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Abstract

Member states of the European Union (EU) have contributed a substantial share to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, the operation's performance is likely to be constrained by the diverse approaches of the European contributors. This paper examines why and how the Afghan operations of different EU member states have differed from each other by looking at the respective motivations of their governments to participate in the ISAF mission. To that end, it analyzes the policies of France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. It is argued that domestic politics, that is the interaction between public opinion, domestic institutions and the framing of the mission by political elites, as well as broader considerations of foreign policy play an important role in shaping a country's ISAF policy. By systematically looking at these factors, the paper concludes that European political elites have often endorsed ISAF participation not so much because they believe a secure Afghanistan serves their national security interest, but merely because participation itself serves larger foreign policy interests such as upholding transatlantic relations or European security politics. Yet governments have generally not been good at convincing their electorates of the necessity of ISAF participation. The resulting dwindling public support has often led to ISAF contributions that are risk-minimizing, inflexible, under resourced, or even a 'showcase mission'.

1. Introduction: fighting with friends?

With currently more than 100.000 forces deployed in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force is by far the most ambitious international engagement of NATO. With no less than 47 countries contributing, it is also one of the largest multilateral operations in the world. It should thus come as no surprise that, with so many stakeholders, cooperation between the different nations and the creation and execution of common policies is often difficult. Countries have different traditions and expertise, interoperability between militaries is a complex matter, and ISAF's mandate includes a wide array of responsibilities. Yet it is often heard that ISAF's main impediments are of a political, rather than a technical or military nature.

This paper examines why and how the ISAF contributions of four EU member states – France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – have differed from each other by looking at the respective motivations of their governments to participate in the mission. Many European countries have been criticized by their allies for impeding the efficacy of the mission, for example by limiting the size of force contributions to ISAF, following a different strategy, or placing restrictions (caveats) on their troops' activities and location. This paper shows that the respective motivations of EU member states to participate in ISAF are a strong determinant of the character of their missions in Afghanistan. To do so, it will try to identify the political factors that influence each nation's ISAF policy.

Based on the analysis of the interplay between the different factors in the case studies – public opinion, domestic institutions, political elites and the foreign policy context – it is argued that European political elites have often endorsed ISAF participation not so much because they believe a secure Afghanistan serves their national security interest, but merely because participation itself serves larger foreign policy interests such as transatlantic relations or European security politics. Not surprisingly, governments have generally not been good at persuading their electorates of the necessity of ISAF participation. In Germany and the Netherlands support for the mission has mostly suffered from inappropriate images of the situation in Afghanistan as drawn by their governments. In none of the countries investigated, populations seem to have been convinced of the necessity of the ISAF mission for their national security. The political elites have been more inclined to use this mission as an asset in their relations with the US (all of the countries), for reintegration into NATO (France under President Sarkozy), to strengthen maintain the relevance of the

organization (UK, Netherlands, Germany), or they complied simply because they saw no other political option but to participate (France under President Chirac). As a result, public support for the mission has dwindled, while the ambivalent motivations of political elites for ISAF participation have often led to ISAF contributions that are risk-minimizing, inflexible, under resourced, or even a 'showcase mission'.

The United Kingdom, Germany, France and the Netherlands have been selected for several reasons. First, for their 'diplomatic weight' as well as the size and impact of their contributions to ISAF. Moreover, their inclusion in the German Marshall Fund's 'Transatlantic Trends' survey since its inception in 2002 allows for consistent comparisons of their populations' views over several years. Second, these countries have adopted a representative sample of most of the different military strategies used by ISAF in Afghanistan, which are the focus of this paper. ISAF's strategy is mostly discussed along a spectrum ranging from 'reconstruction' and 'stabilization' to full-fledged, more violent 'combat' and 'counterinsurgency' approaches.

'Reconstruction' efforts are the most low-risk and non-violent activity in Afghanistan, aiming at rebuilding, among others, the economy and infrastructure. 'Stabilization' involves providing local security to the population (e.g. patrolling and maintaining checkpoints). At the other end, 'combat' and 'counterinsurgency' operations entail the full range of offensive, defensive and stabilization activities dealing with violent conflicts. Counterinsurgency doctrine has specifically been designed by the US military to fight guerrilla wars.¹ It is one of the most expensive and dangerous military strategies.

The analysis is structured as follows: first, a brief description of each country's ISAF policy is provided (i.e. the dependent variable); then several explanatory variables will be investigated. The first factor is public opinion with regard to ISAF and Afghanistan. It will take a closer look at a range of issues that are assumed to be relevant for the public's opinion of ISAF, among others the influence of strategic culture. Strategic culture is a way of thinking and acting with respect to the use of force.² The actual mobilization and strength of public opposition is also subject of research.

¹ Headquarters Department of the Army, "Counterinsurgency", Washington, DC, 15 December 2006.

² Christopher Coker, "Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Multinational Co-operation, Afghanistan and Strategic Culture", *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 5, no. 151, October 2006, p. 15.

The second factor are domestic institutions. These comprise “the nature of the political institutions (the ‘state’), basic features of the society, and the institutional and organizational arrangements linking state and society and channeling societal demands into the political system”.³ Examples discussed here include the character of governments and the influence of parliaments on foreign deployments of the military. The inclusion of domestic institutions is based on a model developed by Thomas Risse-Kappen, assuming that these “determine how political systems respond to societal demands”.⁴ It takes institutions into account as an intermediating factor between the model’s input (public opinion on a foreign policy issue) and its output (a given governmental decision), which can thus explain differences in the policy impact of public opinion between similarly powerful states.

Third, the role of political elites in foreign policy making will be assessed, including their internal division or unity on the Afghanistan issue. Interaction with the ‘domestic institutions’-variable allows for analysis of the elite’s dependence on, and the shaping of, public opinion when making foreign policy.⁵

A fourth factor is the place of the Afghanistan mission in the nation’s foreign policy. It focuses on the mission’s role in relations with NATO and the US and on approaches to international intervention. Foreign policy budgets are also briefly discussed.

2. The United Kingdom

2.1 *Afghanistan policy*

In its Afghanistan policy, Britain has often attempted to bridge what it perceives as differences between the US and the European partners. With missions both in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it participates in ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the United Kingdom has been an active partner in President Bush’s ‘war on terror’.⁶ The British have deployed 9.500 soldiers, of which many in Helmand, a

³ T. Risse-Kappen, “Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies”, *World Politics*, no. 43, July 1991, p. 484.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ R. Hague and M. Harrop, *Comparative Government and Politics: an Introduction*, 7th edn., Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 113.

