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De effects-based approach to operations in Afghanistan : meten van het onmeetbare

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Abstract

Recent examples of international military intervention have shown that the strategic thinking behind the deployment of military forces in crisis situations is changing. Military intervention no longer serves an exclusively military objective, but is part of a broader range of activities conducted by military as well as non-military actors. This trend stems from the vision that international military intervention in a crisis situation is merely one component of a broader nation-building mission drawing on a variety of instruments of power. In other words, military intervention is only one of a number of activities aimed at a country's economic, political, infrastructural and social (re)construction. This integrated approach to resolving international crises is commonly known as the Comprehensive Approach (CA), and the role of the military in the context of the Comprehensive Approach is known as Effects-Based Approach to Operations (EBAO).

Before EBAO could be implemented, a design was made for the manner in which it should function. This design served as the starting point for the research. The next step was to investigate, in the practice of NATO's mission in Afghanistan (International Security Assistance Force – ISAF), in which Dutch forces participated, to what extent the design for EBAO and the practice of EBAO were aligned with one another. In other words, to what extent did the application of EBAO on the ground live up to the promise of EBAO as stated in its design? The research consisted of a review of the existing relevant literature and empirical research.

The review of the literature served among other things to identify the essence of the concept of effects-based operations. This revealed that the effectiveness of the Comprehensive Approach, and therefore EBAO as well, stems from the synergy which should arise from the collaboration between all relevant (military and non-military) actors. Furthermore, the literature review highlighted four aspects which can be related to EBAO, each of which influences the manner in which EBAO produces results in the field.

The first of these four aspects is the manner in which strategy develops in an organisation and the opportunities for the organisation to compensate for differences between the initial strategy design and the strategy which is effectively realised. This first aspect was investigated with reference to Mintzberg's theory on strategy development in organisations and Pfeffer and Sutton's theory of the Knowing-Doing Gap on how organisations try

to bridge the gap between the course of action deemed necessary and the course of action which is effectively pursued. Mintzberg asserts that strategy is rarely, if ever, implemented according to its initial design: during implementation, part of the initial design is discarded and new, additional strategy is developed by the organisation as it proceeds. The Knowing-Doing Gap subsequently provides a perspective for assessing to what extent new, supplementary, possibly ad hoc strategy can close the gap that has emerged.

The second aspect is the theory of sense-making, which describes how people assign meaning to their environment and to information about their environment. In order to determine the effects of a certain course of action or strategy, both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of that action or strategy must be assessed. The quantitative dimensions are typically measured using Measures of Performance (MoP's) and the qualitative dimensions by means of Measures of Effectiveness (MoE's). Measures of Performance typically leave little room for interpretation. A Measure of Effectiveness, however, can only be designed once the information gathered has been interpreted and put into a broader context. This suggests that EBAO has a 'soft side' to it and leaves room for sense-making theory.

A third theoretical aspect concerns the managerial perspective on EBAO, by applying the thinking of Results-Based Management (RBM). In EBAO, the steps that are taken should produce certain outcomes; the organisation performs in terms of the effects it brings about. Performance measurement should reveal to what extent the organisation achieves its objectives and should therefore measure these effects. RBM is a tried-and-tested format in the private sector for this purpose. Given the considerable similarities between EBAO and RBM, experience gained with RBM in the private sector is relevant to the application of EBAO. For example, experience with the implementation of RBM in the private sector has demonstrated that this 'Results-Based Management' does not readily lend itself to application in the public sector. This is because actors in the public sector interact in ways that are different from those in the private sector.

Finally, there are the opposing views of two high-ranking American officers, Ruby and Mattis, on the effects-based approach – Ruby arguing that it should be possible to lead a military mission on the basis of measurable effects, and Mattis placing greater confidence in a commander's ability to set the mission's course, based on his personal experience and charisma and possibly after consulting his staff.

The empirical research involved EBAO's design and how it was subsequently implemented by ISAF. This meant identifying, for the political, military- strategic and operational levels, both nationally and within NATO, which processes had been designed to shape and

implement EBAO, and, subsequently, how these processes were being implemented. This was researched using triangulation, or combining different types of data and methods, and collecting the accounts of different respondents in different locations for the same topics. Four types of triangulation were applied in this research: data source triangulation, investigator triangulation, theoretical triangulation and methodological triangulation.

