

LEARNING FROM IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN: FOUR LESSONS FOR BUILDING MORE EFFECTIVE COALITIONS

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ABSTRACT Despite many tactical and operational successes by brave military and civilian personnel, post-9/11 operations by U.S. led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan did not achieve their intended outcomes. Although many efforts are underway by discrete organizations within coalition countries to identify and learn their own lessons from these conflicts, comparatively less attention is paid to broader lessons for successful coalitions. Given that the U.S. and its allies will most certainly form coalitions in the future for a range of different contingency scenarios, these lessons are equally deserving of close examination. This article identifies four interrelated lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan that can be utilized to inform more effective coalition development and employment.

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Introduction

Post-9/11 operations by U.S. led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan did not achieve their intended outcomes. Despite many tactical and operational successes by brave military and civilian personnel, today the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its affiliates control large areas of Iraq, and the Taliban insurgency rages on in Afghanistan. Both of these outcomes are surprising given the cost in blood and treasure for coalition members.

Much of the lessons learned debate from the two wars centres around how operations were planned and executed, what went well and what did not, and how things could have been improved. In some cases, coalition partners are working to take stock of this analysis and adapt accordingly. Many efforts are underway by military and civilian organizations to place lessons observed in the context of the current security environment, so as to ensure learning, and ultimately, improved outcomes in future engagements. However, less attention is paid to lessons for successful coalitions. Given that the U.S. and its allies will most certainly form coalitions in the future for a range of different contingency scenarios, these lessons are particularly important.

This article identifies four interrelated lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan that can be utilized to inform more effective coalition development and employment. For contingency operations, coalitions play three important roles: geopolitical legitimacy of the mission; shared cost and responsibility; and most importantly the effective design and execution of campaigns. Although all three are important, this article is primarily concerned with the third component. It contends that effective coalitions require clearly articulated goals and strategy that are agreed upon and understood by coalition partners – lessons one and two. It also identifies a

requirement for a strategy coordination element, even when unity of command is absent – lesson three. Additionally, the importance of recognizing the capabilities and limitations of partners is discussed – lesson four. Ultimately, the article provides an analysis of key lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan that if heeded, will lead to improved outcomes for future coalitions.

Lesson 1: Develop Clear and Specific Goals

Effective coalitions require that a clear and specific determination be made upfront about what the campaign is meant to achieve. Although vague goals were developed for Iraq and Afghanistan, clear and specific explanations of what those goals entailed were not. A 2002 U.S. National Security Council memo, signed by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice provides an example. It states that the desired end-state for Iraq was a country that, “Does not threaten its neighbours; Renounces support for, and sponsorship of, international terrorism; Continues to be a single, unitary state; Is free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), their means of delivery, and associated programs; No longer oppresses or tyrannizes its people; Respects the basic rights of all Iraqis including women and minorities; Adheres to the rule of law and respects fundamental human rights, including freedom of speech and worship; and Encourages the building of democratic institutions.”¹ Although these goals were identified, the specifics of what all each goal entailed were not outlined to a sufficient degree. In the absence of a clear and specific understanding of the goals, many different interpretations emerged by individuals, organizations, and coalition partner countries.

¹ NSC Memorandum, signed by Condoleezza Rice, APNSA, SUBJECT: Principals Committee Review of Iraq Policy Paper, October 29, 2002, as reproduced in Feith, 541–543. Referenced in Collins, Joseph; *Lessons Encountered* Chapter 1; NDU Press 2015. <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Books/LessonsEncountered/Chapter1.aspx>

The ambiguity surrounding the enduring steady state that the campaign sought to achieve left many who were charged with executing the operation confused about how to proceed. For example, in a 2015 interview, General David Petraeus shares a vignette from the 2003 initial operations in Iraq:

When I was in Kuwait, we had this final gathering of commanders on the eve of battle, and we were already out on the desert floor. We were already all dispersed in our assembly areas, coiled, just waiting for the word. We were called back to that camp that we had used for our ascent, CFLCC [Coalition Forces Land Component Command] camp, and all gathered in there. At the end of this discussion, they asked for questions. I raised my hand and said, excuse me, but again, could someone just, you know I got it about the fight to Baghdad and taking down Baghdad, but can you go into a little more detail on what happens after that? And one of the ORHA [Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance] guys, a retired General, I think he was a deputy, stood up and said, ‘Dave, you don’t worry about that. You just get us to Baghdad, and we’ll take it from there.’ And I reflected on that many times subsequently.²

