# The crucible of war: Dutch and British military learning processes in and beyond southern Afghanistan

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# Chapter 6

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

## 6.1: Introduction

This research has aimed to study the process and dynamics of learning during counterinsurgency operations and subsequent institutionalization efforts. In order to understand how armed forces learn, chapter 2 built a theoretical framework by synthesizing organizational learning theory and the literature on military adaptation. By integrating these fields this study strove to acquire conceptual insight into *how* armed forces learn. Chapter 3 then narrowed the focus by offering a frame of reference based on historical counterinsurgency prescriptions to assess important themes on *what* militaries can, or perhaps should, learn in counterinsurgency conflicts. With this theoretical lens, the next chapters explored the Dutch and British learning processes in Southern Afghanistan and the subsequent impact on the respective organizations based on a detailed literature review and an extended empirical research process based on 130 interviews and related document analysis of primary sources where available.

In this concluding chapter, the queries that drove this research will be answered. To start, the theoretical contributions will be reiterated. Subsequently, the key findings of this study will be discussed in more detail and analyzed with the help of the new theoretical framework. After this analysis, the chapter will examine the extent to which the Dutch and British militaries learned from their experiences in southern Afghanistan to answer the main research question. Finally, potential avenues for future research will be considered.

## 6.2: Theoretical contributions

As elaborated in the introduction the ability to adapt to wartime challenges has become a pronounced field of research in the last two decades. Beyond the study of how armed forces innovate in peacetime to face future conflicts, examining how militaries adapt to more immediate challenges in wartime became more prominent, with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq providing an important impetus for this field. Western armed forces found that they were ill-prepared for the challenges posed by these counterinsurgency conflicts. This resulted in a vast body of literature that assessed the extent of adaptation by the militaries involved in these Western interventions. As such, the new empirical works contributed to the study of military change as they provided a trove of empirical data. Still, an underdeveloped theme in the literature on military change is how wartime experiences are institutionalized afterwards. Currently, this academic field emphasizes the difference between adaptation in conflict and innovation in peace time, as if two separate topics. This dissertation research

posits that the learning processes in war are better understood as having different dynamics than the institutionalization of the acquired knowledge afterwards. However, recent experiences naturally influence the outlook of the militaries after operations. Therefore, the working assumption of this book has been that learning processes in and beyond war are distinct but related, instead of dichotomous.

To understand these dynamics from a theoretical perspective, this study has aimed to synthesize organizational learning literature with that on military adaptation in chapter 2. By studying military change as an experiential learning process, while acknowledging idiosyncrasies of military organizations during and after conflict, an enhanced theoretical framework emerges. Classical organizational learning contributes the various levels of knowledge transfer and implementing change as being subject to power relations in organizations. More recent work on organizational learning adds concepts of learning from projects and temporary organizations to this synthesis. The most fundamental notion in this regard is the dialectic between exploration and exploitation. This tension is pertinent to armed forces that generally must balance between requirements for diverse types of missions. In other words, militaries are generally required to maintain an ambidextrous posture, balancing the tasks of conventional war fighting and deterrence with of those of counterinsurgency or stabilization operations. Thus, the concept of exploration and exploitation captures the tension that armed forces experience as they have to maintain readiness for different skill sets and consequently cannot focus solely on the conflict at hand, nor on narrow visions of potential wars in the future.

At the heart of this dissertation research then is the notion that military learning consists of distinct but related strands. Chapter 2 built a theoretical framework on how militaries learn in and from conflict. It offered a working definition of organizational learning based on the literature: "the process through which an organization constructs knowledge or reconstructs existing knowledge for maintaining or enhancing its performance in relation to its environment." By synthesizing organizational learning theories with the literature on military adaptation, a constructive theoretical lens emerges through which military learning processes can be examined. This joins recent research that has highlighted the process aspects of military learning, such as work by Dyson and Hoffman. The most pertinent contribution of this chapter is the distinguishing of three strands of learning in relation to conflict: informal adaptation, formal adaptation, and institutionalization. While these strands are related, they form distinct processes. The linkage of wartime adaptation and subsequent knowledge retention through institutionalization has been underdeveloped in the literature on military innovation and adaptation.

To recap the main distinctions, informal learning processes in conflict are those that are initiated by troops in the field that do not require attention, resources, or acceptance by the

wider institution. Prime examples are changing tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) or experimenting with organizational structures to overcome operational challenges. The inherent limitation of informal learning is that many identified deficiencies do require institutional support to overcome. Moreover, without institutional support knowledge transfer and retention are precarious.

Informal lessons can be disseminated and retained by the existence of 'anchor points'. These are specialized units that combine operational practice, doctrine development and education. As such, these units can form a closed learning cycle in which experiences feed into knowledge development and training. Consequently, such learning processes at the lower level acquire a semi-formal character as such units can allocate resources to them beyond the operational theater.

Formal learning indicates that the wider institution supports the outcomes of these processes. For instance, the acquisition of new equipment, implementation of new capabilities or initiating a new strategy for the current campaign require backing by the wider organization. Changes can be implemented through doctrine, training, new organizational structures or preferably a combination of these. However, formal adaptation in conflict does not itself equate to institutionalization of knowledge afterwards.

This discontinuity of learning processes during and after a conflict can be explained by considering three elements from organizational learning literature. First is the above-mentioned tension between exploitation and exploration. After the conclusion of a given conflict, the calculus for maintaining the balance between these elements changes. This is not to say that exploitation equals war-time adaptation or that exploration is more applicable to peace time innovation, but rather that the dynamics can shift. For instance, operational challenges in war may warrant experimentation that go against institutional norms. Conversely, after a mission concludes, a military organization can opt to refocus its attention back onto its normal operations as it deems the latest experiences to be context specific. This dynamic is compounded with the aforementioned necessity of Western armed forces to maintain an ambidextrous stance: readiness for conventional warfare and simultaneous deployments in other types of missions such as counterinsurgency, stabilization and peace-keeping that require the inclusion of different skills.

Consequently, this segues into the second organizational learning concept, learning from projects. While comparing expeditionary military missions with projects might be counterintuitive, there are some relevant similarities. Like projects, military missions to a given conflict work towards a specific objective, albeit often more broadly formulated, for a given time, with allocated resources. Of course, a war will not adhere to restraints in time or resources, but expeditionary missions generally do so. In projects and expeditionary military

operations, participants must adapt to emerging challenges. After the conclusion of such episodes, the wider organization can evaluate the experiences and decide which knowledge it retains as relevant for other contexts.

The third relevant element of organizational learning is formed by temporary organizations. When military units are deployed to conflict, they are generally organized in bespoke task forces. In these task forces, units with various tasks and specialties are combined, with differing levels of familiarity. Additionally, these task forces are subject to rotation schedules which means that there are consecutive temporary organizations. During deployment, these diverse arrays of units must then orchestrate their operations. By itself, this cooperation yields knowledge by coordinating various skill sets, especially at the staff and command levels. After the end of a mission, or indeed a rotation, the task force will dissolve, as such they resemble a project organization. This means that the knowledge on integration can dissipate. Furthermore, the constituent units will then refocus on their respective specialized tasks.

As such, these elements of temporary organizing, learning from projects and the tension between exploration and exploitation point to the dynamics of change both during and after conflict, but with differing weight awarded to them. Operational pressures and close cooperation will shape the extent of change during missions. Conversely, after the conclusion of a military mission, a certain recalibration is warranted to orient a military for future operations. This means that a military must evaluate the experiences and identified lessons from the recent operations and assess their merit for future use. Of course, this evaluation can be subject to fallacies. As William Fuller recognized, militaries can either discard lessons by designating recent experiences as exceptional, or embrace them wholeheartedly as a portent for new war. Thus, this evaluation phase after conflict is crucial for institutionalization of knowledge. Not only must the recent experiences be assessed, but these mission post-mortems must also be fused with analysis of developments in the strategic context. Lessons from the last war can be context-specific, while others may be applicable to potential conflicts. Furthermore, new strategic analysis can prompt the conscious 'unlearning' of lessons as these are irrelevant or even detrimental in new conflicts. Understanding this dynamic of recalibration can contribute to an explanation on how and why lessons are institutionalized.