⁶ Steve Bowman and Catherine Dale, “War in Afghanistan: Strategy, Military Operations, and Issues for Congress”, Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 25 February 2010, p. 9.

southern province tainted by violence and opium production.⁷ Forces are regularly engaged in fights with the Taliban while they are not constrained by any caveats; conditions that are quite unique in ISAF. Other elements of the British strategy appeal more to European traditions. The UK has interpreted ISAF primarily as a reconstruction operation and was the first to propose talks with the Taliban.

The British 'inkblot' strategy consists of counterinsurgency operations followed by reconstruction projects, with the aim that smaller pieces of secured land expand like ink-blots until they eventually join up.⁸ This 'softer' approach to international intervention, which engages the local population more directly than the American counterinsurgency strategy, "conforms increasingly to an emerging European discourse of war".⁹

The British have thus proved to be a flexible NATO partner. Their efforts have been constrained mostly because of limits of the war budget. As a result, its counterinsurgency operations have been hampered by a lack of proper equipment. For example, the 9.000 soldiers that are deployed to Helmand can only rely on 25 helicopters.¹⁰ The Brown government came under political attack for the dangers this poses to Britain's soldiers.

2.2 *Factors shaping British Afghanistan policy*

2.2.1 Public opinion

While their support for the war in Afghanistan was firm for a long time, the British have become more pessimistic about the prospects of the war since 2009. Numbers of 50 percent support in 2004 dropped to only 37 percent at the end of 2009.¹¹ When in September 2006 19 soldiers were killed, it shortly fell to a dramatic low, but recovered somewhat to 40 percent – even though casualty rates have been high ever since (Britain suffered 359 casualties as of March 2011).¹² This suggests that while the British public was shortly surprised by a sudden eruption of violence, high casualty rates in a

⁷ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress (CSP), "Afghan Study Group Report: Revitalizing Our Efforts, Rethinking Our Strategies", Washington, DC, 30 January 2008, p. 31.

⁸ Bowman and Dale, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

⁹ Coker, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ R. Norton-Taylor, "Helicopter shortage seriously undermines UK operations in Afghanistan, report says", *The Guardian*, 16 July 2009.

¹¹ BBC, "Most 'remain against Afghan war'", 7 October 2009.

¹² Ministry of Defense, "Operations in Afghanistan: British Fatalities".

certain month have not directly translated into a drop in long-term popular support.¹³

Neither do perceptions of NATO among the British public seem to hold a strong correlation with ISAF support. No less than 72 percent of the people still regard it as essential for their national security.¹⁴ A bigger problem might be that after eight years of war, the British have started to doubt the importance of a goal for which so many casualties are suffered. In other words, the public is becoming 'war-fatigued'. At the same time, the feeling of the urgency of the mission is dwindling. 42 percent of the population say they do not understand the purpose of the mission, while 64 percent even believe that this conflict is 'unwinnable'.¹⁵

2.2.2 Domestic institutions

British governments have traditionally been based on a single party that is backed by a majority in the House of Commons.¹⁶ The current coalition of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives is quite unique. While the Prime Minister has the power to select the other cabinet members, in reality his position is more like a *primus inter pares* who cannot rule without cabinet backing. On the other hand, accountability to the parliament is tight (ministers often have to defend their policies in the House of Commons). But party discipline, enforced by the Whips, is such that the government can often rely with confidence on its House majority. Thereby, any decision on a foreign deployment of the military is taken solely by the government – the parliament also has little formal influence.¹⁷ This gives a government room to diverge from public opinion in its foreign policy making throughout its term.

2.2.3 Political elites and framing of the mission

The nature of domestic institutions in the UK attributes a significant role to political elites in foreign policy making, while its population has only relatively little direct influence (other than through elections). This also holds for the ISAF mission, which

¹³ R. Norton-Taylor, "Public support for war in Afghanistan is firm, despite deaths", *The Guardian*, 13 July 2009.

¹⁴ The German Marshall Fund of the United States, "Transatlantic Trends 2009", Washington, DC, 2009, p. 15.

¹⁵ BBC, "UK 'not convinced' by Afghan goal", 8 November 2009.

¹⁶ Hague and Harrop, *op.cit.*, p. 336.

¹⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2010*, London, 3 February 2010, p. 172.

enjoys stable and broad support among elites, while the population has grown more skeptical.¹⁸ Even the formerly critical Liberal Democrats support the new ISAF strategy and the supply of new equipment and forces for the mission.

Consensus within the political elite stems from two vital reasons for British presence in Afghanistan. First, many believe that Europe's security would be directly threatened by an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban. In a television interview, former Prime Minister Brown stressed that "[i]t's right that we explain there is a chain of terror that links Pakistan and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to the streets of our cities in Britain".¹⁹

This is the most important argument for political elites to justify the mission, the risks it involves and its combat character to the public. The elite's consensus has given it ample room to communicate the importance of the UK's involvement to the population. Before entering government, then-Shadow Secretary of Defense Liam Fox stated that "[w]e are in Afghanistan today out of necessity, not choice. [...] This is when the Government needs to show leadership and resolve. Explaining why we are in Afghanistan and why we cannot fail".²⁰ Although there are indications that this argument has carried considerable weight with the British public (since the London attacks of July 2005 could be traced back to the Afghan/Pakistan border region), it has not prevented public support from declining over the years.

2.2.4 British foreign policy

A second reason for ISAF participation is related to broader foreign policy. The UK highly values its 'special relationship' with the US.²¹ British governments typically regard NATO and close ties with the US as a crucial element of their national security and are committed to strengthening the organization – in particular through a larger European military contribution.²²

¹⁸ Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress (CSP), "Mobilizing NATO for Afghanistan and Pakistan: An assessment of alliance capabilities", Washington, DC, 26-1-2010, p. 47.

¹⁹ BBC, 8 November 2009, *op.cit.*

²⁰ L. Fox MP, "Beyond the smoke: making progress in Afghanistan", speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 28 September 2009.

²¹ N. Winn, "Towards a common European Security and Defence policy? The debate on NATO, the European army and Transatlantic security", *Geopolitics*, vol. 8, no. 2, summer 2003, p. 63.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

For the UK, ISAF underlines NATO's continuing international relevance and it has thus played a central role in its foreign policy.²³ It was part of Prime Minister Blair's self-declared efforts to bridge the divide between the US and Europe. At a Labour conference in 2000, he had stated that "standing up for Britain means knowing we are stronger with the US if we are stronger in Europe – and stronger in Europe if we are stronger with the US".²⁴ So, the British work with a flexible strategy that attempts to overcome differences of approach in ISAF between the US and the European allies.

