

## **Implementing Lessons Learned: Applying the Dutch Experience with the Comprehensive Approach from Afghanistan to Mali**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper assesses the lessons learned by the Netherlands from its ISAF missions in Afghanistan, and to what extent these are transferred to the ongoing deployment to MINUSMA in Mali, assessing whether experiences from one operation can have value to the next.*

*The limited observation from the current status of operations is that though certain lessons learned from the comprehensive approach in Afghanistan have been incorporated into the mission conceptualization in Mali, it is too early to make a complete assessment of the implementation of best practices until the complete Dutch contribution to MINUSMA is deployed. The current state of deployment suggests that the civilian component of the mission, though represented in the conceptualization of the mission, will be underrepresented in the area of operations.*

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

One of the largest and most challenging questions regarding interagency cooperation in post-conflict environments is the adoption to new realities on the ground, and implementing lessons from previous experiences into new frameworks with new stakeholders, opportunities and challenges. How are experiences from previous missions recorded and conveyed, so that the lessons learned can make that complex transition to lessons implemented?

In attempting to find a tentative answer to this question, this article surveys the recorded lessons learned by the Netherlands as a coalition partner of ISAF in Afghanistan, and how these are reflected in the ongoing deployment of a Dutch contribution to MINUSMA in Mali. As such, it is founded on a number of assumptions on the comprehensive approach which require explication and clarification before a comparative assessment can be made, be it a restricted one due to the differences in the particular missions being scrutinized and the nascent stage of the deployment to Mali with full deployment not expected to be complete until later this year.

First and foremost, the notion of one universally applicable comprehensive approach does not exist. Every mission context is determined by the mandates, stakeholders, timeframes, geographies and the domestic characteristics of conflict and the host nation. As such, the comprehensive approach is an umbrella term that accommodates many constellations of cooperative frameworks, both horizontally between different agents and vertically within organizations. In practice, the integration manifests itself as much before as during deployment.

Secondly, the time the Netherlands has operated as lead nation in the Afghan province of Uruzgan under ISAF and the police training mission in Kunduz have together served as the primary frame of reference for integrated missions planning, doctrine and implementation, both at the HQ level and in the field of operations. As such, they served as a test of cohesiveness in operations, and as the practical blueprint for

interagency cooperation in current Dutch peace operations. The final evaluations of both missions will be assessed by the article 100 letter drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which the mission was announced to the Dutch parliament.

Thirdly, the composition of each mission is very different from the phases of inception to deployment, and the perceived weakness of lessons learned and best practices is that they are limited by the conditions in which they were recorded, hampered by the lack of clearly measurable goals. Nevertheless, there are also grounds for comparison which provide the opportunity to distill a measure of universality that cuts across national contexts, and may be relevant to all those countries currently involved in comprehensive peace operations around the globe.

Finally, a prominent facet of any comprehensive approach to peace operations is the manner in which relations between civil and military components have become central to how a mission is planned, implemented and operationalized. While the historical necessity to distinguish between the roles and responsibilities of military and civilian actors predates any notion of interagency cooperation in peace operations, the two have become intertwined over the course of the last twenty years, to the point where civil-military interaction and integrated operations are used interchangeably, leading to doctrinal and definitional confusion.

By focusing on the lessons learned and best practices of Civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) of Dutch operations in Afghanistan and their transferability to the ongoing Dutch deployment to Mali, this paper chooses a limited scope in order to make a limited observation about an expansive topic.

## **2.0 LESSONS LEARNED FROM AFGHANISTAN**

In the following section, the lessons that have been recorded in publically documents on the best practices distinguished by the Netherlands in both the province of Uruzgan as lead nation and, after withdrawal of the Task Force in 2010, the police training mission in Kunduz will be expounded.