The simultaneous distinction and connection between war-time adaptation and institutionalization then led to the construction of the analytical model that illustrates the process of learning in relation to conflict (see figure 6.1). This model comprises of six steps towards military learning: evaluation, identification, reaction, adaptation, contemplation, and institutionalization. Evaluation serves as a starting point for learning and assesses the performance of a unit in relation to its mission. This can range from verbal after action

reviews to more consolidated analysis at the task force-level. Through constant evaluation the second step is initiated, where identification can be made of performance gaps or opportunities. In the third step of reaction, search actions are undertaken to investigate remedial actions. The fourth step of adaptation then sees the implementation of measures to overcome operational challenges, whether sanctioned by the wider institution or executed informally by units in the field. As seen in the model, such adaptations can inform new learning cycles. Moreover, as chapters 4 and 5 show, multiple concurrent learning cycles can occur simultaneously. After the mission, the lessons from the specific conflict are assessed for their enduring relevance in the fifth step of contemplation. Combined with strategic analysis, the military institution can then choose to retain, reject, or revise the knowledge from past operations. In the sixth and ultimate step of institutionalization the lessons are implemented through structural reforms.

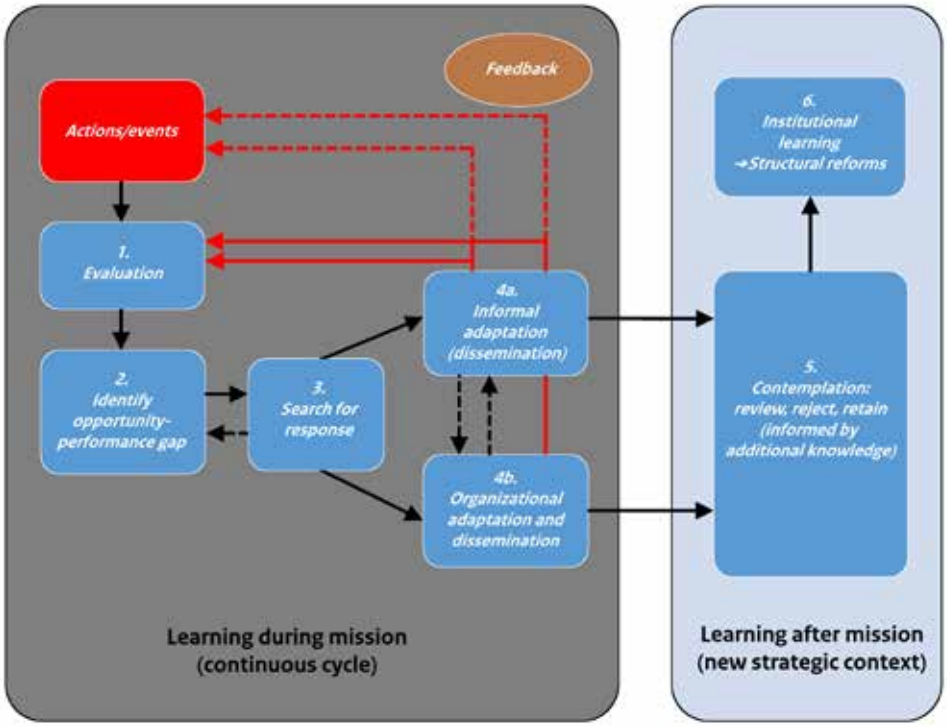


*Figure 6.1: Analytical model for institutional learning in relation to conflict*

Beyond being subject to the organizational learning dynamics as explicated above, more specific influencing factors on military change can be identified through the literature on military adaptation and innovation. In broad terms, these influencing factors can be divided into external and internal factors (see table 6.1). These influencing factors cannot be considered mono-causal explanations of military change; instead, collectively they can form a useful frame of reference for analyzing diverse manifestations of learning processes, adaptation, and institutionalization efforts. Interestingly, the identified set of external factors are specific to military organizations as they describe the (political) environment in which they exist. By contrast, at a more abstract level, the internal influencing factors are applicable to any organization. Whether a large bureaucracy or a nimble start-up company, all organizations are influenced by leadership, culture, organizational politics, resource allocation, learning and dissemination mechanisms. Still, at closer inspection, these attributes have a distinct quality pertinent to military organizations, such as the inter-service and intra-service rivalries, the specific circumstances of military command and the role of doctrine and training on learning processes. Of course, these elements can vary between armed forces and services.

| **External factors of influence** | **Internal factors of influence** |
|---|---|
| Domestic politics | Leadership |
| Alliance politics | Organizational culture |
| Strategic culture | Learning mechanisms |
| Civil-military relations | Dissemination mechanisms |
| Threat perception | Organizational politics |
| Defense policy | Resource allocation |

*Table 6.1: Factor of influence on military change*

This synthesis between the field on organizational learning and the literature on military change helps establish a comprehensive theoretical framework to study how military organizations in relation to conflict. With the empirical data on Dutch and British learning processes in and beyond southern Afghanistan, this framework can help explain how armed forces learn. The next section examines the impact of the empirical findings for the understanding of learning processes in relation to conflict.

## 6.3: Empirical findings and theoretical implications

With this theoretical framework on how military organizations learn in place, chapter 3 aimed to provide a frame of reference of what the manifestations of the learning processes can be in a counterinsurgency context (see table 6.2). By assessing historical and contemporary counterinsurgency prescriptions, a set of common themes emerge. The existence of a comprehensive campaign plan in which military force plays an important yet subsidiary role is identified as one of the most salient manifestations. This links to the importance of interagency cooperation in these conflicts. Further themes under study, although not exhaustive, are the centralities of intelligence, non-kinetic activities, efforts to counter adversarial actions and the ability to learn and adapt. As such, these themes are not intended as a metric to gauge the effectiveness of learning but rather form a prism by which to assess the processes of adaptation and institutionalization.

| **Recurring themes in counterinsurgency prescriptions** |
|---|
| Integral campaign plan |
| Ability to learn and adapt |
| Interagency cooperation |
| Primacy of intelligence |
| Utility of non-kinetic activities |
| Countering adversarial activities |

*Table 6.2: Themes in counterinsurgency prescriptions*

These themes were examined closely in chapters 4 and 5 through the study of Dutch and British learning processes in Southern Afghanistan and the subsequent impact on the respective organizations. Analysis of these themes in relation to the theoretical framework enables six notable outcomes to be presented. These outcomes pertain to: the inadequate formal institutional learning processes by the Dutch and British militaries; the limited learning at the campaign level; the role of "anchor points" in informal learning processes; the effects of the temporal aspects of the missions; the centrality of the tension between exploitation and exploration in military learning; and the assessment of influencing factors on learning. Each of these elements and their implications for the two empirical cases are discussed in the following subsections.

### 6.3.1: Learning processes

First of all, in both the Dutch and British militaries, the centralized lessons learned processes were initially understaffed and not adequately linked. Formal evaluation mechanisms existed in the form of post-rotation evaluations but mechanisms to disseminate lessons were lacking. To an extent, the training establishments sought to incorporate lessons from the field. Still, these lessons were mostly geared towards Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) in relation to adversarial activities rather than the full spectrum of counterinsurgency requirements.

Thus, the learning processes were driven by the deployed units that recognized deficiencies affecting security or performance, and sought ways to address them. The initial informal adaptations ranged from adjusted TTPs to innovative approaches such as the Tactical Conflict Analysis Framework. Still, further adaptations and coordinated knowledge sharing required institutional attention. When informal learning processes from the field were accepted and supported by the institutions, at the service or department level, the adaptations were implemented more consistently throughout the rotations. As such, the processes of adaptation adhered to the processes of organizational learning. It was the deployed individuals and units that evaluated their performance, recognized deficiencies, and searched for responses to overcome operational challenges. With support of the wider institutions, these learning processes could be assisted by allocating resources and ensuring the transfer of knowledge throughout the organization. Both the informal and informal processes were geared towards enhancing the organizational performance.

In the Dutch armed forces, semi-formal arrangements were introduced such as army-level debriefings, deployment of personnel from the training command to acquire the latest insights from theater, and the publication of information bulletins. Indeed, the quick response to the threat of IEDs with the acquisition of electronic countermeasures and mine-resistant vehicles were examples of circumventing normal procedures. Additionally, experiences from the field were swiftly disseminated to the training establishment to help guide the predeployment training. However, this was mostly geared towards the battle group and TFU staffs. Furthermore, informal initiatives to draft a new counterinsurgency doctrine were not followed through. Curiously, while the deficiencies in the formal lessons learned process were well recognized before, during and after the deployment to Afghanistan, no significant remedial actions were taken to address this.

For the British Army, the initial operational challenges were even more intense than for their Dutch counterparts, as Helmand proved to be most volatile province in southern Afghanistan. Thus, the need to adapt to the encountered circumstances was particularly poignant. However, in addition to limited formal learning arrangements, the British forces

were hindered by the continuing operations in Iraq that required substantial institutional attention. Striking examples of this problem were the lack of a specific Afghanistan training by the Operational Training and Advisory Group (OPTAG) and the fact that new mine-resistant vehicles were first deployed to Iraq. More informal initiatives to adapt were launched, yet these often had a limited lifespan as they received insufficient institutional support such as the initial drive to write an updated counterinsurgency doctrine and the Tactical Conflict Analysis Framework (TCAF).

