

COMMENT 216 - Was the NATO Afghan mission a failure? An urgent evaluation by NATO is needed

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25 August 2021 – DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C216](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C216)



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Many commentators in recent days argued that the NATO retreat from Afghanistan represented a failure of Western interventions around the world and even the [end](#) of NATO – or at least the need for a European [autonomy](#) from the US. However, it is perhaps too early for such conclusions. What NATO perhaps needs most is an urgent evaluation of its Afghan mission followed by appropriate measures – that is, if it wants to remain what it has always been: a **political-military alliance** among **free** states.

NATO [blamed](#) mostly Afghan leaders for the military collapse. Actually, the Taliban didn't win a war against NATO, or against the US for that matter. They simply decided to take power by force as soon as the US and NATO retreated (and this instead of respecting the Doha accords)¹. The Taliban preferred military conquest to negotiations with the Afghan government as soon as Western troops left the country – and the Afghan government decided to give up resistance to the Taliban insurgency so as to avoid a civil war. But to place responsibility in Afghan leadership alone is not enough.

Was the NATO mission based on training, advice and assistance for Afghan security forces and institutions in their conflict with the Taliban a failure? This is what NATO now must ask itself. As the recent statement by NATO Foreign

¹ The peace agreement signed in Qatar between the US and the Taliban in February 2020, and supported by China, Russia and Pakistan, decided the withdrawal of American and NATO troops in return for a Taliban pledge to prevent al-Qaeda to be present in areas under Taliban, and negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Ministers on Afghanistan [declared](#): “for the last twenty years, we have successfully denied terrorists a safe haven in Afghanistan from which to instigate attacks” and this can be considered a success, but also “we will fully reflect on our engagement in Afghanistan and draw the necessary lessons”.

NATO’s Resolute Support Mission (RSM) started in 2015, supported by the UN Security Council (thus including China and Russia). It consisted of about eight thousand coalition forces to advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and help build up an army of almost 300,000 troops. It was a follow-on mission to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which started in 2001, with support of the UN Security Council as well. The ISAF’s main purpose was also to train the ANSF, as well as engage in the war against terrorism and in particular against the Taliban insurgency.

This was probably the biggest mistake by NATO operations in Afghanistan: blend the goal of training operations with the actual combat. It was in this endeavour dragged by the US, gradually losing the grip on both aims and strategies and finally also the operation’s legitimacy. Therefore, NATO needs first of all to make one thing clear to itself: even if the world often identifies the Alliance with the US, they are two different actors and is crucial for NATO, and in particular for European Allies, to understand this and act accordingly.

Second, if the Resolute Support Mission taught any lesson, it was that NATO should focus in the future on [Capacity Building](#) and [Security Force Assistance](#) of its needing partners’ National Armed Forces. That is, not engaging in combat operations. Combat operations pertain to national forces – and perhaps to other regional or global powers willing to intervene and legitimated to do so by the UN Security Council itself, for instance due to a Responsibility to Protect of fight against terrorism. Combat operations in foreign countries should not be NATO's main goal: for, again, NATO is an Alliance of Collective Defense.

Therefore, the new NATO Strategic Concept that will emerge next year should learn from this experience and clarify that its first pillar of “Collective Defence” should not create more wars outside its territory – even if and when new terrorist attacks could require such interventions, which must be limited in scope and time. Instead, NATO can focus and expand on the other two fundamental tasks outlined in the 2010 Strategic Concept: [Crisis management](#) and [Cooperative security](#). The first should be related not so much with local conflicts of fragile states, which will

probably increase in the future, but with new global crisis such as climate security disasters, new terrorist attacks (in particular in a complex world of cyber, AI and autonomous systems) or new pandemics. The second pillar of Cooperative Security will have to be more inclusive regarding countries that request help, working especially on root causes of conflicts and instability, with important NATO programmes, from [Building Integrity](#) to [Women Peace and Security](#). NATO is currently training national security institutions in Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia, has similar arrangements with Georgia and Moldova, and will probably do the same in Libya in the near future.

Most importantly, NATO must avoid at all costs a top-down state-building project – the real [failure](#) in Afghanistan. This is the third lesson: nation-building and institution- building, as the combat operations themselves, concern national countries and nobody else. The risk of ethnic conflict and even a new civil war is very present today in Afghanistan, where trust in very corrupted public institutions has always been absent. It remains to be seen whether the Asian powers that want to support the new regime, from China to Russia, have understood this. It is not a question of democracy or dictatorship, secular government or Islamic Republic, Monarchy or Emirate. It is a question of state institutions that need to be built within the traditional way of governance, without an external model imposition.

These are the most important lessons learned from Afghanistan. Let's hope that the Alliance will make an urgent evaluation of its last 20 years operation in the country. For we must prepare for future decades with a better strategic vision and a clearer, more doable, and of course sustainable goals. We must do so for the good of international stability and of the populations in the many countries that will have to deal with regime transitions in the future.

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