The contribution to NATO's ISAF in the province Uruzgan provides a valuable lesson as the Netherlands were active as lead nation for a period of 4 years, from 2006 until 2010. Not only was this characterized by the unprecedented implementation of a comprehensive approach within the Task Force Uruzgan (TFU), combining elements of Diplomacy, Defense and Development (3D) between the different ministries involved on HQ level, the implementation of that approach was reflected in the addition of Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to the Task Force. Indicative of the increasing significance of Civil-Military cooperation (CIMIC) as an important element in comprehensive operations, the leadership of the PRT was transferred from a military to civilian command halfway through the TFU's deployment. During the four year deployment, the Dutch PRT in Uruzgan consisted of roughly 60 personnel, including a political advisor, development advisor and tribal advisor from the ministry of foreign affairs. Later on, a Civilian Representative was added to reflect the increasing number of NGOs operating in the area. The civilian-oriented approach of TFU was noted by various observers, giving rise to the notion of a 'Dutch' approach to Civil-military interaction, captured by the guideline "as civilian as possible, as military as necessary" (MOD, 2007). One element that characterized the CIMIC element in the PRT were the functional specialists, reservists with mission-relevant expertise to provide certain capacities to aid reconstruction activities and to benefit the local population. Accounts from this particular group of actors on their role, and the idea of a comprehensive approach reveal a mixed picture: though their work is perceived as valuable and an important implementation tool for the TFU's objectives, opportunities were also missed due to the underutilization of civilian assets, confusion between military and civilian priorities, and an inadequate system for ensuring continuity in the face of frequent rotations. The most recurring piece of criticism by practitioners was the lack of a grand strategy to unify the three Ds into a cohesive whole (DANS, 2011).

During the final year of the mission, the new NATO Strategic Concept already indicated that important observations were being made from the ISAF experience, stressing the need for enduring interagency cooperation: “The lessons learned from NATO operations, in particular in Afghanistan and the Western Balkans, make it clear that a comprehensive political, civilian and military approach is necessary for effective crisis management.” (2010, 19)

Other lessons were also identified by independent research on the specific characteristics of the Dutch comprehensive approach, corroborated by a SWOT<sup>1</sup> analysis of the many stakeholders involved. A number of interesting observations on the 3D approach emerged. Though there was no collective conception of what a comprehensive approach actually entails, it was broadly interpreted and the idea of coherence was regarded as positive. This meant that many different types of interactions were possible, and that the frameworks of cooperation usually evolved organically on the ground, with overall coherence increasing over the course of the mission. Finally, the degree of coherence varied with each level of the mission hierarchy, and it was overall agreed that future deployments should strive for greater coherence (van der Lijn, 2012, 70).

A number of dilemmas also persist: it remains to be seen whether the integrated approach simulated local ownership, which was part of the objective for the TFU.

Greater cohesion in a mission can lead to less cohesion between different actors on a regional level, also including allies.

More coherence means more coordination, which requires funds, time and goodwill on the part of the stakeholders. These elements are not always guaranteed in today’s operations, sometimes with a very close withdrawal date.

While the comprehensive approach takes a long-term perspective on institution building in post-conflict environments, political will is often short-lived, and easily depleted (2012, 70-71).

Further to the lessons identified from the input of the many stakeholders involved in the comprehensive approach, a report to parliament about the overall mission surmised the most important experiences from the Afghanistan experience in a comprehensive overview.

One of the important observations was that the 3D approach was not only applied at the field level, but also on the ministerial level in The Hague through the experience of working together the mutual engagement of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence become more integrated at the highest institutional level (Rijksoverheid, 2011, 32). A concrete consequence of inter-ministerial coordination is the placement of MFA trainees in field exercises with the MOD, giving a sense of each other’s respective approach and capacities in a simulated mission environment. Both ministries also have liaisons and advisors permanently assigned to each other. Finally, the smaller police training mission in Kunduz that followed the withdrawal of TFU was the first international mission by the Netherlands that featured a comprehensive mission design, which was directly implemented by the close coordination of the civilian, police and military representatives in the field (Rijksoverheid, 2014, 39).

With regard to the future and then lessons identified from TFU’s deployment, the first implication is that during the pre-deployment phase, it is important to distinguish which elements of the 3D approach are actually needed in the mission context: every (post-)conflict situation requires its own unique approach. While all stakeholders have to be involved in the mission design, their performance must also be measured by executing regular mission reviews, which can help in mapping developments over time. Ultimately, the 3D approach should never be a goal in itself, but only serve to address the challenges of the mission more efficiently. In addition to these observations, a number of concrete lessons were formulated to be taken into

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<sup>1</sup> Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.

account in the planning, deployment and execution of future missions. For the 3D approach, the following lessons were to be extended into future operations (2011, 111-13):

- Integral planning must lie at the root of the mission design, involving all partners in equal measure;
- Any mission with a civilian component must have access to adequate civilian expertise; a roster of rapidly deployable civilian experts and staff from the MFA must be maintained;
- Preceding the military planning, it must be decided whether a civil assessment is necessary, and if so, the results of such assessment should be available as soon as possible, preferably before and during the overall decision-making process;
- More mentoring of local actors by civilian experts is requisite and necessary. A multi-year plan for partnering and supporting these local actors must lie at the heart of this activity;
- Respect for humanitarian space needs to be preserved throughout the mission, especially for local humanitarian NGOs, in order not to compromise their safety.

