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Chapter 8 Cross-Case Comparison: A Powerful Idea Meets a Window of Opportunity

8.1 Introduction

The putative idea of deploying military forces to the South of Afghanistan materialised in an extremely powerful manner amongst senior civil and military decision-makers in London and The Hague. In fact, it came to dictate the course of events, driven by the implicit knowledge that a mission had to transpire. The workings of the actions undertaken and the decisions made by the senior civil and military decision-makers in both nations will be compared in this chapter. The findings will be structured along the lines of the propositions that have guided this study.

8.2 The Foreign Policy Problem

NATO's expansion to South Afghanistan was communicated in 2004 at the NATO summit in Istanbul. Thus, the intention of the international community to redirect their focus from Iraq to Afghanistan became apparent. This included both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The disappointing results of the British forces in Iraq very much shaped the way a possible commitment to NATO's expansion was conceived both at the political and military level. In the Netherlands, a possible commitment was considered by a small group of senior civil and military decision-makers and was initially not actually part of a wider political debate.

The foreign policy problem, the expansion of NATO to South Afghanistan and its need for reinforcement, presented itself as a useful 'window of opportunity'. It provided the opportunity to attain a set of interrelated objectives and ideas. The first objective for both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands was being able to manifest themselves as reliable partners to the United States and NATO. Their habitual response to foreign policy actions in support of the Alliance and its leading nation was, as showcased, apparent. Respondents from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in fact indicated the relationship with both NATO and the United States to have been a foundational motivation for the deployment to the South.

The second prominent objective articulated was the Western responsibility to take Afghan society forward and so to fulfil its obligation to deliver the stabilisation it had promised during the initial stages of the intervention. This idea was very much in line with the moral

component present in both nations' foreign policies and consequently a role they very much liked to adhere to. Moreover, the common denominator in the rhetoric as exercised by the British and Dutch civilian and military actors reflected the normative demands they felt needed to be met; collective values about the provision of security and the rule of law.

However, the British case distinguished itself from the Dutch case in the sense that the moral component in its foreign policy was far more pronounced. The British Labour party presented the famous '*forces for good*' idea as a guiding principle in their foreign policy which was carried out by Prime Minister Blair with great dedication and enthusiasm. This kind of policy and rhetoric was not developed with the same dedication in the Netherlands, despite the Dutch tradition of employing moral components to its foreign policy.

The question remains, however, to what extent the rhetoric exercised in both nations truly accounts for the motivations of the senior civil and military decision-makers. Often an idealistic argument is made since it resonates better in the process of obtaining political approval and public support. This aspect of the reasoning practiced by the senior civil and military decision-makers will be considered later on in this chapter.

8.3 The Opportunity for Decision

The opportunity for decision in both nations was instigated by different actors in the civil military interface. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Blair had clearly set out the leading role he would like his nation to play in NATO's expansion in Afghanistan. He had set the stage with regard to articulating his desire to take up a more robust role in Afghanistan, especially with regard to NATO's expansion to the South. He had even promised the employment of ARRC to lead the NATO headquarters during NATO's expansion to the South without consulting some of his primary military advisors.

In the Netherlands, no political guidance was provided prior to the emergence of the trilateral military initiative between Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom with regard to a potential role for the Netherlands in the stabilisation of South Afghanistan. This facilitated the prominent role the director of operations at the Ministry of Defence, General Cobelens, acquired himself in the initiation of the decision path for the deployment of military forces to South Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, the most prominent similarity between the two cases is the role of the military, more specifically the trilateral military initiative, at a very early stage within the decision-making process, pre-dating a formal (political) decision. The fact that the trilateral military initiative reportedly even took SACEUR by surprise is telling. The ambition of those

involved in the military scheme seemed to be two steps ahead of national political obstacles that had to be overcome. Furthermore, they also kept ahead of NATO's force generation process in order to retain initiative in terms of deciding where to deploy their troops and in which configuration.

The dynamics of the trilateral military initiative occurred informally, but conditioned the course of events that ultimately led to the deployment of forces to South Afghanistan to a profound extent. Hence, the military directors of operations of both countries¹ were great driving forces behind the upbeat rhythm that emerged once the trilateral informal working groups were initiated.

8.4 The Emergence of the Decision Unit(s)

The principal actors entrusted with the leverage to assign government resources for the stabilisation of South Afghanistan (the Ministers of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Cabinet, and the Prime Minister) are, for this study, treated as a decision unit. The configuration of these units differed not only in the two nations, but also across time since the series of decisions that were taken, depending on the phase in the decision process, required different actors.

