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Policy Paper 2/2013

NATO and Liberal Interventionism: Don't Back Off

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Policy Recommendations

- Liberal interventionism as an underlying doctrine of NATO's out-of-area military operations is a controversial concept whose implementation has hardly been perfect. Nevertheless, it is by far the safest alternative for maintaining the Alliance's global relevance and influence. NATO leaders should continue emphasizing the benefits of engaging threats, quelling conflict and promoting humanitarian concerns beyond the territory of the member states, including the need for proper budgetary back-up.
- While saving budgetary resources, NATO should by all means prioritize power-projection capabilities on which the possibility of intervening abroad materially depends. Further progress in pooling and sharing, joint procurement and other common projects in this area is essential.
- Exerting influence outside the NATO territory is by no means limited to military capabilities. Just as the Alliance served as a political instrument of countering Soviet diplomatic offensives during the Cold War, it should provide more support for the non-military aspects of its activities. Investing in human resources, intelligence gathering capabilities and military liaisons is both economic and prudent, since human capital and information is crucial for winning asymmetrical confrontations NATO is likely to face in the future. If the Alliance wishes to prevent large-scale deployments in the fashion of Afghanistan, it will need to know more, react faster and with greater precision.
- In 'light footprint' operations, NATO will need to rely more on regional and local partners. It needs to develop and operationalize its existing institutional ties, such as the ICI or the Mediterranean Dialogue, and establish new ones if necessary. Sub-Saharan Africa may be one of the targets of such an effort.
- When dealing with local partners, NATO must respect the limits of such cooperation, including the respect for and acknowledgment of inevitable divergence of interests. Counterterrorist, counterinsurgency and security sector reform missions need to work with a built-in training component which emphasizes the underlying values on which such operations rest in the first place.
- Arguably, the most serious failure in Afghanistan has been a mismanaged and underestimated mission creep. 'Lite' interventions are not exempt from this danger, so NATO representatives and member states should devote serious attention to spelling out the limits of their engagement and the reasons for abandoning a mission.



NATO as an Instrument of Liberal Interventionism

In the sphere of international politics, the doctrine of liberal interventionism, as practiced by the Euro-Atlantic community, is a peculiar hybrid, being both underpinned by certain (largely Western) values on one hand, and guided, as often pointed by its virulent critics, by material interests on the other. As for the former, calls for intervention in foreign countries are rooted in a conviction that state sovereignty, and state interests in general, should not overshadow pressing humanitarian issues like mass murder or large-scale human suffering. Some acts are said to be simply too appalling to be ignored, and in such cases even the sacrosanct principles of international order can be legitimately breached. The international community as a whole has largely accepted this logic, albeit in a muted fashion, through the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

Despite the concerns over the inviolability of state sovereignty by external intervention, it is actually the 'liberal' denominator which is the most controversial in the whole concept – i.e., the conviction that liberal democracy, despite its deficiencies, is the best way to bring about lasting peace, stability and prosperity. First of all, it inevitably puts its proponents in conflict with other actors who do not share the zeal for, or even interest in, the promotion of the Western ideals of democracy, rule of law, protection of human rights and free trade. Secondly, the concept is problematic for the West itself because it has not yet figured out an efficient and sustainable way of transferring its preferred form of political order to its 'end-users'.

At the same time, it is hard to ignore the non-normative stakes inherently present in Western countries' incursions into other states' domestic affairs, since interventions, although underpinned by liberal values, remain military acts and tools of foreign policy guided by national interest. There is a plethora of motives which have bearing on Western policy-makers' decisions to launch specific operations, ranging from promoting 'crude' power interests (by removing hostile, overtly active regimes) to furthering economic goals. Indeed, stabilization, one of the alleged products of the introduction of democratic system in foreign countries mentioned above, often effectively works in favour of the intervening state(s) in the economic sphere as well: It helps ensure steady supply of natural resources and provides calm along trade routes. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that material and/or power interests guiding incursions in third countries are not necessarily in contradiction with the value-oriented, normative aspects of the liberal interventionism doctrine, and that these elements can often easily coexist.

All that being said, it can be argued that NATO with its superb set of military capabilities has for the past twenty years acted as a prominent entity which the Western community



utilized to carry out liberal interventions. After the threat of a massive Eastern Bloc attack evaporated with the dissolution of the USSR, NATO quickly adapted to the new international environment, which was firstly manifested by series of Alliance operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s during the bloody civil war. These piecemeal and cautious inroads into a new territory gradually developed into a more or less coherent doctrine of out-of-area operations which, in practical terms, became the dominant part of NATO activities. This change of goals and overall purpose was sealed by the Alliance's operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan and, lately, Libya.