### **3.0 LESSONS INCORPORATED TO MALI**

This section will expand on the developing deployment of Dutch forces to MINUSMA, identifying some of the differences that limit the applicability of the implementation of lessons learned. Moving to the comparative analysis, it is important to note the many differences between the Dutch contribution to MINUSMA and to ISAF in Afghanistan, yet ample similarities remain to merit a tentative assessment of how lessons learned were conveyed from one mission to the next.

The differences between Mali and Afghanistan are many and greater than the scope of this paper can do justice to. The national contexts differ in terms of history, culture, composition and countless smaller ways that all have their bearing on the manifestation of dynamics on the ground. Furthermore, MINUSMA is still in an establishing phase, where the priority still lies with force generation, and the main internal planning document, the Integral Strategic Framework (ISF) is still being finalized. Therefore the comparison extends only to those prescriptions recorded at the conclusion of deployment in Afghanistan, and the conception and initial Dutch deployment to Mali.

The most significant difference that divides the two missions is the capacity in which the Dutch contribution is situated within MINUSMA. Unlike the more extensive deployment to Uruzgan as lead nation, the 368 personnel are being deployed in a predominantly military capacity, intended for intelligence gathering and reconnaissance activities with the Eastern city of Gao as the main base of operations. While the Dutch forces ultimately serve in this niche capacity to assist the host government in stabilizing the country is a goal shared by previous missions, the choice for a more limited deployment allows for more flexibility on the choice to extend the mission, and implies reduced exposure to high-risk areas of operations (MFA, 2013, 1).

With regards to including an integrated approach within the mission design, a mixed picture emerges: the components of Development and Diplomacy are operating in a comparatively limited role, making the mission less comprehensive and integrated than that of the TFU. However, the conception of the mission explicitly refers to the importance of a comprehensive approach realized through 3D. More specifically, this ambition is guided by another lesson learned from previous missions, the necessity of Security Sector Reform (SSR) activities as part of addressing the root causes of conflict, by combating impunity, establishing and/or improving the rule of law and combat corruption in the judicial system through development programmes (MFA, 2013, 8). This component of the mission is once again directly linked to the 3D approach in the official letter informing parliament of the mission, and informed by the experiences in Afghanistan. How the intelligence gathering activities and military assistance of the Netherlands will contribute to these broader ambitions is thus not completely defined.

At the same time, the goals and ambitions are more limited in comparison to the missions in Afghanistan, and more dependent on cooperation with the UN and EU to achieve greater comprehensiveness. In case of the former, the main guiding document in this regard will be the anticipated Integrated Strategic Framework (ISF), which is intended to secure unity of command and unity of effort (2013, 11). With the ISF still pending release, the mission is still lacking a clearly defined goals, strategies, implementation plans and indicators (2013, 17). With this document still in a revision process, it remains uncertain to what extent the MINUSMA mission will address the issue of comprehensiveness as an important consideration for the success of the mission.

Regarding the civilian sphere, the importance of including the local population as stakeholders is another lesson learned adopted from Afghanistan, and one that has been explicitly included in order to achieve durable stability in Mali. Awareness of local needs, grievances and capacities is an important consideration in the development of a comprehensive approach, and clearly marks a best practice being integrated into the mission conception. Concretely, the Netherlands is an active supporter of the local development forum *Groupe de Soutien et Suivi sur le Mali* en engages in donor conferences (2013, 9).

However, there is no clearly stated intention to measure the effectiveness of such an intention through civil assessments, a lesson learned from ISAF in connection to the 3D approach. Instead, most of the assessment and periodical review is performed by MINUSMA according to UN guidelines for result-based management (2013, 17).