In the Netherlands, the interdepartmental Steering Group Military Operations concerned itself with the conditions of the deployment whilst the planning team at the Ministry of Defence carried out the planning. The members of the steering group got along rather well, but their loyalties resided with their respective departments. Interestingly, this did not seem to interfere with the advancement of their decision-making. Whilst preparing to inform Cabinet about an upcoming military deployment they acquired a shared sense of direction with an ability to resolve potential problems.

Even though the Netherlands was, at the time, ruled by a coalition government, the members of Cabinet could have acted autonomously in that they did not necessarily need to check back with the political leaders of their party whilst engaged in decision-making. It can, as in fact occurred in this particular case, result in tensions between the political leader of a ruling party and its Ministers in Cabinet. This in itself reflects the single group features of the Dutch Cabinet. As soon as their decisions are discussed in Parliament however, coalition features come into play again more prominently.

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1 Even though their position cannot be compared one on one due to the clear separation between the strategic and operational level in the British military structure (see chapter 6), for the sake of argument their respective positions in terms of power are viewed to be at the same level.

Whilst formally Cabinet is not required to obtain a majority of votes from Parliament to deploy their military forces, in practice it does so. Once Parliament was included in the decision path set out by the senior civil and military decision-makers, the configuration of the decision unit changed into a coalition of autonomous actors. Even though the group of senior civil and military decision-makers remained the focal point regarding the employment of its military means, the political sign off and consequent debates in Parliament were required to provide legitimacy to the military endeavour.

In the United Kingdom, the senior civil and military decision-makers advanced the series of decisions primarily through the interdepartmental Reid Group that was called into life by Prime Minister Blair. He maintained a prominent role in the decision-making whilst appointing Secretary of State, John Reid - a trustee of Blair – to run the group. Reid was instructed to deliver the mission to South Afghanistan. The relations in the group amongst the civil and military members were difficult as the Prime Minister favoured the military as his pivotal actor, not leaving much room for those would have liked to challenge the perspective of the military actors in the group. Consequently, conflict in the group was largely avoided.

(Inter) Governmental Coalition Decision Group

Besides the particularities of the decision groups of both nations in which the senior civil and military decision-makers acted, another dynamic came into play. From the outset, the civil military decision units in both nations acquired features of an (inter) governmental coalition decision group, since the conditioning activities of the trilateral military initiative instigated a dynamic of its own. The informal, but nevertheless shaping, trilateral military working meetings went into great detail, concerning themselves, for example, with the concept of operations whilst political approval still needed to be obtained. The workings of the (inter) governmental coalition group became most prominent during the last phase in the decision process in both nations.

In fact, both nations had made their deployment conditional on one another. At this point, the intergovernmental coalition feature of the civil military decision group which had been present all throughout the decision-making process acquired a more prominent stature: neither the Netherlands nor the United Kingdom could do something without checking back with the other nation. This represented a shift in the configuration of the decision unit: the initial single group (the senior civilian and military decision-makers) had changed into an inter-governmental coalition group. This group required not only the cooperation of various groups within their own society but also collaborative inputs from other nations.

Consequently, the Dutch delay in the decision-making stalled the decision-making process in the United Kingdom, since the Secretary of State for Defence had made the deployment of his forces dependent on the political decision of the Netherlands. The delay in the Dutch decision-making was caused by a prominent aspect of Dutch politics in general: the need for consensus, first in Cabinet, and subsequently in Parliament. The junior coalition party - D66 - stalled the decision-making process to a significant degree. The internal division that had occurred within their party needed to be co-opted in order to advance the decision-making. The consequent mincing of words, employing indistinct terms such as '*intention*' in the Article 100 letter were designed to accommodate a solution for the division within D66. However, once the letter was delivered to Parliament the use of the word '*intention*' resulted in political commotion. No longer were the content of the letter and the objective of the mission a point of debate, but a play on words to safeguard political support within Cabinet and beyond, became the centre of the debate. Even though, in the end, the deployment could not be halted the decision-making process had been severely hampered and delayed. This in itself, caused quite some distress at both the national and international level since NATO's expansion to South Afghanistan was dependent on the deployment of forces from Britain, Canada and the Netherlands.

This finding outlines and builds on the notion that a decision group, in response to a problem, in fact undertakes several different actions simultaneously. As such, they are often still interpreting one aspect of the problem whilst already initiating provisional action with respect to another aspect of the problem², as has been showcased by the workings of the trilateral military initiative on the one hand and the domestic features of the decision-making process for the employment of military means on the other.

