

The too many faces of war -- why the war in Afghanistan is so complex

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Conflicting roles among military and civilian personnel is counterproductive to NATO's strategy for peace in Afghanistan, concludes PhD candidate Lillian Katarina Stene after six months in the country.

"We must differentiate better between [military](#) and civil tasks, and present ourselves more clearly," she says.

The former army officer studies civil military coordination in conflicts at the University of Stavanger, Norway's [Risk management](#) and societal safety programme. She has interviewed military colleagues during her stay at the German NATO headquarter in Mazar e Sharif in the North of Afghanistan.

Through participant observation, she has gained access to the inner workings of the NATO forces.

"Since there is no unified way of doing things in Afghanistan, NATO has a problem," Stene says.

Different national caveats and ingrained practices, attitudes, training and interpretations conducts different operational modes among the countries working under the NATO umbrella, she asserts.

"While Americans like to act quickly, Germans and Scandinavians prefer to consider the long-term effects of civil military coordination.

The Americans are likely to dig a well on the spot, while Germans prefer to let the Afghans dig the well themselves."

To connect local structures and military intentions, designated civil military coordination (CIMIC) units are set up within NATO. Their three core functions are to liaise, be a support to the civil environment and the military force. They contribute by assessment of villages and supporting basic infrastructure such as roads, water and bridges when needed.

"Civil military coordination is about working behind the scenes, and handing over tasks to the Afghans," says Stene. She worked as a CIMIC officer herself during her time in the country.

"It is vital to gain insight into people's real needs, and to involve local projects and contractors. Building schools may not always be the answer to everything," she says.

In her opinion, too little effort is put into long-term planning for reconstructing the country.

"If local structures are not sufficiently developed, I'm afraid we are building a house of cards which will fall down after we have left," she says.

"The war in Afghanistan cannot be won by military means. There are only political solutions to crises and conflicts. The Afghan people itself, through its leaders and representatives, must take the lead in finding a solution. Which is quite a challenge as the international community – meaning the UN, NATO's coalition forces and numerous governmental and non-governmental organisations – are all deeply involved in the development of the country," says Stene.

She believes the military alliance's 'comprehensive approach' is counterproductive to both civilian and military parties operating in Afghanistan, since this strategy enables role conflicts among them.

"The military is the prolonged arm of politics, but soldiers are neither politicians nor aid workers. Never the less, the NATO strategy presupposes interference with civilian life. This gives rise to concern, and it is not an easy task to win the 'hearts and minds' of local people," Stene asserts.

As long as war skirmishes are taking place within and among local inhabitants, many will maintain that there is no alternative to this strategy. This perception is maybe the greatest challenge of all, according to Stene.

When grey zones between military and civilian participants appear, it is harder for locals to separate the two groups, and to establish who does what. Aid workers, whose safety depends on being trusted by the local communities, may be seen as representatives of the occupation force, and thus become more vulnerable. A case in point is the dramatic increase in the killing of aid workers over the last years.

"It is vital to separate between strictly humanitarian organizations, whose task it is to supply basic utilities such as water, food and medicines to everyone in need – regardless of who they are – and international or independent organizations which are building schools and infrastructure and cultivate land in compliance with the international community's or the Afghan government's development plans," Stene says.

When some of these organizations profess to be impartial, while simultaneously running development projects paid for by Afghan authorities and the international community, they are not considered neutral by local inhabitants. Such organizations suffer more frequent

attacks, and their security situation is deteriorating.

As military forces continue to build infrastructure and cooperate closely with large civilian organizations, it may be very difficult for local people to distinguish between the different actors' roles and mandates. Since many civilians have lost their lives during the war, this fact has of course contributed to the growing skepticism towards the international community among Afghans.

Although Afghanistan is a war-torn country with war-weary inhabitants, Stene thinks there is light at the end of the tunnel. But the key to a peaceful solution does not necessarily lie in the withdrawal of foreign troops, as President Hamid Karzai and NATO's leadership now have agreed on. She thinks stability is possible to enforce with more troops present. In Stene's opinion, NATO is too top-heavy today.

"We are missing boots on the ground," the former major says.

Compared to the number of NATO soldiers present in Kosovo, there are far fewer soldiers in an area the same size in Afghanistan. Another challenge for the alliance is the extensive rotation of staff. Short stays inhibit cooperation and the building of trust between the parties.

"Building trust takes time. In order to succeed in Afghanistan, we have to spend time in the country and perform our tasks in accordance with the Afghans' terms," Stene says.

Provided by University of Stavanger

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