The inclusion of civilian capacity has also been added as a secondary component to the mission, addressing issues such as protection of civilians, establishing rule of law, security sector reform, gender and cultural heritage protection. Practically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently in the process of generating a roster of civilian mission experts for rapid deployment, using selection criteria relevant to the mission and to be operational this summer (CIF, 2014). The civilian element of MINUSMA will be guided by the mission concept, while military matters are addressed in the concept of operations. Learning from the experience with civil-military cooperation in Afghanistan, the MOD inaugurated the Civil-Military Interaction Command in November of 2013, composed of 90 permanent staff members and 900 reservists. With the stated intent to be the link between the Dutch military actors and the civilian sphere, thus institutionalizing the 3D approach, both ministries demonstrate adaptations based on prior experiences in Afghanistan.

While the mission conception of the Dutch contribution to MINUSMA shows clear reference to a number of lessons learned from the comprehensive approach as lessons incorporated in the next deployment, grounds for criticism and improvement remain.

First and foremost, with the creation of MINUSMA approximately a year ago and deployment several months thereafter, the mission still suffers from a number of issues to be resolved, primarily involving clarification of goals and means by the ISF. By extension, the Dutch contribution is still subject to a number of uncertainties, primarily how the concrete intelligence gathering and reconnaissance activities will contribute achieving a political, population-oriented resolution of the conflict, beyond maintaining stability in the build-up phase. While the importance of human security and protection of civilians are elements mentioned in the planning, it is not entirely clear how these will be operationalized (Gruiters, 2013, 1-2). The strong military character of the deployment could also benefit from a more clearly defined integrated approach, beyond the current reference to the 3D approach as a blanket term for all interagency cooperation. Currently the elements of Defense, Diplomacy and Development are all referred to in the document, but lack a clear implementation and link to the overarching and impending framework of MINUSMA. At the moment, the means are the most clearly defined part of the equation, but cannot be assessed without a similarly defined goal and approach. Furthermore, the concept of relevant mission expertise is often considered a resource that is widely available, easy to locate and adopt. In practice, such skills are difficult to identify, co-opt and implement in a mission design, and a greater elaboration of this process will create



greater understanding on how the civilian dimension is addressed in comprehensive mission designs.

The assessment of MINUSMA is left to common UN evaluation methods, meaning that there will be little opportunity to measure the Dutch intelligence contribution effectively in the greater whole of the mission. This will make it more difficult to make an informed decision on extending the mission beyond 2015, though parliament will be performing a more limited evaluation of the operationalization of the mission in mid-2015. A final evaluation will also be conducted at the mission's conclusion, shared between the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Security and Justice and Development (MFA, 2013, 17).

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION: FROM LESSONS INCORPORATED TO LESSONS IMPLEMENTED?**

Based on the available information on the Dutch contribution to MINUSMA, there are strong indications that many of the lessons learned from the experience in Afghanistan have been adopted in the planning the contribution to the mission in Mali. There is repeated reference to integral planning in the mission design, and the importance of a comprehensive approach in the overall implementation of MINUSMA's mandate, based on a firmly embedded civilian component coordinated with, yet separate from the military element. In response to the need for a permanent capacity to address the civilian dimension of post-conflict and crisis challenges in the host nation, both the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense have established rosters that will provide civilian expertise that is deployable with short notice.

However, at this stage the conclusion only extends to the observation that many of the lessons learned from Afghanistan are incorporated to the extent that they fit the deployment to Mali, which is more limited in terms of ambition, time and resources, and more military in composition than both the mission in Uruzgan and police training mission in Kunduz. Moreover, in anticipation of the ISF as the guiding document for MINUSMA, an overarching strategic guideline is still lacking to frame the Dutch contribution. Practically, the deployment of forces and equipment is still an ongoing process, and until a fully operational intelligence and reconnaissance force is established, little can be observed in terms of operationalization of the comprehensive approach in the context of MINUSMA.

In conclusion, the enduring value of the lessons learned from Afghanistan is clearly present in the planning of the Dutch contribution to Mali, and as such can be considered lessons incorporated. Yet, given the impending release of the ISF, along with the intelligence and reconnaissance forces reaching operational status, this developing situation requires close observation and evaluation before reaching a conclusion on how the incorporated lessons manifest themselves as lessons implemented.

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