By 2009, the British Army decided to concentrate all its institutional capital towards Helmand and launched Operation Entirety. Foremost, Entirety was meant to harness the experiences from the field and foster organizational learning. It set the British Army on a campaign footing and established learning and dissemination mechanisms to capture knowledge and use it to enhance the performance of the deployed units and their supporting structures. An important aspect of Operation Entirety was the establishment of Force Development and Training Command (FDT) that, under the leadership of a lieutenant-general, oversaw the implementation of the measures. Under FDT's guidance new elements that were established were the Lessons Exchange Centre (LXC), the Afghanistan COIN Centre and the Mission Exploitation Symposia. Such elements did not only actively hunt for relevant lessons, but also followed upon them and streamlined the responses throughout the Ministry of Defence and beyond. Furthermore, the predeployment training became far more attuned to the experience of the operations in Helmand. Units that were deployed received a ready-made training package that was constantly updated. A final beneficial result of Operation Entirety was that initiatives to address deficiencies now had institutional backing and could be implemented throughout the Army. Examples of these include the new doctrine publications on counterinsurgency and the establishment of units such as the Land Intelligence Fusion Centre-Afghanistan (LIFC-A), the Defence Cultural Specialist Unit (DCSU) and the Miliary Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG).

With Operation Entirety, the British Army established a central direction for its learning processes and improved its leverage over the necessary channels within the Ministry of Defence. This central direction sets the British learning processes in Afghanistan apart from that of the Dutch. Given the smaller size of the Dutch Army and the challenges it had in deploying the later rotations, it is doubtful whether it had the capacity to organize a scaled equivalent. Of course, by the time Operation Entirety bore fruit in 2010, the Dutch were already packing up and leaving Uruzgan.

At the end of the operations in southern Afghanistan, both militaries conducted evaluations on their campaign to identify lessons and best practices. These should serve then as input for either fostering change or institutionalization of acquired experiences. In the Dutch case, a joint-level evaluation was drawn up based on the input from the successive TFU-rotations

and further research by specialists that tackled various themes like command and control, training, intelligence, and counterinsurgency. Although it focused on land operations and was thus dominated by lessons that pertained to the Dutch Army, it also investigated the performance by the Defence Staff in directing the campaign and other joint processes. Additionally, other, semi-formal evaluations attempted to capture the experiences of the TFU-commanders and the lessons for the permanent education of officers. These evaluations resulted in troves of lessons that could be implemented and help enhance the Dutch military's performance beyond Afghanistan and specific counterinsurgency missions.

The British had a different approach. The Army mandated the most important evaluation when TFH was still conducting operations. This resulted in a veritable tome that was designated the Operation Herrick Campaign Study. As it was commissioned by the Army, its scope was naturally limited and was mostly focused on the tactical level and what this meant for the British Army. Although some critique at the strategic direction of the Helmand campaign can be found, it does not address these shortcomings in a coherent manner. Of course, dealing with such deficiencies requires efforts beyond a single military service.

Between the Dutch and British learning processes, the enduring effects of the campaigns differed (see table 6.3). In the Netherlands, despite acknowledging that the formal lessons learned processes had been inadequate, no significant remedial action was undertaken to address this. In the British Army, Operation Entirety was naturally concluded at the end of the Helmand campaign. Elements of the learning processes were retained in a downscaled version as the army tried to capture lessons from new missions. However, the FDT was swiftly abolished after the withdrawal from Helmand. This indicates that the formal learning processes lost important backing at the institutional level.

| Learning processes | Formal learning processes | Evaluation efforts | Institutionalization |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Netherlands | Limited to evaluation mechanisms during and after operations; semi-formal efforts in Dutch Army and Training Command | Internal evaluation at department level | Recognized deficiency, no remedial action |
| The United Kingdom | Revamped with Operation Entirety (2009), linking informal initiatives with formal support | Internal evaluation at service level (army) | Limited: abolishment of FDT, some elements persist in British Army |

*Table 6.3: Learning process in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom*

### 6.3.2: Limited learning at the campaign level

The second finding from the case studies indicates that both the Netherlands' and the United Kingdom's efforts to address deficiencies at the campaign level were inadequate. Issues regarding the campaign plans, rotation schedules and task force configuration remained unresolved or had limited impact on mission itself. In turn, while these deficiencies were recognized at the end of the campaigns, attempts to remedy them for future operations were limited.

Over the course of the campaign, the Dutch and British campaign plans saw several iterations and improvement. As time progressed and the violent nature of operations in southern Afghanistan was apparent, (population-centric) counterinsurgency principles became a more overt source of inspiration for these plans. Still, aspects of counterinsurgency theory such as the primacy of political considerations featured in the early plans. In the Dutch Uruzgan Focal Paper and the British Helmand Road Map (both in 2008), counterinsurgency elements were more pronounced. Moreover, both countries concurrently increased the civilian contributions to the campaigns. This was reinforced by the 2009 iterations of the Uruzgan Campaign Plan and the Helmand Implementation Plan. As these plans were geared towards a population-centric counterinsurgency approach, they aligned with the new ISAF-campaign Plan by general McChrystal.

A crucial difference between the Dutch and British campaigns was where the drafting of the campaign plans was initiated. For Uruzgan, the three campaign plans were drafted by the TFU with no substantial input from military or political leadership. Conversely, the British produced plans through interdepartmental processes, although these were dominated by the military.

However, despite this difference both campaigns suffered from a similar defect: the disconnect between strategic guidance from the capitals and the conduct of operations in Afghanistan. In the Netherlands, this was manifested by the aloofness at the ministerial levels and above for the campaign plans drafted by the TFU. Tellingly, the attempt to get political backing for the Focal Paper in 2008 was rebuffed, yet it was still implemented in Uruzgan. For the subsequent Uruzgan Campaign Plan, this support was not even sought. In the United Kingdom, this disconnect meant that the plans were inadequately coordinated and enforced with Task Force Helmand. Consequently, the initial Joint UK Plan for Helmand was immediately jettisoned by TFH when the situation in Helmand proved more volatile than envisioned. Subsequent rotations saw a highly varying approach of the campaign with little consistency. Even after the latest plan was implemented in 2009, British rotations shifted their focus away from the hallmark notion of "courageous restraint" on their own initiative. Towards the end of the campaign, successive TFH commanders had coordinated among

themselves to ensure campaign continuity. Thus, despite the existence of a sanctioned campaign plan, there still was no effective central direction of the effort in Helmand.

Another fundamental deficiency was the inability to assess the effects of the campaigns in a meaningful way. This hindered the ability to adjust operations and campaign plans. The role of campaign assessment differed starkly between the British and Dutch missions. In Uruzgan, a relatively small cadre of Dutch operational analysts rotated as augmentees within the TFU-staff's plans section (G5). Thus positioned, they had considerable influence on the drafting of plans for the longer term. Moreover, they either initiated or contributed to the three successive campaign plans and functioned as advisors for the TFU-commanders.

In contrast, the role of operational analysts was more limited in Helmand. Although the British analysts had nominally a similar position as their Dutch colleagues in TFH's headquarters, their influence on the campaign was more constrained. In part, this can be ascribed to the fact that there was no extant campaign plan between 2006 and 2008. Additionally, as some interviewed officers and the official evaluation by the British Army indicated, the analysts were not among the principal advisors in the TFH staff. This is evidenced by the short-lived experiment of the Tactical Conflict Analysis Framework (TCAF). That this informal initiative was deemed necessary is indicative that the measurement of effectiveness was deficient hitherto. Furthermore, after the discarding of TCAF, no real alternative was introduced, let alone institutionalized. It was only in 2010 that the Helmand Monitoring and Evaluation Programme (HMEP) was introduced by the Helmand PRT.

Overall, efforts by the analysts were hampered by the difficulties of acquiring valid data on the progress of the campaign. By and large they relied on sources within the task forces for data, as they were mostly unable to venture into the province by themselves. Naturally, interlocutors from the battle group, PRT or intelligence were not singularly focused on acquiring data for the activities of the operational analysts. Efforts to outsource data-collection through sub-contractors undermined the veracity of the information.

Furthermore, the task forces were too small to secure all population centers and thus conduct operations that adhered to counterinsurgency principles. This is not to say that with additional troops these campaigns would have been more successful. However, the Dutch and British forces, at first tacitly, professed that these were guiding principles but with these force configurations they did not meet the requirements for such an approach. Indeed, reinforcements in Helmand by British and even more American forces had only a transient effect. Paucity in personnel that could patrol the Afghan towns and rural areas was compensated with firepower, which further undercut a genuine population-centric approach.

