

MIRJAM GRANDIA MANTAS

Inescapable Entrapments?

*The Civil-Military Decision Paths
to Uruzgan and Helmand*

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Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play

—Immanuel Kant

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Introduction

By Professor Hew Strachan

In *Missionaries*, Phil Klay's 2020 novel about war (among other things), one of his protagonists, Lisette, an American journalist, talks to a friend and former soldier, Diego, about the conflict in Afghanistan. 'Go through the mission set of every unit operating in Afghanistan right now', Diego challenges her; 'tell me a single one that doesn't make sense.' Lisette concedes the point. Individual missions did make sense. 'It was the war as a whole that was insane, a rational insanity that dissected the problem in a thousand different ways, attacked it logically with a thousand different mission sets, a million white papers, a billion "lessons learned" reports, and nothing ever approaching a coherent strategy.'

Lisette's views presumably reflect those of their author: Klay served with the United States Marine Corps during the 'surge' in Iraq. The war in Afghanistan may have been different in many respects but, even if its veterans disagree over specifics, they will recognise the force of Lisette's point. British and Dutch units in southern Afghanistan did their best to bring stability and security to Helmand and Uruzgan. At the end of each tour, their commanders could and did reflect with pride on what they had achieved – what Lisette calls 'a thousand tight logical circles' as each task was executed 'with machinelike precision, eyes on the mission amid the accumulating human waste'. Nonetheless, by the end of 2014, when NATO ceased active offensive operations, nobody could be quite sure what lasting results had been achieved. That uncertainty has only increased with the passage of time.

The British and Dutch armed forces were good at addressing what Mirjam Grandia in this important book calls the 'how' of the war in Afghanistan but neither government proved able to provide a consistent and coherent answer to the question 'why'. Throughout the Cold War, for both countries the 'why' of military effectiveness had been simple: the defence of western Europe from Soviet aggression, most probably along the inner German border. It was the 'how' that generated the big questions: whether NATO had sufficient conventional military strength

to mount a successful defence without an early recourse to nuclear weapons, whether Dutch conscripts of the 1960s or '70s would be ready to fight, and whether either army was intellectually equipped for war at the operational level. None of these issues mattered when the two countries finally found themselves fighting alongside each other, albeit in a theatre of war that was geographically distant from the imperatives of their own national security. Two former colonial powers that had withdrawn from east of Suez decades before committed themselves to a protracted conflict in a land-locked country in central Asia.

For both, Afghanistan was the 'good war', a way to atone for Srebrenica and to regain the public backing seemingly forfeit in Iraq. And yet since 2014, despite the continuing challenge of the Taliban and the mounting threat of Islamic State, the British and the Dutch have largely turned their backs on Afghanistan. Their indifference raises serious doubts as to whether ever they really cared about the political, social and economic progress of a deprived country afflicted by more than three decades of persistent conflict. As Mirjam Grandia makes clear, for NATO and its members this was never a war about the future of Afghanistan, however much many of those who served there came to care deeply about the welfare and prospects of its people. Since 2014 both the British and Dutch armies, propelled by Russia's resurgent challenge, have been quick to turn their attentions back to Europe's security.

This is not just morally reprehensible; it is also strategically imprudent. The effort expended in the 'tight logical circles' of Helmand and Uruzgan make the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, as well as Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United States and others, part-authors of the travails which both provinces continue to undergo: having contributed to the problem, they continue to be its part-owners. Failing to reflect on the implications of the war in Afghanistan is also stupid. The 'billion' reports may have identified many lessons but few have been 'learnt', internalised or digested.

The most obvious of these focused on counter-insurgency and stabilisation, and on the political-military tools required for their implementation – the 'comprehensive approach' as Mirjam Grandia calls it, reflecting the vocabulary generated by Afghanistan itself, or 'fusion doctrine', to use the more recent coinage of British national security policy. Armies are often criticised for fighting the next war with the tools acquired as a result of the last. That charge, when justified, is the product of superficial analysis but even that is better than no analysis. The threat

of such an accusation is not a reason for not thinking in the first place. Whether NATO will ever again undertake a comparable operation is a legitimate question, but it would be absurd to presume that it will not at some point in its future. More immediately, NATO's armies need to disaggregate from the experience of Afghanistan the lessons specific to that country, context and time and those of more general application. This is where *Inescapable entrapments* makes such a significant contribution.