Imperfect Concept, Sloppy Implementation – But Still the Best We Have

Despite numerous deficiencies, some of them scrutinized further down this paper, the Euro-Atlantic community and NATO in particular were right to embrace the concept of liberal intervention as one of its foreign policy tools. It is tempting to be critical towards the idea of the 'export of democracy' by military means, but at the same time it must be asked if there was any other way how to alleviate humanitarian distress, resolve civil strives and enact peace in the crises in which NATO has intervened since the beginning of 1990s. After careful examination, it seems an intervention from the outside was the most benign solution. While operations in third countries do not achieve all stipulated aims, they are still successful to a degree which provides them with a high level of legitimacy.

Although the situation in countries which experienced Western intervention often remains volatile (a glimpse at Bosnia almost two decades after the end of the civil war is illustrative in this regard), these operations have undoubtedly helped stop the suffering, ease the transition towards a post-conflict political order and – which is by no means unimportant - increased the influence of the Euro-Atlantic community in the given areas. Physical presence, along with ideological foundations underpinning newly introduced institutions, work effectively to make local population and leaders more susceptible to Western values and goals.

Operations with a normative agenda conducted by NATO also serve to disseminate Western values globally. Even though various interventions have been fiercely criticized on different grounds, including their denouncement as an insensitive imposition of Western way of life on others, it was the actual practice of the doctrine that led to a certain convergence in opinions on the limits of state prerogatives and significance of humanitarian issues. The R2P has been at least rhetorically embraced by practically all countries in the world which means that, at least theoretically, state sovereignty does no longer shield country leaders from being widely criticized for domestic human rights abuses.



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The ongoing conflict in Syria is a case in point: Even though Russia and China, 'traditional' opponents of meddling into states' domestic affairs, are far from suggesting an international intervention, they do not shy away from being critical towards Assad's policies. The normative underpinnings of the Euro-Atlantic community's post-Cold War operations, while – and through - being object of heated discussions all over the world, have thus obtained considerable level of international salience and recognition.

Last but emphatically not least, interventions carried out during last twenty years by NATO, regardless of their normative overtones, have proved to be critical in the removal, mitigation, or at least containment of various security threats. Countering these at the area of their origin is arguably more effective, and from Western countries' and their citizens' point of view also preferable, to fighting them at home. Interventions in often distant areas are thus indispensable for tackling various challenges which might possibly endanger the Euro-Atlantic community should they spiral out of control.

While defending the use of liberal interventionism by the Euro-Atlantic community, it is clear that the continuation of liberal interventionism, as conducted by NATO so far, faces numerous obstacles. Most notably, recent mixture of financial crises, economic recessions and budgetary austerity has vividly exposed the scarcity of resources allocated to the defence sector in NATO countries, a factor which had already been visible before 2008 and which has a profound negative impact on options of respective Western governments to conduct complex operations in third countries. Secondly, a fatigue visibly sets in among the citizens and political elites of Western countries after two decades of practically continuous deployment in the Balkans, Afghanistan and elsewhere, whose inconclusive results undermine the will to carry on with overseas operations. Finally, continuing shifts in the power structure of global political and economic order raise the question whether the relatively permissive international environment for Western interventions – which, in its extreme, provoked only rhetorical and widely ineffective reactions to an intervention so controversial as the one in Iraq – can endure.

These and other problems inherent in overseas deployments have been sharply highlighted by recent experiences from NATO's missions in Libya and Afghanistan. The following parts of the paper therefore offer closer look at these missions and their implications for future NATO operations and liberal interventionism in general.



Beware the Heavy Footprint: Lessons from Afghanistan

NATO's gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan after 11 years of deployment triggers many questions regarding not only the ISAF mission's success (or lack of it) and the country's troublesome future but also broader implications for future NATO operations, especially under the long shadow cast by continuing budgetary austerity.

A brief glance at the results of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan is not reassuring: The human toll on both sides of the conflict, the intricate transition of power to Afghan security forces and their highly uncertain ability to ensure stability of and control over the country do not point to a 'mission success' assessment. The peace-building and nation-building efforts, the main component of the mission, which should have improved the life of the ordinary Afghans, hardly look more positive. Neither does the poor record of civil rights protection, high levels of corruption and prevalent violence which prevent the people from living at least a relatively normal life and the country from functioning and prospering. A cynical observer might utter that the only success of the long-term NATO effort has been to solidify Afghanistan's position as a 'global superpower' in the production of opium. On top of that, the country's development after NATO forces leave, the looming possibility of a civil war, possible disintegration and/or its fall back to the hands of Taliban loom large on the evaluation sheets, questioning even the only clear, tangible and undisputed positive outcome of the Western intervention.