8.5 The Dynamics in the Groups: the Process of Interpretation

The political situation never stood still after the possibility of a military engagement surfaced; indeed, it constantly challenged the senior civil and military decision-makers to make judgements. The complexity of the dynamics which occurred within this group of people can first and foremost be explained and interpreted by the configuration of the group. As witnessed in these cases, the operation of the respective decision units differed to a great

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2 Robert Billings and Charles F. Hermann, 'Problem Identification in Sequential Policy Decision-making: The Re-representation of Problems' in: Donald A. Sylvan and James F. Voss (eds.), *Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Cambridge 1998) 53-79, 61.

extent. This is largely attributed to the fact that different techniques were employed during the interpretation of the ‘foreign policy problem’, depending on the configuration of the unit.

The starting point of interpreting the task at hand was, as addressed earlier, in the British case clearly articulated by their Prime Minister. In addition, it was common knowledge that the military was his preferred institution. Even though within the group of senior civil and military decision-makers, they did not always seem to agree, the majority of them desired to remain loyal to their political leader. As such, an actual ‘open’ debate within the Reid Group questioning the intention of the deployment did not transpire to any great degree. As some of the participants commented, hardly any debate occurred as the common focus was to make the deployment happen.

In the Dutch case, the Dutch Prime Minister was not that engaged in military endeavors and as such recused himself from an active role. He delegated the decision-making to the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs. They were informed about a possible Dutch mission to South Afghanistan several months after the first informal [military] talks had taken place between the British and Dutch directors of operations. Once they were informed however, they acquired for themselves a more prominent role in the decision-making process.

In the process of interpretation two prominent issues needed addressing: the force levels and the selection of the provinces where both nations were to deploy their troops. The military was to provide advice about the military feasibility of the operation and about the force structure. Interestingly, both militaries provided their political masters with a force level proposal that came back to haunt them. Their respective habitual responses, anticipating a political distaste for launching grand and expensive operations – especially in the light of ongoing operations at that time – turned out to be a miscalculation. Once the required troop numbers were communicated it became rather difficult to attain more troops needed for the task at hand.

Through convincing argumentation by military commanders lower in the chain of command - most prominently those who were to command the respective task forces - the force levels were increased. Interestingly though, the tendency amongst the military - both in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom - was to blame the politicians for having provided an untenable force level required for the mission, only to later conclude that the initial advice had come from the military establishment itself.

Another component of military advice required for an informed decision-making process was an assessment of the security situation in the respective provinces and the feasibility of troops stabilising the region. The provision of military intelligence is a crucial factor at this stage. The intelligence assessments that were distributed in both countries became the center of heated debates - interestingly, two different debates at different times within the decision-making process. In the United Kingdom, mostly in retrospect, the military has

been blamed for failing to conduct proper assessments and the lack of solid advice about the achievability of the deployment. In the Netherlands a rather skeptical report provided by the military intelligence service [which questioned the achievability of the mission and sketched a rather disturbing picture about the security situation and stated the likelihood of casualties] ultimately left the Minister of Defense and others to question the feasibility of the mission.

In the process of interpretation, the use of an assessment framework in the Netherlands at least generated a sense of informed and rational decision-making. But as evidenced in the Dutch case, despite the fact that some major questions, like the objective of the mission, and the attainment of goals were not sufficiently specified, the decision-making was not hampered by the lack of explicating these points in the assessment framework.

8.6 The Process Outcome

The outcome of the process itself indicates what happened in the course of the deliberations of the senior civil and military decision-makers. The outcome is inherently dependent on the configuration of the decision unit of which they are part.³ Since the process of deploying military troops in both nations contained sequential decisions, at times including a changing configuration of the decision unit, subsequent process outcomes came to light.

The insights as provided by the respondents in the British case pointed to groupthink as the dominant feature of their decision-making process. The Reid group to a great degree instinctively provided advice in line with what was communicated to them as the preferred course of action. Put differently, they habitually followed the lines of thought as explicated by their leader. As predicted by the decision framework, a single group with a dominant leader will very likely produce a tendency to avoid group conflict. This model of reasoning is coined by Hermann as ‘concurrence’⁴ and the hallmark of the model is groupthink.

The phenomenon of group think did not surface in the Dutch case. The most obvious explanation would be the institutional setting in which the decision-making took place. For one, the Prime Minister is truly a ‘*primus inter pares*’ and, as said earlier on, he did not concern himself that much with foreign politics, let alone outline a direction from which the senior military decision-makers were to generate certain actions. It would be too simplistic

3 For a detailed description of the various outcomes of the process outcome see: Hermann, ‘How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy’, 68.

4 Charles F. Hermann, Janice Gross Stein, Bengt Sundelius and Stephen G. Walker, ‘Resolve, affect or dissolve’ *International Studies Review* 3 (2) (2001) 133-168, 138

however to solely explain the absence of group think by pointing to the differences of the two different political systems and subsequently their decision units.