The rotation schedules then limited the accumulation of knowledge on the environment. Although this was recognized, considerations such as unit cohesion and administrative difficulties precluded extending tours. In the Netherlands, mandating extended tours could be challenged by the military labor unions. Moreover, deploying soldiers for longer tours would be politically unpalatable in both countries. Another consideration was that the wider institutions did not want to deny commanders the opportunity to command their formation or unit. Such experiences generally had positive effects on individual careers.[1701] Furthermore, the reasoning was that operations in Afghanistan were a valuable experience for the units themselves which benefitted the entire army, especially when as many units as possible would be able to serve a tour there.

Finally, deploying large task forces on open-ended counterinsurgency campaigns became politically infeasible given the unpopularity of the Afghanistan conflict and militarily impractical due to budget cuts after the troops were withdrawn. Consequently, despite the inclusion of the comprehensive approach in policy papers, there is little evidence that the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have enhanced their ability to conduct a counterinsurgency or stabilization campaign.

To a certain extent, the quality of the Dutch and British performance at the campaign level in southern Afghanistan is moot. Uruzgan and Helmand had specific local dynamics but were of course part of a larger theater. Thus, even if the Dutch and British had produced feasible campaign plans that were attuned to the resources available and the operational environment, this set of facts in itself would not affect the strategic direction in the Afghan conflict. This strategic guidance and overall plan should of course have originated from the Afghan authorities, strongly supported by the international community. In practice, the fact that allies like the Netherlands struggled to draft and implement discrete campaign plans is indicative of the lack of strategic direction in the Afghanistan war.

The implications of these difficulties of learning at the campaign level (see table 6.4) were mirrored after the Dutch and British missions in southern Afghanistan ended. After the respective withdrawal of Dutch and British forces, embarking on open-ended expeditionary counterinsurgency campaigns was no longer politically feasible. Furthermore, the allied militaries recalibrated towards conventional warfare. Consequently, deploying large task forces for counterinsurgency or stabilization missions became beyond the scope of the armed forces. Instead, the Dutch and British opted for smaller contributions with specific capabilities in such as in Iraq, Mali, and Afghanistan. Furthermore, due to large budget cuts, both armies' capacity to field large forces for prolonged campaigns was severely diminished.

1701 Indeed, many of the Dutch and British commanding officers that were interviewed for this research had been promoted in the subsequent years.

As such, the political will and capacity to wage large scale counterinsurgency operations had declined in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Still, the operations in Afghanistan had brought serious deficiencies at the campaign level to light. Unfortunately, these identified lessons went unheeded or were unevenly implemented. For instance, the Dutch idea to establish a Permanent Joint Headquarters to better guide expeditionary operations was silently jettisoned in the years after Uruzgan. Additionally, instead of drawing up comprehensive campaign plans for new missions, the Netherlands and the UK mostly contributed specific capabilities to international missions instead of a self-supporting task force. Furthermore, in Dutch and British doctrine and policy papers, counterinsurgency is now a reticent theme. Instead, the most touted topic in these documents with regard of Afghanistan is the comprehensive (or integrated) approach. However, there is no evidence that for future campaigns the interagency cooperation or indeed campaign planning will work better based on the experiences in Afghanistan. One potential positive aspect that a number of interview respondents from both countries mentioned was that the interagency cooperation in Afghanistan has led to a better understanding between service members and civil servants. Still, this experience is highly personal and ephemeral. Finally, the mention of lessons at the campaign level or existence of updated counterinsurgency doctrine is hardly a guarantee for implementation of these concepts in future operations. Both countries under study had recent relevant experiences and current doctrine publications when they deployed to southern Afghanistan in 2006 yet both failed to tap into their institutional knowledge.

| Aspects of the campaign | Manifestations | Influencing factors | Institutionalization |
|---|---|---|---|
| Plans (NLD) | Informal adaptation of plans, disconnect between theater and strategic level | Organizational culture, leadership | Acknowledged deficiency, no evidence of implementation beyond doctrine |
| Plans (UK) | Formal adaptation of plans, disconnect between theater and strategic level | Organizational culture, leadership | Acknowledged deficiency, no evidence of implementation beyond doctrine |
| Analysis (NLD) | Informal drafting of plans and metrics | Organizational culture | No, recognized deficiency |
| Analysis (UK) | Informal and formal establishment of programs | Organizational culture | No, recognized deficiency |
| Configuration (NLD) | Limited reinforcements | Domestic politics, civil-military relations | - |
| Configuration (UK) | Extensive reinforcements | Alliance politics, domestic politics, civil-military relations | - |
| Rotations (NLD) | Limited, extension of PRT. Recognized deficiency | Organizational culture: administrative considerations | No, recognized deficiency |
| Rotations (UK) | Recognized deficiency | Organizational culture: administrative considerations | No, recognized deficiency |

*Table 6.4: Learning at the campaign level*

### 6.3.3: The role of anchor points in learning

A third germane finding is the role of ''anchor points" below the institutional level for developing knowledge and implementing lessons. When examining the various themes in which the Dutch and British forces learned in relation to their operations in Afghanistan, the existence of these anchor points is indicative of whether specific knowledge was retained. As described in chapter 2, anchor points are organizational elements that are responsible for a specific area of knowledge. As such, they can harness informal adaptations and even 'institutionalize' them without support from the wider institution. Consequently, informal learning processes from the field acquire a more semi-formal character.

Within Western militaries, most arms and branches have their own knowledge or expertise centers. However, to function as an anchor point, such elements must have proximity to the operational practice and combine the factors of doctrine development, education, and training. As such, these anchor points can help institutionalize specific knowledge as they incorporate experiences from operations, implement these into doctrinal publications and disseminate the knowledge through education and training.

This dynamic is visible in both the Dutch and British armed forces in relation to learning in the realms of intelligence and counter-IED efforts. For instance, the Dutch Army's ISTAR-battalion and associated school adapted its intelligence process to meet the requirements of counterinsurgency operations. As mentioned in chapter 4, intelligence in the Dutch Army suffered from the institutional unwillingness to establish a separate branch and specialized career paths. Still, intelligence personnel fed their experiences and adaptations into training at the intelligence training establishment that was collocated with the battalion. Moreover, service members with prior experience went on to instruct new personnel. After Afghanistan, this specific "knowledge hub" continued to develop this capability, even though there was no specific branch or a dedicated career path for intelligence personnel in the army. Of course, the British Army had an intelligence corps and thus a more formal anchor point. Consequently, its adaptations were more far-reaching and saw a better implementation and institutionalization.

Regarding the threat of IEDs, this knowledge fell inside the remit of both armies' Combat Engineers and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) units. This was reinforced by the creation of Counter-IED Task Forces that sought to develop comprehensive lessons for reducing this threat. The establishment of these task forces were indicative of the institutional and political pressure to decrease casualties from IEDs. Along with the existing units, the C-IED task forces developed improvements in training, equipment, TTPs and targeting IED-networks. Throughout the campaigns, IEDs remained the weapon of choice for the insurgents. After the end of operations in Afghanistan, both armies have institutionalized the knowledge in specific organizations. The Dutch Army has created a permanent expertise center and the British Army has incorporated the knowledge in a reinvigorated training regiment and has established regular specialist regiments. While the urgency of the threat has naturally diminished, the knowledge has been retained and continues to be developed. For now, deployments in areas like Mali ensure that this knowledge continues to be disseminated.

Conversely, interagency cooperation and non-kinetic activities initially had no anchor points in the Dutch and British militaries. Consequently, adaptations in these fields remained largely informal and haphazard. For example, the Dutch PRT-rotations were built around staffs drawn from, among others, cavalry, engineer, and field artillery battalions. Of course, fostering governance and development was beyond their organic tasks. As a result,

the operational experience of operating as a PRT was extraordinary for these units. After their redeployment, they would begin to refocus on their normal tasks. Moreover, there was no specific knowledge hub in either the Dutch army or the Ministry of Defence into which the experiences could be fed or from which disseminated. Consequently, the PRTs continued on the basis of personal relations to share knowledge. However, this knowledge quickly dissipated after a rotation. In the British case, their Stabilisation Unit served as an interagency "anchor point," but the disconnect between the PRT and TFH precluded coordinated knowledge development on this topic. After the establishment of the Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG), the British Army formed its own knowledge hub. In relation to non-kinetic activities, both armed forces lacked a dedicated unit that could serve as a conduit for knowledge. As a case in point, the Dutch Army had delegated the task of psychological operations to its Air Defence Artillery-units. Although the British Army had assigned associated tasks to various units, there was no unit responsible for non-kinetic activities.