The realization of such gloomy scenarios would undoubtedly prove devastating to NATO's prestige and relevance, not to mention their grisly effects on the country and its population. Recent Foreign Policy poll on 'What Went Wrong in Afghanistan' offers a multitude of reasons and culprits for NATO's (and, more generally, international community's) travails in the country. On the other hand, more focused accounts of the development on the ground continue to stress numerous improvements and often rapid progress which Afghanistan achieved during the decade of NATO's presence. The list could start with the removal of one of the most retrograde regimes which the world had encountered since the end of Cold War, as well as the uprooting of Al-Qaeda presence in the country. It might continue with pointing to the material improvement in the lives of countless Afghan citizens, as well as their opportunity to participate for the first time in decades in the political process which, though corrupted and crude, still seems better than the fighting which wracked the country's prospects in mid-1990s. Finally, it needs to be emphasized that the security of the country, while still haphazard from the point of view of 'standard' statehood, has improved to levels which might, with financial backing by the international community, be sufficient to prevent the aforementioned worst-case scenarios. Moreover, it must be noted that the ISAF mission itself or its misconducts cannot be blamed for the current state of affairs in Afghanistan



alone, as it was launched in a country which easily topped various failed state indices and had more than twenty years of fighting behind it.

Nevertheless, there are critical conclusions and lessons to be drawn from the ISAF mission, from which the NATO can benefit in the long term. These lessons have more to do with the particular character of the mission and structural processes within the organization than with the mission's setting. Put simply, the ISAF mission effectively demonstrates potential shortcomings and hubris of liberal interventionism – not disqualifying the concept itself but setting clear limits to its applicability and usefulness. On a general level, these conclusions can be summed up as the lessons learned concerning 'heavy footprint' operations with extensive presence of foreign troops, conducting intensive operations near the higher end of the spectrum of non-conventional warfare.

The character of the Afghan mission was unique in many respects and the most crucial shortcomings of the mission stem from its distinct nature. First of all, in the beginning the mission was set as a retaliatory action of the USA for the 9/11 attacks. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty was invoked and, almost without pondering what the mission would entail and for how long the troops would be deployed, NATO members prepared for their engagement. Rather than being the main driving force, the normative motive, i.e. the dismantling of the Taliban regime for the sake of the Afghan people, was only used for the mission's justification. Only later came the realization that peace-building and reconstruction efforts need to be systematically implemented to prevent the Taliban and other insurgents from taking over again. Eventually, the changing goals of the mission have gradually transformed it into a complex large-scale operation to include, besides the immense counterinsurgency force, also the civilian, nation-building component. Happy-go-lucky mission creep can thus be easily singled out as the most important culprit of the Alliance's shortcomings.

Secondly, the mission has taken place in a completely new environment for most NATO members that brought with it many cultural as well as operational challenges due to the mission's scale. Furthermore, the number of troops deployed by various countries – some with relatively limited capacities – represented a great challenge of cooperation and coordination on the ground. As a result, over the years the ISAF mission has become loaded with bureaucracy. The example of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) demonstrates that in certain areas a functioning coordination among partners has never been fully achieved. Every state has perceived the concept differently and the countrywide systematic coordination among teams has not existed. Last but not least, the longer the operation draws on, the more its legitimacy and overall sustainability decreases. Political and financial pressures led to hasty decisions that generated more political problems and additional costs.



The Afghan mission has first and foremost revealed the limitations of NATO to carry out large-scale, complex missions. Certain degree of failure was clearly inevitable for NATO to realize where it stands and what its limitations are. The main goals of the mission should have been clearly stated from the beginning to allow comprehensive preparation and planning.

Based on this experience, it is not hard to imagine that unrealistic political motives will be curbed in launching future operations. That NATO has been learning from its Afghan lessons can be deduced from the shape of its Libyan mission. While not repeating the old mistakes, any organization is, however, susceptible to making new ones – especially those stemming from correcting the course too far.

