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

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Summary

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Over the last two decades, the study on how armed forces learn during wartime has proliferated significantly. In part, this academic interest can be ascribed to the Western large-scale counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. During these conflicts, the Western militaries involved were caught unprepared to conduct counterinsurgency operations. While the involved armed forces adapted, for better or worse, during these conflicts, some signs indicate that Western militaries are already in the process of discarding the knowledge they have acquired in order to recalibrate towards conventional warfare.

From a theoretical perspective then, the study on how armed forces learn during conflict is germane, but incomplete. The resulting vital complementing question is to what extent these lessons are retained in the context of another conflict. Are the lessons regarded as applicable solely to the previous conflict? Does the altered context lead to further contemplation and a reappraisal of the knowledge acquired in wartime? What is the influence of the new context on the lessons learned?

This study examines the Dutch and British campaigns in southern Afghan provinces of Uruzgan and Helmand and the impact of these experiences on the respective military organizations. For both militaries, the campaigns in Afghanistan are regarded as formative experiences. As earlier research attests, both militaries expended significant efforts to adapt to the challenges in Afghanistan. Yet, the extent of institutionalization of this knowledge remains uncertain. Therefore, the main research question underpinning this study is: *to what extent have the Dutch and British militaries learned from their counterinsurgency operations in southern Afghanistan between 2006 and 2020?*

As such, this research has both empirical as well as theoretical objectives. By reconstructing the learning processes of the Dutch and British militaries in relation to their experiences in Uruzgan and Helmand we can examine the lasting impact of these hard-won lessons on the organizations. Furthermore, this provides insight into the aforementioned concern that Western militaries are already forgetting the knowledge from the latest counterinsurgency operations. For the case studies in chapters 4 and 5, archival records, doctrine publications, formal evaluations and policy documents have been analyzed. Furthermore, over 100 service members, civil servants and scholars were interviewed who were involved in the Dutch and British campaigns in southern Afghanistan.

The theoretical contribution was made by synthesizing organizational learning theory with literature on military innovation in chapter 2. Combined with a frame of reference

based on enduring counterinsurgency prescriptions in chapter 3, I established a theoretical framework through which to engage with the case-studies.

One of the most pertinent elements of chapter 2 is the distinguishing of three strands of learning in relation to conflict: informal adaptation, formal adaptation, and institutionalization after conflict. 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.

This discontinuity of learning processes during and after a conflict can be explained by considering three elements from organizational learning literature. First is the tension between *exploitation* and *exploration*. After the conclusion of a given conflict, the calculus for maintaining the balance between these elements changes. A second aspect is learning from projects. In projects and expeditionary military operations, participants must adapt to emerging challenges. After the conclusion of such missions, the wider organization can evaluate the experiences and decide which knowledge it retains as relevant for other contexts. The third element is the role of temporary organizations. When military units are deployed to conflict, they are generally organized in bespoke task forces. 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.

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. This worked well when a certain unit could serve as an anchor point for knowledge. 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. While the former bore many hallmarks of exploration, the latter resembled the notion of exploitation. Of course, this distinction is not absolute. Yet, due to the dramatic swings in organizational focus, the learning processes during and after Afghanistan caused much disruption in the Dutch and British militaries. 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.