In the evaluations after the campaigns, the interagency cooperation and non-kinetic activities were identified as institutional deficiencies. The British Army opted to institutionalize these lessons in its Army 2020 reorganization by establishing 77 Brigade. This new formation was tasked with, among others, non-kinetic activities, and civil-military cooperation by absorbing the MSSG. By contrast, the Dutch Army pondered allocating such tasks to its CIMIC-battalion but did not follow through on this. Establishing a new unit for these tasks was deemed impractical as it would be vulnerable for new budget cuts. Only much later did the Dutch Army establish a Communication and Engagement branch for non-kinetic activities.

Thus, the existence of "anchor points" can indicate whether informal lessons can be shared and retained (table 6.5). The examples of intelligence and counter-IED show that specialized units can help institutionalize lessons. In the case of Dutch Army intelligence, the lack of institutional support for retaining the knowledge from Afghanistan proved no insurmountable obstacle. However, as the C-IED efforts and British intelligence indicate, the combination with institutional support can help attain more extensive adaptations. Conversely, when no anchor points exist, informal learning processes have limited value beyond a single rotation as the knowledge quickly evaporates.

| Anchor points | The Netherlands | The United Kingdom |
|---|---|---|
| Interagency cooperation (PRT) | No dedicated unit, novel, and singular task for deployed units | Not within armed forces, remedied by establishment of MSSG and later 77 Brigade |
| Intelligence | Yes, ISTAR-battalion and Intelligence school | Yes, Intelligence Corps and associated units |
| Non-kinetic activities | No dedicated unit, secondary tasks | No, later remedied by establishment of 77 Brigade |
| Counter-IED | Yes, engineers and EOD, reinforced by specific task force | Yes, engineers and EOD, reinforced by specific task force |

*Table 6.5: The role of anchor points in learning*

### 6.3.4: Temporality in organization and missions

The fourth finding pertains to the temporal aspect of the missions in Southern Afghanistan. This notion affected the associated learning processes. By definition Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) and Task Force Helmand (TFH) were temporary organizations that existed for the duration of the campaign. Built around a brigade staff, the task forces consisted of a nucleus of infantry and other combat arms that provided the battle groups. These troops were to be assisted by a vast array of supporting units such as artillery, engineers, logistics and medical support. Of course, integrating these different capabilities required coordination but was familiar for officers and NCOs. What was particular to Afghanistan was that this integration occurred at the platoon-level or even below.

Thus, introducing such capabilities into temporary organizations such as the task forces and their constituent parts were straightforward. These were either informal initiatives or sanctioned by the wider institution. As the militaries recognized the value of these nonorganic capabilities to overcome operational challenges, these adaptations often received some institutional support. For the deployed task forces the main challenge proved to be integrating such new capabilities into the normal framework of security operations. At an institutional level, the main concern was to find personnel that could fulfill the roles. As seen in the PRTs and non-kinetic activities, these subunits were often comprised of personnel that was available instead of specifically trained for such roles.

More intricate was the integration of more exotic capabilities such as the PRTs, specialized intelligence detachments and non-kinetic activities. These were either relatively new or normally attached to higher echelons. As such, the traditional and the novel capabilities had to integrate to attain the operational and tactical objectives during deployment. This

in itself required a learning process, as this was largely unfamiliar territory for the involved personnel. This collaboration thus led to new experiences that were specific to the mission. Whether this knowledge could be captured and institutionalized after the mission is a central consideration in the theory on temporary and project organizations.

Furthermore, the deployed forces were not only configured as temporary organizations, but the personnel also rotated after a few months. Again, this was for good reason, but inherently affected the campaign continuity and accumulation of knowledge. After the end of the mission, these temporary organizations were naturally subject to a centrifugal dynamic in which the constituent unit would again refocus on its original tasks. As a result, experiences with integrating and orchestrating the various capabilities dissipated over time.

The temporary character of the Dutch and British missions ties into the challenge of institutionalizing knowledge after the campaigns. As the case studies demonstrate, formal learning during missions does not automatically lead to institutionalization of lessons. Instead, the lessons were weighed for relevancy in future missions during post-mission evaluations. Transferring knowledge from a specific episode to the institutional level adheres to the same principles. Moreover, the post-mission evaluations are conducted with this objective. The Dutch and British armed forces produced candid internal evaluations on their performances in southern Afghanistan.

As such, institutionalization of lessons from a specific conflict resembles organizational learning in project environments. Here, organizations seek to capture knowledge from particular contexts that can be useful for the wider organization and future projects. Comparing, or even equating, military missions as TFU and TFH with projects is somewhat counterintuitive. As mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, wars are not bound in time. Furthermore, the desired end-states are often unclear, and progress is hard to assess. However, the Dutch and British missions in Afghanistan have been tacitly approached as discrete projects. While the international endeavor in Afghanistan lasted from 2001 to 2021, countries like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom had deployed troops for bracketed terms, in various areas and different mandates. In this way, Western states picked a type of intervention that matched their appetite for risks and expenditure of resources at the time. While understandable from a political perspective, such project-based deployment precluded strategic consistency.

In both cases the formal evaluations provided these institutions with identified lessons and best practices that could be used for organizational change without the pressure of supporting an intense and large-scale campaign. However, institutionalization of wartime adaptation and remedying extant deficiencies beyond the operations in Afghanistan was hindered by several factors. A first mundane but crucial element was that after the

withdrawal from southern Afghanistan, the sense of urgency to address deficiencies had naturally diminished. Additional funding that was made available to support the operations in Afghanistan had stopped, thereby limiting the willingness to introduce new capabilities. Furthermore, the Dutch military did not address its lack of an adequate formal learning process while the British Army downscaled its learning capacity from operation Entirety. Secondly, both militaries faced substantial budget cuts because of the global financial crisis. A third factor that hindered institutionalization was that the armed forces started to recalibrate from a specific counterinsurgency footing towards an outlook for conventional warfare.

These impeding factors notwithstanding, the British Army made a concerted effort to implement the relevant lessons from Afghanistan in its Army 2020 reorganization. Despite the budget cuts, new formations such as 77 Brigade and 1 ISR-Brigade were established. These new organizational structures institutionalized manifestations of learning as increased attention to non-kinetic activities, civil-military cooperation, and developments in intelligence. As such, the British Army combined the evaluations of the Helmand campaign with a new strategic analysis while incorporating new financial realities. In the Netherlands, the implementation of lessons fell flat due to the budgetary constraints and the lack of a comprehensive implementation plan.

### 6.3.5: Ambidexterity and the tension between exploitation and exploration

The fifth finding concerns the influence of the inherent tension between *exploitation* and *exploration* on the examined learning processes in the Dutch and British militaries. As often described, Western armed forces are organized for conventional interstate warfare. This leads to a cultural penchant to further develop capabilities associated with this type of conflict. Adaptations and adjustments associated with these capabilities can be designated as *exploitation*. By contrast, the more specific capabilities relevant to counterinsurgency or stabilization operations are indicative of *exploration* as they fall outside the established organizational norms.

As described above, the Dutch and British armed forces had to adapt significantly to the operational challenges posed in southern Afghanistan. Addressing identified deficiencies could not solely rely on *exploitation*. Adjusting capabilities associated with conventional warfare was strategically irrelevant against an irregular adversary. To be sure, adaptations regarding counter-IED efforts and improved targeting cycles had tactical benefits and proved a genuine ability to learn. However, many of the other recognized problems required looking beyond the existing norms and organizational capabilities. Integrating concepts such as the PRT and non-kinetic influencing were of course not completely novel to the Dutch and

British militaries, but as inorganic capabilities with highly contextual specificity these could be designated as *exploration* activities.

More difficult was the institutionalization of these capabilities associated with *exploration*. This required for instance: arranging specialized training, permanent organizational structures, and dedicated career paths. Implementing such administrative arrangements are crucial for institutionalization; but with finite resources available to armed forces, adopting such capabilities that are associated with specific conflict types cut into resources available for existing capabilities. Moreover, questions can be raised whether militaries must implement units like a PRT when this role is more attuned to interagency partners.

Understandably, being proficient in both conventional and irregular warfare or peacekeeping is a challenging proposition at best, as these types of conflicts have diverging requirements. The notion of organizational ambidexterity is therefore central to most Western armed forces who are tasked with territorial defense and expeditionary stabilization and peace keeping operations. During the initial years of either campaign, the wider institutions of the Dutch and British struggled in this balancing act. Operational concerns were pressing but had limited effect on the institutions themselves. However, the British Army recognized the partiality towards *exploitation*. Operation Entirety was initiated to counter this and put the army on a campaign footing, thereby consciously mortgaging its readiness for other types of missions. As such, the balance swung towards addressing shortcomings in the Helmand campaign.