It offers a set of conclusions which we should draw from the British and Dutch experience in Afghanistan that reach back into our own capitals and forward into our own futures. *Inescapable entrapments* works at two levels. Its core provides a comparative account of how the two armies worked as partners and learnt to respect the constraints under which each operated and how they could best combine their efforts. Secondly, it goes on to pose major questions about how strategy is conceptualised. They are applicable to all democracies and to their models of civil-military relations. Governments too often focus on the form of civil-military relations rather than their substance. They judge them on the basis of their inputs, not their outputs, shaping them according to the theoretical norms of military subordination to civilian control, not according to the purpose they are designed to serve, which is the making of strategy. The most important yardstick with which to measure the effectiveness of civil-military relations in war is their capacity to develop strategy. That task is too often treated as a secondary consideration.

Although Mirjam Grandia develops her argument in relation to Britain and Holland, it clearly applies with equal force to all their allies, including the United States. The war in Afghanistan re-emphasised that at its heart strategy is about action. It is pragmatic and in some respects even intuitive; it is also contingent, however much it needs to look to second and third order consequences. Moreover, it is not linear in the way which civil-military relations theory demands. The politicians do not lay down a policy, from which strategy is developed and then put into practice by fighting. Politicians in modern democracies frequently prefer to postpone difficult decisions and to wait on events. While they do so, the military have to plan so that they can be ready to act if required. Strategic planning is not the same as strategy, but military planners need strategy as a tool with which to shape the assumptions which underpin their assessments and appreciations. They study strategy as part of their professional education in ways that politicians do not. They test their assumptions in war games and crisis management exercises which

civilians would be well advised to emulate but on the whole resist. As a result the civil-military relationship is an unequal partnership, in which the military – especially in a crisis – holds the whip hand, and in which strategy, if it is to exist at all, develops through interaction.

Grandia argues forcefully for theoretical approaches to both strategy and civil-military relations which are grounded not in abstractions about normative behaviour but in these realities. If her call is not heeded, then we risk further failures, probably greater than those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Neither defeat (for that is what the outcomes look like when judged against their opening ambitions) has been sufficiently humiliating to prompt the fundamental rethink which both logically demand. Their consequences have, moreover, been diffused because the states which suffered them did so as members of an alliance. Each army has been able to sustain its sense of self-worth through its own operational and tactical successes while distancing itself from the overall political outcome.

Even NATO itself has been able to play this game. As Mirjam Grandia points out, NATO was never the driving force in making strategy in Afghanistan. NATO has deemed Afghanistan a success. It was the biggest post-Cold War challenge the alliance has faced and it emerged intact. Afghanistan involved operations which were not only 'out of area' but also beyond the immediate national security concerns of most members. And yet they rallied to the cause with remarkable solidarity. In response to the 9/11 attacks, for the first time in its history NATO invoked article 5, the principle that an attack on one member is an attack on all. It did so in defence of the United States, the member best able and most inclined to act on its own. America's allies responded in large part out of self-interest. By showing support for the United States, they invested in the hope that the United States would support them too if they came under attack.

Since 9/11, both sides in this equation seem at times to have forgotten the terms of their contract. It was designed for far greater challenges than Afghanistan. As the United States 'pivots' to Asia and the Pacific, the European states which abut the north Atlantic have to decide how they will shape their response to China. Thirty years ago, in celebrating the end of the Cold War in their own backyard, they overlooked its continuation in Asia. Now strategists have begun to wake up to the emergent threat presented by China, but as a result strategy in Europe is once again being made – to quote Mirjam Grandia's description of what happened in Afghanistan – from the bottom up. NATO has opened discussions about its response to China, but its political leaders will prevaricate and

hedge their bets as long as possible, eying the economic opportunities of cooperation and reluctant to weigh them against the security threat. For totally understandable and proper reasons, their messages to their nations will equivocate and their peoples will be confused in consequence – just as they were over Afghanistan. They will be told to see China both as a commercial partner and as an ideological opponent, and will be unsure as to which to prioritise.

The making of strategy is a transactional process, and one whose partners are not just political leaders and strategically-minded generals but also the electorates to whom, at least in democratic states, they are accountable, especially in matters involving the use of force. Now more than ever, we need to respond to Mirjam Grandia's call for a more realistic approach to civil-military relations and to the making of strategy.