Upon arriving in Iraq in 2003 as the Commander of the 1st Armoured Divisions, General Martin Dempsey remembers, “My sense was that we were a bit adrift frankly, at least in Baghdad. I can’t speak to what was happening in Mosul, Ramadi, or Diyala Province. But in Baghdad, there was a bit of almost discovery learning, about what it means to have gone from this exquisite manoeuvre across the desert from Kuwait to Baghdad, to now being fundamentally responsible for the safety of a city of 7 million people, 75 square miles with a river running through it, and with

² David Petraeus, unpublished interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, March 27, 2015

deep ethnic and religious tensions.” He reflects, “I was trying to learn as quickly as possible what the mission was going to be because it was, quite frankly, unclear. The Iraqi army had been disbanded and de-Ba’athification had occurred. General David Petraeus at this time famously asked, ‘How does this thing end?’ It was a fair question.”³ Dempsey concludes of the Iraq war that, “We debated and negotiated resources before we debated and negotiated objectives.”⁴

Although former U.S. National Security Advisor Steven Hadley claims that there was more planning for a post-invasion Iraq than is frequently characterized, he also admits that it could have been much better.⁵ Hadley explains what he believes was required for Iraq and Afghanistan through the words of General John Allen. Hadley quotes Allen, “The thing I’ve learned from Iraq and Afghanistan is, that when you do your planning, you need to begin with Phase IV and what you want it to look like; how you are going to get it to look like that? And then work backwards.”

³ Chairman Martin Dempsey, Interview conducted by Richard D. Hooker Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, 7 January 2015; an abbreviated version of this interview was published in July 2015 Issue of Joint Force Quarterly, NDU Press, National Defense University, Washington DC, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/NewsArticleView/tabid/7849/Article/607296/jfq-78-from-the-chairman-interview-with-martin-e-dempsey.aspx> Note: General Dempsey also explains, “General John Abizaid came to see me around the time I took command, and I had a candid conversation with him about my initial observations, and I asked him as CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] commander: “What is my mission, how would you articulate the intent?”

⁴ Chairman Martin Dempsey, Interview conducted by Richard D. Hooker Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, 7 January 2015, published in July 2015 Issue of Joint Force Quarterly, NDU Press, National Defense University, Washington DC, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/NewsArticleView/tabid/7849/Article/607296/jfq-78-from-the-chairman-interview-with-martin-e-dempsey.aspx>

⁵ Stephen J. Hadley, interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nicholas Rostow, October 7, 2014; Published in PRISM Volume 5, No. 3, 2015; http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_5-3/Interview_Stephen_Hadley.pdf

Hadley continues in his own words, “So, where you want to end up informs your Phase III, II and I planning about how you are going to get there. This was a new idea to me; we didn’t do it that way. I don’t think the United States has ever done it that way.”⁶

With the U.S., as the coalition leader in both countries having fallen short in articulating specifically what it was the campaigns were trying to achieve, it goes without saying that the desired ends eluded coalition partners as well. This clouded the ability to make informed decisions about who to bring into the coalition, what type of assistance different coalition members might provide, and how. In an effort to be pragmatic, coalition personnel regularly developed their own views about the specific nature of the goals. The lack of specificity left a lot of leeway for interpretation of what right looked like, which led to friction among members of the force. Former ISAF Commander General McChrystal provides an illustration:

“What’s the overall mission?’ I’ve written about this in my own book, and you’ve probably heard as well, we’re in that one session, an early VTC, and I’ve had our people study the mission, and we got it from reading Presidential speeches, before and after his election, and in everything we had. But we didn’t have a mission statement otherwise. So we derived a mission statement, we put it up, and said here’s our mission statement and people go, ‘Well where did you get that mission statement?’ So I had them make a slide that says, ‘Here’s our NATO mission statement,’ and ‘Here’s our U.S. one,’ here’s where we derived them from. If they’re wrong, somebody please change them, and I’m happy to

⁶ Stephen J. Hadley, interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nicholas Rostow, October 7, 2014; Published in PRISM Volume 5, No. 3, 2015; http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_5-3/Interview_Stephen_Hadley.pdf

change. ‘Oh you know, that’s right.’ Then somebody says, ‘Why are you trying to destroy the Taliban?’ I said, ‘I’m not. I’m trying to defeat the Taliban.’ ‘Well, what do you mean you’re trying to wipe out the Taliban.’ I said that’s not what defeat means. Defeat doesn’t mean that. Defeat means rendering the enemy incapable of achieving their mission. Someone says, ‘Argh! Well, where did you get the word defeat?’ I got back to the mission statement, ‘That’s what you told me to do.’”⁷

The unclear, unspecific mission objectives enabled a situation where virtually anything coalition civilian and military organizations did could be interpreted as supporting the mission, regardless of the impact. This issue applied across the security, governance, and development efforts of the coalitions, but a statement in Kabul from a senior U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) official is particularly telling. He explains how the ambiguous goals led to a situation in the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan where, “Development people in the field had a lot of leeway to do whatever it was they wanted. All they had to do was get somebody to take them out to a village, pick a few things that they could focus on over the course of their deployment, and hang their ornament on the Afghan Christmas tree.”⁸ Similar observations were made about the Canadian development efforts in Regional Command – South and the German development activities in Regional Command – North.⁹ The ambiguity surrounding the mission challenged the ability of the coalitions in both countries to

⁷ Stanley A. McChrystal, interview by Joseph J. Collins, Frank G. Hoffman, and Nathan White, April 27, 2015.