However, even when deemed applicable for new operations, the organization had to allocate resources to retain manifestations of learning such as equipment, training programs or organizational structures. After a mission that required the attention of large parts of the institution, such as in southern Afghanistan, armed forces seek a form of recalibration. Missions of a longevity and intensity characteristics of Uruzgan and Helmand were formative experiences for individual service members and units. Moreover, the counterinsurgency context placed specific requirements on the organization and its members. Yet, western militaries remain tasked to maintain readiness for a wide array of missions, ranging from conventional warfare to peace operations and assistance to civilian authorities. Consequently, the skillset had to be rebalanced after the latest era of large-scale counterinsurgency operations. This need for ambidexterity and recouping skills that had been previously under-resourced affected institutionalization of mission specific capabilities.

This recalibration affected large parts of the Dutch and British armies, in particular the manoeuvre-battalions and brigades. These had made up the bulk of the battle groups and task forces. In Afghanistan they had formed the central organizing element to which non-organic capabilities, such as PRTs, non-kinetic influence teams and reinforced intelligence

detachments, had been attached. Throughout the campaigns, the staffs of the battalions and brigades had tried to integrate such capabilities in counterinsurgency operations. As described above, these efforts met with varying degrees of success. After the conclusion of the operations in Afghanistan, the temporary organizational structures dissolved, and the various units started to refocus on their organic tasks. For the specialist units, to the extent that they existed, this change was limited. Conversely, the combat units had to readjust to their organic tasks. For instance, the deployments in Afghanistan had led to atrophying of the ability to conduct combined arms operations at the battalion and brigade levels against a capable adversary. Thus, such skills had to be relearned by these units in exercises that were not suited for the more specific capabilities of other units. In turn this led to the decline of knowledge and familiarity of integrated capabilities relevant for counterinsurgency or stabilization operations.

Although far from absolute, the trend of recalibration toward conventional warfare was reinforced by new strategic analyses that indicated that states like Russia and China could be potential threats. Furthermore, these analyses led to defense policy papers that emphasized the need for proficiency in combat operations against such threats and the effects of integrating new technologies. As such, institutionalizing counterinsurgency experiences was less of a priority given the financial constraints both militaries faced. This is not to say that the leadership did not recognize their value, but more that they had limited resources to allocate to specific capabilities.

Recalibrations like these have been ascribed to a cultural predilection of Western armed forces towards conventional warfare by, for instance, scholars as Sergio Catignani and Tom Dyson. Although this is a contributing factor, the refocusing on a broader spectrum of conflict is warranted. At the tactical level, the adversaries in Afghanistan had limited capabilities that could defeat the Western militaries in sustained combat. Of course, this says nothing of their strategic capabilities and political acumen. However, adversaries in future conflicts may well employ different and new capabilities whether they are conventional or irregular actors. Any professional military must thus prepare for such eventualities and not dwell on previous experiences.

After the operations in southern Afghanistan, the Dutch and British armed forces thus had new capabilities that were associated with the Afghanistan campaign. Their worth was recognized for future potential conflicts. However, the institutions had to balance between recalibration towards their norms of conventional warfare and implementing lessons from a counterinsurgency campaign. A complicating factor was that the resources available to the militaries decreased after the missions. Furthermore, the lack of success in Afghanistan provided additional ammunition for skeptics of counterinsurgency. As such, the institutionalization of counter-IED measures could be aligned with combat operations

as a specific topic. Still, in the British Army modest resources were allocated for retaining capabilities or implementing broader lessons from Afghanistan such as 77 Brigade and 1ISR Brigade. For the Netherlands, knowledge was retained at a lower level and only institutionalized when additional resources became available.

### 6.3.6: Influencing factors on learning processes

The final general finding of this research is the role of the identified influencing factors on the learning processes in the studied militaries. The literature on military innovation in its broadest sense lists several factors that can influence how armed forces innovate or adapt. Originally, most literature categorized exogenous factors to military organizations, with prime examples being the role of national strategic culture, domestic politics, alliance politics and civil-military relations. Conversely, more recent works have introduced endogenous characteristics that shape military change, like organizational culture, leadership, learning mechanisms and dissemination mechanisms.

In general, the influence of external factors was mostly manifested at the campaign level. Perhaps the most politically salient aspect of the missions was troop levels. In both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, military planners proposed task force configurations based on what would be politically feasible instead of based on strategic analysis. In the Dutch military, the requests by commanders in Uruzgan for additional troops were often rebuffed. This points to an unwillingness to broach this subject to the political masters. As the run-up to the mission had been highly contentious in parliament, the expectation of political pushback for new troops was warranted. Conversely, the United Kingdom increased its troop levels in Helmand as the campaign stalled. Beyond operational necessity, an important consideration for the British government to do this was to demonstrate to the United States its commitment to the war in Afghanistan. Still, the effect of alliance politics was eventually trumped by domestic politics. American requests for further British reinforcements were not answered as the British effort in Helmand became increasingly unpopular domestically. A further salient domestic political aspect of the missions was casualties among the deployed troops. Countermeasures to IEDs and other threats to service members garnered political attention and often incentivized adaptations in terms of allocating additional resources.

However, the studied learning processes were largely internal affairs. As described, the initial absence of aligned and resourced learning and dissemination mechanisms impeded both formal and informal learning processes. While learning mechanisms were in place through various forms of evaluation, they were inadequately linked with dissemination mechanisms such as doctrine development and predeployment training. As discussed above, the existence of "anchor points" could help retain knowledge from informal learning processes.

The conscious attempt by the British Army to ameliorate the paucity of formal learning processes through Operation Entirety led to improvements during the Helmand Campaign. In this instance, forceful leadership was crucial against the internal opposition against mortgaging the British Army's readiness for future missions. By contrast, the Dutch Army's leadership refrained from addressing identified deficiencies in its intelligence process. In the evaluations from its mission in Iraq (2003-2005), the scarcity of trained intelligence personnel was recognized. A proposed solution was the founding of an intelligence branch or at least a dedicated career path for intelligence personnel to ensure knowledge retention in this field. After the operations in Afghanistan further reinforced the dearth of qualified intelligence personnel, this proposed solution was still not implemented. A main consideration was that a new intelligence branch would have to come out of existing personnel slots and thus (further) decrease the numbers available for the established arms and branches. It was not until 2020 that a dedicated intelligence corps was founded in the Dutch Army when additional funding came available. A somewhat similar dynamic can be seen in the British 77 Brigade where regular personnel come from the established arms and branches. As such, knowledge retention is tenuous as these personnel often do only short tours in this formation. The positive impact of leadership on learning processes arises thus when individuals help to overcome structural hindrances to implementing knowledge.

Often the organizational culture of Western militaries is designated as being an impediment to learning. In particular, the culture of armed forces is slanted against lessons that do not adhere to the institutional norm of conventional warfare. While this notion has its merits, it warrants some qualification. As discussed above most western armed forces have to balance between territorial defense against conventional threats and expeditionary stabilization missions. These tasks impose distinct requirements and force militaries into an ambidextrous stance, in which the conventional 'leg' is generally dominant. In this the Dutch and British militaries form no exception. However, at the same time most adaptations in Uruzgan and Helmand were initiated by service members instead of through external interventions. Thus, organizational culture cannot be considered as a catch-all concept to explain military change.

Furthermore, with some adaptations, the deployed militaries tried to compensate for capabilities that ideally should be deployed by other government agencies or even other organizations, such as reconstruction and building viable governance structures. This is hardly a military task but has been executed by soldiers throughout history in volatile environments whenever appropriate civilians were not available. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan have been lauded as an innovation that integrated interagency efforts within a military mission. The PRT were tasked with fostering development and assisting the fledgling Afghan authorities while most deployed troops would either provide security or sustain the international effort. Closer examination shows that designating the Dutch and British PRTs

as hallmarks of interagency cooperation is overly generous. The paltry civilian contribution and inadequate coordination with security operations hampered the effectiveness of the PRTs. Although the civilian contribution and coordination were improved over time, the campaigns were at their core military missions with limited buy-in from other departments. Thus, while civil-military interaction is a familiar if secondary aspect in western militaries, the Dutch and British PRTs were initially more indicative of the failures of interagency cooperation. Consequently, efforts to remedy deficiencies in this field went against the dominant organizational culture. Still yet both informal and formal adaptations were made. That the PRT concept was not retained at the end of the Afghanistan mission cannot be solely ascribed to the choices or resources of the Dutch and British armed forces.