As a consequence, the main constraint on the UK's performance has been the overstretched state of its army, which has conducted extensive missions to both Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade. The fact that it had to perform these two missions, combined with the economic crisis of 2007/2008, has left the army with a lack of equipment and serious budgetary problems. In 2008, Prime Minister Brown declared that he could only send an extra 300 forces in 2009.²⁵

To conclude, even though the British people have grown skeptical of ISAF over the years, political elites support the mission broadly and consistently. This suggests that larger foreign policy objectives such as relations with the US influence the elite's opinion more than that of the electorate. And as the government has significant freedom to diverge from public opinion in its foreign policy, it has maintained a robust presence in Afghanistan.

3. Germany

3.1 Afghanistan policy

On 11 September 2001, Germany declared 'uneingeschränkte Solidarität' (unlimited solidarity) with the US. As the primary advocate of NATO's candidature after the UN advised to create a multinational force for the stabilization of Afghanistan, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder deployed 1.800 soldiers to the northern region of Kunduz.²⁶ Germany led ISAF for a period of six months at the beginning of 2003, and

²³ Timo Noetzel and Sibylle Scheipers, "Coalition warfare in Afghanistan: Burden-sharing or disunity?", *Chatham House briefing paper*, October 2007, p. 3.

²⁴ D. Hastings Dunn, "The double interregnum: UK-US relations beyond Blair and Bush", *International Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 6, 2008, p. 1133.

²⁵ Vincent Morelli and Paul Belkin, "NATO in Afghanistan: A test of the transatlantic alliance", Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 17 April 2009, p. 19.

²⁶ D. Roctus, "Alle ogen gericht op Duitsland: heeft de NAVO in Afghanistan behoefte aan een nieuwe 'Blücher'?", *Internationale Spectator*, vol. 62, no. 4, April 2008, p. 226.

it still heads one of the five Regional Commands.²⁷ In the meantime, the number of German soldiers present in Afghanistan has risen to more than 4.500.²⁸

Being the third largest troop contributor, Germany is a significant player in ISAF. Nevertheless, it has until recently been the target of severe criticism. Initially, its mission only focused on reconstruction projects. The German government opposed involving NATO in counterinsurgency operations that were, according to some of its allies, necessary to counter increasing violence in Afghanistan.²⁹ Soldiers were officially prohibited from being involved in combat. Although forces have been allowed more freedom to engage in combat if in defense under Chancellor Merkel, Germany has been notorious among its allies for its use of caveats. For example, forces have to return to base before dusk.

Germany has insisted on deploying forces to the north of Afghanistan, where the Taliban were hardly active initially and forces were thus most needed in the violent south. This in turn allowed the government to stick to its 'reconstruction' approach, with little necessity to engage in offensive operations against Taliban insurgents.

3.2 *Factors shaping Germany's Afghanistan policy*

3.2.1 Public opinion

With no less than 75 percent of the Germans pessimistic about the prospects of the situation in Afghanistan, it is the most negative public in Europe.³⁰ Support for the mission has consistently been weak (below 50 percent) across the political spectrum.³¹

Although 62 percent of the population still finds NATO useful a guarantee for its security,³² most Germans do not regard the ISAF mission useful as such – probably because Germany has not suffered any terrorist attacks that originate from networks in the Afghanistan region. Indeed, the most common reason for the public to oppose the Afghanistan war was that it is 'not our problem'.³³ 31 percent of the

²⁷ Bowman and Dale, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁹ The New York Times, "Europeans balking at new Afghan role", 14 September 2005.

³⁰ The German Marshall Fund, "Transatlantic Trends 2009", Washington, DC, 2009, p. 14.

³¹ Noetzel and Rid, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

³² The German Marshall Fund, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

³³ Central Intelligence Agency, "Afghanistan: Sustaining west European support for the NATO-led mission – why counting on apathy might not be enough", 11 March 2010.

Germans even believe that their national security situation is *negatively* impacted by the ISAF mission.³⁴

A second reason for the unpopularity of ISAF is a general abhorrence of violence and militarism, based on the German experiences with war under the Nazi regime. Many Germans believe they are a 'special nation' that should be careful to use force in international relations.³⁵

Yet although opposition to the war is widespread, it is not an issue that mobilizes many Germans.³⁶ Demonstrations against the conflict have drawn only a couple of thousand protesters.

3.2.2 Domestic institutions

Through its parliamentary system, the German electorate has great influence on foreign deployments. Even though the Chancellor formally occupies a powerful place in the government (as all Ministers, including those for Foreign Affairs and Defense, answer parliament through her), her power is undercut by the fact that German governments are often coalitions. This makes consensus-building a necessary practice among the political elite.³⁷

Germany's parliament has control over military policy through the *Parlamentsheer*.³⁸ although the executive has the formal freedom to shape a foreign mission, any activity involving combat has to be approved directly by the Bundestag.³⁹ Through its power of approval and the fact that mandates only apply for one year the Bundestag practically holds the right to design the mission's mandate,⁴⁰ only counterbalanced by the Defense Ministry's attempts to restrict the sharing of information with parliamentarians.⁴¹ Foreign policy is usually not a big issue in German election campaigns. Yet the fact that elections are often held at various

³⁴ G. Murry, "Mass opinion and armed military conflict: Germany and the ISAF", conference paper, 6th Global conference on war, virtual war and human security, Budapest, May 2009, p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

³⁷ Hague and Harrop, *op.cit.*, p. 341.

³⁸ Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste, "Parlamentsheer unter exekutivem Befehl", *Aktueller Begriff*, Berlin, 20 May 2008.

³⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ Bowman and Dale, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Interview with Niels Annen, Washington, DC, 2 September 2010.

levels of government makes them a potential factor of influence on policy making for foreign missions.⁴²

3.2.3 Political elites and framing of the mission

Only slightly more support for ISAF is to be found among Germany's political elite than among its population. With NATO's deployment request coming more than two years after the 9/11 attacks, many among the German political elite did not see the mission as a contribution against international terrorism, relevant for Germany's own security. According to a then-SPD-parliamentarian, "[y]ou saw Al Qaeda basically disappear from the political forum, from German speeches".⁴³ Reasons to back the mission vary: the left side of the political spectrum mainly appeals to the responsibility to help the Afghans live in humane conditions, while politicians on the right use NATO's argument of security for Europe and the US. Support is not solid among party members; yet opposition party *Die Linke* is the only party for which resistance to ISAF is the official standpoint.

