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Coalition Warfare in Afghanistan: Burden-sharing or Disunity?

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US and Afghan troops on joint training exercises, 2006.
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Summary

- Western forces' success in fighting the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and in achieving a satisfactory level of security throughout Afghanistan remains limited. The lack of success results from the coalition's failure to develop and implement jointly a coherent strategy for Afghanistan that integrates counter-insurgency, counterterrorism and stability and reconstruction operations.
- The coalition's internal cohesion regarding the development of the Afghanistan operation is becoming increasingly fragile. The willingness to share risks has become a key issue. National caveats are increasingly disputed. Not all NATO member states are prepared to send their forces into combat. This puts the fundamental principle of alliance solidarity on the line.
- The coalition forces' comprehensive approach towards stability and reconstruction operations remains an elusive concept on the ground in Afghanistan. The consensus is that civil-military cooperation has to become an instrumental part of the Afghan operation, but it remains an unresolved issue how this could be translated into operational practice.
- The conflict has increasingly become a regional one. Taliban bases in Pakistan cannot be targeted by coalition forces; however, logistical and armament supplies out of Pakistan are significant, and Pakistan is used as a recruitment base. As long as parts of Pakistan serve as a safe haven for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, coalition forces will not be able to control Afghanistan.

Introduction

The war in Afghanistan began in 2001 as a counterterrorist operation. Its purpose was to eliminate Al-Qaeda and to remove the Taliban regime, which had provided it with protection. After initial military success, since 2005 coalition forces – i.e. both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) troops and troops from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – and NATO forces have increasingly encountered attacks by re-emerging Taliban insurgents. In 2006 forces became involved in the heaviest combat engagements in Afghanistan since the beginning of coalition operations. NATO was forced to conduct intensive ground combat operations in southern Afghanistan.

Why were coalition forces unable to translate initial military success into sustainable security and stability for Afghanistan? Common wisdom holds that the operation in Afghanistan mainly suffers from a lack of resources and troops, in particular since the parallel conflict in Iraq captured the attention of both policy-makers and the public. Indeed NATO has voiced its concern about the under-supported ISAF mission since 2003. Yet the operation is hampered by a more fundamental difficulty: the actors involved in the coalition failed to develop a coherent approach concerning the question of how to achieve Alliance and coalition objectives in Afghanistan. This lack of coherence among coalition partners manifests itself at various levels in different forms:

- *The strategic level:* agreed political aims for the operation were to eliminate Al-Qaeda, to defeat the Taliban and to help Afghanistan develop into a stable and democratic state. Yet the coalition failed to develop a comprehensive strategy that would address those issues equally. Instead, it devised partial and ad-hoc solutions.
- *The operational level:* varying national legal frameworks for military operations contribute greatly towards ISAF forces' ill-preparedness to engage in a long-term counter-insurgency campaign. As a result, their chances of success in Afghanistan are more and more unpredictable. This is testing the coalition's internal cohesion, which is becoming increasingly fragile.
- *The tactical level:* Afghanistan highlights the value of combat capabilities even within the context of stability and reconstruction operations. However, alliance and coalition forces are short of relevant capabilities. In particular, resources to provide for operational mobility remain scarce.

The lack of a coherent strategy for Afghanistan

In the initial planning stages for the war in Afghanistan, coalition member states agreed that a sound strategy had to include and combine combat operations, stability and reconstruction efforts and humanitarian relief. When under the mandate of Operation Enduring Freedom American and British forces entered the military campaign on 7 October 2001, policy-makers and the armed forces had prepared for initial combat operations and also for short-term humanitarian relief. However, it remained unclear how the long-term issue of sustaining a stability and reconstruction operation for Afghanistan was to be addressed. Efforts towards developing a comprehensive strategic approach that would involve stability and reconstruction operations started only months after the military operation already had begun.¹ Right from the start, reconstruction efforts lacked the necessary degree of coordination and political support. As a result, the coalition forces' initial military successes could not be translated into sustainable degrees of security and stability throughout the country.