In the Netherlands also, the power of a dominant idea did come to dictate the course of events albeit in a slightly different manner. The main difference from the British case is the fact that the opponents of certain decisions were not afraid to speak up throughout the chain of command (civil and military actors). As indicated by some military planners, they felt that decisions about, for example, the selection of the province had already been taken and their recces were 'just cosmetic'. One of the planners who did not agree with the force package, arguing it would be of a too small size to deal with the tasks at hand, refused to sign off the operation order to the subordinated units.

The line of reasoning which occurred within the group of Dutch senior civilian and military decision-makers is attributed to the unanimity model. The benchmark of this model is the phenomenon of bureaucratic politics in which the struggles amongst group members, whilst advocating the preferences of their respective agencies, occurs. The existence of decision rules and norms can provide means for alternative decision outputs.⁵ The Dutch case has demonstrated this with the prominence of the assessment framework (rule) and its preference for a parliamentary majority before military forces are deployed.

The process outcome in the Netherlands featured characteristics of concurrence amongst the senior civil and military decision-makers and the way they came to decide that a deployment of military forces was to take place. However, when Parliament had to endorse the decision as presented to them, it refused to do so. The interesting aspect of it being that they declined to do so because of the fact it was not presented to them as a genuine decision. Aware of the sensitivities present amongst one of the governing coalition parties, the decision was delivered masked by a subtle change of wording, namely 'intention'. The usage of this word, rather than Cabinet taking full responsibility for their decision to employ military troops, caused a deadlock. This form of deadlock, also known as 'fragmented symbolic action',⁶ is a disagreement that explodes outside the decision unit. Consequently, the participants of the decision unit will take action by themselves, or even criticise the behavior of those who compromised their decision.

Once the senior civil and military decision-makers in both countries came to agree on the need to deploy forces to respectively Helmand and Uruzgan, the resources needed to implement the prescriptions of the task at hand needed to be made available. What did acquire quite a prominent status in the Dutch decision-making process was the list of ten bullets as set up by the Minister of Defence. It attempted, and ultimately succeeded in safeguarding political and popular support for the mission. In the United Kingdom, the

5 Hermann et al., 'Resolve, affect or dissolve', 139

6 Hermann, 'How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy', 68.

Secretary of State for Defence had drafted a similar list, stating three preconditions that needed to be accomplished before he would seek political approval from the members of Cabinet. He had clearly stated, as had his Dutch counterpart, that if these preconditions were not fulfilled, the deployment was to be halted. As such, both Ministers of Defence did acquire 'ownership' over the decision process albeit relatively late in the process.

Within the United Kingdom, much more debate during and after the decision-making process occurred at various levels and in various departments amongst the senior civil and military decision-makers. In the Dutch case the major debate occurred within Parliament, and initially concentrated more on the use of the word 'intention' than the mission itself. However, there had not been that much debate and/or difference of opinion between the senior civil and military decision-makers themselves. This is not to say none of the actors involved in the Netherlands had been questioning the utility or achievability of the mission, but the differences of opinion were less profound than in the United Kingdom.

The attainment of political approval mattered, as outlined earlier, to a great degree for the outcome of the decision-making process in the Netherlands, and as such influenced the course of events more than in the United Kingdom. The main explanation for this divergence is, as alluded to earlier on, the difference in political system: a coalition cabinet versus a majority cabinet.

Interestingly enough, the political purpose of the mission was neither at the centre of the debate in Parliament nor at the centre of public attention as expressed in the media. As such, the construction of a narrative underlying the interaction within the public sphere was less evident. Yet, strong arguments needed to be formulated due to the probing of Members of Parliament that took place in the last phase of the decision-making process in the Netherlands. Party politics had come to haunt the attainment of political approval from Parliament, delaying the decision for at least two months. Not because, as indicated earlier, of the content of the objective to deploy forces, but because of the procedure and the employed wording in the notification letter to Parliament.

In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister does not formally require the obtainment of political approval, but in practice he did seek agreement of members of his Cabinet. In the Cabinet, the Secretary of State for Defence was to attain approval for the deployment to Helmand. In the meeting however, the Secretary of State waved away a critical question from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who then decided to abstain from voting. In contrast to the Dutch case, obtaining political approval from Cabinet in the United Kingdom is far less guided by consensus.

All in all, the process of obtaining political approval for the respective missions to South Afghanistan brought to light the rhetorical actions and strategic adaptation to external pressures (international, alliance obligations) resulting in what is known as 'argumentative

self-entrapment'.⁷ Ultimately, the Netherlands especially, but to an extent the United Kingdom as well, were put under pressure by internal and external actors to deliver military troops. The detailed planning that had occurred had instigated certain expectations, especially for the United States that subsequently exercised diplomatic pressure when the decision-making process halted.

