghan police and is in overall charge of operations in the south. Only because of good personal relations between the chief of the US-led Afghan Regional Security Integration Commands (ARSIC) and the ISAF chief in supporting the Afghan national security forces was Regional Command South informed about the decision and their subsequent role in the increase. As the ISAF officer said, "There are no official communications structures. It is all about personal relations, and this has to be solved if unity is to be achieved".[87] In conducting a counterinsurgency campaign of such complexity as that in Afghanistan, it is imperative that the Alliance has clear communication and control structures, otherwise nobody will know what anyone else is doing. This will eventually undermine the efforts to build up the national security forces and thus the efficiency of the mission.

Currently, the Afghan National Army is scheduled to grow to 134,000 troops and the Afghan National Police to 82,000, plus 4,800 extra police for Kabul and 10,000 extra for the southern and eastern regions. However, there is a persistent debate about the proper size of both the army and the police,[88] which, in combination with the deteriorating security situation and the international desire to downsize the military presence, is constantly increasing the need for mentoring and training teams for the two services. An Afghan army of 134,000 soldiers is authorised to have 168 OMLTs and the current number of police (including border police) to have some 600 PMTs. With currently less that 50% of the OMLTs and only a fraction of the PMTs provided by ISAF, the US has realised that ISAF will probably not be assuming its share of the burden. Therefore, in launching his new Afghanistan strategy, President Obama stated that 4,000 trainers were to be deployed to assist both the Afghan army and the Afghan police.[89] However, in the summer of 2009 the US was still relying on ISAF to come up with approximately 200 of the PMTs and a majority of the OMLTs.[90]

Whether the Alliance will buy into this crucial element of counterinsurgency is uncertain. Even in relation to the newly agreed decision to establish a NATO training mission to Afghanistan,[91] Washington does not seem to have much confidence that there is a genuine commitment to the Afghan national security forces on the part of NATO members. As several high-level members of the international community in Kabul stated, "The US will take what they can get from NATO and then deliver the rest themselves". The impression given was that NATO's role within the newly strengthened US commitment will be "as a bit player" within the ISAF mission. The US will see what the different countries provide, but they seem to be

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[86] CSTC-A is represented in the regions by Afghan Regional Security Integration Commands (ARSIC). CSTC-A and the ARSICs are designed to support the build-up of the Afghan national security forces: CSTC-A in conjunction with ISAF and the Afghan government "plans, programs and implements the generation and development of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) in order to enable GIRoA [the Afghan government] to achieve security and stability in Afghanistan", at http://www.cstc-a.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=124&Itemid=1.

[87] Interview conducted in Regional Command South and ARSIC South on 30 May 2009 in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

[88] Commander ISAF recommended in his *COMISAF's Initial Assessment* that the national army should grow to 240,000 and the national police to 160,000. Also, one of President Karzai's five priority areas mentioned during his election campaign was to increase the Afghan national security forces to some 260,000 members.

[89] Obama, Barack: "speech on the new US strategy towards Afghanistan" (27 March 2009).

[90] Interviews conducted at ISAF headquarters in May and June 2009 in Kabul, Afghanistan.

[91] "Summit Declaration on Afghanistan", *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation* (NATO), *Strasbourg/Kehl Summit*, Strasbourg/Kehl (4 April 2009), at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52836.htm.

taking the lead themselves. As one informant stated, "within a year we [NATO] will only be contributors to the mission, not taking the lead".[92] One current issue illustrating the challenges involved is the discussion over whether the ISAF operational plan (O-plan) should be revised to meet the current challenges of a counterinsurgency operation. A revised plan could make the training and mentoring of the ANP a "key military task", as opposed to its current status as the "key supporting task" of ISAF. That will make it easier for ISAF to engage fully in the programme. However, revising the operational plan will probably open up another Pandora's Box, with 28 member states trying to agree not only on the new police training role, but also on all the other issues that will ultimately surface because of the direction the engagement has taken since ISAF took command in August 2003.

5. Conclusion

The problems of conducting classic counterinsurgency by alliance have been painfully revealed by NATO's current mission to Afghanistan. Eight years after the toppling of the Taliban regime, the insurgency seems stronger than ever, while the public support for the campaign is steadily eroding in several western capitals. To be sure, prevailing against a weak but determined irregular opponent in an ill-defined conflict is no easy feat for any actor. History offers quite a few examples to corroborate this observation. The analysis, however, suggest that fighting an insurgency the classic way is particularly challenging for a multilateral coalition or an alliance. Collective action problems, inconsistent threat perceptions, free-riding, and an unwillingness to subjugate narrow national interests to the need for tight coordination all work to the detriment of the effective implementation of a traditional counterinsurgency approach.

This is not to say that fighting as an alliance in an armed conflict against insurgents is all negative. Most importantly, an alliance can add significant legitimacy to the mission in ways that a small coalition built around a clearly dominant actor or a single nation state engaged in a war against irregular forces overseas, can not. Consider the war in Iraq. Although Washington occasionally portrayed the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) as a truly multilateral cooperation, it was evidently the United States that was doing the majority of the fighting and calling the shots. And although a significant number of western countries took part in the coalition, key NATO allies derided the war as an illegal attack on a sovereign state. Despite the fact that 40 countries contributed to the U.S.-led coalition, MNF-I thus never enjoined the broad political goodwill that still surrounds ISAF's mission in Afghanistan.

This is also why the current Americanisation of ISAF might turn out to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the strengthened American commitment and the increased number of US forces deployed to the particularly unruly parts of the country are raising hopes of a diminishing of the problem of collective action and the lack of coordination currently plaguing ISAF's undertakings. Greater unity of effort and more adequate military and civilian resources could reasonably be the results of increased US leadership. On the other hand, Washington's decision to take ownership could also engender even more political opposition to the campaign in European capitals. Already unpopular, turning the conflict into an "American-led war" would do little to make the mission more accepted. Less multilateralism would thus mean that the war efforts would be viewed as less legitimate. On a wider scale,

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[92] Interview conducted with a NATO staff officer in Regional Command South headquarters, Kandahar, 31 May 2009.

Americanisation could even endanger the cohesiveness of NATO, as US policy-makers might eventually lose interest in European partners who persistently show themselves unwilling and unable to contribute significantly to out-of-area operations.