The Perils of ‘Intervention Lite’: From Libya to Mali

NATO's operation Unified Protector in Libya was substantially different from the Alliance's endeavour in Afghanistan – not the least because it was the first out-of-area deployment conceived in the new age of austerity. It is worth noting, however, that while NATO fully accomplished its basic goal of protecting Libyan civilians, and ventured decidedly beyond it by overthrowing the Qaddafi regime, Libyan turmoil did not stop with the end of NATO engagement and subsequently spilled over to Mali in a crisis that provoked yet another Western intervention in the region. Whereas the ultimate outcome of the war in Libya was decisively – if somewhat unwillingly – altered by the NATO intervention, the Alliance has left its consequent Malian ‘spill-over conflict’ to its fate.

Both the war in Libya and the intervention in Mali, despite NATO ostentatious absence, illuminate the contours of ‘light footprint’ operations of the future. It is thus not only relevant to consider both conflicts as intimately connected but also talk about Mali even if NATO has not been directly involved there.

The lack of political will to commit NATO (or EU) troops in a combat role demonstrates the limits of hands-off, lite operations – which is especially true given the Sahel's role as the weak underbelly of Maghreb where the influence of Jihadist extremists and existence of terrorist safe-havens has much more direct consequences for European security than the situation in Afghanistan. There are, of course, perfectly understandable reasons why NATO conducted the Libyan mission in a limited manner (and the EU, while formally announcing a peacekeeping force, never launched an operation there), and why it abstained from engaging directly in Mali where the European Union deployed a training mission with a limited mandate, leaving the actual fighting to French units. While not denying the underlying



rationale, it is nevertheless necessary to critically assess the implications of this newly found reluctance to intervene in a more robust manner.

First of all, the impact of budgetary austerity in Europe, but also the United States, coincides with the exact moment when the Islamist threat and state failure in the Sahel region (e.g. Nigeria, Mali, CAR, Niger and Burkina Faso) is actually growing and spreading to neighbouring countries. Bloody hostage crisis in Amenas, Algeria gas plant, was an alarming proof of these developments. This, combined with the destabilizing effects of the Arab Spring in the region, creates a situation where asymmetric limited conflicts like the one in Mali are much more probable than the opportunity to challenge conventional opponents in a Libya-style fashion.

If we accept that continued foreign presence in cases of vital interest is better than the alternative 'hit-and-run' approach, we should nevertheless admit that in the Sahel this idea faces several challenges. In the first place, Mali proves that it is impossible to control the whole vast territory of a state. Attacks in Libya against Western targets after the end of NATO mission also indicate that foreign presence can be politically and culturally unacceptable for local population even if the West literally saved its lives. It was, after all, in Libyan Benghazi, a city saved by NATO intervention from the looming horrors of Qaddafi's wrath, which later saw an attack against the U.S. consulate and still serves as a base for local Islamist factions who challenge the authority of the provisional government and are hostile to the West.

Does swift handover of the mission to the locals solve the problem? Mali suggests that 'staying through partners' may sometimes be the only viable option. Rather than conforming to the hit-and-run view, such an approach works alongside a more considerate hit-lock-leave process, which may be 'lite' in the use of military personnel but certainly requires 'heavy' diplomatic engagement, hard work of military liaison officers and active use of intelligence services, all underpinned by extensive regional expertise and human capital. That said, NATO is well placed to go this direction, thanks to its web of institutionalized regional partnerships, such as the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) and the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), as well as working relations with the UN, EU or the African Union. Establishing the position of a NATO Special Representative for the Sahel might be a possible next step in this direction.

Mali also proves that 'intervention lite' is no less susceptible to the change of scope and length of the mission. Strategic foresight is by definition limited, and by starting a limited intervention NATO (or the EU) may inadvertently trigger a chain of events which will result in calls for more robust engagement – a situation known to decision-makers from Vietnam to Afghanistan. The only prevention to the ever-present threat of mission creep is thus not a more diligent planning at the military level but clearly set boundaries of the interests



involved – something that collective bodies like the Alliance or the Union may find even more difficult to achieve than traditional state actors but still need to strive for.

Finally, relying more on local actors and forces generates dangers of its own. These are, on the one hand, technical: the need to build the army and the police from scratch highlights the difficulties of the process, from Afghanistan to Mali. It took the European powers and the USA centuries to build a well functioning military machine, and it is utterly misplaced to expect that the process can be sped up into years or even months without leaving out some crucial elements. Which points to the second aspect of this issue, that of the value-based foundations of liberal interventionism: While the Western forces are not immune from abusing the noble principles in whose name they fight, the expectation that these ideals will be respected by local leaders and their soldiers and policemen may be seriously flawed. Planners of the operations should always take into account the law of unforeseen consequences, including the risks that carelessly transferred know-how and weaponry can easily end up being used against our wishes and, more importantly, interests.

