In a farewell speech in Brussels, outgoing US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates painted a bleak future for NATO. The Alliance’s failings are well known: NATO members appear increasingly divided ‘between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of Alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership … but don’t want to share the risks and the costs’.¹ Budget pressures are bringing closer the prospect of ‘collective military irrelevance’. Should European leaders not redress this state of affairs, the United States may reconsider its underwriting of European security, which would herald, in Gates’s words, ‘a dim, if not dismal future of the transatlantic Alliance’.

The travails of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan are often cited as evidence for NATO’s dismal future. Yet a closer look at that experience suggests that the Alliance can adapt to difficult circumstances, albeit only in supertanker style. It may take years of small-step decisions, but the ship can change course. This is not to say the Afghan campaign is going swimmingly (far from it), but the health of the strategic dialogue in the Alliance is improving rather than deteriorating. In spite of all the doom and gloom about the campaign itself, and without denying the many challenges the Alliance confronts, it can be said that in political and military terms, NATO may yet emerge from its Afghan crucible a leaner and more effective security organisation.

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¹ This refers to a speech given by Robert Gates to the NATO Defence Ministers Council on 30 March 2011.
The evolution of ISAF

Afghanistan became NATO’s top priority in June 2004 after the heads of state and government approved a plan to provide security assistance across the entire Afghan territory. This document – SACEUR Operation Plan (OPLAN) 10302 – outlined a counterclockwise geographical expansion of ISAF in four stages. The first two stages, which saw ISAF expand into northern and western regions, passed relatively smoothly. Things quickly went wrong, however, after NATO foreign ministers approved a revised OPLAN for stages three and four in December 2005, instructing ISAF to deploy into the unruly southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. As it became clear that Afghanistan was facing a full-blown insurgency, difficult debates about appropriate resourcing and burden-sharing plunged NATO into an existential crisis.

Under tremendous pressure to shore up a campaign that seemed to be faltering, the Alliance embarked on a corrective process from the end of 2007. As a first step, the defence ministers called for the development of a so-called Comprehensive Strategic Political Military Plan. While this document was too general to serve as an instructing directive for the military chain of command, it was relatively successful in bridging the existing politico-military divide within NATO Headquarters, as well as drawing the national capitals into the Afghanistan debate. In this way, the document gradually became a kind of benchmarking tool. As one staff officer put it, ‘we wanted to develop a mechanism for measuring progress in a way the ministers can understand’. While it would be easy to dismiss this effort as merely a bureaucratic exercise, it contributed greatly to improving the situational understanding.

A second major breakthrough in the process of reorienting ISAF came in the form of the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM-A). As NATO officials searched for ‘deliverables’ in the run-up to the Strasbourg–Kehl summit in April 2009, US Ambassador Kurt Volker identified police training as his top priority. Given that the EU civilian police-training effort in Afghanistan was struggling to deliver the necessary resources, Volker argued that a complementary paramilitary effort under the NATO flag was required. Rather unexpectedly, Allied leaders agreed. In effect, they
approved a new mission for ISAF without knowing much more about it than its name. Owing to the monumental nature of the decision, it was felt that political support from the highest level was needed before working out the specifics. The initial aim was to integrate all ongoing training efforts under a single command to increase coherence and effectiveness, but eventually the NATO defence ministers endorsed a more ambitious task list for the newly created NTM-A. This included the introduction of NATO Police Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams, which had important consequences in terms of resourcing: NTM-A would require up to 475 such teams. The United States agreed to provide more than half, but the other Allies also agreed, at least in theory, to help meet the pressing need for thousands of police trainers. Significantly, Allies with a more military-centric view of the Alliance’s purposes (such as France and Belgium) let go of their policy preferences and agreed to let NATO take on a key role in the civilian realm.