⁸ Interview with senior development official, conducted July 2011 by Nathan White and Sara Thannhauser

⁹ 2011 interviews with military and civilian personnel in Kabul and Afghanistan conducted by Nathan White and Sara Thannhauser

prioritize their efforts and make valid determinations about what they needed to do that was truly required for mission success.

Lesson 2: Develop a Workable Strategy

Related to the imperative of well-defined goals, an effective coalition requires a workable strategy that is clearly articulated, specific, and understood by the relevant coalition partners. Certainly many partners will come to the table long before a strategy is developed, and in fact, it is optimal that these partners play a role in the early stages of strategy development. However, once the strategy is formulated, the coalition must be assembled and structured to support the strategy.

Yet in Iraq and Afghanistan, the problem of unclear goals was compounded by that absence of a true strategy. Effective strategy aligns ends, ways, and means while also nesting the tactical and operational levels of war with the strategic.¹⁰ When a coalition does not know where it is heading (the ends), it goes without saying that aligning ways and means for a positive strategic impact is difficult – some would even say impossible. Even when goals were articulated more clearly as the campaigns progressed, the lack of a coherent strategy remained. General Petraeus identifies a lingering strategy deficit in Afghanistan that persisted over the course of nine years, “I think it still took us until late 2010 before we had the inputs right in Afghanistan. And by inputs, I mean all of the different concepts and strategy, second, the organizational architecture and elements to carry out that strategy.”¹¹

¹⁰ Hoffman, F.G.; “Grand Strategy: The Fundamental Considerations”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 August 2014. Mr. Hoffman referenced the article in response to an inquiry by this author, 21 October, 2014; http://www.academia.edu/8890589/Fall_2014_472_Grand_Strategy_The_Fundamental_Considerations

¹¹ David Petraeus, interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, March 27, 2015.

When such a strategy gap occurs, as with ambiguous end-states, what tends to happen is that different entities within the assembled coalition are forced to interpret the strategy in their own way, either through the lens of their own organization's core mission, their own experiences, or a combination of these and others. The interpretations of the many disparate individuals and organizations often at best do not complement one another and at worst, they work at cross purposes. Iraqi Security Force development is a case in point. Without a clear understanding of the type of force that the coalition sought to build as part of its strategy, disparate efforts went on simultaneously where different elements of the same force were trained differently. General Dempsey remembers that coalition partners, "took sectors of Iraq." He explains, "The boon and bane of a coalition, as you know, is that it is a coalition—so everyone gets a voice. The boon is they're there, and you get 26, 28, or 45 flags. But there's no doubt in my mind, I can give you chapter and verse, that the way the British were developing the security forces in Basra was different than the Poles were developing security forces, and it was different than the way the [U.S.] Army was developing security forces in Diyala Province, different than the way the [U.S.] Marines were developing security forces in Al Anbar." He notes that, "Even in our own Service [Army] we had different approaches, a different way of partnering," and he asks rhetorically, "Now is that a strength or a weakness? Initially it was a weakness because we were a little inconsistent."¹²

Even worse is that the interpretations of the strategy tended to devolve into an overwhelming focus on achieving technocratic

¹² Chairman Martin Dempsey, Interview conducted by Richard D. Hooker Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, 7 January 2015, published in July 2015 Issue of Joint Force Quarterly, NDU Press, National Defense University, Washington DC. <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/NewsArticleView/tabid/7849/Article/607296/jfq-78-from-the-chairman-an-interview-with-martin-e-dempsey.aspx>

outputs within functional lines of effort. The following description of five lines of effort for Afghanistan in 2012 provides a typical example:

- Completing the *transition* to Afghan full sovereignty. This effort had three major components: security transition — Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) taking lead security responsibility across the country; political transition — conducting the 2014 and 2015 elections and transfer of power from the Karzai government to a successor; and economic transition toward greater Afghan self-reliance.
- Prosecuting *the civil-military campaign* to degrade the Taliban and build Afghan capacity. This included developing Afghan government institutions, security forces, and economy.
- Developing a *strategic partnership* with Afghanistan, which encompassed a long-term diplomatic relationship; negotiations to conclude a bilateral security agreement for a post-2014 troop presence; and commitments for long-term economic support;
- Promoting *regional diplomacy* to gain support from neighbours and the international community for a peaceful, stable Afghanistan.
- Exploring *reconciliation* in an effort to seek a diplomatic solution to the conflict.¹³

