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# Deadly Embrace?

*The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*

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# **Deadly Embrace?**

*The Decision Paths to Uruzgan and Helmand*

## ***Proefschrift***

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***“Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play” -***

*- Immanuel Kant*

# Contents

# Contents

<b>Prologue</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Part One Theories, Concepts and Methods</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>19</b>
1.1 Research Puzzle	19
1.2 Objectives and Relevance	22
1.3 Research Strategy	23
1.4 Book Outline	25
<b>Chapter 2 Theoretical Foundations</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1 Introduction	29
2.2 Contemporary Military Interventions	30
2.3 Senior Civil and Military Decision-Makers and the Nature of Their Relations	38
2.4 Strategy as The Product of a Dialogue Between Politicians and Soldiers	42
2.5 The Analytical Framework	48
2.5.1 Institutional Setting and Roles of the Actors	50
2.5.2 Decision Units and Decision Paths	54
2.5.3 The Propositions	59



<b>Chapter 3. Methodology</b>	<b>61</b>
3.1 Introduction: From Distinctions to Generalisations	61
3.2 The Unit of Analysis	61
3.3 A Multiple Case Study	63
3.3.1 Process Tracing and Structured Focused Comparison: Linking Outcomes and Conditions	66
3.3.2 Process Tracing	67
3.4.1 Elite Interviews	68
3.4.2 Document Analysis	72
3.5 Reliability, Validity and Generalisability	72
3.6 Limitations	73
<b>Part Two Context, Cases and Analysis</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Chapter 4 From Regime Change, to Peace Building, to Countering     Insurgents: Stabilising Afghanistan</b>	<b>77</b>
4.1 Introduction	77
4.2 Setting	78
4.3 Intervening in Afghanistan in Pursuit of Osama: The Coalition of the Willing (2001)	80
4.4 A Collective Effort Towards Building Peace: NATO's Arrival (2003)	82
4.5 Disillusionment: From Assisting to Fighting (2006)	85
4.6 Conclusion	87

<b>Chapter 5 The Strategic Context</b>	<b>91</b>
5.1 Introduction	91
5.2 The Netherlands: A Small Power with a Desire to Make a Difference	91
5.2.1 The Senior Civil and Military Decision-Makers and Their Relations	95
5.3 The United Kingdom: The Grandeur of a Great Power	101
5.3.1 The Senior Civil and Military Decision-Makers and Their Relations	103
5.4 Conclusion	110
 <b>Chapter 6 The Dutch Case</b>	 <b>113</b>
6.1 Introduction: Setting the Stage	113
6.2 The Foreign Policy Problem: The Logic of Participating in NATO's Expansion to the South of Afghanistan	113
6.3 Occasions for Decisions: Military Trilateral Initiative	115
6.4 Emergence of a Decision Unit: The Actions of a Single Group	118
6.5 Decision Unit Dynamics: The Process of Interpretation	119
6.6 Occasion for Decision: Political Involvement	123
6.7 The Process Outcome: Provisional Consensus	126
6.8 The Action and the Subsequent Occasion for Decision : Notification of Parliament	126
6.9 The Changing Configuration of the Unit: An (Inter) Governmental Coalition	127
6.10 Process of Interpretation: Domestic versus International Pressures	129
6.11 Process Outcome: The Article 100 Letter and Its Delivery to Parliament	134
6.12 The Foreign Policy Action: The Deployment of Forces	139
6.13 Conclusions	148