The early phase: 2001–02

In the initial phase of the operation (2001–02), there was a consensus among Western policy-makers that Al-Qaeda had to be defeated militarily and that the Taliban had to be removed from power. Afghanistan was regarded as a 'failed state' and this condition was perceived as the main reason why it had become a safe haven for terrorists in the first place. Consequently, the long-term aim of the Western coalition was to enable the country to become a prosperous, politically stable and accountable state so as to prevent it from hosting terrorist organizations in the future. However, how both counterterrorist and stability and reconstruction efforts could be incorporated into a coherent strategic approach was contested. Two different models were discussed among Western policy-makers:

- First, there was the light military footprint approach. Strategic thinking was based on the hope that once the Western community had achieved an initial military success against both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the coalition could leave reconstruction tasks to the Afghans. This option was designed to necessitate only a small military contingent intended to provide a security shield for the emerging Afghan government.² The latter would in turn incrementally extend the reach of its authority across the country. This approach was favoured by the United States and Britain.³

- The alternative was the traditional Western humanitarian interventionist approach consisting of a relatively resource-intensive UN-led peacekeeping and stabilization operation with OEF as a security provider and both civilian and military capabilities to support local authorities. If the UN did not take the lead in such an operation, it could be led by a coalition of Western states. This approach was favoured mainly by Continental European countries.

According to then Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's dictum that the US 'doesn't do nation-building', the US administration's priority was not to become involved in stability and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Some voices in Britain echoed these preferences and demanded that British forces should not 'get fixed in Afghanistan'.⁴ This 'light footprint' approach was regarded with scepticism by European allies who advocated putting more emphasis on stability and reconstruction issues.

The eventual solution was a mix of both approaches. The Bonn Agreement of December 2001 envisaged an approach that was clearly limited in terms of necessary resources, but provided for at least some coalition-led stability and reconstruction efforts: ISAF, comprising troops from 37 nations and initially led by the UK, would be assigned to stabilize Kabul and to assist the Afghan authorities in reconstructing their country.

US policy-makers were also reluctant to place forces firmly under a multinational command. NATO had been offering support for the operation in Afghanistan from the outset; however, the United States had been averse to binding itself to NATO's consensus-oriented decision-making procedures, which it had perceived as counter-productive during the Kosovo campaign. Yet, faced with the alternative of committing more of its own troops to a stability and reconstruction mission it fundamentally did not want from the start, the US finally accepted the Europeans' offer to help. From the European perspective the ISAF mission was built upon a rather diffuse consensus on why European states should contribute troops to the operation in Afghanistan. The Europeans' respective reasons for this varied greatly: for instance, the UK and then also Germany were eager to strengthen the transatlantic security framework, whereas France saw European participation as a further step towards developing a genuinely European security identity. However, precisely what these troops were supposed to do in Afghanistan and in particular how they were supposed to stabilize and reconstruct the country was unclear. Moreover, ISAF's initial restriction to Kabul reflects the assumption that indigenous Afghan

military and police forces would be rebuilt in no time and could stabilize the country beyond Kabul. In retrospect, this assumption in particular looks astonishingly optimistic, since Afghanistan was a war-torn country with hardly any functioning state institutions. ISAF effectively embarked upon a mission without a strategy. Meanwhile, the US-led counterterrorist operation was supposed to continue to conduct combat operations there.

This overall arrangement not only fell short of formulating a strategy for long-term stability and reconstruction, but also hampered military operations right from the start:

- The parallel structures of OEF and ISAF violate the principle of unity of command in military operations, thus increasing the likelihood of operational confusion.
- Different mandates resulted in the formulation of different strategic objectives for deployed forces, in addition to individual contributing member states' varying interpretations of their mandates.
- ISAF was far too limited with respect to geographical reach and use of resources to provide a sustained stability and reconstruction effort for Afghanistan.
- OEF was far too unilaterally US-dominated to find the sustained support of other Western member states.

As a consequence of this mandate structure, the coalition forces' operations in Afghanistan have been shaped right from the start by deficiencies at the strategic level. The initial military success against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban could not be consolidated.⁵ The existing threat could not be eliminated: Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were driven to the southern and eastern border provinces where they reassembled in loose networks of smaller groups. A security vacuum emerged in areas in which OEF had operated against enemy forces, since the newly established Afghan military and police forces were slow to build up and remained too weak to secure gained territory, while ISAF was not equipped to fill this security vacuum.

Elements of a strategy: security sector reform and the introduction of Provincial Reconstruction Teams

Efforts to make up for these obvious deficiencies were focused on rebuilding the Afghan security sector as of mid-2002. The intention was to enable the Afghan authorities to contribute to the improvement of the security situation throughout the country and to provide a basis from which indigenous security forces

could eventually assume responsibility. Security sector reform was conducted in a framework of burden-sharing among coalition members: the United States would be responsible for building up the Afghan National Army (ANA) forces, Germany for the build-up of the police sector, Italy for reforming the legal system, the UK for counter-narcotics operations and Japan for disarmament, demilitarization and the reintegration of former militias. The conceptual idea behind this framework was that of assigning specific responsibilities to individual governments.