An important outcome of the decision-making process was the drafting of an interdepartmental strategy guiding the stabilisation effort. It turned out to be a complex endeavor for both nations. Firstly, major decisions such as the selection of the respective provinces had not been taken at the strategic level, paving the way for the general bottom up approach illustrated by both cases. The window of opportunity in which the senior military decision-makers had initiated the trilateral working groups dealing with the specifics of the operation occurred with no or limited political guidance. Hence, a clear political objective had not been explicated but this did not seem to hamper the development of, for example, a concept of operations in line with the existing NATO order of operations.

However, the fact that both nations had called for a comprehensive approach to the stabilisation of the respective provinces implied a joint strategy to guide this intended integrated effort. The difficulties with the development of a joint strategy are illustrated by, first of all, the lack of habit of strategy making for complex operations in general and more specifically with comprehensive strategies in particular.

In the United Kingdom, Secretary of State for Defence John Reid had supposedly called for a joint plan, and two separate civil and military teams had been sent to South Afghanistan to draft a plan. In fact, the PCRU was tasked with designing a strategy for the British stabilisation effort in Helmand, but so was a military team from the Permanent Joint Headquarters. No strategy had been delivered to these teams, just some general guidelines about the timings, force compositions and available funds. The fact these two teams joined hands and came up with a joint plan was the result of serendipity: the head of the civil and military teams were old acquaintances, got along well and shared mutual beliefs about the importance of a joint plan.

This pragmatic approach, albeit on another level, was also adopted by General Theo Vleugels and his staff. In search for a comprehensive campaign plan, he decided to not only develop one himself but to include a team of civilian experts. By doing so, he did not only acknowledge the need for an inclusive approach but also sought to include the other departments. However, mandated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch Embassy in Kabul had started drafting a civil assessment. This document was to guide the civilian effort of the campaign. Like in the United Kingdom, the initial attempts to deliver a comprehensive



7 Risse, "Let's Argue!", 32.

plan were everything from joint from the outset, and, in contrast to the British case, had ultimately not become joint at all.

This also brings to light that despite institutional arrangements which are designed to guarantee a joint approach (the SMO and the PCRU), these arrangements are by no means a guarantee that a comprehensive approach to operations actually occurs. One does however need to take into consideration the - at that time - novelty of these kinds of operations. Even though both nations had experimented with their respective comprehensive approaches to operations in both Iraq and North Afghanistan, the comprehensive approach remained rather novel.

Consequently, the plans developed in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom had to be 'owned' by the respective task forces assigned for the deployment. In the Dutch case, this was not difficult since they themselves had written the plan. In the British case however, this ownership turned out to be more complex. Neither the commander of the first task force nor his planning staff had been included in the writing of the plan. As a result, their habitual response to the product was to ignore it and carry on in whatever way they saw fit.

Within this phase of the decision-making process, the actual writing of the campaign plans and the size of the force package had become an issue high on the agendas of the civil and military actors involved. Both the British and Dutch task force commanders had time and time again expressed their severe concerns about the number of troops that had been assigned to them. However, some tended to forget the fact that this had been a so called 'self-inflicted wound' instigated by the top of the military establishments in both nations. Hence, they directed their frustrations at the political level, blaming them for the composition of the task force and, therefore, putting the relations under strain. One could argue this to have been a habitual response toward those (the political class) who are traditionally viewed as having no clue about the military and military operations.

8.6.1 The Foreign Policy Action: The Deployment of Forces

The ultimate action that was to come about from the sets of decisions made by the senior civil and military decision-makers in London and The Hague was the deployment of their military forces. Despite the high profile of the deployment that had taken root in their reasoning, the provision of a strategic narrative capturing the nature of the mission proved to be a complex enterprise. Thus the nature of the mission remained a source of controversy in both nations. The most prominent reason for this controversy turned out to be a fundamental misconception about the reconstruction aspect of the mission. Both London and The Hague emphasised the reconstruction aspect of the mission since it was believed to facilitate more popular support than emphasising the possibility of getting engaged in fighting activities.

Arguments therefore needed to be selected that would sway the national audiences and gain their support.

Thus, once political approval was obtained, senior military decision-makers in both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands engaged themselves with the crafting of a strategic narrative. The Dutch Chief of Defence sensed the sensitivities amongst the Dutch audience about the potential 'fighting mission' that he was about to engage his forces in. This role was not quite in line with the belief that the Dutch military was to engage in peacekeeping. He understood that if one was to gain public support for an 'a-typical' mission, the strategic framing was crucial. Consequently, a careful juggling with words occurred, trying to emphasise the reconstruction effort of the mission whilst not downplaying the possibilities of armed engagements.

Although the British audience was far more accustomed to having its troops deployed to remote and dangerous places, the mission to Helmand was first and foremost presented to the public as a 'stabilisation mission'. The Secretary of State for Defence, John Reid, was in-famously (mis) quoted time and time again about the presumed low fighting intensity of the mission.