Never able to find a firm electoral base for the ISAF mission, Chancellors Schröder and Merkel adopted a reticent communication policy on ISAF. First, in an attempt to avoid widespread debate about the issue in society, little attention was devoted to the mission. As a result, 56 percent of the Germans did not know anything concrete about their country's ISAF contribution in 2008.⁴⁴ When its mandate had to be renewed in October 2008, Merkel specifically asked the Bundestag for one lasting more than twelve months, so as to avoid the issue from becoming a hot topic during the fall 2009 elections.⁴⁵

Second, the situation in Afghanistan and the risks involved were downplayed by dubbing the mission a 'stabilization deployment'⁴⁶ that would primarily be concerned with reconstruction and humanitarian projects.⁴⁷ While both Schröder and Merkel refused of late to call the situation in Afghanistan a 'war,' Schröder's Defense Minister Struck stated that Germany's defense 'started at the Hindu Kush'

⁴² Noetzel and Rid, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

⁴³ Interview with Niels Annen, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴ T. Bulmahn, "Bevölkerungsbefragung 2008: Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsklima in Deutschland", Kurzbericht, Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr, Strausberg, 2008.

⁴⁵ Murry, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ The Economist, "What is this thing called war?", 24 April 2010.

⁴⁷ Murry, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

(the region in which Afghanistan is situated). Implying that this is a security mission after all, this led to general confusion about Germany's government standpoint.

NATO officials have pointed out that avoiding public debate and creating inaccurate images of the mission, instead of explaining its motivations, is a politically risky strategy.⁴⁸ Without a clear understanding of ISAF's relevance, public views could easily change from apathy to outrage if violence in Afghanistan would increase. To control this risk, Germany has followed its risk-averse strategy in Afghanistan involving caveats, tight political control on the operation's whereabouts and a narrow, non-combat strategy.⁴⁹

The Merkel government eventually changed course. After several controversial incidents (one involving the death of 142 Afghans, another of 5 German soldiers), the then-new Defense Minister zu Guttenberg was the first to use the word 'Krieg' (war) in relation to Afghanistan. In a speech following one of the incidents, Merkel staunchly defended the mission, leading to a 10 percent increase in the number of Germans thinking they should stay in Afghanistan.⁵⁰

3.2.4 German foreign policy

In the foreign policy debate surrounding security capabilities of NATO and the EU, Germany usually takes a middle road. It has been a proponent of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), but only as a reinforcement of European capabilities *within* the transatlantic framework.⁵¹

The decision to participate in ISAF can be seen as a reflection of this balancing act within the post-9/11 international context. Although Chancellor Schröder declared himself in solidarity with the United States after 11 September 2001, he was highly critical of the attack on Iraq. Participation in ISAF was partly meant to tighten transatlantic ties.⁵² However, relations with the US would only improve under Merkel, who reconfirmed her commitment to NATO.⁵³

⁴⁸ Interview B. Bach, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ Noetzel and Scheipers, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

⁵¹ M. Overhaus, "In search of a post-hegemonic order: Germany, NATO and the European security and defence policy", *German Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2004, p. 556.

⁵² Noetzel and Scheipers, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

⁵³ J. Schmidt, "Last alliance standing? NATO after 9/11", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1, winter 2006-07, p. 97.

The ISAF proposal, and the way Germany has interpreted its role in Afghanistan, are also telling about the place of defense and security in its foreign policy. After the Cold War, Germany cut defense spending and – like more European nations – remodeled its army according to a doctrine of humanitarian intervention rather than combat operations. So, its ‘structural underfunding’ follows from the relatively pacifist strategic culture in Germany.⁵⁴ Then-Defense Minister Struck remarked in 2005 that “NATO is not equipped for counter-terrorism operations. That is not what it is supposed to do”.⁵⁵ Yet the relatively limited funds available for army equipment have initially left German soldiers in Afghanistan vulnerable to threats.

In conclusion, ISAF’s unpopularity and the need for public support in policy making have long led the German government to neglect the mission’s risks both domestically (by silencing and misrepresenting the mission) and in Afghanistan, where forces were heavily restricted. This policy was confusing, inconsistent and ultimately untenable as the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. The German government has struggled to find a proper narrative to motivate its mission to Afghanistan to its electorate. This suggests that rather than to addressing terrorism for reasons of national security, a more important reason for Germany to participate in ISAF has been a strengthening of relations with the US.

4. France

4.1 *Afghanistan policy*

France’s ISAF mission has differed considerably in form and size under the two Presidents that have led the country since ISAF’s inception. While France declared its solidarity with the United States after the 9/11 attacks, President Chirac only sent a limited number of 975 soldiers to Afghanistan. Not minding strong pressure from the US and the UK to increase this contribution, the French mission remained about the same size until 2007. Just like Germany and the UK, France also opposed American plans to transform ISAF into a counterinsurgency mission as it felt that this would ‘undermine NATO’s role’ as a stabilizing force.⁵⁶ Only when violence intensified in 2006, the government changed its mind. In 2008, one year after Nicolas Sarkozy became President of France, counterinsurgency became official ISAF policy.

⁵⁴ Winn, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Morelli and Belkin, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

⁵⁶ The New York Times, *op.cit.*, 14 September 2005.

Sarkozy became an active participant in ISAF, nearly tripling the troop numbers in Afghanistan to 3.750. Some 750 of them are stationed in the east for 'extensive combat operations'.⁵⁷ This region is one of the most violent in Afghanistan. France leads one of the five regional headquarters (RC-Center) while maintaining a combat-oriented approach that is relatively unrestricted by caveats. French diplomats contend that NATO is not the right organization to undertake reconstruction and development operations.⁵⁸ The work of French forces has received considerable appreciation from NATO and the US because they are well trained for their combat and stabilization tasks.

Still, the French contribution is constrained. Although its size is substantial, it punches below France's military potential. The number of troops active in Afghanistan amounts to only 0.67 percent of its active forces – a low among ISAF participants – even though lack of manpower (especially more specialized forces) has been at times a great problem for ISAF.⁵⁹ France has specifically been criticized for having 1.294 forces and helicopters (much-needed in Afghanistan) deployed in Kosovo.⁶⁰

4.2 *Factors shaping French Afghanistan policy*

4.2.1 Public opinion

The war in Afghanistan cannot count on much support from the French public. Support for the mission was still 55 percent in 2004, while in 2009, 51 percent of the population favored reducing or withdrawing forces.⁶¹ Only 15 percent still favored sending more troops to Afghanistan in 2009. Combined with the view that Afghanistan is 'not our problem', with which many French agree, the Sarkozy government lacks a positive sentiment among the public to build its Afghanistan policy on. While only few French see the conflict in Afghanistan as vital for their security, neither do they think highly of the NATO alliance. In 2009, only 56 per cent of the citizens believed that NATO was still necessary for their security, one of the lowest percentages in Europe.⁶²

⁵⁷ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Calculation after Korski, Daniel, "Shaping Europe's Afghan Surge", *Policy Brief*, London, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2009.

