

## **NATO AND AFGHANISTAN: DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN?**

*James Sperling*

*Professor of Political Science*

*University of Akron, USA*

The invocation of Article V in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon underscored NATO's continuing viability and vitality as a collective defense organization. Although the Bush administration solicited, welcomed and catalogued the political and material support provided by its NATO allies, it also embraced the 'lesson' of Operation Allied Force: the United States would not allow itself to be subjected to the political and operational constraints of a NATO operation, derisively referred to as 'war by committee'. Instead, the war in Afghanistan was to be conducted as an American-led operation---Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) --- unencumbered by the political sensitivities or preoccupations of its allies, major and minor alike. Although the United States refused the allied offer of executing the war within the NATO integrated military command, it did willingly accept and expect allied contributions to that effort. Several NATO allies, particularly Canada, France, Italy and the UK, made significant contributions to combat operations and devoted an impressive share of national naval and air assets to OEF. NATO only became a party to the reconstruction and stabilization efforts in Afghanistan in August 2003, when it assumed responsibility for the UN-mandated International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF). Over time, American forces have been slowly integrated into ISAF, but the formal separation of the OEF and ISAF command structures continues, despite the acknowledged interdependence between the on-going OEF counter-terrorism operations and ISAF mandated tasks of providing security for the Afghan government and the reconstruction.

The Alliance has been bereft not only by fundamental disagreements about the importance of Afghanistan for the security of the individual member states, but disagreements about key aspects of any NATO operation: the precise meaning of the NATO operational mandate; the (a)symmetry of burden- and risk-sharing; and the allowable degree of freedom from the NATO consensus

principle when conducting an out of area operation. If the diplomatic disagreements and hedged contributions to the counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan demonstrate anything, it is that the Senator Richard Lugar's 'out of area' aphorism should be revisited. If America should seek a global NATO as some advocate, it appears more likely that going out of area will drive NATO out of business.

Afghanistan demonstrates that the United States and its European allies should settle for 'coalitions of the willing' outside Europe since member state interests (mis)align at different times and in different geopolitical spaces. NATO continues to perform its postwar collective defense function; only a strategic over-extension attending a too ambitious enlargement or too broad a geopolitical remit could pose an existential threat to NATO's continued viability as a collective defense organization. The unanimity principle and collective defense obligation remains robust within the transatlantic area, as the invocation of Article V in 2001 demonstrates. Arguably, the NATO experience in Afghanistan suggests that non-Article V missions outside Europe require an alternative decision-making principle in order to accommodate divergent threat assessments or disabling domestic political contexts. Were NATO to adopt a form of 'constructive abstention' in such cases, it would insulate the alliances' core purpose of collective defense from divisive geopolitical divergences. Moreover, this approach to out of area operations would correct an existing asymmetry of rights and responsibilities: the Berlin-plus arrangements currently codify a mutual recognition that Europe may have security concerns not shared by the United States. A symmetrical application of the Berlin-plus arrangements would merely acknowledge that on occasion American security interests are tangential to those of some or all of its European allies.

Afghanistan also suggests that the Bush Administration not only embraced the wrong lesson of OAF, but ignored valuable lessons of the first Gulf War. Afghanistan confirmed that only multilateral negotiations, rather than bilateral bargains, provide the foundation for a sustainable diplomatic and operational

consensus accommodating overlapping national interests. Afghanistan represents a lost opportunity; when the United States refused to take advantage of the Article V invocation to remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, it weakened NATO as a diplomatic as well as military asset for the United States. More important, NATO's success or failure in meeting the complex and intractable challenges posed by Afghanistan should not be allowed to serve as the acid-test for the judging the health of the alliance. What infirmities NATO suffered in the conduct of operations in Afghanistan are not intrinsic to the alliance, but largely reflect America's dyspeptic leadership of it in the recent past.