These lines of effort are all certainly useful and very important, but they do not constitute a strategy on their own. Instead, they

¹³ Kolenda, Christopher; “How can we avoid losing more wars? Start by putting somebody in charge of them” in Best Defense, January 13, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/13/how-can-we-avoid-losing-more-wars-start-by-putting-somebody-in-charge-of-them/>

represent a set of functional activities, elements of which, if pursued and integrated in accordance with a workable strategy for stabilizing the country, may have resulted in improved strategic outcomes. But successful actions in each line per se did not necessarily equate to strategic progress.

Good strategy for a campaign synchronizes lethal and non-lethal actions over time and space to create conditions that drive the decision making and behaviour of relevant actors (e.g. militants, host-nation governments, sections of the local populace, regional governments, and any other individuals, groups, and populations that impact mission success) in accordance with objectives. More specifically, whether applying lethal force to remove adversaries from the battlefield, conducting negotiations with host-nation and regional governments, training indigenous military forces, supporting host-nation governance, or conducting economic development, these actions must all be subordinate to a campaign strategy and corresponding plan designed to shape relevant actor decision making and behaviour in a manner that is in line with (passively or actively) coalition objectives.¹⁴

Often missing from the strategies were the specific effects coalition activities were supposed to achieve and how those effects would lead to attainment of the overall goals. As an example, one might ask, “how did the coalition in Afghanistan ensure that efforts designed for a transition to Afghan full sovereignty in the areas of security transition, political transition, and economic transition result not just in transition, but also greater stability?” There was no guarantee that the ANSF taking lead security responsibility across the country, successful elections and transfer

¹⁴ White, Nathan; “Organizing for War: Overcoming Barriers to Whole-of-Government Strategy in the ISIL Campaign” 28 December 2014: <http://smallwarjournal.com/jrnl/art/organizing-for-war-overcoming-barriers-to-whole-of-government-strategy-in-the-isil-campaign>

of power, or greater Afghan economic self-reliance would actually result in corresponding stabilization effects. And in fact even if these efforts were successful on paper, they could have the opposite effect on the ground for stabilization. The lines of effort and the activities within them amounted to things that the coalition would do, as opposed to the effects it sought to achieve.

The second line of effort – Prosecuting *the civil-military campaign* to degrade the Taliban and build Afghan capacity – provides another example. It supposedly relied on developing Afghan government institutions, security forces, and economic mechanisms.¹⁵ But these activities, even when successful, were often executed in a way that was politically destabilizing for the country. A proper strategy draws a link between the activities that will be conducted and a theory of change for achieving the desired enduring steady state, and this element of the strategy was almost always absent.

Without properly conceptualizing strategy, a coalition runs the risk of what Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster describes as a tendency to, “confuse activity with progress,” which refers to mistaking success within an activity or line of effort as progress toward desired campaign ends, regardless of whether or not those actions had any real value.¹⁶ In both countries for instance,

¹⁵ Kolenda, Christopher; “How can we avoid losing more wars? Start by putting somebody in charge of them” in Best Defense, January 13, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/13/how-can-we-avoid-losing-more-wars-start-by-putting-somebody-in-charge-of-them/>

¹⁶ Erdmann, Andrew; “How militaries learn and adapt: An interview with Major General H. R. McMaster” April 2013 McKinsey and Company http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/public_sector/how_militaries_learn_and_adapt LTG McMaster explains that in war, “... we often start by determining the resources we want to commit or what is palatable from a political standpoint. We confuse activity with progress, and that’s always dangerous, especially in war. In reality, we should first define the objective, compare it with the current state, and then work backward: what is the nature of this conflict? What are the obstacles to progress, and how do we overcome

coalition civilian and military organizations often focused on achieving metrics that they deemed to be favourable, but which had a questionable correlation to strategic progress. In the security realm, favourable numbers related to troops trained, reductions in significant activities (SIGACTs), and the amount of improvised explosive device (IED) incidents were held up as signs of progress across both countries. For development, roads built, children educated, and the amount of people provided healthcare were often highlighted. On the governance side, government posts filled, government officials trained, and the amount of people who voted in an election were all considered important.¹⁷

Although aspects of all of these factors are usually required, they do not alone lead to greater stability. What if SIGACTs and IED numbers went down because insurgents, on their own accord, had moved out of a given area to mass in another location where coalition forces were not present? Or how about if coalition forces had shifted their patrolling to areas where militants were not present? The resulting decrease in security incidents might be falsely interpreted as progress. What if the government positions filled were filled by predatory corrupt officials that inflamed grievances within the population and fuelled instability? Was filling those positions still an indication of progress? What if the basic services provided or restored were not actually addressing drivers of instability? In fact many were provided electricity who didn't want or need it. Is that still a sign of progress?¹⁸

them? What are the opportunities, and how do we exploit them? What resources do we need to accomplish our goals? The confusion of activity with progress is one final continuity in the nature of warfare that we must always remember.”