⁶⁰ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ The German Marshall Fund of the United States, "Transatlantic Trends 2004", Washington, DC, 2004, p. 14; and The German Marshall Fund 2009, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

⁶² The German Marshall Fund 2009, *op.cit.*

4.2.2 Domestic institutions

Constitutionally, the French government has the authority to decide on any foreign deployment of its forces.⁶³ Officially, this is done by the Minister of Defense; in reality, foreign policy making – including overseas deployments – is the *domaine réservé* of the President.⁶⁴ France is governed through a centralized political system in which the power of the executive is reinforced by the French bureaucracy. The parliament's role in foreign policy making is almost marginal and its approval is not necessary for the deployment of troops abroad.⁶⁵ Since this *Assemblée Nationale* is almost always elected in the same period as the President, it often backs him, as is the case today: Sarkozy's *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) has a 55 percent majority. According to Risse-Kappen, "[s]tate dominance in the policy network is facilitated by the famous French 'defense consensus' among the elites and all political parties in support of French independence in world politics and of the *force de dissuasion*".⁶⁶

The power of the President and the consistency of his foreign policy are enhanced by the character of French governments, which are usually not coalitions.

4.2.3 Political elites and framing of the war

The French political elite are clearly less opposed to the ISAF mission than the public is. With a majority in parliament, most parliamentarians back Sarkozy's Afghanistan policy. When, after losing ten soldiers in 2008, he requested the Parliament to reaffirm the operation, he won the vote with a significant margin.

Opposition is clearly organized along party lines. The *Parti Socialiste* (PS), the strongest critic, asserts that the French mission frees up American troops in Afghanistan for deployment in Iraq – an unpopular conflict in France.⁶⁷ Yet the PS is internally divided.

While the Sarkozy government has maintained a communication policy of low public salience on ISAF, it has never downplayed the mission's risks and combat character. The French public seems to accept the role of force in international relations more

⁶³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *op.cit.*, p. 132.

⁶⁴ Risse-Kappen, *op.cit.*, p. 487.

⁶⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Risse-Kappen, *op.cit.*, p. 491.

⁶⁷ Morelli and Belkin, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

than its German counterpart; it is also prouder of its forces.⁶⁸ ISAF might thus benefit from a more permissive strategic culture. And indeed, although the war is unpopular, objections to it have not mobilized the public.⁶⁹ This could change if France would suffer more casualties in the future. The isolation of foreign policy making from the electorate also seems to have made a crucial difference here.

4.2.4 French foreign policy

Foreign policy interests provide a strong explanation of the different forms the French ISAF contribution has taken under two Presidents. It seems that the first President, Jacques Chirac, never was a strong supporter of ISAF, given the limited mission he sent to Afghanistan. Since he had criticized the US attack on Iraq and the ISAF mission had been confirmed by the United Nations, Chirac had little option but to participate in the deployment.

This changed with the coming to power of Sarkozy in May 2007. President Sarkozy, is more US-oriented than many of his predecessors. Active ISAF participation has obviously facilitated his policy of NATO integration which culminated in the rejoining of NATO in March 2009, after more than forty years.

Yet while being an Atlanticist, Sarkozy has also continued an independent and activist foreign policy. Traditionally, France has promoted a European security policy with strong CSDP-capabilities in parallel with NATO and the US.⁷⁰ Paradoxically, the French contribution to NATO is also commonly viewed as part of this strategy.⁷¹ The return to NATO has been explained as actually *servicing* the goal of a stronger CSDP: the former French position outside the alliance “vowed suspicion and distrust of French political ambitions” among its European allies.⁷² The ISAF participation of France and 24 other EU member states is in that sense a catalyst of this process. Learning and cooperation in ISAF can also benefit a new European security identity.⁷³

In a broader sense, France “has often been the most assertive of its own foreign policy autonomy, even when this insistence contradicts the positions of its European

⁶⁸ Murry, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Winn, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

⁷¹ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

⁷² J. Ghez and F. Larrabee, “France and NATO”, *Survival*, April-May 2009, p. 79.

⁷³ Noetzel and Scheipers, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

partners".⁷⁴ It maintains extensive international deployments in, for example, Lebanon (1.585) and many African countries like Djibouti (1.690) and Chad (1.200).⁷⁵ Upon the reintegration into NATO, Sarkozy insisted that he would always maintain control over the deployment of forces. The ambition to uphold a large international military presence is likely to have a negative effect on its ISAF contribution, even as the mission does not seem to suffer from any budgetary problems. It is well-equipped and well-trained, in line with the French defense spending of a solid 2,3 percent of GDP.

In summary, French ISAF policy has mostly been formed in isolation from the public's modestly negative opinions on Afghanistan. The mission both serves, and is constrained by, broader foreign policy goals of France: strengthening relations with the US, while fostering European defense cooperation through learning in ISAF. The fact that its deployment is small, but not avoiding risks or violence, can best be explained by the French ambition of a global military presence.

5. The Netherlands

5.1 Dutch Afghanistan policy

The Balkenende III government deployed 1.800 forces to Afghanistan in the spring of 2006. Forces were divided over 'Kamp Holland' and a civil/military Provincial Reconstruction Team in Tarin Kowt, both located in Uruzgan, a southern province tainted by Taliban and Al Qaeda violence. The Dutch also led the Regional Command South in rotation with the UK and Canada. The mission received substantial praise, and the Obama administration called the Netherlands a 'model participant'.⁷⁶ Reconstruction projects were well-funded (development aid worth €360 million between 2002 and 2008⁷⁷), forces were relatively unconstrained by caveats and engaged in combat when necessary.⁷⁸ The Uruzgan mission ended on 1 August 2010.

