

Caveats, Values and the Future of NATO Peace Operations

Stephen M. Saideman

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has spent more money, sacrificed more lives, and engaged in more activities in the past couple of years in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan than anyone could have expected in the aftermath of the Cold War. The alliance, originally set up to deter the Soviet Union and defend Western Europe, has become the mainstay in managing severe civil strife, including the ethnic wars of the Balkans. NATO ended the Bosnia War with an air campaign and then a peace-keeping force. In a bombing campaign, this alliance forced Slobodan Milosevic to part with a much prized part of Serbia, and NATO has been keeping the peace there since. In a much less visible and much less costly effort, the Atlantic alliance stopped conflict among Albanians and Macedonians from escalating.

These past successes at peace enforcement may have set the stage for unrealistic expectations in Afghanistan, as countries sought to support the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. Some countries signed up, thinking that the war was over and it was peace-keeping as usual. Others knew they were going to engage in combat, including Canada, but were

At a glance...

- *National caveats that restrict the activities of different NATO contingents in Afghanistan are more than just operationally problematic; they represent profound differences among NATO countries on the use of force.*
- *These differences have had significant domestic political repercussions so that it is unlikely that NATO will be able to agree on deploying “out of area” operations in the near to medium future.*

surprised by its severity. Not only did the NATO partners have different expectations going into Afghanistan, but they have maintained different ways of operating – some units have significant restrictions on what they can do and others have less. These limits, or caveats, have provoked perhaps the most significant crisis within NATO since the end of the Cold War; some publics are upset that the burden-sharing has been so uneven. This is especially the case in Canada, where

Canadians think that the Canadian Forces have been operating by themselves in Kandahar.

The conflict over caveats has been exacerbated by another set of unmet expectations – the difficulties of promoting a mission that supports a government with values that are incompatible with our own. Over the past year, the Karzai government seems to have focused on undermining Western support for his regime, with the current election fiasco as icing on the cake. In the space below, I will briefly clarify the caveat challenge, consider the values gap, and justify my pessimism about the future of NATO as a peace operator.

First, to be clear, caveats or national restrictions are not new. Alliances have always placed limits on how one country's commander can order the troops of another into battle. NATO needs caveats, as decisions to send troops anywhere require consensus, and there is no way all of the members of NATO are going to agree to a mission unless they can opt out of some or all operations. In Bosnia and Kosovo, various countries were and are restricted from operating in specific ways. Canadian Forces could not move out of their sector without calling home. Seeking approval from Ottawa took time, and was often met with a "no".

Second, despite the tenor of the current debate, caveats can be reduced or increased. While Canada sees itself as one of the most flexible, least restricted countries operating in ISAF, this was not always the case. In the first few years of operating in Afghanistan, the Canadian Forces actually had some very severe restrictions, limiting the ability of NATO commanders (including when Canadians such as Rick Hillier were in command positions) to employ them. Since then, decision-makers in Ottawa have given the troops on the ground far more discretion, allowing them to operate more freely and effectively.

While national caveats can be fairly complex, perhaps the most controversial one in Afghanistan refers to geographic restrictions. Most famously, the

Germans cannot move out of the relatively quiet (although increasingly violent) Northern sector to help out the Canadians and others in the South. Because risk in Afghanistan is not evenly distributed, but is much more significant in the South and East than in the North and West, there is a very uneven distribution of the burden. The Canadians, the British, the Danes, the Dutch and the Americans have paid a far higher price than the Italians, the Spaniards or the Germans (the French have recently moved forces to the East of Kabul so they face more threats now).

Moreover, in addition to the formal caveats, there are two other restrictions on the forces of many countries: limited capabilities and national agendas. Regarding the former, countries either have had very little to provide or have decided to provide much less than they need to be capable. To pick on the Germans again, they have only a half-dozen or so armoured helicopters in theatre, which significantly hampers the ability of their forces. As they are required to fly in pairs and there are usually a couple undergoing maintenance, this is a very important constraint.