¹⁷ White, Nathan; “Learning from the Struggle to Assess Counterinsurgency and Stabilization Operations in Afghanistan”, 2015 not yet published.

¹⁸ White, Nathan; “Learning from the Struggle to Assess Counterinsurgency and Stabilization Operations in Afghanistan”, 2015 not yet published; Also discussed in an interview with a coalition official at National Defense University in 2012, conducted by

Without tying the various coalition efforts to some type of vision of progress toward a goal, conclusions drawn could be misleading. Referencing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, a report from a Wilton Park conference with many coalition partner representatives in attendance found that, “There is an urgent need to ensure that the new ‘population centric’ COIN strategy is evidence based, and does not continue to uncritically assume that development aid ‘wins hearts and minds’ and/or promotes stability. Priority should be given to assessing stabilization effects of projects, rather than assuming impact based on amounts of money spent or the number of projects implemented.” The report continues, “Greater emphasis should also be given to understanding drivers of conflict, as aid projects can only be effective in promoting stability objectives if they are effectively addressing the main causes of instability.” The report concludes that, “The replacement of the international community’s ‘enemy-centric’ approach with a ‘population-centric’ military strategy emphasizes the need for a sober assessment of what motivates people to rebel, and a deliberate incorporation of these observations into the design of a more effective strategy that addresses the underlying causes of unrest.”¹⁹

Dr. Stephen Downes-Martin explains how this disconnect manifested itself through the lens of assessments of progress in accordance with an ambiguous strategy. He reports, “during an IJC [ISAF Joint Command] Metrics Evaluation Meeting held in Washington, D.C., on 17–18 March 2010, one participant claimed that ‘child mortality’ was an appropriate metric under ‘Development.’ Asked to explain how this metric supported counterinsurgency, the participant replied simply, ‘Afghan families

Nathan White and Sara Thannhauser.

¹⁹ Report from Wilton Park Conference WP1022; Winning ‘Hearts and Minds’ in Afghanistan: 11 - 14 March 2010, <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/wp1022-report.pdf>

care about their children.” He continues, “Unfortunately, most commands do not appear to have clear connections between their objectives and the metrics they are collecting; and at this conference no sound answer was forthcoming from the officers present as to how infant mortality was *or was not* tied to their counterinsurgency objectives.”²⁰

The coalition approach to strategy was often more akin to throwing a bunch of things up against the wall and seeing what would stick, as opposed to determining first what specifically the coalition was trying to accomplish and how, and then applying only the required tools, when and where required, to achieve those goals. There was often no clear line drawn between the hard work and sacrifice, and the relevance to mission success. Assumptions often permeated that if organizations just did things that fit their core missions in the realm of security, governance, and development (e.g. Advise on democratic processes, progress human rights, deliver humanitarian assistance, eliminate adversaries from the battlefield, and complete development projects), this would lead to some type of desirable end-state. What was really required was that to the extent these activities were relevant (and many were), they needed to be tailored for the local context and nature of the conflict, in accordance with a workable strategy to shape relevant actor behaviour in an enduring way. As one civilian observed of his time in Afghanistan, “a lot of brilliant people and a lot of brilliant teams are all digging tunnels through the mountain and they are not going to meet in the middle. There needs to be more strategy.”²¹

²⁰ Downes-Martin, Stephen ; Operations Assessment in Afghanistan is Broken: What is to be Done? *Naval War College Review, Autumn 2011, Vol. 64, No. 4.*

²¹ Center for Complex Operations Iraq and Afghanistan interview database. This database contains interviews with civilian and military personnel who had returned from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. The interviews were conducted between 2010 and

Lesson 3: Put Somebody in Charge

For a coalition to be effective, somebody has to be given the task and authority to lead strategy formulation and execution, and of course the adaptation of both over time. This does not mean a single chain of command, which is bureaucratically unrealistic. But it does mean that there needs to be some type of coordination body that oversees the design and implementation of strategy. Without someone playing this role, there is no way to get everyone in the coalition on the same page about what the campaign is trying to accomplish and how, or to ensure partners are working together for maximum impact toward desired ends. Especially in the absence of clear guidance from higher, having an entity that plays such a role is the only hope for ensuring that all of the tools of hard and soft power that are employed by the coalition ultimately contribute to something of strategic value.