The creation of NTM-A was but one part of a wider process of restructuring the convoluted ISAF command structure. A lack of command unity had been identified as a long-standing problem hampering ISAF performance. Thus, in May 2009, NATO commanders set in motion a debate on establishing an intermediate headquarters below the level of ISAF Headquarters but above the different regional commands. Following the requisite ministerial decisions, the creation of ISAF Joint Command (IJC) was approved in August 2009. As a result, the ISAF command chain gradually moved away from the doctrinal NATO model of standing headquarters with deployable staff elements towards more flexible, ad hoc arrangements tailored to the situation. The upper command levels such as Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and Joint Force Command Brunssum were thereby increasingly cast in the role of supporting commands. In turn, the Commander ISAF (COMISAF) became ever more endowed with strategic command responsibilities, such as managing the interface with the political level. This was ultimately to lead to another major shift in NATO policy triggered by the Initial Assessment Report prepared by the new COMISAF, General Stanley McChrystal, shortly after he assumed command in June 2009.
In his report, McChrystal controversially argued that ISAF needed to adopt a more resource-intensive counter-insurgency strategy.\textsuperscript{8} While this sparked a fierce policy debate within the Obama administration, there was a NATO dimension to the debate too.\textsuperscript{9} SHAPE had quietly added McChrystal’s request for 40,000 extra troops to its own statement of requirements, causing quite a stir in Brussels.\textsuperscript{10} Interestingly, the Allies made up their minds about the COMISAF assessment without waiting for Obama’s decision. In October 2009, more than a month before the president rendered his verdict in a speech at West Point, the defence ministers broadly endorsed the assessment and broke the logjam on the use of counter-insurgency language within NATO, which until that point had been a political taboo.

Although the debate over an ‘Afghanistan surge’ left deep wounds within Obama’s national-security team, eventually leading to the dismissal of McChrystal, the COMISAF assessment carried an important institutional legacy for NATO.\textsuperscript{11} Firstly, it greatly improved the level of transparency in terms of mission management by prompting a great leap forward in declassification efforts. Moreover, McChrystal had ordered a full review of the family of plans underlying ISAF operations. Rather than following the doctrinal model of plan reviews cascading down the chain of command, this was a bottom-up process starting at ISAF Headquarters and trickling upwards. After a sustained build-up of US pressure, NATO’s North Atlantic Council finally ordered a new strategic-level OPLAN in June 2010. Such a move had long been considered akin to opening Pandora’s box, an act that could cause the Alliance to fall apart. Instead, the result was a new plan that put the concept of returning security responsibility to Afghans at the very heart of ISAF operations.

This review process coincided with a highly divisive debate about the impending shift from the stabilisation phase to the transition phase in ISAF’s operational design. On a military level, the preparations for a transition to Afghan leadership over operations was well advanced by the beginning of 2009, when the draft concept of operations was submitted to NATO Headquarters for political approval. It took the political leadership several months to vet the detailed criteria under which this ‘conditions-based’ transition should occur. Establishing who would have the authority to initiate
this transition required balancing the roles of the North Atlantic Council, the Afghan government and the military chain of command. Political reality dictated a joint Afghan–NATO decision, but in order to nullify political interference by the national capitals, the North Atlantic Council delegated full authority to Supreme Allied Commander Europe to manage the transition process once it had begun. Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s announcement in March 2011 of the first batch of districts in which Afghan security forces would assume operational leadership was the first sign this transition was under way.

The evolution of NATO

It is noteworthy that the steps which transformed ISAF from a fledgling stabilisation mission into today’s relatively large counter-insurgency mission were taken as a series of ad hoc ministerial decisions rather than being part of an all-encompassing strategy review. The 2010 review of OPLAN 10302 in many ways represented little more than a bureaucratic consolidation of previous decisions. It did feature some salient details: the development of the Afghan police force, for example, was relabelled as a key military task, where once it had been regarded as a supporting task. Yet ISAF’s operational design never changed fundamentally. The template conceived of in 2004 remained applicable throughout the changing situation: ISAF would disrupt the insurgency, deny the Taliban the ability to unseat the government and train Afghan security forces to eventually take over this role. Thus, the changes ISAF underwent concerned not so much the overall intent but rather the way in which it was to be implemented. This involved fine-tuning the political objectives and follow-up via the Comprehensive Strategic Political Military Plan; fostering unity of effort through the creation of ISAF Joint Command; treating Afghan capacity-building as the main strategic effort rather than an afterthought (hence the NTM-A); cultivating a counter-insurgency mindset as advocated by the McChrystal assessment; and preparing for the transition to Afghan leadership. It is worth noting that this framework for implementation was only being properly calibrated eight years into the campaign. In other words, challenges were only seriously addressed once failure became a likely outcome.
While it is as yet unclear whether this recalibration is a case of too little too late, at the very least it served as an intensely educational experience that transformed and ultimately strengthened the Alliance. Lessons can be identified on both the political and military levels. In political terms, it is remarkable how once-rigid policy positions became increasingly flexible. As a result, NATO is now wading more deeply into the realm of civil–military stabilisation tasks than anyone would have dreamed possible only five years ago. In military terms, the Afghan campaign has served as a critical wake-up call for European militaries, many of which had not seen genuine combat action since the Korean War. Due to the large number of European personnel rotating through ISAF positions, the impact of the Afghan campaign on the military mindset in Europe cannot be underestimated.