While this approach suited the interests of individual lead nations, it also led to incongruent outcomes. All five pillars are closely intertwined. For instance, effective counter-narcotics operations would have to draw on a powerful police force and a functioning legal system. Militias had to be disarmed before the police and armed forces could successfully assert their authority. As a result, the lack of progress in one pillar would affect all other pillars. In addition, the division of responsibilities for security sector reform hindered the interlocking of personnel that would need to be coordinated in order to ensure the establishment of structures to promote the rule of law. In hindsight, the pillar structure, while theoretically sound, did not pass the test of operational reality.

The introduction of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in 2002 and their incremental establishment throughout the country in 2003 constituted a second step towards enhancing stability and reconstruction efforts. The aim was to extend the influence of the Afghan central government into the regions and to provide for security and reconstruction at the local level without committing too significant levels of resources.⁶

The PRT concept left room for divergent stability and reconstruction approaches among the coalition, since PRTs are run by individual contributor nations, according to their own concepts, rather than by the Alliance as such. One rationale for the introduction of PRTs was to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local populace, particularly in areas where the military had conducted a large number of combat operations.⁷ For ISAF contributor nations such as Canada, Germany and the Nordic countries the core motivation behind the introduction of PRTs was to enhance Western efforts without expanding the operation itself. This concept was based on the idea that, first, success in stabilization efforts was primarily to be achieved at the local level, and, secondly, it would require effective collaboration between military and civilian actors.⁸

Yet PRTs are only one step towards a more comprehensive strategy that still needs to be developed. PRTs were geared towards dampening the level of violence and managing short-term local reconstruction efforts, but they could not provide the

core for a long-term effort.⁹ Moreover, there simply are not enough PRTs to reach out to all regions of Afghanistan. PRTs and security sector reform have been logical steps towards strengthening the stability and reconstruction aspect of the operation in Afghanistan, but they could not make up for the lack of a comprehensive Western strategy.

As a result, by now it is obvious that the Afghan authorities will not be able to assume core security functions as of 2010 as initially planned. The reasons for this are:

- The light footprint approach has led to a scarcity of resources on the ground, effectively making stability and reconstruction efforts for Afghanistan unlikely to succeed.
- The pillar structure has proved to be a dysfunctional concept for security sector reform, producing insufficient results in all identified key sectors.
- A large gap exists between the coalition's ambitious stability and reconstruction objectives on the one hand and its limited willingness to devote resources on the other. How to strike a balance between these two aspects remains to be agreed upon.

Differences in the legal framework

The Afghanistan operation is shaped by the inability of coalition members to agree on a joint strategic approach. This lack of a joint strategy is closely intertwined with the fact that coalition partners operate on the basis of different legal frameworks, which are reflected in their respective national mandates for military operations in Afghanistan.

Parts of the strategic discourse after 9/11 – in particular in the US, but also in the UK – were guided by the view that the 'war against terror' would differ completely from how war had been conducted in the past. Consequently, it was argued that the law of armed conflict, most parts of which were drafted 30 or more years ago, could not be applied to the 'war on terror'. Since the opponent itself, i.e. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, showed scant regard for the law of armed conflict, it was argued that binding Western forces to its provisions would unduly restrict their room for manoeuvre in an 'asymmetric' conflict. Differences with respect to the legal provisions of coalition partners pertained in particular to the legal status of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The legal status of Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters

On 7 February 2002, the US government issued a memorandum stating that neither Taliban nor Al-Qaeda fighters captured in Afghanistan would be granted prisoner-of-war status. As a matter of policy, however, US armed forces would treat all detainees humanely. In contrast, European states involved in the Afghanistan operation left no doubt that from their perspective, the Geneva Conventions were to be adhered to. Moreover, the legal framework of the ISAF mandate, UN Security Council resolution 1386 of December 2001, contained an explicit reference to international human rights standards that were binding for ISAF forces operating in Afghanistan. As a consequence, deployed military forces were subject to significantly different legal frameworks depending on their respective country and the mandate under which they were operating. Incoherence in the conduct of the coalition's operations was a direct result of this.

Although it was plain by early 2002 that the coalition partners' legal perspectives on the treatment of detainees differed greatly, all the long-term consequences were not foreseen. Policy-makers and military experts in Europe were simply in doubt about the implications of their US counterparts' disregard for both the Geneva Conventions and international human rights standards with respect to detainees from Afghanistan. Traditionally, the experience of the European allies had been that even if coalition partners were bound by different international legal obligations, those differences could be worked out in a pragmatic way.