Even within just the U.S. Government, such a coordination capability does not exist. Some contend that this is the role of the U.S. National Security Council, but former NSC director for Afghanistan and Pakistan Paul D. Miller argues to the contrary, “The United States’ national security establishment lacks an integrated strategic planning capability.”²² The reality is that the Iraq and Afghanistan coalition structures were set up far more to support and protect the bureaucratic equities of the partner nations and individual organizations within them than they were for coordinated strategy formulation and execution. In the case of the United States, Miller notes, “Disparate organizations—such as the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, the Joint Staff’s J5,

2012, although many of the interviewees served their deployments prior to 2010

²² Miller, Paul D., “Organizing the National Security Council: I Like Ike’s”; *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (September 2013) Paul D. Miller previously served as director for Afghanistan and Pakistan on the National Security Council staff from 2007 through 2009

United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning, and the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy—carry out strategic planning for their respective organizations with minimal coordination between them.²³

U.S. administrations recognized and sought to address this issue internally at different points for Iraq and Afghanistan. Examples include General Doug Lute's role as Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's role as the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. But, Miller explains, "the most crucial piece of the national security establishment, the one designed to knit it together and coordinate all its parts, has gone completely untouched by the reforms of the past decade: the National Security Council (NSC) and the interagency system it oversees."²⁴ Furthermore, Miller notes that, "The NSC and its

²³ Miller, Paul D., "Organizing the National Security Council: I Like Ike's"; *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (September 2013)

²⁴ The Project on National Security Reform's "Forging a New Shield" 2008 report highlights five major deficiencies in the national security system that, among other things, impede the management of strategy. It lists the following: "1. The System is grossly imbalanced. It supports strong departmental capabilities at the expense of integrating mechanisms; 2. Resources allocated to departments and agencies are shaped by their narrowly defined core mandates rather than broader national security missions; 3. The need for presidential integration to compensate for the systemic inability to adequately integrate or resource missions overly centralizes issue management and overburdens the White House; 4. A burdened White House cannot manage the national security system as a whole to be agile and collaborative at any time, but it is particularly vulnerable to breakdown during the protracted transition periods between administrations; 5. Congress provides resources and conducts oversight in ways that reinforce the first four problems and make improving performance extremely difficult." The report goes on to summarize, "taken together, the basic deficiency of the current national security system is that parochial, departmental, and agency interests, reinforced by congress, paralyze cooperation even as the variety, speed, and complexity of emerging security issues prevent the White House from effectively controlling the system...The resulting second and third-tier operational deficiencies that emanate from these five problems are vast...Among the most worrisome is an inability to formulate and implement a coherent

subordinate committees and supporting staff are supposed to integrate and coordinate interagency efforts—but no regular mechanism for integrating strategic planning has existed in the NSC system since 1961.”²⁵

In the field, coalitions in Iraq, and especially Afghanistan, were devastated by the absence of a strategy coordination element. With four deployments to Afghanistan under his belt and having served as a senior advisor in the Pentagon on Afghanistan policy, COL Christopher Kolenda outlines the impact, “...no one is in charge of our wars...Among all of the so-called lessons from the recent bloody, expensive, and protracted wars, this one needs urgent attention. This may also help explain why the best people armed with the best equipment and supported by American national resources underperform and fail to deliver success when it counts the most.” He concludes that, “An organization with the necessary authority, responsibility, and accountability is needed to organize and direct the conduct of the war and manage the myriad trade-offs that inevitably occur. It is here that we consistently fall short.”²⁶

Indeed it is actually quite remarkable how little the ISAF Commander for instance actually controlled in his own battlespace. General McChrystal shares that even having served previously as the JSOC Commander, he arrived in country as ISAF Commander and he did not control any of the special operations forces operating on the ground. “I took over [in 2009] as ISAF

strategy.”

