

INTRODUCTION

THE ALLIES OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), along with partners, have for more than a decade been fighting a dogged and brutal war in Afghanistan. What was once a small security operation has become a major war effort involving, at its height in mid-2011, 131,000 troops from forty-nine troop-contributing nations led by the United States.¹ The war is dynamic and defies easy control and conceptualization. The allies have tinkered with various mission headers, such as counterterrorism, stabilization, and security assistance; in the end, settling on counterinsurgency, though transition to Afghan leadership has brought a new focus. The killing of Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda's leader, on May 2, 2011, is a victory of sorts, but it is now widely understood that outright campaign victory is off the books. The 2009–2011 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) surge led by the United States hit the Taliban hard but was a prelude to transition and thus a strategy for drawing down force engagements and encouraging Afghan reconciliation and regional engagement. The end game will be difficult, and the outcome remains uncertain. Still, it is clear that the Atlantic Alliance must come to grips with the wider geopolitical lessons of a campaign that has accelerated a global power shift and revealed a deficit in the Alliance's collective purpose.

During the Cold War, NATO's purpose was easy to identify. Lord Ismay, NATO's first secretary general, summed it up eloquently: NATO is here to keep the Soviets out, the Americans in, and the Germans down. This was Europe-centric NATO. But what is NATO's purpose now that questions of security in Europe have evolved and integrate with security issues in other regions and indeed the world? This was a question already posed in the early

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1990s. NATO toughed it out, defying political death and busying itself with the reordering of the NATO borderland from the Baltic to the Balkans. The question is not going away, though, as Afghanistan so vividly reminds us. When confronted with the question, NATO's current Lord Ismay—Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen—ventures that NATO's purpose today is to keep “the Americans in, the Europeans engaged, and new threats out.”²²

It is a balancing act between the old and the new—between a Europe-centric NATO that the United States must remain involved in and a global-centric NATO that Europeans must engage. NATO's new Strategic Concept of November 2010 embodies the balancing act stringently and with a degree of vision, and yet it remains a roadmap that struggles with political reality. This reality is notably defined by the tension between coalitions of the willing who drive campaigns and provide leadership on the one hand and collective and formalized institutions such as NATO that provide support and backup. The intervention in Libya—Operation Unified Protector (OUP)—that unfolded through 2011 is a case in point. It was not run by “political NATO” but rather “command-and-control NATO” because the United Nations defined the “Responsibility to Protect” mission, and a coalition of the willing—attached to the Libya Contact Group that later morphed into Friends of Libya—dealt with the high politics of the campaign. NATO was left with military execution, by and large. That campaign had positive effects in terms of Libya's incipient regime transition and Colonel Qaddafi's demise and death but also highlights, therefore, NATO's challenge of political impact and relevance. It is the story we will encounter in Afghanistan as well. If coalitions gain all the political purpose as defined by particular campaigns, if NATO is reduced to a military toolbox because the allies fail to agree to a collective engagement beyond Europe's peripheries, then NATO will be the loser of today's wars. Put differently, NATO is faring badly in Afghanistan because a deficit in political purpose translates into inadequate strategic thinking about ends, ways, and means, and NATO must now confront this deficit.

This book is the first comprehensive assessment of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan and what the war in Afghanistan means for NATO as an alliance. Books on NATO do deal with Afghanistan, just as books on Afghanistan do deal with NATO, as the book review in Chapter 1 demonstrates, but no book has to date focused primarily on the two—NATO and Afghanistan—and the implications of their coming together. This book is about NATO as a Western alliance and a pillar of international order and about what war in Afghanistan

has done to this pillar. It offers insights into what NATO is, how it evolves, why it sometimes does not, and what NATO will likely become. It is based on the author's years of engagement with the issue and notably builds on insights generated from discussions and interviews with key NATO actors—statesmen, generals, and other Alliance officials—in Brussels, Kabul, and elsewhere. And it appears at a propitious moment because we know the allies' Afghanistan exit strategy following a decade of war and diplomatic engagement. The exit strategy is contained in the so-called *Inteqal*—from the Dari and Pashtun word for transition—document that the U.S.-led troop surge is designed to realize. The *Inteqal* was negotiated and then embedded into allied strategy in the course of 2010. Thus we know that the Atlantic allies are set to terminate the combat mission within a few years, which naturally raises the question: What is next? What do we learn from the Afghan campaign, and what will NATO evolve into?

LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN

It is useful to distinguish between lessons that apply to the NATO experience and the future of the Alliance, and lessons for observers of international affairs more broadly. There are several lessons regarding NATO. The first one is that NATO is failing—and has consistently failed—to provide a purpose for the fight in Afghanistan that connects the ground effort to NATO's wider international effort. It is one thing to say that NATO is in Afghanistan to assist the Karzai government or to counter Al Qaeda; it is quite another thing to justify it with reference to a wider Alliance purpose. NATO's wider purpose is either Eurocentric or only tenuously related to Afghanistan: Combating terrorism is vaguely defined and buried in references to cyberwar, deterrence, and antipiracy missions off Africa's Horn. Assisting Afghanistan is a noble cause in and of itself, but the cause has come to demand such a massive level of engagement that Afghanistan should be situated at the heart of what the Alliance is about. NATO's best answer is to point in the direction of global security management and the need for multiple organizations to cooperate in the management of new threats. It locates NATO at the heart of a wider liberal order and attaches it to the United Nations, which likewise seeks security management. NATO has developed a doctrine to this effect—the Comprehensive Approach. As a tool for organizational cooperation it is appropriate, but as a political agenda for an alliance it is a misfortune.

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NATO has in effect retreated into liberal wishful thinking. The assumption that a wider liberal community is ready to act if it can only be organized—via the Comprehensive Approach—is just that, an assumption. It is not warranted by events on the ground, though the assumption must be politically comforting. If the mission spins out of control, we appeal to the community while getting on with our business. If things go wrong, the diffuse community is there to pin the blame on. But the comfort is deceptive because comprehensive cooperation is just a tool: It does not confer purpose, and it does not result in strategy. The liberal ideal has thus become disconnected from reality, and NATO is one of the main culprits of this—the liberal disconnect.

This is not an argument against liberalism but for liberalism's rooting in geopolitical reality. NATO once managed this balance with ease because values and interests coincided. This was during the Cold War. Unsure of its interests in the post-Cold War era, NATO took to cultivating its inherent liberal values as a source of cohesion and a blueprint for external action. It continued to manage the value-interest balance with success, though, because it did not cave in to liberalism's universal impulse and worked predominantly within realistic geopolitical—Euro-Atlantic—confines. It became, in effect, a "benevolent alliance"—still an alliance but also a provider of progress. The terrorist attacks of 2001 and the war in Afghanistan challenged the compromise behind the "benevolent alliance," thrusting it onto the world stage where other actors and issues clamor for influence and attention. Bewildered in terms of interests, NATO has committed even further to liberal values. It thus lost its balance.

Not all is yet lost for the Alliance, though. Afghanistan tells us that the Alliance is capable of change. In 2006–2007, when the insurgency took off in earnest and threatened NATO and ISAF with campaign failure, NATO managed not only to stay together but also to change course. Change began with the collective recognition that this was a real fight and that NATO as a collective body could not handle it. Instead, NATO prepared to support a lead nation—the United States—on the security side and draw in a variety of political and civil means to advance the broader campaign. NATO might not be a strategic actor—one capable of commanding and controlling ISAF in a real fight—but NATO could be a strategic enabler, supporting a lead and gaining a say in the overall strategy. This was an important turn of events, which began in 2007–2008 and continues to this day. It showed that NATO is adaptive. What NATO now needs to do is carry this momentum of change into the wider political

arena. In Afghanistan, NATO picked a fight it was not ready for, and it wisely settled for supporting a U.S. lead. Beyond Afghanistan, NATO must maintain the political ability to set priorities when challenged. NATO cannot predict the future and plan strategically for it, any more than other actors, but it can retain its capacity to react thoughtfully and vigorously—strategically—to the changing fortunes that campaigns put on offer. The Comprehensive Approach has become a cover for a deficit in strategic capacity. It provides for an ongoing liberal disconnect. The war in Afghanistan is thus tied to a war for the West. NATO can muddle through in Afghanistan, but it needs to win the latter, and it will require that NATO comes home. To come home is not to redefine Russia as a regional threat or to build a firewall around NATO territory; it is to rediscover the political purpose of the Western alliance in the twenty-first century.

This brings us finally to some more general observations that the reader will be able to take away from the engagement with this book. They will be substantiated by the analysis and will therefore be briefly presented here. The first observation is that there is no antithesis between liberalism and realism, which is otherwise a much-deployed confrontation in the academic literature. Writer and analyst Edward H. Carr once observed that the utopian will fail to find refuge from reality because reality will refuse to conform to utopian standards but also that the realist will find no resting place in pure realism because it fails to provide goals and inspire action.³ Politics is the art of balancing utopian thought and realist analysis, of infusing into geopolitical analysis the kind of purposive thought that will advance the management of power without wrecking its foundations. This remains the case. It follows that political artists—statesmen—must be cognizant of two challenges. One is the balance between leadership and organization—between heroic initiative and routine. A political community needs both, but in contested operations the schism between coalitions building on initiative and institutions marked by routine can grow dangerously. Though Afghanistan may show that allies can operate a coalition of the willing without endangering the collective Alliance, it has been a rough ride.⁴ The coalition—Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)—was hotly contested by some allies, and it took a long moment of campaign crisis in 2006–2008 to make for a cohesive allied approach, which was the Obama-led surge and transition strategy. The balance between Alliance leadership and allied organization is tenuous, therefore, and the balancing act will continue beyond the transition target of 2014 and beyond Afghanistan itself. Another challenge and balancing act concerns the tension between network and actor.