However, this did not apply to the conduct of OEF. The handling of detainees is a protracted activity that requires a high degree of coordination between different forces operating in one theatre. Ultimately, in the early phase of the operation in Afghanistan, detainees were to be handed over to US forces simply because non-US OEF members did not run their own detention facilities in Afghanistan. That, however, meant that the Europeans had no legal guarantees as to how these detainees would be treated.

Devising a new detainee policy

While Europeans largely neglected the issue of detainees in the early phase of the operation in Afghanistan, they became very alert to it after allegations of ill-treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay became public in 2004. It also became clear once it was agreed in 2005 that ISAF would expand to the whole of Afghanistan that troops would have to handle more detainees than before. As a result, ISAF changed its detainee policy. Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between ISAF members and the Afghan government in 2005 and 2006 stated that

detainees would have to be handed over to the Afghan authorities within 96 hours of their arrest.

While this step put states participating in ISAF in a legally safe position, it did not solve the problem of incoherence with respect to detainee policy in Afghanistan. Initially, NATO had attempted to negotiate a joint agreement covering all NATO member states. However, this attempt failed owing to disagreement over the provisions to be included in the joint MOU. Moreover, the MOUs provide no practical solution to the detainee problem in Afghanistan. Handing over detainees to the Afghan authorities is highly problematic, since the country still lacks the necessary infrastructure in terms of both facilities and personnel to ensure proper treatment of those individuals. The only Afghan detention facility that comes close to Western standards is Puli Charkhi Prison near Kabul. It was rebuilt with US support and serves mainly for detainees the US forces hand over to Afghan authorities. European ISAF members have made no effort so far to provide comparable support to the Afghan security sector reform by assisting the build-up of adequate detention facilities.

Strategic impact of the divergent interpretations of the law of armed conflict

The coalition forces' differences concerning the legal framework of the operation in Afghanistan proved disastrous. They directly contravened the strategic objectives of the operation, with the following consequences:

- The legitimacy of OEF was jeopardized by unclear legal foundations for the 'war on terrorism', and this led directly to domestic repercussions in the states involved in the counterterrorist campaign in Afghanistan, with a decrease in public support for coalition operations there.
- The coalition forces' legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan populace was undermined, thereby contradicting the objective of winning 'hearts and minds'.
- Hence, the objective of establishing rule of law structures in Afghanistan was damaged. The proper treatment of detainees should be a benchmark for the establishment of structures for the rule of law, but the coalition failed to establish a model to be followed by the Afghan authorities.

ISAF's expansion to southern Afghanistan

When in 2006 NATO's ISAF began to replace US troops deployed in southern Afghanistan under the OEF mandate, this effectively also meant that ISAF would

become increasingly involved in combat operations. However, ISAF's geographical expansion also led to increasingly visible cracks within the coalition, especially when the Taliban launched an insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan in 2006.

The large operational spectrum ISAF finds itself confronted with today leads to increasingly divergent perceptions of operational objectives among coalition members. Most participating states define coalition operations in Afghanistan as being specifically about counter-insurgency and counterterrorism or about stabilization and reconstruction. The situation on the ground is that coalition forces are deployed to conduct operations across the whole operational spectrum, increasingly under both ISAF and OEF mandates. However, forces operate under different commands and out of geographically separated headquarters. On a daily basis coalition commanders are faced with the need to coordinate forces tasked to conduct stability operations and reconstruction activities but also deployed to wage combat and counter-narcotics campaigns all within the same theatre of operations. Clearly, this constitutes a highly complex operational agenda for ISAF. Southern Afghanistan has become the focal point of this development.

Britain provides the bulk of the ISAF force in southern Afghanistan, supported by troops that are predominantly from Australia, Canada, the United States and the Netherlands. Some Nordic countries, such as Estonia and Denmark, also lend their support to the campaign in the South. In contrast, other ISAF members are reluctant to provide forces for operations in southern Afghanistan. Their force deployments in the country are heavily constrained by restrictive caveats. National legal and political restrictions on geographical deployment areas and the availability for operations reduce the flexibility of ISAF operations.¹⁰ The tendency towards caveats is further strengthened by a more general tendency to make force protection a primary issue of concern.