<b>Chapter 7 The British Case</b>	<b>153</b>
7.1 Introduction: Setting the Stage	153
7.2 The Foreign Policy Problem: The Logic of Participating in NATO's Expansion South Afghanistan	153
7.3 Occasion for Decision I: Blair's Desire to Lead NATO's Expansion to The South	155
7.4 Occasion for Decision II: NATO's Force Generation Meeting	158
7.5 Emergence of a Decision Unit: The Actions of a Single Group with a Dominant Leader	159
7.6 Decision Unit Dynamics: The Process of Interpretation	160
7.7 Process Outcome: Sequential Decisions	165
7.8 The Process of Interpretation Continues	167
7.9 The Foreign Policy Action: The Deployment of Forces	177
7.10 Conclusions	180
 <b>Chapter 8 Cross-Case Comparison: A Powerful Idea Meets a Window of Opportunity</b>	 <b>185</b>
8.1 Introduction	185
8.2 The Foreign Policy Problem	185
8.3 The Opportunity for Decision	186
8.4 The Emergence of the Decision Unit(s)	187
8.5 The Dynamics in the Groups: the Process of Interpretation	189
8.6 The Process Outcome	191
8.6.1 The Foreign Policy Action: The Deployment of Forces	195

8.7 The Propositions	196
8.8 Conclusions	200
<b>Part Three Conclusions and Recommendations</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>Chapter 9 Conclusions</b>	<b>205</b>
9.1 Introduction	205
9.2 Why and How: Inescapable Entrapments?	205
9.3 Theoretical Deductions, Inductions and Recommendations	206
9.4 Recommendations for Future Research	208
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>List of Respondents</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>List of Key Players and Time Line Key Events NL</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>List Key Player and Time Line Key Events UK</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>Samenvatting (Dutch)</b>	<b>253</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitea</b>	<b>258</b>

# Prologue

My deployments to Afghanistan made me wonder and at times question the use of international military engagements. Sure, an armed servant is trained not to question the political use and necessity of endeavours but my curiosity led me to dig into the concepts that had put us there. But, whilst reflecting upon our engagements with the Afghan population, these suddenly seemed rather shallow concepts. This is not to say I came to reject them, but more so these deployments came to cater an interest to further investigate our stabilisation efforts in (post-) conflict states.

In 2005, whilst preparing a conference with prof. dr. Myriame Bollen of the Netherlands Defence Academy, she asked me whether I would be interested in conducting a PhD research project to analyse my operational experiences from operations from an academic perspective. My commander at that time, Colonel Harry Knoop, was a great supporter of the initiative and encouraged me to discuss the matter with the director of our personnel department. Armed with his letter of recommendation and an evaluation report of my competences, I was determined to convince the personnel department of the need to allow me to conduct a PhD project. However, it was the head of the personnel department who convinced me that an academic tour would seriously hamper and endanger a military career. My ambition prevailed and I chose to listen to her. Some years later, I realised that my interest in broadening my view and to further investigate the theories and concepts on practices in the field, was greater than my initial desire to seek safety in trying to follow a traditional career path. This in itself had been questionable from the outset, since my career in the military so far had been everything but traditional.

The time that I was allowed by the army to fully indulge myself into the wonders of academia allowed me the hindsight that is often needed to gain discerning insights. As so expressively formulated by a former commander of the NATO forces in Afghanistan: "It is much harder to be an active practitioner than to be an analyst/historian/academic/journalist, etc., especially when they have the benefit of hindsight and no pressure of time and events".<sup>1</sup>

The initial academic journey started out in the summer of 2010 at the Netherlands Defence Academy with critically analysing the concept of the comprehensive approach. I had been a firm believer in the concept on paper but when put into practice some defies with regard to its underlying assumptions surfaced. It was not so much the often discussed differences between the civilian and military actors in the field that seemed to hamper the implementation of the comprehensive approach, but more so the ability and willingness of the state subject to the stabilisation project.

■  
1 Sir General Richard quoted in Jack Fairweather, *A War of Choice: The British in Iraq 2003-9* (Random House, London). 217

As such, I came to redirect my intention to those who design and implement military operations: the senior civil and military decision-makers. On the basis of what premise do they come to design missions like to ones to Afghanistan? And what informs their decision-making and ultimately their strategy? Questions like these came to guide the research that evolved into this dissertation.