All in all, in both nations the senior civil and military decision-makers faces several difficulties with constructing a convincing narrative. Not surprisingly, the audiences in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom were not that convinced about the purpose of the mission, leaving the deployment controversial. Consequently, the controversy about the mission left room for widening the gap between the two opposing views of the goals of the nature of the mission. This in fact occurred because of a lack of a convincing narrative. In other words, the process of argumentative entrapment that had taken the senior civil and military decision-makers down the road of deploying their forces, did not seem to have the same effect on their national audiences.

8.7 The Propositions

After having described how the sequential decisions of the senior civil and military decision-makers culminated in the ultimate action of the deployment of military forces, the propositions that have steered both the data collection and analysis will be further scrutinised below.

The first proposition engaged with the initiation of the decision-making process that ultimately resulted in the deployment of forces. It presupposed that inputs into the decision-making process to use military means were instigated by political guidance on a foreign policy problem. This assumption derived from the prescriptions as put forward in theory

on civil military relations and strategy. As presented in both cases, the trilateral military initiative between Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom carried great value in a sense that without this partnering, none of these nations would have deployed their forces. The catalysing effect of this partnership is an essential finding of the study with regard that it proves the utility and importance of (multi) lateral military relations as breeding grounds for the deployment of forces. It challenges the classic belief of the military following politically initiated goals. Even though the political context of NATO's expansion to South Afghanistan shaped the minds of the military high command, NATO in itself remained rather passive and at no point took the lead, either as an organisation or through the permanent missions of the two nations in Brussels.

The driving forces behind the trilateral military initiatives were the directors of operations, General Cobelens (NL) and General Fry (UK). The resemblance between these men, in terms of their ability to act beyond their prescribed roles, is significant. The reasoning of these two men was shaped by their own respective ideas on how to potentially claim a role for 'their militaries',⁸ in the stabilisation of Afghanistan, whilst knowing that NATO would eventually call for their assistance. In this way they could keep the initiative instead of having to sit back and wait. In this way they identified a window of opportunity: it combined calculation of their interest with shared ideas amongst the group of senior civilian and military decision-makers, namely the desire to be a good ally to both NATO and to the United States.

Furthermore, the practical experience of both directors of operations informed their strategies for convincing others through their personal communicative encounters. Both men were known for their charismatic personalities but also for their dedication to 'making things happen'. Their ability to do so was largely a result of their convincing argumentation. Their communicative skills are the primary attribute in the way these men swayed major actors like the Director of Political Affairs (NL case) or the Permanent Under Secretary of State (UK case). But without the feel for the political game, i.e. familiarity with the 'rules of the game' neither one of them would have been able to initiate the scheme of events.

Interestingly, the roles assigned to the directors of operations required them to fulfill a less weighty posture. Despite the fact that both theory and societal norms require the military to refrain from the initiation of missions and policy respectively, these two men nonetheless went ahead and acted as they saw fit. Nevertheless, the Ministers of Defense of both nations indicated that they required their military chiefs of operations to be two steps ahead and to anticipate possible future missions. The question remains as to whether the activities developed by these two directors can in fact be described as a pro-active approach,

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8 Also known as the 'use it or lose it' argument

or something beyond that. Without a doubt, as indicated by the respondents as well, their role in the shaping of events has been large.

Furthermore, the institutional differences between the British and Dutch and their impact on the provision of political guidance during the respective decision-making processes are prominent. The main features and distinctions between the two political systems are the role and position of the Prime Minister and certain facets of coalition politics and procedures. The British case has evidenced Prime Minister Blair's influence on both the decision to engage and the course of events resulting in the deployment. This particularly emerged from his personality, his personal preference for small advisory committees, his preference for employing military means in pursuit of the attainment of political goals in the international arena, and his preference for the military 'can do mentality' which he viewed as diametrically opposed to the attitudes of civil servants.

The fact that the Dutch Prime Minister did not play a major role in the decision-making process leading to the deployment of Dutch forces cannot be solely explained by his position within the political system as a '*primus inter pares*' (a first among equals). Here, the interests of Prime Minister Balkenende have to be taken into consideration. For one, he had never engaged himself much with military endeavours as a way to implement foreign policy goals, leaving most of the decisions to be taken, from a very early stage onwards, to the Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs. Secondly, as explained by his special advisor, he was more engaged with domestic politics, which were assessed to have a greater impact on him and his party's achievements.