The Netherlands clearly defined its interests in Afghanistan. Uruzgan was chosen because it would best suit its '3D' approach involving development, diplomacy and

⁷⁴ Winn, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

⁷⁶ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

⁷⁷ D. Korski, "Shaping Europe's Afghan Surge", *Policy Brief*, London, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2009, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Morelli and Belkin, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

defense. This strategy, in essence a form of counterinsurgency, has inspired NATO's current comprehensive approach.⁷⁹

There is criticism too. Some have called the Dutch 'flower-strewers' preoccupied with development projects. As a "'best friend' to the local people, they were less convincing as a 'worst enemy' to the Taliban".⁸⁰ They were unable to break the power of corrupt local warlords. And the insistence to deploy only in Uruzgan was seen as a geographical caveat that limited the flexibility of the Dutch forces.⁸¹

On 20 February 2010, the Dutch coalition government collapsed over the decision to extend the ISAF mission, fuelling fears among the NATO allies that this might also tempt other governments under domestic pressure to leave Afghanistan.

5.2 *Factors shaping Dutch Afghanistan policy*

5.2.1 Public opinion

Dutch public support for participation in ISAF decreased significantly over time. While it was still at a European record of 66 percent in 2004, 55 percent of the Dutch population *opposed* extending the mission in 2007.⁸² New casualties often led to public debates about the relevance and effectiveness of the mission. Even though Dutch intelligence services have released a report singling out Afghanistan and Pakistan as seedbeds of terrorism that also target the Netherlands, the Dutch public has never really seen the Afghan mission as being in its own interest.⁸³ Yet 77 percent of the Dutch regard NATO as essential to their national security, a record high among NATO members.⁸⁴

5.2.2 Domestic institutions

In the Netherlands, the government holds the exclusive power to deploy armed forces abroad. While it officially only needs to inform the parliament, custom is that

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ The Economist, "The Dutch model: the flower-strewers partly vindicated", 14 March 2009.

⁸¹ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

⁸² The German Marshall Fund 2004, *op.cit.*, and Brouwer, Marina and Frank Driesen, "Peiling: missie Uruzgan niet verlengen", Radio Nederland Wereldomroep, 31 July 2007.

⁸³ The German Marshall Fund of the United States, "Transatlantic Trends 2009: Topline Data", Washington, DC 2009: only 4% of the Dutch points to 'stabilizing Afghanistan' as the most important topic for western leaders.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

the government demands its approval to send forces, also when extending a mission after its mandate has expired.⁸⁵

Hague and Harrop have asserted that in the Netherlands decision-making processes require consensus among political elites in order to be successful.⁸⁶ As governments are built on coalitions of different parties, the Prime Minister derives most of his power over other cabinet members from acting as their party leader. The Foreign and Defense Ministers have little autonomy in policymaking, as important decisions are taken with the explicit approval of the entire Council of Ministers and, to a lesser extent, all the government parties.⁸⁷

5.2.3 Political elites and framing of the mission

Among the political elite, ISAF was a more polarizing issue than among the population. The Christian Democrats (CDA) and the Liberals were the strongest proponents of participation in ISAF, while the Labour party was critical and other parties on the left outright opponents.

Upon deployment, the Dutch government attempted to rally public support by presenting the mission as a reconstruction effort. This is remarkable for two reasons. First, in 2006, there were already signs that OEF had not cleared Afghanistan from insurgents as hoped, and a higher level of violence could thus be expected.⁸⁸ Second, the government was at that time not confronted with great public disapproval of ISAF.⁸⁹

So when Uruzgan appeared to be corrupt, unstable and violent, and the Dutch forces frequently engaged in combat, the mission lost credibility and public support. Even though the strategy could now most aptly be described as 'counterinsurgency', Balkenende's successive governments meticulously avoided the use of this word, instead preferring the term '3D approach', which practically meant the same.⁹⁰ Consequently, parliamentarians publicly accused them of selling a 'fight mission' as a 'humanitarian effort'. In 2007, the Balkenende IV government could only gain approval for a prolongation of the mission by also setting an ultimate deadline for withdrawal from Uruzgan. Additionally, the Foreign Ministry focused

⁸⁵ Center for the Study of the Presidency and the Congress 2010, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

⁸⁶ Hague and Harrop, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁸⁸ NRC Handelsblad, "Situatie in Uruzgan in 2006 ernstiger dan bekend", 19 January 2011.

⁸⁹ De Volkskrant, "Reëel beeld Uruzgan ontbrak", 31 August 2010.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

exclusively on the Dutch efforts in Afghanistan in its public communication, while the broader ISAF context was hardly mentioned. This strengthened the view held by the public that the Netherlands was one of the few 'doing the hard work'.⁹¹

With the mission becoming ever more unpopular, NATO requested the Netherlands in 2009 to stay in Uruzgan. But the Labour party, having promised a retreat from Afghanistan during the elections, still opposed. Disagreements became so intense that Dutch officials proposed to the American ambassador how the American Treasury Secretary Geithner could put Labour party leader Bos under pressure to comply at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh.⁹² However, on 20 February 2010, the Labour party resigned from office, causing the government to collapse and bringing the Uruzgan mission to an end in December 2010.

5.2.4 Dutch foreign policy

The character of the mission and the decision to deploy were mostly determined by its place in Dutch foreign policy, which aims at maintaining strong relations with the US. Active NATO participation, including a significant ISAF contribution, has been part of this policy.⁹³ The Netherlands also was one of the few West European nations to give political support to the attack on Iraq.

ISAF Uruzgan has been the Netherlands' first large military operation after the traumatic experiences in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, where a Dutch peacekeeping force, mandated by the UN, was unable to prevent a massacre of Bosnian men and boys.⁹⁴ This failure led the Dutch government in the following years to develop clear thinking on what kind of missions its army should be able to perform, leading to the '3D approach' according to which all missions, including the Uruzgan mission, are designed.⁹⁵

The army, well-equipped for overseas deployments, has basically used up its materials in Uruzgan.⁹⁶ The great costs involved in the mission, even in the context of the government's budget cuts following the economic crisis, have arguably not

⁹¹ Interview with national diplomat 2.

⁹² US diplomatic cable The Hague-Washington, DC, 10 September 2009, p. 5.

⁹³ Adviesraad International Vraagstukken, "Het nieuwe strategische concept van de NAVO", no. 67, The Hague, January 2010, p. 43.

⁹⁴ The Economist 2009, *op.cit.*

⁹⁵ Dutch Ministry of Defense, "Besluitvorming uitzending militairen".

⁹⁶ Interview with J. Shea, *op.cit.*

been part of the decision to withdraw forces. Before the government collapsed, the Defense Ministry was ordered to investigate an extension of the mission.