Germany is a case in point. German political leaders categorically refuse to let the German army become involved in ground combat operations in Afghanistan, and indeed its overall involvement in both OEF and ISAF has become a sensitive issue. Placed under tight political restrictions by the Bundestag, the German government was even forced to ensure that reconnaissance data collected by its Tornado aircraft deployed under ISAF command would not be provided to OEF – a reflection of German politicians' continued insistence that the Bundeswehr's role in Afghanistan remain limited to combat support. This has created a peculiar situation. By being a member of both ISAF and OEF, the German government has committed its forces to the full operational spectrum covered by the ISAF and OEF mandates. However, it is neither prepared to

make the case for such operations publicly nor is it willing to provide German commanders on the ground with the freedom to operate according to those mandates. Instead German forces are constrained by tight national political restrictions that reach well beyond existing legal restrictions.¹¹

The case of Germany illustrates a more general and serious difficulty with coalition operations in Afghanistan: not all ISAF members are prepared to share the increased risk of casualties that is inherent in ISAF's geographical expansion. The unwillingness to share risks emanates from national domestic political contexts but inevitably has larger repercussions for NATO's future.

Military operations in southern Afghanistan

A prime example of the effects of these constraints on operations was seen in Operation Medusa in southern Afghanistan, conducted in September 2006 and led by Canadian ISAF forces and Afghan National Army troops. Its purpose was to take control of an area in Kandahar province. In the course of the operation ISAF forces were confronted with entrenched Taliban units capable of defending and holding ground against them. Canadian commanders asked at least four allied partners for relief, but were turned down on the basis that legal restrictions would not permit their forces to come to the Canadian forces' assistance. As a result of such operational experiences, national caveats have become increasingly contentious matters among coalition members. The willingness to share risks has become a key political aspect of the operation. The principle of alliance solidarity has been put on the line.

However, even among those coalition members that are prepared to engage in military operations, approaches vary greatly. The coalition's inability to agree on a joint response to the insurgency in the south and east of Afghanistan has become evident at various times since 2006. Seeking ways to engage the local populace in constructive dialogue, British forces made an attempt to reach a limited political settlement in the south. The effort was criticized by US forces from the very beginning. After British forces were repeatedly attacked by the Taliban throughout the summer of 2006 at Musa Qala in Helmand province, then ISAF commander General David Richards engineered an agreement between local tribal elders and the provincial governor to withdraw from the area in return for their guarantee to keep the Taliban out of the town. Subsequently Musa Qala was attacked by the Taliban in early February 2007.¹² ISAF forces – whose command had just been handed over from British to American forces – resumed control of the town. Since then the coalition, now under US command, has been much more sceptical about negotiations with local representatives.¹³

ISAF's shortfalls regarding the provision of forces

and their readiness to deploy them owing to tight national political and legal restrictions, and its failure to agree on a joint strategy, are not the only difficulties confronting commanders. They are also faced with shortages of equipment.¹⁴ Key resources such as transport helicopters for expeditionary operations are just as scarce as reconnaissance capabilities. The issue is that the Alliance's force structure is not geared towards the provision and support of forces for such operations.

Finally, the sheer lack of manpower is a growing problem. Western and Afghan forces are too thinly stretched across Afghanistan. This issue has become particularly sensitive in southern Afghanistan, where the terrain forces commanders to rely on ground troops to fight the Taliban effectively. However, manpower shortages mean units assigned to attack the Taliban are unable to control areas for any length of time. Hence coalition forces are capable of achieving tactical victories over the Taliban and controlling areas for short periods, but remain unable to defeat them. In addition, the lack of ground forces means ISAF has been incapable of establishing more than a few permanent bases in the south. Thus attempts to secure whole regions are bound to fail. Overall, the growing insurgency clearly demonstrates the need for an increase in manpower on the ground; however, the majority of coalition members are against sending more forces to Afghanistan.

Low troop levels, lack of equipment for ground forces and contingents constrained by political and legal restrictions are factors that increasingly lead commanders towards the use of air power. In particular it is the tactical element of choice since the risk for the forces involved is comparably low and it meets force protection requirements. The use of air power against insurgents, however, inevitably increases the likelihood of civilians being killed in such operations. One reason for this is that insurgents tend to hide among the civilian populace or even use civilians as 'human shields'. However, the growing number of civilian casualties and mounting collateral damage are undermining the coalition forces' legitimacy in the eyes of both Afghans and the international community, including the latter's respective domestic publics, and will eventually erode support for the coalition forces. Overall, the Taliban's ability to address the media dimension of this war is obvious and has to be taken into account.