The dominance of the military in the decision-making process in the run up to the deployment caused far more nuisance in British civil military relations than it did in Dutch civil military relations. True, some Dutch diplomats felt the military was moving too fast, but most of them tellingly stated this was feasible because they had been provided with great room to maneuver in accordance with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The question remains as to whether Foreign Affairs had really consciously provided the military with the room to maneuver or if they neglected to acquire an active role themselves at an early stage. Some diplomats have argued that the military was far ahead of a political situation that needed time for deliberation.

Even though historically the senior civil decision-makers of the United Kingdom have been faced with a proactive military and public support for military missions, they now felt themselves to have less and less influence on the deployment of military forces. As indicated by some of the political advisors who acted in and around the decision group entrusted with the deployment to Afghanistan, civilians who allegedly had great concerns about the mission only spoke up briefly or remained silent throughout the process, only to comment on the course of events later on.

The second proposition put forward the decision-making dynamics to reveal a process of interpretation in which the senior civilian and military decision-makers perceive and deduce constraints and pressures imposed on them by the domestic and international environment.

As the cases have evidenced, this occurred in both nations. In addition, the (normative) pressures imposed upon the senior civil and military decision-makers conditioned the language that was exercised both in the formulation of the goals that needed to be attained and in the accompanying rhetoric. As a result, slowly but distinctively, a discursive exchange of arguments transpired whereby all actors tried to establish some common definition of the situation. The argument that had swayed domestic interest was the need for both nations to employ their militaries and the international argument was to uphold NATO's legitimacy and to live up to the expectations that were created by the international community to take Afghanistan forward. This argument coincided with the international pressure that was felt, especially in the Netherlands, to deliver troops and ensure NATO's ability to expand its presence to South Afghanistan.

The primary constraint that featured the processes of interpretation in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were the limitations with regard to the force packages and the time frames of the deployment.

Within the process of interpretation, especially in the Netherlands and less so in the United Kingdom, the senior civil and military decision-makers accepted each other as valid interlocutors. Eventually, they established some common definition of the stabilisation of South Afghanistan and agreed on the norms guiding the situation. Hence, argumentative rationality took over and both governments that started moving down the road of arguing eventually matched words with deeds⁹: the deployment of troops to respectively Urzgan and Helmand. The dynamics in fact featured the working of what is known as 'argumentative self-entrapment'. The process of argumentative 'self-entrapment' commences as rhetorical action and strategic adaptation of governments to external pressures. Governments are seen as not entering the process of arguing on a voluntary basis but are in fact forced into a dialogue by the pressures of fully mobilised domestic and/or (trans) national networks.¹⁰

The third proposition suggested that the output of the series of decisions on the deployment of military forces was a strategy articulating the purpose of their use. Like the first proposition, this proposition was informed by theoretical prescriptions. The study brought to light the delivery of strategy as a complex endeavour in the sense that the purpose of the use of military means remained vague. Furthermore, the creation of a strategy did not derive from a political objective that has been put forward but in fact was very dependent on bottom up initiatives. A pragmatic approach to the formulation of strategy, allowing room for these initiatives, would not be as worrisome as many theoretical purists would like to believe. It becomes problematic however if no strategic ownership is assumed over the strategies that are in fact guiding the military efforts.

9 This line of thought is taken from Risse, "Let's Argue!".

10 Risse, "Let's Argue!", 7, 34.

Unfortunately, this is what occurred in both nations: room was allowed for bottom up initiatives in the drafting of a plan, but little strategic ownership was acquired. The main reason, as brought to light by the respondents, was the bureaucratic infighting amongst the departments about who would be responsible for what. Whilst all of them acknowledged the need for a comprehensive approach, it now seemed to be more of an artefact than a reality. In fact, the lack of ownership acquired the features of ‘fragmented symbolic action’. This is in fact a deadlock where disagreement explodes outside the decision unit.¹¹

The lack of strategic ownership that occurred in both states seriously hampered not only the articulation of a narrative that was to facilitate public support but more so caused friction at the military operational level. The friction that occurred was paradoxical in nature: on the one hand the military asked for clear objectives and guidelines on the other hand, given the limited information and intelligence that was available about the regions they were to deploy to, they felt they were the only ones able to draft a reasonable plan.

To conclude, confronting the propositions with the collected data it becomes apparent that the theoretical prescriptions on civil military relations and strategy have not been as prevalent in the practices of the senior civil and military decision-makers of these case studies as one would supposedly expect. The decision unit dynamics and interpretation process of the problem during the decision-making as described in Hermann’s model however does seem to reflect very much the realities as discovered in the case studies.

8.8 Conclusions

The decision of both nations to deploy troops to South Afghanistan was based on an emergent case that largely built itself. One of the most prominent findings is the dynamics of the trilateral military initiative that occurred at the level of the directorates operations at the respective Ministries of Defence. The cooperation between the three NATO partners was commented on by the respondents of both nations as a logical step since they viewed one another as like-minded and shared thinking about how to best stabilise the Southern Afghan provinces as well as feasible time-frames. The habitual response that informed the trilateral cooperation between Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in fact created agency which ultimately led to the deployment of forces to the South of Afghanistan.

