

Afghanistan Lessons Learned Process

Following the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and security forces in August 2021, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proposed to the North Atlantic Council that NATO conduct a comprehensive assessment of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan lessons learned process, launched in September, included both operational-military and political reviews, each covering the full timeline of NATO's involvement, from the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 and the invocation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, to the evacuation from Kabul. As such, it covered the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) combat mission (2003–2014) and NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to train, advise, and assist the Afghan security forces (2015–2021).

In addition to the military lessons learned process using established processes for NATO missions, the International Staff led a comprehensive review together with NATO Allies and Resolute Support Mission Operational Partners. This included the participation of 19 experts providing historical, political, operational, and cultural perspectives on NATO's involvement. NATO held seven meetings of the Deputy Permanent Representative Committee, with sessions dedicated to discussions of key events and drivers in NATO's engagement, as well as key takeaways.

The Chair of the Deputy Permanent Representative Committee Afghanistan lessons learned meetings produced a report summarizing these discussions, which was reviewed and discussed by the North Atlantic Council at Permanent Representatives and Foreign Ministers levels. The Chair's report does not reflect a consensus view of NATO Allies and Partners, but is an attempt to capture the broad conclusions and recommendations as discussed among Allies and experts during this process. These key conclusions and recommendations are outlined below and are intended to inform NATO's political and military leaders as they consider and direct future crisis management operations.

Over the years, hundreds of thousands of Allied and partner nation military and civilian personnel served in Afghanistan. Thousands lost their lives, and many others suffered visible and invisible wounds. As we continue to learn the lessons of our engagement, we must honour their service and sacrifice, and that of all the Afghans who have stood with us.

Key Conclusions and Recommendations

NATO's engagement in Afghanistan demonstrates the immense strength of Allies working in pursuit of a common goal. The political power, cohesion and combined military capabilities of the Alliance on display in Afghanistan remains unrivalled and must be preserved as the Alliance enters a more dangerous and complex global security environment. Crisis management should therefore remain a core Alliance task.

The international community as a whole made massive investments in Afghanistan. In sum, this established a level of ambition which went far beyond degrading terrorist safe havens. NATO made significant gains in the fight against terrorism. However, the wider ambition of building a stable Afghanistan, while not without important gains, proved extremely challenging.

When planning and conducting future operations, Allies should continuously assess strategic interests, remain acutely aware of the dangers of mission expansion, and seek to avoid taking on commitments that go well beyond assigned tasks. NATO should establish realistic and achievable goals and seek increased participation by other international actors who are better suited to deliver those non-military effects.

NATO's missions in Afghanistan drove the political integration and military interoperability of Allied and Partner forces, thus increasing the Alliance's overall political strength and combat capabilities. NATO should consider how to maintain the level of military interoperability and political dialogue gained by working with Operational Partners in Afghanistan.

Future NATO train, advise and assist missions should carefully consider the political and cultural norms of the host nation and the ability of that society to absorb capacity building and training.

Reporting from the field during the ISAF and Resolute Support eras was frequently delayed and encumbered by procedures, thus making it difficult for Allies to effectively evaluate and provide relevant direction for the mission. Allies would have benefitted for more meaningful discussions on the negotiations of the US-Taliban agreement. At the same time, the consultations in February-March this year on the future of our mission were open, sincere and clear. Allies should consider mechanisms to improve the timeliness and relevance of reporting from the field and for more interactive discussions in the Council.

NATO Allies demonstrated the capability to carry out a massive evacuation operation under extreme circumstances. However, the evacuation, while supported by NATO, was not conducted under NATO command and control. NATO should consider how to strengthen capabilities to support short-notice non-combatant evacuation operations for the future.

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