²⁵ Miller, Paul D., “Organizing the National Security Council: I Like Ike’s”; *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (September 2013)

²⁶ Kolenda, Christopher; “How can we avoid losing more wars? Start by putting somebody in charge of them” in *Best Defense*, January 13, 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/13/how-can-we-avoid-losing-more-wars-start-by-putting-somebody-in-charge-of-them/>

commander—NATO Commander, U.S. Commander. These Special Forces didn't work for me, the American Special Forces didn't work for me technically." In addition to Special Forces, he explained that the Marines and the Air Force didn't work for him either. He chalks up this challenge to major systemic obstacles, "...we have these doctrinal habits that are created that we say we're going to cooperate or we're going to give TACON [tactical control], and my sense is that we've created these doctrinal practices that are absolutely counter to what you need for modern warfare: unity of command and flexibility." The general continues, "We've let cultural things reinforce those practices, but the practices are in many cases bad habits. To maintain good will, we're willing to allow those things, and say: 'It's not optimal, but we'll make it work.'"²⁷ He concludes by saying that in retrospect, he should have spoken up, "I know for many years, to include my time in ISAF, at least initially, I said, 'well, it's not optimal, but I'll make it work.' I think that was a mistake. I think there are things where you've got to put a stake in the ground and say, 'If you don't fix this, then I think the risk to mission is higher than you perhaps perceive up the chain of command...' And I think that if we look at ourselves hard in the mirror, you can't do something as difficult as Afghanistan without one person in charge. And we still don't have that."²⁸

Especially when the strategy and goals are vague back in the home capitals of coalition leaders, there has to be somebody in charge of campaign strategy coordination to pull disparate efforts together and synchronize them over time and space for greatest effect. In the words of General McChrystal, speaking specifically about the U.S. Government, "If they've got a shared task, you've got to have

²⁷ Stanley A. McChrystal, interview by Joseph J. Collins, Frank G. Hoffman, and Nathan White, April 27, 2015.

²⁸ Stanley A. McChrystal, interview by Joseph J. Collins, Frank G. Hoffman, and Nathan White, April 27, 2015.

some person in charge. It usually should be civilian. I'm not pushing for military. But you've got to have somebody who gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night knowing that they're in charge."²⁹

Lesson 4: Understand Partner Strengths and Weaknesses

Coalition strategy must be informed by an understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of coalition partners. Each partner brings its own unique characteristics and allotted resources to bear in a campaign. Only by developing a sound understanding of what each partner is capable of and willing to do can a coalition be properly organized and employed for best effect. Speaking for non-attribution at a 2012 conference, one senior official reflected upon his time in Afghanistan's Helmand Province. He recalled that in the early stages of his deployment, the strategy called for coalition partners to do things they couldn't and/or wouldn't do. This led to operational approaches that were based on unrealistic and ultimately false assumptions, which in turn led to less than favourable outcomes. He thought that once it proved impossible to push the capability and will of a partner any further, instead of

²⁹ Stanley A. McChrystal, interview by Joseph J. Collins, Frank G. Hoffman, and Nathan White, April 27, 2015. The General adds, "We didn't have the big huge pieces right in Afghanistan. Lines of authority were confused in some cases. Again, when you're looking at SOF, and you've got black SOF, white SOF, coalition SOF, some US only SOF, some are coalition SOF, it actually matters. You have to know what hat a guy is wearing at a particular time." General McChrystal provided an example of how the lack of a strategy coordination element played out on the ground. He remembers that in 2009 as he was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan, there was a bombing that went bad and that killed several Afghan civilians. He observed that, "there was an Afghan force that had a MARSOC element working for it – didn't own the battlespace. They were out there doing their own thing. There was a Special Forces regional taskforce, but that was different from the battlespace owner, and then the people who were actually dropping the bombs. So essentially, I can't remember exactly, I think there were 5 different players all in the proximity of the things that happened and nobody in charge, in fact. They didn't even have the requirement to keep each other informed except from the standpoint of common sense."

continuing down a path with limited likelihood of success, it was far more effective to adapt and design strategies and corresponding plans with realistic expectations of partners in mind. This would help identify gaps, which would either need to be filled by other partners, and/or lead to further adaptation of the approach.³⁰

Navigating the intricacies of partner capability and will is particularly challenging for coalition Commanders. Speaking from experience as the ISAF and MNF-I commander, General Petraeus explains that, “the art of coalition command involves enormous amounts of coalition maintenance, sensitivity to national sentiments, as well as national caveats. And it requires the commander to organize the force in a way that capitalizes most effectively on what each coalition member provides, and, perhaps most importantly, uses U.S. resources to compensate for shortcomings that virtually every coalition partner has.”³¹

The issue of national caveats is particularly challenging. Each nation comes with its own caveats that serve as self-imposed limitations on what they can and will do. Petraeus explains, “I might note that there was no country in Afghanistan that did not have caveats.” He recalls a vignette where the challenge posed by caveats came to a head in Southwestern Afghanistan:

British protestations notwithstanding. Evidence that was most vivid came when the commander in Helmand Province, the Marine two-star, who had tactical control of British, Georgian, and UAE, and others, in addition to U.S. Marines and Soldiers, decided to expand the British area of

³⁰ Brownbag at the Center for Complex Operations at National Defense University with senior coalition officials, 2012.