In broad terms, the empirical research consisted of two parts. The first part – looking at how EBAO was designed – highlighted five processes: knowledge development, planning, execution, assessment and adjustment. These processes were carried out repeatedly, in the order stated, in successive cycles and should thus contribute to achieving effects on the ground. By designing procedures for implementing the Comprehensive Approach, NATO attempted to control the EBAO process. The research showed that NATO, in its feedback procedures (adjustment), tried to limit control loss and minimise the Knowing-Doing Gap. The results from the assessment process were fed into the organisation with a view to adjusting its course of action if it was found that it was not doing what it had been intended to do. In this way, Knowing and Doing remained aligned as much as possible, and control loss was limited.

The above processes were reviewed in the field at three relevant levels:

- Political – The Dutch ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation in The Hague, and NATO headquarters in Brussels;
- Military-strategic – The Dutch Ministry of Defence in The Hague and NATO headquarters (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe – SHAPE) in Mons;
- Operational – Joint Forces Command in Brunssum, ISAF headquarters (HQ-ISAF) in Kabul, and Regional Command South (RC-South) in Kandahar.

The second part of the empirical research concerned the practice of EBAO as it was found at the different levels: political, military-strategic and operational. It was this part of the research which revealed the gaps between EBAO's design and its implementation.

Consistent with the pre-eminence of politics in decision-making on deploying military force, the design for EBAO stipulated that the political level should instruct the military-strategic level, specifying what it expected the military to do. This applied to each of the NATO member states individually as well as to NATO as a whole. In practice, however, the political level's demands on the military-strategic level, and ultimately the operational level, proved far from clear. In the end, the actors at the military-strategic level and, to a lesser extent,

those at the operational level, had to make things clear for themselves. However, neither of these two levels had any prior experience in effects-based operations, nor had they prepared for it in any way. The question arises, therefore, whether expectations were perhaps imposed upon them without prior verification of their ability to deliver.

At the political level, the intended end state of the pending mission was described in circumspet terms – objectives being stated in indefinite and abstract wording, in order to create room for diplomatic manoeuvring. This made it more difficult for the national military-strategic level in each of the NATO member states contributing to the mission to devise a plan featuring an unambiguous end state in combination with clear objectives and performance indicators. More or less the same applied to the military-strategic level within NATO. Mission planning was to be guided by the resolutions adopted by the North Atlantic Council (NAC), expressing the consensus in the alliance on the intended end state and objectives. Being a compromise that all alliance members could agree to, these resolutions lacked clarity and explicit unity of purpose. Nevertheless, NATO's military-strategic level had to develop military plans on the basis of these texts. Taking its cue from the intended end state, NATO's military-strategic level, SHAPE, started planning the deployment of NATO forces. In these plans formulated by SHAPE, the first outlines of the desired effects emerged.

Next, the plans formulated by SHAPE were handed down to the operational level, which translated them into action plans addressing the situation it faced. These action plans spelled out the military contributions to the desired effects. While these plans explicitly stressed the importance of collaborating with other actors, they did not spell out how such collaboration should be achieved. In practice, collaboration with non-military actors proved difficult, although it was crucial for a successful outcome of the Comprehensive Approach and EBAO. Contact between military and other actors was negligible at the political as well as the military-strategic level. Furthermore, there were major organisational and cultural differences between the military operating at the operational level of HQ-ISAF and the non-military actors who had to work with them, and these differences apparently could not be overcome. ISAF's efforts were therefore focused mainly on the military contributions to the realisation of effects.

It proved difficult to decide up front which outcomes should be achieved through the efforts made at the operational level, and how these outcomes would – or would not – result in achieving the desired effects and the ultimate goal. Efforts were not based on a

joint frame of reference (i.e. one that was subscribed to and supported by both the military and non-military actors), which provided unambiguous definitions, accepted by all actors, for effects, Measures of Effectiveness, responsibilities, information-sharing and reporting. The individual actors involved therefore had ample room to focus on what they themselves considered important and decide unilaterally what was to be measured, and how. As a result, the entire notion of making integrated efforts towards common goals came under pressure.

In practice, this meant that the data for the reports drafted by HQ-ISAF for higher levels in the chain of command were one-sided and incomplete, and therefore barely reliable and valid. As a result, the perspective obtained at higher levels within NATO on developments in Afghanistan was questionable. In short, at the operational level – at least, as far as HQ-ISAF in Kabul was concerned – the organisation was unable adequately to assess the gap between what it knew and what it did.

