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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

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

- Immanuel Kant

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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".¹

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.