³¹ David Petraeus, unpublished interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, March 27, 2015.

operations slightly to encompass three additional villages, that were part of a district; half of a district, so that we could focus other assets on a key operation. And to me, this seemed to be a tactical decision, not even operational, not one that the IJC needed to be involved with, much less myself, but that decision ultimately ended up in Number 10 Downing Street. It ended up the subject of a late night conversation with Prime Minister Cameron, when he visited Kabul at the British Ambassador's residence. And it ultimately resulted in the Brits not moving. Again, even the British had caveats, as they also had in quite significant ways in Basra, as well.³²

Throughout the campaigns, different partners were repeatedly surprised and even grew angry at times due to the challenges posed by caveats. Yet based on the fact that they always exist in a coalition environment, they will always be a point of consideration for strategy development and execution. As Petraeus notes, "Typically, soldiers sometimes tried to rationalize politically imposed caveats, but more forthrightly, they would sometimes acknowledge that these were political constraints within which they had to operate."³³

In Iraq and Afghanistan, arguably the most important partners to understand were the host-nation governments that were stood up in the wake of regime change. In both countries, those governments adopted practices that disenfranchised elements of the indigenous populations and significantly added to the instability. Nevertheless, the coalitions continued to work by, with, and through the indigenous governments without applying

³² David Petraeus, unpublished interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, March 27, 2015.

³³ David Petraeus, unpublished interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, March 27, 2015.

sufficient carrots and sticks to change behaviour. Having first not fully recognized this shortcoming in their indigenous government partners, and then failing to take adequate action to address the problem, the success of the coalitions was severely challenged. Adding to the difficulty, the coalition was seen as siding with the predatory central governments, which served to drive greater instability in many instances.

General Dempsey speaks to this point in the context of failed and weak states, “I have come to believe that support needs to be transactional and conditional. I believe that because, generally speaking, in these failing and failed states the issues are societal—they are not political issues. Sometimes they begin as political issues, or they’ll start as representational...It starts political, but it goes pretty quickly to sectarian issues, to religion, and ethnicity because these are historic impulses that have been suppressed for generations. In those environments, it’s absolutely predictable that the “victor and vanquished” mentality will quickly come forward. Those who have been suppressed will see themselves as victors, and they will come and vanquish those oppressing them, and I think whether we are asked to conduct military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, [or] Nigeria, that “victor-vanquished” instinct is the dominant societal instinct. If I’m right about this, then there can be no unconditional support, in my opinion, because unconditional support will simply reinforce the “victor-vanquished” paradigm as it emerges.” Linking this observation to the current situation in Iraq, the General states, “Some people are saying, ‘Why aren’t you doing more, and sooner?’ Our support needs to *remain as* support and *not* ownership. Furthermore, support needs to be conditional. If the Iraqi government does not meet its commitments to create a more inclusive political environment and to address some of the grievances of the Sunni

and Kurd populations, then nothing we do will last. It will be painting over rust.”³⁴

More realistic and workable coalition strategies for Iraq and Afghanistan would have been far more likely had efforts been made to fully understand the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of the coalition partners themselves and integrate that understanding into the design and conduct of operations. This is especially true of coalition local indigenous partners.

Conclusion

It is impossible to know if the U.S. led coalitions would have achieved complete success had they considered the four lessons discussed here. Both conflicts were extremely complex and had countless challenges. Yet, so many who served in the two coalitions raise variations of these issues time and time again, to include a number of current and former high-level civilian and military officials within the governments of the U.S. and coalition partners. The research for this paper reflects that there is merit to these issues. And in order to avoid repeating the many mistakes of the past, they are worthy of careful consideration by those charged with forming and employing coalitions in the future.

With similarly unfortunate results from coalition operations in Libya where the U.S. played a supporting role, and with many expressing concern about the progress of the U.S. led coalition to degrade and defeat ISIL, there is clearly work to be done on improving the effectiveness of coalitions to succeed in contingency operations. Future coalitions should take note of the lessons raised

³⁴ Chairman Martin Dempsey, Interview conducted by Richard D. Hooker Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, 7 January 2015, published in July 2015 Issue of Joint Force Quarterly, NDU Press, National Defense University, Washington DC.<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/NewsArticleView/tabid/7849/Article/607296/jfq-78-from-the-chairman-an-interview-with-martin-e-dempsey.aspx>

here and apply them, as appropriate, to the specific context of their own campaigns. The lessons should also be incorporated in the training and education schoolhouses where senior civilian and military officials prepare to be effective coalition leaders. It is the hope of this author that by doing so, the U.S. and its allies will avoid repeating mistakes of the past and achieve improved results that are worthy of the contributions and sacrifices made by so many.