Conclusion: The Way Ahead

After the exhaustion from Afghanistan and the imposition of budgetary austerity, NATO cannot simply go back to the practices established in 1990s and after 9/11. It is reasonable to expect that manpower-heavy, intense, protracted operations like ISAF will be avoided at almost any cost. At the same time, limited interventions, such as the one in Libya, when a conventional foe was targeted by superior air power, should not be treated as a panacea. If NATO wants to remain capable of conducting non-Article 5 military operations, it needs to learn the right lessons which will frame a more modest yet sufficiently robust doctrine of value-based interventions.

First of all, NATO needs to maintain a credible power projection capacity. This will inevitably require more intense pooling and sharing of key capabilities, such as those providing strategic sea and air lift. Besides these, NATO members (especially the European ones) should clearly invest in the development of remote surveillance and strike capabilities (including drones and special forces), in order to cover wider territory and sustain operations in remote areas. Heavy fighting in the vast deserted mountainous terrain of the northern Mali is a timely reminder that more limited missions may not be less demanding in this regard.

In the light of recent developments in the Sahel, it is safe to claim that counterinsurgency will remain as relevant in the future as it turned out to be in Afghanistan. Since NATO is no longer ready to commit vast intervention armies of its own, counterinsurgency operations will by necessity rely on the cooperation with local and regional partners (e.g. ECOWAS in the context of western Africa) or civilian experts. The trend towards mixed military-civilian



teams, as started and formalized through PRTs and other arrangements in Afghanistan, will continue. While from the military-technological perspective it may make sense to talk about network-centric warfare, it is reasonable to expect that NATO's future operations will be equally importantly human-centric. This will require systematic investment in human resources within the Alliance, and in building up human capital in potential theatres of future operations. NATO needs to realize that a well connected special forces officer or intelligence operative with long-nurtured local contacts can be as valuable and productive as an aircraft carriers. Put simply, if NATO (and the Euro-Atlantic community in general) wants to remain relevant and prevent security threats outside its territory while reducing defence budgets, it needs to enhance its spending on diplomacy, military liaisons and further sources of regional expertise. Heavy on information, light on actual deployments – such could be the translation of NATO's 'smart defence' concept for the purpose of out-of-area operations.

Working with regional and other partners will inevitably remain part of the pattern. NATO already has an experience with de facto coalitions of the willing conducting operations under its banner (e.g. in Libya) but it should consider formalizing this practice and the 'lead nation' concept, while actively preventing the possibility its missions will only serve as a cover for particularistic national interests of its members. The second way is to join forces with international and regional partners like the EU or AU which are both currently present in Mali in the form of missions EUTM Mali and MISMA. NATO has officially emphasized global partnerships as the third pillar of its activities, and it needs to continue building practical capabilities on the existing institutional links, and create new ones if necessary.

While 'outsourcing' the out-of-area operations such as the fight against terrorism or security sector reform to regional partners and local actors, NATO should not focus solely on the issue of combat effectiveness but also stress the message of democratic control of armed forces and respect to human rights. Mali provides a chilling reminder how the lack of such a component can backfire: It was the Malian national forces trained by U.S. experts who ignored democratic norms, overthrew the legitimate government and ultimately led the country to a state of near collapse. Furthermore, it was probably the Malian army which has committed abuses during regaining the country's north and thus hampered efforts for national reconciliation. Widespread corruption and claims of abuses of power by armed and police forces in Afghanistan provide another proof. It would be quixotic to expect that the security apparatus in post-conflict societies or failed states will conform to the same code of conduct as the one emphasized in Europe and North America, but while respecting the need for flexibility on the ground, NATO should never lose from its sight the normative underpinning of its actions. Paradoxically, 'lite' operations could more easily lead to heavy human rights abuses by local partners – something which NATO needs to prevent by all means available.



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Last but not least, NATO and its member countries need to remain active at home, conducting efficient PR strategies to convince the sceptical electorates that military operations far beyond the borders of their countries are essential for maintaining their security and the influence of the Euro-Atlantic community. While the number of conflicts and their casualties continue to drop, the world is far from being a safe place. NATO's absence from it would either lead to more conflict situations getting out of hand and security threats mushrooming, or to rising influence of other global powers – hardly a scenario we should accept lightly.



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