Civil–military reorientation

While movement towards the much-touted ‘comprehensive’ or ‘integrated’ approach to crisis management has often been thwarted by bureaucratic resistance, ISAF represents, in the words of former NATO Senior Civilian Representative Mark Sedwill, ‘a civil–military experiment [conducted] in real time and under conditions of stress that only combat can deliver’. This has prompted national capitals and their representatives at NATO Headquarters to largely abandon their traditional resistance to increased civil–military integration. At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, Alliance leaders ‘agreed to form an appropriate but modest civilian capability to interface more effectively with other actors and conduct appropriate planning in crisis management’. While some Allies may have accepted this evolution only grudgingly, the net result is that NATO is becoming more than a purely military alliance, if indeed it ever was such.

The creation of the NTM-A in particular stands out as an important step in this direction. Given that other international organisations such as the EU and the UN were perceived as not delivering on expectations, NATO as a last resort accepted widening its task portfolio to include civilian stabilisation tasks. This trend is continuing and even accelerating. At the June 2011 defence ministerial, the ministers decided to endorse
the creation of the NATO Rule of Law Field Support Mission, adding yet another civilian subcomponent to the ISAF structure. However tentative these steps may seem, NATO’s civilian component in Afghanistan is already larger in financial and manpower terms than anything so far seen elsewhere.

NATO’s civil–military realignment is not limited to operational-level developments. If anything, the most important political legacy of the Afghan campaign for NATO lies in the fact that national capitals and their diplomatic delegations were forced to recognise that strategy cannot be equated with wishful thinking. Whereas some of the political caveats initially imposed by ISAF participants were defensible enough, many had to be dropped in order to avoid mission failure. The best example is perhaps the fact that NTM-A tasks pertaining to capacity-building at the level of the Afghan Ministry of Defence and Ministry of the Interior had been vetoed by France in 2009 on the grounds that it would be improper to use military advisers for coaching civilian ministries. When the OPLAN came up for review in 2010, however, the continued lack of EU civilian training personnel effectively undermined the argument against NATO filling this vacuum. Some nations, such as Sweden, even lifted all functional caveats on the use of their mentoring team with a view to giving US forces the flexibility to be redeployed elsewhere; and those forces that continued to be constrained by functional caveats (such as Belgian mentors to the Afghan National Army, who were not allowed to support operations conducted under US national command) could be used more flexibly as a result of the widening of NATO’s command remit that occurred when ISAF Joint Command was set up. It is no denial of political primacy to argue that civilian control entails a responsibility to understand the mechanics of the military instrument politicians wield, knowledge that can only be gathered in practice. Even though the North Atlantic Council has been criticised for not providing strategic guidance to the Afghan campaign, this cannot negate the steep learning curve national capitals and ministries underwent precisely because of the many failings experienced in the field. While the Alliance certainly suffers from shortcomings, it is indisputably learning much the hard way.
European military awakening

NATO governments are not the only actors to have drawn important lessons from the Afghan campaign. Militaries too, particularly in Europe, have arguably been transformed by their participation. Indeed, some believe the ISAF experience is responsible for a full professional reset.17 As the experience of small colonial wars in the aftermath of the Second World War gave way to the nuclear strategising of the Cold War, European militaries gradually lost touch with warfare in practice. For many of them, ISAF provided a long-awaited reality check. The resemblance between ISAF and the small wars of the past is sometimes uncanny: it is no coincidence that Allied counter-insurgency doctrine has intellectual roots stretching back to the writings of Algerian War veteran David Galula, if not earlier.18 The biggest change, however, is not so much the rediscovery of the concept of limited warfare, but the more fundamental rediscovery of the use of the military as an instrument of policy, one that can serve more ends than just peacekeeping and stabilisation. Of course, some European powers, notably France and Britain, scarcely needed reminding of this (as they recently proved in the Libya campaign), but Germany and some of the smaller Allies clearly did. Today, the notion that any military ultimately has a war-fighting role is unmistakably gaining political acceptance in a supposedly postmodern Europe. It has thus become possible to ask how this function should be approached in terms of contemporary military doctrine.