This is the story of national and allied power versus globalization and global governance. Any one actor can do only so much, and the power of global networks can be immense. However, networks are leaderless. Spoilers can easily exploit this lack of leadership, which we see in respect to Afghan governance and development. Global governance visions have been out of sync with Afghan reality, in other words. To an extent, NATO has been slow in recognizing that it had to provide the overall campaign leadership—not just for security but for the whole range of efforts—and the issue of leadership remains a contentious one in the wider context of NATO–U.N. relations.

The sum of these observations is that NATO has had a deficit of leadership, a strategy building on organizational routine, and a hope that global governance would solve its problems. It was the downside of the benevolent outlook that was nourished through the 1990s. NATO's political leaders have been engaged in the Afghan campaign, for sure, but they have lacked in alliance convictions. Once the Taliban had been chased from power, which happened very quickly, NATO's mission expanded to nation building without the Alliance leadership questioning the appropriateness of this mission end point. Organizational routine then took over, and politics became a question of engineering as opposed to making hard choices: Confronted with vast social and political problems in Afghanistan, the engineer will choose a vast and comprehensive solution. NATO to an extent failed in its responsibility to design policy according to consequences, a classical ethical yardstick. In recent years NATO leaders have come to realize that engineering is a problem, not a solution, and that global governance in situations of war is theory, not practice. The result is a tentative return to political leadership and the type of conviction that could provide renewed purpose to NATO. It could turn NATO around but is, as mentioned, a work in progress.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 takes stock of the debate on NATO. NATO has been around for so long that it is not possible to point to any one source of Alliance continuity. It could be the balance of power or democracy. It could be both, and it could be something else. The ambiguity spills over into the assessment of NATO and Afghanistan. A number of analysts claim that NATO is finished as an effective alliance and that Afghanistan shows it. This is the NATO-is-dying school, and it is countered by another school of thought that believes NATO is doing the right thing but too little of it. This is the NATO-should-globalize school.

This book takes issue with both these positions in terms of how they interpret the record of NATO and Afghanistan and also in terms of their tendency to look at NATO from the outside. To properly grasp NATO we must get inside it. NATO has not only disparate national interests but also collective meaning, as German sociologist Max Weber would have argued. It leads to a third school of thought that finds NATO viable, as opposed to dying, but in need of a more distinct regional, as opposed to globally networked, identity. NATO has people, machines, and missions but also, and critically, a Western character. This book argues that NATO's future depends on its ability to confront and renew this character as it extracts itself from Afghan warfare.

Section I provides overviews of both NATO's recent past and the Afghan conflict. Chapter 2 offers an overview of what NATO had become by 2001 following out-of-area experiences, notably in the Balkans, and what NATO looked like on September 10, 2001. Chapter 3 outlines the kind of government Afghanistan gained following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in late 2001 and how the international community initially set out to assist this new government. It also locates the key points of decision making that shaped and deepened NATO's Afghan engagement.

Section II is composed of three investigative chapters that account for NATO's entry into Afghanistan, its near-death experience as a strategic actor but also its comeback as a strategic enabler, and its dangerous flirtation with the agenda of global governance. Chapter 4 deals with the period 2001–2005, when NATO was at first sidetracked and then pulled in to take the ISAF lead. A number of original sins were committed to the effect that by 2005, when NATO decided that its lead should extend to the entire country, it was not the strategic actor it pretended to be. Chapter 5 covers NATO's encounter with the brutal and difficult campaign in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The campaign shocked the Alliance and left it bereft of leadership. However, NATO managed in these years, 2006–2008, to redefine its role to that of strategic enabler. NATO lost the sense that it could take the military lead, but it gained a policy for handling civil-military matters more coherently. Chapter 6 covers 2008–2012 and thus the struggle to recover purpose and fight the war in Afghanistan to a successful end. There are telling signs of renewal because the allies are cohering around the transition strategy. However, the renewal is incomplete, and NATO must continue to develop its response to critical events in and around Afghanistan and indeed in the wider Middle East.

The conclusion takes stock of NATO and looks to the future. NATO holds potential. NATO remains a valuable gateway for the United States to influence key Eurasian developments and thus manage the international order, and NATO gives European allies a seat at the American table. To realize this potential, the Alliance must face the fact that its tendency to be visionary but not realistic has to do with the “benevolent” mind-set that was nourished through the 1990s. It must balance ideas of benevolence with ideas of Western alliance and purpose, which requires a sustained effort of political leadership. Continued NATO engagement in Afghanistan will be the right policy and not only because it would contribute to Afghan and South Asian stability: It could be the catalyst for NATO’s rediscovery of itself.