Put together, the gaps between theory and practice for EBAO which were found at the political, military-strategic and operational levels provide an overall perspective on EBAO's implementation (ISAF):

1. Planning. The first gap involved the starting point or the end state defined for EBAO. The military forces required a clearly defined end state, but the non-military actors with whom they were supposed to collaborate all pursued objectives and desired end states of their own. While most of these non-military actors were not restricted in their actions by mandates handed down by politicians, they had to take into account the preferences of their financial backers.

2. Exchange of information. A second gap involved the exchange of information within the EBAO context. Within NATO, EBAO-related information predominantly flowed up and down along the NATO command-and-control hierarchy, in line with prescriptions in the design for EBAO. But while the design explicitly acknowledged the importance for an effective Comprehensive Approach of horizontal information exchange among the different actors (military and non-military), it did not specify qualitative and quantitative criteria for such horizontal information flows and, in practice, very little information was exchanged between military and non-military actors. All the actors involved measured their own progress independently, making it virtually impossible to translate all the information that was gathered into an accurate picture of the situation in Afghanistan.

3. Implementation. The third gap involved NATO's collaboration with non-military counterparts. A major gap between the design (theory) and reality (practice) concerned NATO's collaboration, as the military actor in the field, with relevant non-military actors operating in its environment: in practice, the various actors largely worked alongside rather than in collaboration with each other, in all five processes of EBAO (knowledge development, planning, execution, assessment and adjustment).

4. Progress measurement. The fourth and final gap involved the full set of measurements which should have served to identify progress made towards the desired effects. Progress measurements were conducted, but without devoting specific attention to validity and reliability. Moreover, due to the absence of integrated planning and execution, a method for integrated data collection was also missing. In effect, this fourth gap has two dimensions: a technical dimension (the absence of instructions with respect to the validity and reliability of measurements) and a coordination dimension (the absence of an integrated data gathering method). Due to the former, the information gathered did not provide a clear picture of the reality on the ground, while the latter meant that no integrated picture was obtained of that reality.

It should be noted that the military actions undertaken in the context of EBAO were executed, measured and adjusted more or less according to plan. In that respect, it can be said that EBAO's implementation matched its design. However, the five processes which collectively form the EBAO cycle (knowledge development, planning, execution, assessment and adjustment) saw little or no integration of actions by the military and non-military actors involved – although such integration was deemed crucial for EBAO's effective and efficient implementation. In practice, little or no co-ordination of effort emerged, which meant that the desired effective and efficient deployment of people and resources was not achieved. EBAO's implementation therefore cannot be deemed successful as far as collaboration with other relevant actors outside the military hierarchy is concerned. In this crucial respect for EBAO, its design did not match its implementation. As a result, the different actors all pursued their own objectives alongside each other instead of jointly working towards the realisation of shared goals.

The Knowing-Doing Gap remained, because the difference between EBAO's design and implementation could not be eliminated by 'ad hoc strategy'. The organisation (ISAF) conducted actions without knowing whether these would contribute to achieving the ultimate

goals. It stands to reason, therefore, to assume that people and resources were not consistently deployed effectively and efficiently.

Finally: EBAO has not developed in a 'vacuum'. It should be considered from the perspective of the thinking which dominated at the time when it was designed and applied. From a management perspective, this means that EBAO is driven by the thinking behind New Public Management (NPM), or Results-Based Management (RBM), the dominant management philosophy during EBAO's development and application. Moreover, it is important to note that the people who made the plans for EBAO were not the same as those who put these plans into practice, and that this affected the manner in which plans were implemented. In their interpretation of the plans handed down to them, people were influenced by their own experience, professional training and cultural background. This meant that EBAO was effectively 'coloured' by the characteristics of those responsible for carrying out the policy, as described in Weick's sense-making theory. This lends a certain 'human dimension' to EBAO.

As military resources deployed in areas of conflict are largely subject to uncertainty and unpredictability, it is impossible to control EBAO's application in every detail – also in terms of the transparency required in RBM thinking. When considering EBAO, it is therefore important to understand that the deployment of military resources in areas of conflict tends to be an act of intuition rather than calculation. EBAO is almost never fully implemented as planned; it tends to be adjusted in an ad hoc fashion to the circumstances encountered by those who work with it.

This realisation does not make EBAO less relevant. The complexity of contemporary crisis response operations in general requires a multi-disciplinary approach. EBAO can provide for such an approach, as long as all actors involved develop their plans and execute their actions jointly, in an integrated fashion, rather than separately and in parallel. Pursuing such a collaborative approach would not only make crisis response operations more effective and efficient, but would also pave the way for a broader, societal application of EBAO which would help government and private organisations work together more effectively and efficiently.