Several observers have already pointed to the revival of (or, alternatively, the crisis in) ‘operational art’ among European militaries.19 One can clearly identify a convergence of military thought on how to approach the challenge of campaign planning.20 Even if the doctrinal model of campaign design based on centres of gravity, lines of operations and end-states is encountering serious difficulties in terms of its practical applicability, the debate itself was only made possible by the reality check provided by recent operational experience. Moreover, this convergence of thought has been led and enabled by the consolidation of Allied joint doctrine. As this represents the only available doctrinal standard in a multinational
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setting, it is also being relied upon in the context of EU, UN and coalition operations. In the case of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, for example, it is notable that all concepts need to be checked against NATO’s new Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive. It is also worth noting that this new planning manual is heavily inspired by the ISAF experience, as shown, for example, by the codification of the Comprehensive Strategic Political Military Plan as a new type of planning document.

Of course, defence cuts among European militaries mean that many are now giving up a significant part of their fighting prowess. Belgium and the Netherlands, for instance, are in the process of phasing out their main battle tank capability. This raises the question of whether combined-arms warfare will ever be anything more than a pipe dream for Europe. That said, Europeans’ increasing willingness to get rid of heavy armour is also influenced by the logistical requirements of expeditionary operations such as Afghanistan. As Dutch general Ton van Loon recently remarked, ‘what ISAF teaches us is that if something cannot be loaded up on a cargo plane, it is simply useless for operations’. While the shortcomings of the European Allies are well known, there are early signs that the old continent is close to bottoming out in terms of taking its security ever less seriously. As the air campaign in Libya is putting the burden of leadership in European hands, this experience is likely to continue the ongoing shake-up of European military establishments.

The future of the Alliance

Summer 2011 marked the beginning of the end for the NATO campaign in Afghanistan. ISAF troop numbers have peaked and Obama has initiated a gradual move to a much lighter military footprint based on training and advisory efforts. The year 2014 has been identified as the de facto end date by which full responsibility for security will be handed over to Afghan hands. Meanwhile, the death of Osama bin Laden has provided sufficient grounds to claim, at least rhetorically, that victory against al-Qaeda is in sight. As NATO’s endgame for Afghanistan unfolds, what are the implications for the Alliance’s future?
In political terms, the Afghan campaign has shown that the NATO Alliance is increasingly a mechanism for addressing defence matters on an opt-in basis, rather than a genuinely collective effort. When SHAPE issued its recommendations based on the McChrystal assessment, for example, the Military Committee grouped these into three categories: those for which it advised Alliance-wide agreement, those warranting further political discussion, and those which were left to each nation’s discretion. In other words, fundamental questions of campaign design were being subjected to a flexible geometry approach, reflecting varying degrees of political commitment.

In more general terms, the 28 Allies may not agree on how to address any given global security challenge, but the Alliance at least offers a platform for coalitions of members and non-members alike to address specific issues. It also comprises multiple smaller groupings of countries that are able to pursue far deeper defence cooperation than is possible on an Alliance-wide basis: think of the Benelux or Visegrad countries, for example. NATO’s new Strategic Concept, which outlines only the most basic principles of the Alliance (a residual common-defence clause, expeditionary crisis-management and cooperative security initiatives), does not do justice to the full range of NATO activities. In this sense, the organisation is perhaps best thought of (at least, in its current form) as a sprawling, complex security network rather than a traditional alliance focused on a common enemy. This configuration should be seen as a geopolitical reality rather than as an inherent weakness: it opens new doors just as it closes others.

More than ever, NATO is acting as a kind of military service provider to its member states. In this regard, its greatest asset is its permanent command chain, which is linked to a culture of inter-operability based on Allied joint doctrine. The importance of the enabling function this provides for the conduct of multinational operations is perhaps the best guarantee of NATO’s continued existence, at least as long as it is not replicated elsewhere. Indeed, inter-operability is not the only consideration. As practically all Allies have abandoned the pretention of being able to command multi-brigade-sized operations (or sizeable air campaigns, for that matter), this
critical military expertise has effectively been uploaded to the NATO chain of command. From this point of view, it is unsurprising that the intervention in Libya eventually ended up under NATO command. Despite the recently announced downscaling of the overall size of the command chain, this constitutes a key capability that European militaries will not abandon and in which they will continue to invest.