■
11 Hermann, ‘How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy’, 69

Without the partnering of any one of these three states, none of them would have been likely to have deployed their forces.

This military initiative demonstrates the emergence of agency at a level not commonly expected and illustrates the gap between civil military theories and practice. Moreover, it exposes the multiple roles and the variety of alternative rules assigned to the senior civil and military decision-makers. It furthermore reveals that an apparent clarity of political goals that needed to be attained in South Afghanistan seemed to be predominantly founded in a combination of the various demands put upon the senior civil and military decision-makers in both states. These demands were at times difficult to reconcile as the decision-makers engaged in a series of decisions in response to the foreign policy problem. Whilst involving themselves in several different actions simultaneously, some of the senior civil and military decision-makers would at times still be interpreting some parts of the problem, whilst others were in the midst of already initiating provisional action.

In establishing a common definition of the task at hand, the Dutch and British senior civil and military decision-makers were predominantly led by their desire to matter to both NATO and subsequently the United States. That is, they habitually followed their traditional foreign political strategies which required them to maintain good relationships with the United States and its preferred alliance NATO. Secondly, there was the normative demand derived from the language exercised in the international arena with regard to the Western responsibility to 'finish the job' it had started in Afghanistan. These two demands needed to be captured in a convincing strategic narrative that was to provide guidance for the planning of the mission and was to facilitate public support.

The dictating prominence of the belief in deploying military forces to South Afghanistan acquired features of groupthink, more so in the United Kingdom than in the Netherlands. This can be primarily explained by the different institutional settings of the two nations, foremost the role of the Prime Minister in the United Kingdom, which effected the configuration of the decision unit in which the senior civilian and military decision-makers operated. He had articulated his desire for a prominent British role in NATO's expansion in Afghanistan and due to this open preference, most senior civil and military decision-makers focussed on the task that was set out. Moreover, the senior military decision-makers were in favour of the mission, seeking a way out of Iraq.

In the Netherlands, a dominant idea had not been communicated top down and had to be developed. However, as witnessed in the British case as well, a coinciding of mutual interests between the senior military decision-makers served to permit the series of decisions. Even though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had not instigated the initial undertakings for the employment of forces to South Afghanistan, it did provide its support - albeit initially only at working level - to the activities as initiated by the senior military decision-makers.

The course of events in both nations seemed to emerge within a dynamic that, at times, transcended institutional peculiarities. This can be best explained by three striking features: personal initiatives of authoritative (military) personalities, the convincing logic of a dominant idea, and the lack of strategic guidance during the decision-making process, resulting in bottom up initiatives. These workings seemed to matter far more than the institutional differences between the countries or the different configurations of the decision units that were engaged with the deployment of forces.

A remarkable aspect of the comparison of the political oversight provided during the decision-making phase is the fact that even though the Netherlands applied the assessment framework developed to prevent political and military fiascos when deploying military means, the outcome of the decision-making process in both nations was the same: the forces were deployed in the way that was put forward in the international military working groups. This implies that regardless of the existence of such a framework and the requirement of parliamentary approval, the course of events remains the same. This is an interesting finding in the sense that it falsifies assumptions held in both countries on the use and non-use of such frameworks and regulations.

In both nations, the question was raised by respondents as to whether sufficient political oversight was delivered throughout the decision-making phase of the deployment of troops to South Afghanistan. In itself, as stated earlier, the sheer fact that military agents proactively sought opportunities to employ their means is not a novelty. It is a rational tactic if the military is to prove the ongoing need for its existence. In addition - as alluded to earlier on - a shared belief was present amongst most of the senior civil and military decision-makers in maintaining good relationships with the United States and its preferred alliance NATO. That is, they followed their habitual traditional foreign policy strategies which prescribed them to do so: a role enactment that had proved beneficial many times before.

To conclude, the governing idea of the need to deploy military forces to South Afghanistan, as brought about in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, showcased the working of a trap. The momentum created by the internationally agreed NATO expansion to the South was captured by a like-minded group of senior military decision-makers acting as agents of their states. Their actions were – albeit to some degree much later than one would expect – supported by their political masters, who joined them in the workings of a self-enforcing logic, at times habitual, at times reflexive. The interesting aspect is that despite the differences in the British and Dutch decision-making process and the divergence in the configuration and dynamics of the decision unit(s) in which the senior civil and military decision-makers acted, the eminence of the deployment remained. As such, the ultimate foreign policy action, the deployment of military forces, as had been envisioned from the outset, came about in both cases.