Ultimately, the vignettes show that while deficiencies in capabilities were generally recognized within both armies, the most prominent factor for formal adaptation was the willingness to spend resources such as personnel, budget or equipment to address them. Of course, allocating resources to specific capabilities useful for counterinsurgency or stabilization mission is subject to organizational politics and culture. Here the British Army proved more able to allocate resources to such capabilities during the Helmand campaign. This was facilitated by Operation Entirety. Afterwards, new capabilities were retained within the Army 2020 program and beyond, despite a more general recalibration towards conventional warfare and declining budgets. Conversely, the Dutch armed forces awarded limited resources to these capabilities. The exception to this were the counter-IED efforts. After the withdrawal, most of the lessons concerning these capabilities were not implemented, in spite of the acknowledgement by the Army's leadership of their value. With shrinking budgets, the Dutch Army opted to retain existing units and capabilities instead of building new ones geared towards stabilization operations.

In sum, the identified external and influencing factors offer a useful frame of reference. This research indicates that the Dutch and British processes of learning were impacted mostly by internal influencing factors. External factors were generally limited to changes at the campaign level. However, the studied learning processes show that monocausal explanations offer limited value. With multiple learning processes in a complex mission, several influencing factors will be at play and a framework must encompass them.

## 6.4: Conclusion

To answer the main research question *"to what extent have the Dutch and British militaries learned from their counterinsurgency operations in southern Afghanistan between 2006 and 2020?"* this study has examined and compared two episodes across the case studies. First, the learning processes during the respective campaigns in Uruzgan (2006-2010) and Helmand (2006-2014) have been scrutinized. The second aspect of study was to analyze the effort of both armed forces to institutionalize the lessons from these formative experiences up to 2020.

As the empirical chapters describe, the allied forces in Uruzgan and Helmand ran into various challenges when they deployed in 2006. Recognizing deficiencies, in particular in specific capabilities relevant for a counterinsurgency campaign, the deployed task forces initiated informal adaptations. Some of these were quickly disseminated over rotations and found their way into the predeployment training such as TTPs to mitigate the threat of IEDs. As such, these informal learning processes were accepted by the institutions and thus became part of formal responses. Other initiatives did not receive formal backing and consequently dissipated after one rotation. Interestingly, informal learning processes could maintain their momentum when these were supported by specialized units (or branches) that were responsible for drafting doctrine and providing training for their personnel. In this way for instance, the intelligence units in both armies served as anchor points for developing the knowledge derived from operational experience.

While the deployed task forces were the principal agents for identifying deficiencies and at times formulating responses, they often required institutional support for implementing solutions. In essence, many identified capability gaps needed additional resources to ameliorate them - resources that could only be conferred by the home institution, whether that was the Army as a service or the Ministry of Defence. However, the formal learning mechanisms had been inadequately resourced by both the Dutch and British armed forces to enable them to act on signals from the field. While evaluations existed to capture identified lessons from theater, there was insufficient linkage to dissemination mechanisms to incorporate changes such as doctrine and predeployment training. When the Dutch military deployed equipment to mitigate the threat of IEDs, it was able to do so by circumventing established processes. A further dynamic that impeded formal learning processes was that, while the operations in Afghanistan were the primary focus of the Dutch and British forces, both armies had to balance between the mission at hand that required specific capabilities and maintaining readiness for other contingencies that were more aligned with the institutional norms. In other words, the tension between *exploitation* and *exploration* was keenly felt by both institutions.

The most salient difference between the Dutch and British learning processes was central direction. Admittedly, the British Army as an institution only became serious about learning from experience with the advent of Operation Entirety in 2009. The suite of measures resulted in an organization more attuned to processing signals from the field and using these to enact changes to enhance performance. Crucially, while Operation Entirety was instigated by Army leadership, it sought to expedite the wider Defence processes that were necessary for implementing changes. Moreover, not only were improvements implemented in TFH, but new organizational structures were established in the British Army that could support the operations. Elements like the Force Development and Training (FDT) Command, the Lessons Exploitation Centre (LXC), the Land Intelligence Fusion Centre – Afghanistan (LIFC-A) and others, not only captured experiences from Helmand but also developed knowledge processes that fed lessons back into the deployed units. In this way, the British Army bestowed resources - funding, attention, and personnel - to improve its central learning processes. In this way, the British Army's focus was consciously swung towards *exploitation*. By contrast, the formal learning processes within the Dutch military lacked such a central guidance and mostly relied on initiatives by the Training Command and specialized units that functioned as anchor points.

Despite this difference in the resources awarded to formalized learning processes, the Dutch and British shared similarities in terms of where their learning abilities were inadequate. According to the introduce model of learning, both armies correctly identified performance gaps (step 2) and looked for responses (step 3), but in a several instance refrained from implementing formal adaptations (step 4). Two aspects stand out in this regard First, both militaries struggled with addressing shortcomings at the campaign level. Although campaign plans were revised periodically, their implementation was hindered by a disconnect between the deployed task forces and the national strategic headquarters. Furthermore, counterinsurgency theory increasingly a reference point for the conduct of operations. Yet, beyond the development and implementation of capabilities like interagency cooperation, intelligence, counter-IED and, to a lesser extent, non-kinetic activities, there was no orchestrated execution of the campaign. Elements such as campaign assessment, task force configuration and rotation schedules were not sufficiently addressed during the missions. Consequently, although these inadequacies at the operational and strategic level were discussed in post-mission evaluations, the lack of adaptations in this regard hamstrung the extent of institutionalization after the withdrawal from southern Afghanistan.

A second noteworthy aspect that hampered formal adaptation, and subsequently institutionalization, was the general inability or unwillingness to make significant adjustments to administrative norms. While changes pertaining to operations themselves were fairly straightforward, if not easy, to implement, seemingly mundane peace-time considerations proved refractory. Prime examples of this were the unwillingness to change

rotation schedules, command arrangements and establishing career paths for specialist service members such as intelligence personnel in the Dutch Army. Again, the latter was primarily a consequence of resource allocation because this would eat into personnel billets of the established arms and branches.

Although the effects of the learning processes on the operational environment itself are beyond the scope of this research, the empirical findings suggest that these have been limited. To be sure, the allied forces made relevant adaptations, but the local and strategic environments were subject to influencing factors other than the military task forces. Of course, any progress that was made by the international efforts in southern Afghanistan proved to be transient. This is not to say that adaptation in counterinsurgency conflict is irrelevant, as the inability to learn from experience will have negative effects on the changes of military success. However, as the war in Afghanistan demonstrates, counterinsurgency conflicts are ultimately political struggles in which the legitimacy and effectiveness of the incumbent government are challenged. If the host-nation government cannot improve its functioning and increase its base of support, the level international support will eventually be moot at best. Furthermore, this research shows the limitations of conducting operations in a coalition. Even if the Dutch and British task forces would have been completely attuned to their environment, they were still composite parts in a coalition effort that lacked strategic guidance and feasible objectives. As such, one of the more germane lessons of Afghanistan concerns the limitations of expeditionary military missions in a coalition to address political problems.

As the Dutch and British withdrew from southern Afghanistan, they took stock of their experiences. Although there was a sense of pride concerning the conduct of the armed forces in these volatile environs, sincere internal evaluations were drafted listing deficiencies and best practices based on these experiences. The evaluations pointed towards further solutions that could be implemented to remedy capability gaps. However, many of such institutionalization efforts required additional resources at a time when both militaries were faced by severe budget cuts.

Moreover, as the intense campaigns in Uruzgan and Helmand had ceased, the balancing act between *exploitation* and *exploration* became more pronounced. The operations in Afghanistan had added more weight to *exploration* in the pursuit of specific capabilities associated with counterinsurgency. Now the scales tipped towards *exploitation* as the militaries had to prepare for other potential mission types, most prominently conventional warfare. This was not solely a return to cultural fondness for combined arms operations; the specific circumstances of southern Afghanistan, the resulting adaptations and the longevity of the campaigns had led to units and service members that were geared towards a specific type of operations. For instance, patrols were normally conducted by augmented platoons with

overwhelming firepower. Furthermore, task forces in Helmand operated from sprawling bases with ubiquitous logistical support while the allies enjoyed complete air superiority. In future conflicts, conditions were likely to differ.

As the combat arms of the armies had been the most affected by these experiences, both militaries sought to recalibrate them towards combined arms operations against potential similarly operating adversaries. Thus, manoeuvre brigades and infantry battalions, who had made up the bulk of the deployed task forces and battle groups, started to refocus their training on conventional warfare and the associated tasks. In effect, with this recalibration the combat arms were trained to unlearn certain aspects of their experiences in Afghanistan. Of course, new strategic analyses indicated that the resurgence of interstate competition with countries like China and the Russian Federation became a more distinct possibility based on their increased assertiveness in recent years. As such, the recalibration after the specific conditions in southern Afghanistan were underwritten by the changes in the strategic contexts.