Countries also have their own agendas so the twenty-odd Provincial Reconstruction Teams operate in very different ways, and their coordination with the Afghan government is inconsistent at best.¹

This has led to a significant split within NATO, leading to three factions with disparate views about the future of NATO operations. The first faction, which includes Canada, are those who see themselves as bearing far more of the costs than is fair or politically defensible. It is extremely unlikely that any of these countries will sign on to another NATO expedition in the near future. Their politicians have learned that the political rewards at home for doing more than one's share abroad are slim at best.

The second faction, which includes Germany, Italy

¹ This was a consistent theme throughout a ten day visit to Afghanistan in December 2007.

and Spain have paid very steep political prices for participating in a mission that has changed since when they signed up. Politicians in these countries have received a great deal of criticism at home for an unpopular mission and from abroad for not doing enough. Why should they agree to do something like this again?

Finally, there is the United States, a “faction” all of its own, given its power relative to the rest. The U.S. had already learned from the struggles during the Kosovo campaign that working through the alliance was very difficult, leading the Bush administration to reject initially any NATO participation in the defeat of the Taliban in the fall of 2001. History seems to be repeating as the Obama administration is now learning that the legitimacy of the NATO label comes at great cost, and that perhaps the best course ahead is to make the war in Afghanistan an American one. The surge of troops over the past six months is indicative of how much faith the US is willing to place upon its allies these days. Likewise, the new review and strategy developed by General McChrystal points out the weaknesses in the efforts of the allies. So, if another crisis arises, will the U.S. look to its alliance, or will it try to build a coalition of the willing?

Thus, there will be a great deal of hesitation the next time NATO leaders are compelled to consider another deployment, and that is before we consider the second great challenge facing the leaders of the alliance – the values gap. Since the Bonn Accord was signed in 2002 to develop an Afghan government, there have been conflicting expectations about what was to be achieved – a self-sustaining democracy with greater rights for women or a barely stable political system with symbolic democracy?

The past year’s events have been most illuminating in this regard. Despite the claims about girls in schools, President Karzai’s willingness to go along with a so-called “rape” law significantly undercut support for his government by Western publics and


politicians. It became increasingly hard to justify to Canadians, Americans, Brits, Dutch, Danes and others that it was worth sacrificing the lives of their soldiers for a government that seems to be facilitating the repression of women.

This stance was part of Karzai’s campaign to be re-elected. He also spent much time during the campaign positioning himself against ISAF and the collateral damage this causes. While it is understandable that Karzai would care about the costs civilians are paying in this war, he was abetting the Taliban, revealing his desperate thirst for re-election. We should not have been surprised that he would then cozy up with those with checkered pasts (and presents) – warlords and drug dealers. And now, we find that Karzai’s efforts to win the election have crossed the line from somewhat questionable to Iranian-levels of ballot-box stuffing and other shenanigans.

This is going to distress not only the publics of most of the democracies involved in ISAF but the politicians as well: What are we paying for with our lives and our tax dollars? This is a good question. While one can argue that the mission in Afghanistan actually is in accordance with Canadian values,² it is clear that it is difficult for politicians to justify to skeptical publics when the government we support has acted irresponsibly. To be clear, the idea is to develop Afghan institutions and not individual politicians, but the distinction is hard to make most of the time.

Can we expect NATO to deploy its forces again in the near to medium future? I highly doubt it, as the ISAF mission has made it obvious to all that the political risks, which are always high when putting troops in harm’s way, are quite steep when NATO cannot get its act together (caveats) and those that we are supporting seem unworthy of our effort (the values gap). For Canada, it seems as if this question was already resolved. The focus now is Arctic Sovereignty, which

² As I recently did in “The Afghan Pullout Reconsidered,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 21st, 2009, provoking much criticism.

will produce few casualties and few concerns about the values at stake, even though this will mean declining relevance on the international scene. 

Stephen Saideman is the Canada Research Chair in International Security and Ethnic Conflict at McGill University.



Centre for International Policy Studies
University of Ottawa
55 Laurier Avenue East, Room 3170
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 5N5

cepi-cips@uOttawa.ca
www.cepi-cips.uOttawa.ca

CIPS Director: Roland Paris
CIPS Policy Briefs Editors:
Marie-Eve Desrosiers and Philippe Lagassé