In sum, an ill-placed communication policy that provided an unrealistic image of the Uruzgan mission led to the erosion of initial public approval and the fragile coalitions supporting it. Combined with the practical need for parliamentary approval and fragmentation of both the parliament and the governing coalition, the political foundations of the Dutch mission were weak from its inception.

6. Comparative analysis: determinants of national ISAF policies

The case studies have shown that while the scale and the nature of the shortcomings in ISAF commitments differ significantly across countries, some overarching issues in the Afghanistan debates and policies of the different countries can be identified. The following section analyzes how exactly the explanatory variables have related to create different policy outcomes in each nation.

6.1 Domestic institutions

In the countries investigated, the ability of elites to decide on foreign deployments independently from their electorates differs substantially. This variation among the cases allows one to conclude that domestic institutions can work to dampen or amplify disagreements in societies, impacting a country's international military contributions. The commitments of the two coalition governments discussed (Germany, Netherlands) have been substantially more unstable than those of non-coalition governments. Since all governing parties are involved in decision-making on controversial issues, Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers enjoy little policy autonomy on military deployments. Coalitions are less likely to diverge from public opinion in their policies. While this enhances democratic accountability, the nature of a coalition makes the delivery of 'tough messages' to the domestic public particularly difficult. These messages often concern exactly those issues on which multiparty governments clash the most.⁹⁷ Yet as the example of Germany has shown, they are an important means for a government to create and sustain domestic understanding and support for a military mission. The nature of coalition governments can thus limit the scope for politicians to take the lead in public debates.

⁹⁷ Interview with national diplomat 2, *op.cit.*

6.2 *Political elites*

One of those tough messages for elites is justifying a mission, which is essentially part of a global counterterrorism effort, to publics who did not experience any terrorist attacks on their own soil. And indeed, the German and Dutch governments never attempted to explain their missions in this way, but rather brought up other reasons to deploy to Afghanistan. Their communication policies were inappropriate: the message was adjusted to the public's expectations, not to the actual situation in Afghanistan.

Instead of trying to convince their populations of the importance of the ISAF mission for their national security, they shaped unrealistic images of the mission as development efforts, which would meet as little public opposition as possible. In Germany, the government was eventually able to change course, but only with a new, less divided government coalition (as expected from the interaction between the 'domestic institutions' and 'political elites' variables) and after the escalating situation in Afghanistan left Chancellor Merkel no other option. But in the Netherlands, it has had more dramatic results when the 'inflight cabinet'⁹⁸ Balkenende IV ultimately collapsed over the issue of deployment.

The situation has been somewhat different in France, where the President does not need the public's support for a foreign deployment as much as in Germany or the Netherlands. Here, the Chirac and Sarkozy governments did not find it necessary to frame their mission in different terms. Rather, they have been successful in driving the issue off the public agenda.

It seems that just like their electorates, political elites on the European continent have never been convinced of the relevance of a stable Afghanistan for their national security.⁹⁹ While many politicians have mentioned the issue as an important asset in their bilateral relations with the US, they have hardly connected Afghanistan to any European self-interest.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ De Volkskrant, "Vechtkabinet mist overtuigingskracht", 23 May 2008.

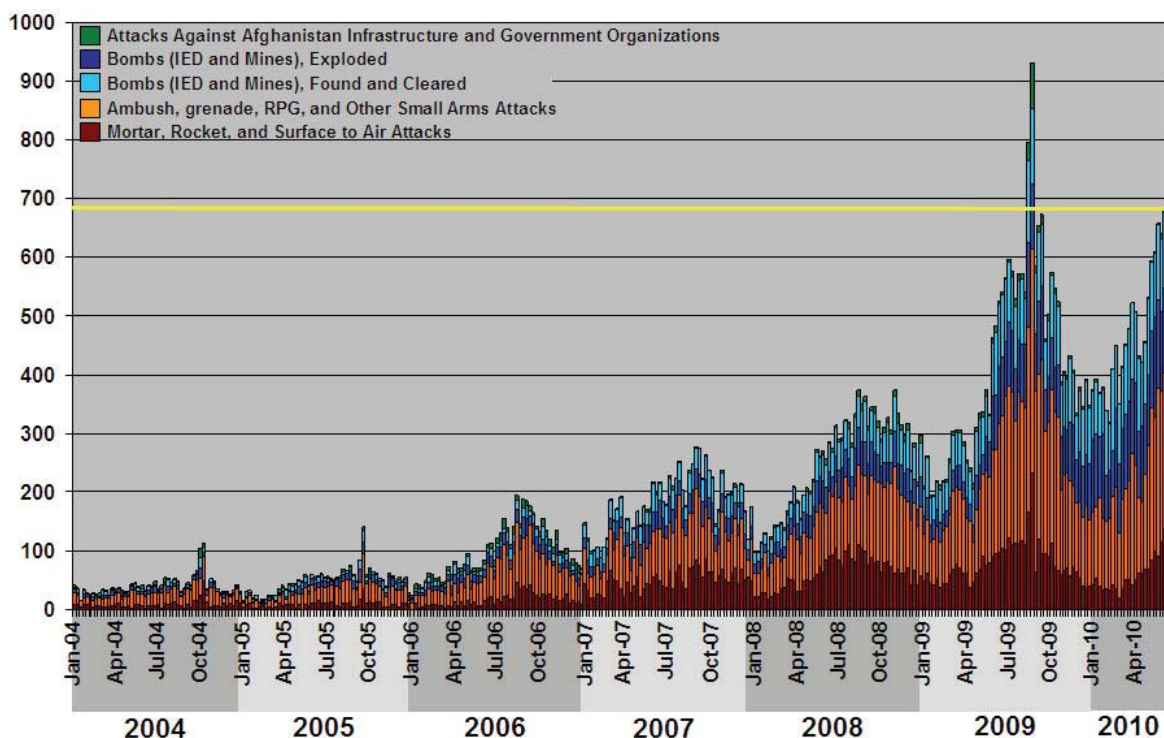
⁹⁹ Interview with a senior official, US State Department, Washington, DC, 30 August 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Shapiro and Nick Witney, "Towards a post-American Europe: a power audit of EU-US relations", London, European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2009, p. 52.

6.3 Public opinion

Apart from the cohesion of their political elites or the nature of domestic political institutions, European publics have generally been skeptical about the war in Afghanistan. All of them doubt the importance of the ISAF mission for their own security – except for the British in the period immediately after the 2005 London attacks. Yet nowhere does the Afghanistan war mobilize the public, and hardly anywhere is the Afghanistan war discussed in terms of gains for national security.