Thus the framework for coalition operations in southern Afghanistan presents major obstacles to the effective use of force. Coalition forces are confronted with an enemy capable of engaging ISAF troops in a variety of ways ranging from suicide attacks to positional warfare. The coalition is ill prepared for this in particular for the following reasons:

- The war in Afghanistan is of a highly multi-faceted nature. This makes it difficult for coalition members to mobilize the necessary political will to provide adequate resources to meet politically agreed objectives. Operation commanders are confronted with a clear gap between available resources and assigned operational objectives.
- Given that the military operation involves continuously intensifying risks for the forces involved, ISAF is increasingly likely to have mounting casualty rates and to cause collateral damage. Alliance electorates have not been prepared for this.

Disagreement on the way forward

Within the coalition, debate has evolved about the need to develop an approach based on more reliable arrangements with the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank. The consensus is that those actors should bear the burden of civil tasks, with NATO and coalition military forces concentrating on the military ones. However, there is an evident lack of political will on the part of those civilian international actors to commit considerable resources over a sustained period. This puts ISAF into a difficult position. Coalition efforts towards civilian reconstruction such as the PRTs can only provide short-term effects while civilian instruments need to be employed to tackle structural long-term threats to stability in Afghanistan. However, there is an obvious lack of success in that area. Current stability and reconstruction efforts are failing to generate enough progress and in particular a sustainable process of reform in the security sector.

Little progress has been made in dealing with the warlords, whose infighting and various forms of criminal activities remain a major security threat. In particular, the coalition has failed to tackle the nexus of Afghan government, warlords and the drugs trade. The evident linkages have greatly contributed to the Afghan government's loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan population; however, the coalition has tended to ignore this issue in the past.

Tackling the issue of the production and trafficking of narcotics, which increasingly threatens the Afghan government's authority, is one aspect of this. According to the United Nations, Afghanistan produces almost 90 per cent of the world's illicit opium, up from 70 per cent in 2000 and 52 per cent a decade earlier.¹⁵ The narcotics trade generates revenues equivalent to about 30 per cent of Afghanistan's total economy.¹⁶ Even though it is clear that stepping up counter-narcotics efforts is a vital requirement for the coalition's future success in Afghanistan, coalition members find it difficult to agree on a way forward. Some advocate the comprehensive eradication of poppy crops in Afghanistan. Others, however, argue that the eradication of poppy fields in areas where alternative livelihood

schemes are not immediately available would lead affected farmers to support the Taliban, thus adding fuel to the insurgency. As a result of this disagreement over appropriate measures, counter-narcotics efforts are effectively heading nowhere. Inevitably, this inconsistency over how to tackle such a vital issue weakens the credibility of the coalition in the eyes of the Afghan populace.¹⁷

Finally, in order to succeed coalition forces depend on the support of regional players such as Pakistan. The Taliban and their allies enjoy significant advantages crucial to the insurgency by using Pakistan as a safe haven: their bases cannot be targeted by coalition forces, and logistical and armament supplies out of Pakistan are practically unlimited. Moreover, as long as parts of Pakistan are also used as a recruitment base for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, coalition forces are fighting a lost cause.¹⁸ However, so far the coalition's efforts in this respect appear to be only half-hearted. An approach that takes into account regional actors in the conflict needs to be developed. All these unresolved issues demonstrate that coalition operations suffer from a lack of consensus on how to move forward in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The coalition does not have a coherent strategy for Afghanistan and some member states are not prepared

to sustain a counter-insurgency operation. In the Taliban, NATO faces an opponent that aims to create disagreement within the Alliance and wants to influence national domestic publics. The consensus-based nature of NATO's decision-making mechanisms provides insurgents with an obvious opportunity to influence NATO's strategy-making process. In particular, they can selectively target individual member states in their attacks in order to affect public opinion and make it more risk-averse. Thus, the Afghanistan operation clearly demonstrates the limitations of NATO's consensus-based decision-making process. It places clear limits on NATO's ability to successfully develop and implement a coherent strategy. The evolution of the Afghan operation shows that NATO is ill prepared to conduct a large-scale and complex stability and reconstruction operation that requires its forces to be capable of sustaining counter-insurgency campaigns. These difficulties are multiplied by the coalition's inability to agree on a joint perception of the conflict in Afghanistan, whether regarding adequate responses or in terms of operational objectives. Overall, the multi-faceted nature of the Afghanistan operation makes it difficult for coalition members to generate the necessary political will to raise the necessary resources to make progress towards agreed operational objectives. Adequate resources and a coherent strategy for Afghanistan, however, are a prerequisite for success.

Endnotes

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