As debates about further rationalisation within the Alliance structure continue, the largest elephant in the debating room is the question of what tasks the Alliance should make its priorities. In this regard, US frustration with European performance in ISAF may be biased by a disregard for the fact that Europeans, at least by their own calculations, have hardly anything at stake in Afghanistan, apart from providing the minimum required to satisfy American expectations. This may be a sign that the demands of expeditionary crisis-management far beyond Europe’s borders are an insufficient impetus for investing in defence, and consequently that efforts to fine-tune the Alliance for Afghanistan-like operations may run out of steam. On the other hand, enhancing European responsibility for its own territorial defence and for stability in its neighbourhood may provoke an altogether different reaction. Paradoxically, any hypothetical US disengagement from the Alliance could be reasonably expected to produce not collective irrelevance, but rather a return by European states to the deadly serious business of deciding upon matters of war and peace. The Alliance format this would produce, however, would be tailored more to European than American demands, which is to say more focused on territorial defence in both its old and new forms, and more selectively interventionist.

Acknowledgements
This article draws heavily on a larger research project, involving dozens of interviews with senior NATO officials and military commanders, on the planning of crisis-response operations.
Notes


2 For a more detailed analysis of this plan, see Steve Beckman, From Assumption to Expansion: Planning and Executing NATO’s First Year in Afghanistan at the Strategic Level (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2005).

3 An unclassified and abridged version of the SACEUR OPLAN 10302 (Rev 1) was released and published as an appendix to the report ‘Afghanistan Five Years Later: The Return of the Taliban’ (London and Kabul: Senlis Afghanistan, 2006), http://www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/Afghanistan_5_Years_Later.pdf.

4 Confidential interview, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 3 November 2009.

5 Confidential interview, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 24 March 2010.


7 See, for example, Ian Hope, Unity of Command in Afghanistan: A Forsaken Principle of War (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008).

8 The ‘Commander’s Initial Assessment’ (Kabul: HQ ISAF, 30 August 2009) is now widely available on the Internet (see, for example, http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Readected_092109.pdf). The leaking of the confidential report and the ensuing political debate is described in detail by Bob Woodward in Obama’s Wars (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

9 The debate regarding whether Afghanistan actually warranted all the extra effort and resources was widely commented upon. See, for example, Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, ‘Afghanistan: How Much is Enough?’, Survival, vol. 51, no. 5, October–November 2009, pp. 47–67.

10 Confidential interview, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 3 November 2009.


12 Confidential interview, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 20 December 2010. Given that this opens the door to common funding schemes within NATO, under which the United States will contribute significantly
less than its economic weight would suggest, this implies that European Allies, responding to US pressure, implicitly signed up to a significant, long-term police-training effort, or at least agreed to foot the bill should this task have to be outsourced to private contractors. On the broader trend of underinvestment in defence capabilities leading to common funding and, in a subsequent step, to outsourcing solutions, see Patrick Wouters, ‘The Political, Legal, and Military Implications of Outsourcing to Private Military Companies’ (Brussels: Egmont Institute Security Policy Brief No. 15, November 2010), http://www.egmontinstitute.be/papers/10/sec-gov/SPB-15-Wouters.pdf.


See the ‘NATO Senior Civilian Representative Report – A Comprehensive Approach: Lessons Learned in Afghanistan’ (Brussels: NATO, 15 July 2010), p. 11.


The most material manifestation of this convergence of thought is undoubtedly the NATO document Guidelines for Operational Planning (Mons: SHAPE, 2005) and its successor, the Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive (Mons: SHAPE, 2010).

See the EU Military Concept Development Implementation Programme 2010–2011 (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 12 April 2010).

Guest lecture by Lt-Gen. Ton van Loon at the Advanced Staff College, Royal Military Academy, Brussels, 31 January 2011.

In any case, the combination of the budgetary crunch, the eurozone crisis and the developments in Northern Africa are making difficult choices increasingly unavoidable. It has already been argued elsewhere, for example, that the Libya crisis may galvanise the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy. See, for example, Wolfgang Ischinger and Timo Noetzelt, ‘Libya Could be a Catalyst


26 Confidential interviews, NATO Headquarters and SHAPE, Brussels, 10 December 2009 and 29 January 2010.