At the same time, the Dutch and British armies sought to retain the more specific adaptations from Afghanistan. The ability to institutionalize these capabilities was contingent on the existence of a unit that could serve as an anchor point for the specific knowledge. In the Dutch Army, the Counter-IED task force and the ISTAR-battalion with the collocated Joint Intelligence School (DIVI) served as such knowledge hubs. Conversely, interagency-cooperation and non-kinetic activities were only tangentially designated towards the army's CIMIC-battalion.

In the British Army, 77 Brigade was established and made responsible for civil-military cooperation and non-kinetic activities. Adaptations in intelligence were incorporated into a reorganized ISR-Brigade. These new formations were part of the Army 2020 reorganization and thus were part of a concerted attempt to institutionalize these capabilities. As the British Army had to contract due to budget cuts, this allocation of resources is an indication of a genuine effort to retain the competencies based on the Afghanistan experiences.

Whether 'anchored' informally in specialist units or in newly-established formations, these specific competencies were continuously developed in the years after Afghanistan, either through new insights from training or from other missions. As such, a new cadre of specialized personnel was trained in these capabilities. Eventually, this was reinforced in the Dutch Army by the creation of new branches in intelligence and non-kinetic engagement, with concomitant career paths. However, as the combat arms refocused on conventional warfare, the traditional elements of the armies and these more specialized elements were placed onto diverging paths. Training exercises for both elements are often incompatible to simulate genuine integration, risking the integration of these elements in new missions,

whether in a conventional conflict or a new counterinsurgency operation. Consequently, the potential negative effect of this change is that these elements must familiarize and integrate again in new missions.

Ultimately then, the answer to the main research question is that the learning processes in the Dutch and British armed forces were uneven and to a large extent ephemeral. During the operations, the deficiencies pertaining to the campaign and specific counterinsurgency capabilities were recognized. To an extent, adaptations were made to address capability gaps at the unit level. However, at the campaign level, changes proved to be more limited. Moreover, the formalized learning process proved to be inadequate for quick implementations of lessons learned. While this was ameliorated by the British Army with Operation Entirety, this applied mainly to measures to address the capability gaps and supporting structures and not to the strategic conduct of the campaign. Furthermore, the institutions struggled with balancing the requirements of the current counterinsurgency operations and the need to maintain readiness for other contingencies. After the withdrawal of Dutch and British forces, both militaries wanted to institutionalize lessons from Afghanistan. This was offset however by financial constraints and the recalibration from the specific prerequisites of Afghanistan towards conventional warfare. As a result, while specific capabilities were developed in both institutions based on the Afghanistan experiences, crucial lessons from the campaigns were not implemented or dissipated.

### 6.5: Avenues for further research

While recognizing the limitations of this study, it can open potential avenues for further research. A first worthwhile subject of examination is the notion of institutionalization of knowledge after conflict of recent wars. In particular, the identified dynamic of recalibration can be assessed against other case studies. Relevant lines of query can be developed whether recalibration occurs after all types of conflict and what further influencing factors can be identified beyond available resources and the need to maintain an ambidextrous stance. In a similar vein, the dialectic between exploration and exploitation in large organizations after crisis situation or projects in volatile environments may hold relevant insights for institutionalization in military organizations.

Of course, other case studies that couple adaptation and institutionalization in (southern) Afghanistan are topics of interest. The Dutch and British contributions were just two of various task forces that were deployed during these years. Among others, Australia, Canada, Denmark, and Romania fielded substantial task forces. Furthermore, contrasting the learning processes of these smaller states with those of the United States can garner additional insight. A comprehensive study of collective learning among a multinational

coalition such as ISAF, Inherent Resolve in Iraq, and Syria or MINUSMA in Mali will be a further important contribution to the field. Perhaps even more interesting is the inclusion of non-Western perspectives such as the lessons derived from the Nagorno-Karabach conflict by its belligerents or the adjustment by the military forces of the Taliban as they transformed from an insurgency to the incumbent armed forces.

Finally, as this research shows, learning processes by military organizations on their own cannot produce successful strategic outcomes in counterinsurgency contexts. Instead, a comprehensive study of the learning and institutionalization efforts of involved government agencies is warranted. Whether lessons derived from conflicts like Afghanistan are compatible across departments is an open question. Nevertheless, an enduring lesson from Afghanistan should be that deploying military forces to tackle a political problem will end in failure, despite genuine efforts to address deficiencies through organizational learning.

### 6.6: Practical considerations for military learning

This dissertation sought to understand how military learning processes worked in relation to the Dutch and British campaigns in southern Afghanistan. As will be apparent from the preceding chapters, there is much room for improvement as to how armed forces learn. Although this study is not meant to be prescriptive on improving learning processes, a few identified British best practices and deficiencies warrant reiteration at this point in order to serve as foundation for remedial action.

First and foremost, learning from experience must be more pronounced, both during operations and in peace time. Although the operations in southern Afghanistan were thoroughly evaluated, the Dutch and British militaries struggled to implement this knowledge, in particular beyond the theater of operations. The lessons learned process itself was an afterthought within both institutions. Where the British Army sought to remedy this through operation Entirety, the Dutch were unable to address this problem. After the operations in Afghanistan, both armies struggled with preparation for new missions. Units and individuals had to unlearn some recent experiences while training for new skills. Yet, the processes to disseminate knowledge from exercises or smaller missions remained under-resourced. Fortunately, both the Dutch and British armies currently boast dedicated units for experimentation and are actively pursuing concept development. Still, how the results of these efforts are disseminated and used for organizational change remains an open question.

Another aspect that should be addressed is the demonstrated inability to learn at the campaign level. One of the most fundamental deficiencies in this regard was the disconnect

between the strategic level and the conduct of operations in theater. With each new rotation, the approach to the campaign could change. Transfer of knowledge was thus contingent upon the relationship of rotation commanders and the compatibility of their plans. From a learning perspective, this arrangement was not conducive for the accumulation of knowledge on the campaign and the operational environment.

To remedy this, strategic direction at the interdepartmental level is necessary as opposed to controlling discrete operations in the field. Of course, this requires a strategic outlook on an expeditionary mission from the outset. Clear and attainable objectives must be formulated for each campaign and progress, or the lack thereof, must be assessed to guide the conduct of operations and the drafting of plans. As such, operational analysts should not only be deployed within task forces, but also be attached to the strategic headquarters in the capitals. To be sure, the identification of relevant metrics and assessment of progress continue to be intractable challenges in stabilization and counterinsurgency campaigns.

A more straightforward remedial action is to form an equivalent of the British example of Force Development and Training (FDT) command. By uniting concept development, lessons learned processes and collective training, the capability to collect and transfer knowledge can be established at a central level. This is not to say that all learning efforts should be centrally directed. Instead, it can act as a conduit for bottom-up initiatives and adaptations. Moreover, it can ensure the transfer of this knowledge across the organization.

Although this FDT-organization should be nimble, a potential constituent part should be a reach-back facility that can function as a knowledge repository on missions in the vein of the British LIFC. To be successful, such a knowledge hub should not be overly restricted in terms of classification. Moreover, beyond the support of troops in the field, it should play a central role in mission preparation and evaluation to collect and share knowledge. When there is no (large) mission to support, the center can partly adopt a more explorative stance by scanning for new developments relevant to warfare and potential threats. Furthermore, closer cooperation between personnel involved in intelligence, operational analysis and lessons learned in a fusion center is warranted. More often than not, these individuals are trying to make sense of the campaign and the environment. By at least coordinating these intellectual endeavors, duplication of effort is prevented, and a more thorough understanding can be attained.

The final British example that deserves emulation is the mission exploitation symposium. Its strength was that it had a broad attendance that consisted of various elements of the armed forces, allies, interagency partners and the military industry. Consequently, the symposia were not just evaluation tools but could also serve as conduits for remedial action. To retain the experience of the overall campaign, an “end-of-mission evaluation” symposium can

form part of a solution. This would entail an evaluation process instead of a single event. The lessons of a larger campaign require more contemplation in order to assess which lessons are relevant to retain, revise or reject. At the end of the evaluation process, a more explorative view can be adopted to ponder the impact of campaign for the future of warfare and the institution itself. Finally, the evaluation process must end with an action plan to implement changes.

Of course, most identified deficiencies are of a fundamental nature and relate to organizational culture and politics. These defy simple solutions. Learning starts with an inquisitive attitude to one's performance and to the environment. Organizations of all stripes would be well served by promoting such curiosity among its members to ensure that prior experience will enhance its performance in the future.