Figure 1: Number of average insurgent attacks per week in Afghanistan



Source: Brookings Institution, Afghanistan Index August 2010, p. 9.

The lack of progress in Afghanistan after eight years of deployment, combined with continuing casualties (see figure 1) has also been generally detrimental for public support. Although there is only detailed information for the presence of this mechanism in the UK, the consistently decreasing support rates in all the countries investigated suggest that they are becoming 'war fatigued', too.

In the shorter term, however, publics can be receptive for actions and statements of natural leaders. For example, public support for ISAF in Germany increased when Chancellor Merkel stressed its importance for national security. NATO officials have also pointed at the US, where regardless of increasing casualty rates, support for ISAF (and OEF) increased after President Obama announced a new strategy and troop

increases. As a NATO official put it, "You lose public support when there's this sense of [...] 'floundering': 'We're not losing, but we're not winning either - we're not getting anywhere.'" ¹⁰¹

6.4 Foreign policy context

Elites are better able to fit the ISAF mission in broader foreign policy objectives when political institutions leave them freedom to decide independently on military deployments. The European states have several of such broader foreign policy objectives. For example, many countries strive to 'contribute to a better world' by creating a safe Afghanistan. ¹⁰²

Yet there are more important reasons for ISAF participation. It is often argued that many European states see their commitment in Afghanistan as a favor to the US and NATO – a favor that can be used as an asset in their relationship with the American government – rather than as an offensive against terrorism that benefits their national security. This would clarify the lackluster commitment in Afghanistan of which many European nations have been accused – for them, presence is more important than progress in Afghanistan. With the striking result that many Europeans have been reluctant to engage in offensive operations in a war. ¹⁰³

So, most European countries were loath to change their strategy and increase their flexibility when the violence in Afghanistan began to escalate in 2006. It also shows why the Afghanistan debate in the US has differed so much from the debate in Europe, where national security considerations have been almost fully absent. Both publics and elites have perceived Afghanistan as an American problem, and hence a NATO problem – except in the UK, the only nation in the sample that experienced an attack which can be traced back to Afghanistan. ¹⁰⁴ With NATO still seen as Europe's ultimate security guarantee, upholding this 'security umbrella' is central in the ISAF motivations of the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the Sarkozy government. Lastly, this argument provides a rationale for the European hesitance to address the issue through the EU: in pursuit of a 'foot in the door' with the US government, every country will opt to show its commitment individually and not through a common effort. Indeed, several European and American diplomats have

¹⁰¹ Interview with J. Shea, *op. cit.*

¹⁰² Interview with national diplomats 1 and 4.

¹⁰³ Shapiro and Witney, *op.cit.*, p. 52. Sipri defines a war as a conflict with more than a 1,000 deaths per year.

¹⁰⁴ Shapiro and Witney, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

noted the “eagerness [of the Europeans] to score bilaterally” with the US administration.¹⁰⁵

It is disputable whether this strategy has actually worked. While the US does often work with reward and punishment in international relations, it has mostly been the European states which have made the connection between Afghanistan and other international political issues. Privileges from trading the ‘Afghanistan card’ have mostly been limited by the US to giving their allies easier access to high officials.¹⁰⁶ Take for example the case of the Dutch Finance Minister and Labour party leader Bos, who opposed redeploying forces in Afghanistan in 2009. In a remarkable move, a top Dutch diplomat suggested to the American government that they could pressure Bos by threatening to withdraw the Dutch observer seat in the G20. However, Treasury Secretary Geithner did not make this connection in talks with him.¹⁰⁷

It has not helped for ISAF’s military power that the United States took an ambiguous stance towards European involvement in Afghanistan in the period just before and after the surge. Immediately after the events of 9/11, NATO did offer the US to conduct a joint counterterrorism mission. Yet the Bush Administration, who still remembered NATO’s viscous decision making during the Kosovo offensive of 1999, turned down the offer. Neither did it help that when the US desired assistance from an international force in Afghanistan, the NATO institutions and the US deliberately downplayed both the dangers of a mission and the security situation in Afghanistan in their campaign to engage NATO allies. As a result, some allies might have underestimated the risks involved in the Afghanistan conflict.¹⁰⁸ At least, it makes the initial European focus on reconstruction projects more understandable.

7. Conclusion

This paper has investigated why the national contributions of EU member states to the ISAF mission vary. Such variation may have a negative impact on the mission’s overall performance. The interaction between public opinion, the nature of domestic institutions, the interests and opinions of political elites, and the foreign policy context, plays an important role in the political process shaping a country’s ISAF

¹⁰⁵ Interview with national diplomat 3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ NRC Handelsblad, “Ambtenaren tegen VS: Zet Bos onder druk”, 15 January 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with J. Shea, *op.cit.*

policy. To a different degree, countries have adjusted troop levels, caveats and military strategies to exert political control on their missions.

The European nations investigated in this study mostly contribute to ISAF for other reasons than building a secure Afghanistan from where terrorists can no longer pose a threat to the West. Considerations of terrorism do not carry much weight with most European publics, nor do they seem to be a priority for political elites – with the UK as a notable exception. All nations see their contribution as a vital part of their transatlantic relations, as proof of NATO's continued relevance, or, paradoxically, to strengthen a future European security system.

The attempts of the European nations to connect the Afghanistan issue and other international political issues appear problematic. As shown, it is implausible that approaching Afghanistan as part of a 'tit for tat' politics really pays off. Subsequent American governments have often approached issues of international politics on an *ad hoc* basis, in which they work with whoever wants to. The three continental European nations have all found it hard to produce a narrative that would create solid public support for the mission. Depending on the setup of domestic institutions and the cohesion of political elites, this has influenced their performance in ISAF in different ways. The German government's need for popular approval when deploying abroad has induced it to follow a low-risk strategy in Afghanistan, involving tight restrictions and an initial focus on reconstruction. At home, an unrealistic image of a development mission in a peaceful country proved untenable when the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. Support dropped in the same way in the Netherlands, leading to the collapse of government and a retreat from Afghanistan. Yet Sarkozy's independence in foreign policy making has allowed him to ignore public disapproval and send a strong, offensive mission that is only constrained in numbers – most probably a result of the French desire to maintain a global military presence. Britain's special place within the European ISAF debate is illustrated by the fact that its mission has only been impeded by a lack of resources.

The struggle of the European states with their Afghanistan missions demonstrates the importance that domestic politics retains in approaches to global political problems. It once again vindicates the one-liner of US Congressman Tip O'Neill, quoted by one of the diplomats in an interview for this article: "All politics is local."

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