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REPORT

DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND LESSONS LEARNED

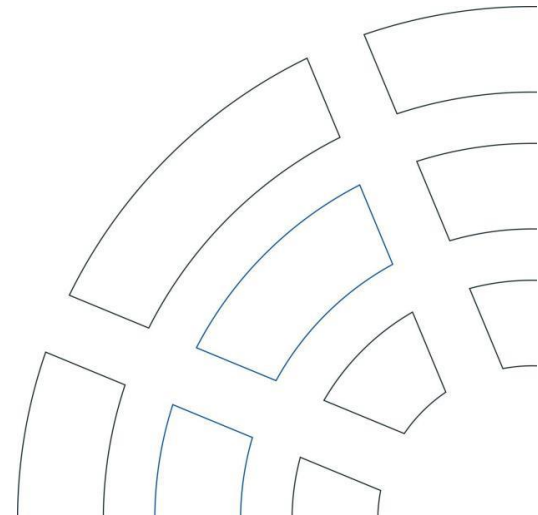
Report

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Founded in 1955, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly acts as a consultative interparliamentary organisation which is institutionally separate from NATO. This report was adopted by the Committee at the 68th Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. It is based on information from publicly available sources or NATO PA meetings – which are all unclassified.



In August 2021, Allied and partner engagement in Afghanistan came to a sudden end, culminating in one of the largest airlift evacuation efforts in history. While the 20-year engagement by Allies and their partners in Afghanistan successfully prevented new terrorist attacks against Allies originating from the country, their broader nation-building efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

Unfortunately, post-NATO Afghanistan has been mired in spiralling economic turmoil, which has sparked a broader humanitarian crisis in which the overwhelming majority of the population finds itself facing acute food insecurity. In addition, the Taliban leadership in Kabul have increasingly been returning to form by reimposing draconian restrictions across civil society. Further, the Taliban's partnership with the Haqqani Network, a designated terrorist organisation, has raised concerns among experts that terrorist groups sheltering in the country, especially al Qaeda, may soon be able to reflourish and be capable of launching attacks from Afghan territory. The explosive socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan as well as the revelation of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul should remind policymakers that it would be a grave mistake to ignore the developments in and around Afghanistan.

This report reviews Allies' engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 and draws attention to some of the challenges facing post-NATO Afghanistan, such as the economic and humanitarian crisis, new restrictions for women and girls, and a rising terrorist threat. This report assesses Allied engagement by outlining mission successes and failures, as well as reviews some of the initial lessons learned.

The final part is dedicated to Allied Parliamentary Assessments of Afghanistan and draws some broader recommendations for Allied parliamentarians. This report approves of the central findings of NATO's lessons learned reviews and highlights the added value of stronger parliamentary oversight within the civil-military nexus in NATO missions and operations. Moreover, the report calls for a comparative approach in reviewing all crisis management operations.

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I- INTRODUCTION

1. Allied and partner efforts in Afghanistan came to a sudden conclusion in August 2021. According to the decision of NATO foreign and defence ministers on 15 April 2021, the withdrawal of all remaining forces from the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan was to be completed by 11 September 2021. However, the rapidly advancing Taliban summer offensive against the collapsing Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) resulted in the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021, which in turn unleashed a rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis. The following two weeks were marked by the frenzy of the Allied-led Kabul airlift, during which Allied and partner forces executed the large-scale evacuation of over 120,000 foreign nationals and vulnerable Afghan citizens by 30 August. This was one of the largest airlift evacuation efforts in history.

2. The international efforts in Afghanistan were ultimately unsuccessful in facilitating a stable and functioning Afghan state, and the execution of the withdrawal was widely judged as flawed, affecting the reputation of the Alliance and raising serious questions, particularly about the overconfidence in the ability of the Afghan institutions and security forces to resist. However, NATO did deliver on its original mission of ensuring no new terrorist attacks against Allies originated from Afghanistan. Yet, as NATO officials also note, the terrorist challenge has evolved significantly since Allies first went into Afghanistan, justifying the withdrawal and shift in tactics and focus of the Alliance's terrorism policy.¹

3. Russia's unjustified and barbaric invasion of Ukraine has opened a new chapter in modern history and somewhat shifted the international attention away from other real or potential hotspots, including Afghanistan. There is one reference to Afghanistan in NATO's new Strategic Concept, although the Concept does prioritise the fight against terrorism as one of the key tasks for NATO. The explosive socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan as well as the revelation of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul should remind policymakers that it would be a grave mistake to ignore the developments in and around Afghanistan.

4. Throughout the tragic period leading up to the withdrawal as well as in its wake, the Assembly expressed deep concern about the preservation of the significant political, economic, and social gains made by Afghan citizens, especially women and girls, since 2001. Members of the Assembly's Bureau held a [meeting](#) on 28 July 2021 with members of the National Assembly of Afghanistan (*Wolesi Jirga*) to discuss the security situation, the intra-Afghan peace process and the way forward. At its Annual session in Lisbon, the Assembly endorsed a 2021 [resolution](#), *Learning the Lessons of NATO's Engagement in Afghanistan*, which urges member governments and parliaments of the North Atlantic Alliance "to conduct a thorough, clear-eyed, and comprehensive assessment of the Alliance's 20-year engagement in Afghanistan" (NATO PA, 2021). The resolution also called for these lessons to be incorporated into NATO's new Strategic Concept and broader 2030 initiative, as well as to harness the NATO PA as a forum for discussion on the issue. In support of this, the following report will review Allies' engagement in Afghanistan, highlight some of the challenges facing post-NATO Afghanistan and discuss some of the initial lessons learned, as reported by NATO HQ. It will also review some of the internal assessments, either completed or underway, of Allied parliaments and draw some broader recommendations for Allied parliamentarians.

¹ The DSCTC's 2022 Report, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat: Adapting the Allied Response*, reviews NATO's ongoing adaptation and strengthening of its terrorist policy.

II- THE INTERNATIONAL MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN 2001–2021

5. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and following the request by the new Afghan authorities, the UN authorised the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) on 20 December 2001.² ISAF's initial principal mandate was to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security in and around Kabul for both Afghan officials and UN personnel. By August 2003, again at the request of the Afghan government and the United Nations Security Council, NATO assumed command of ISAF. By 2006, the UN began gradually mandating the expansion of ISAF's remit outside of Kabul eventually to cover the entire country.³

6. By 2007, as ISAF moved to cover the south and east of Afghanistan, Allied and partner forces found themselves increasingly engaged in combat operations in defence of their mission against a growing Taliban-led insurgency. By 2009, Allies and partners decided to increase the number of forces supporting ISAF significantly to engage in a broader counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign (NATO, 2021a). In line with its mandate to support the government in Kabul, ISAF worked with the ANDSF to conduct COIN operations across the country to degrade insurgent forces' capabilities and deny them territory.

7. The ISAF coalition was among the largest in history. Over the timeframe of its existence, armed forces from 51 Allied and partner nations participated in its mission. At its peak, ISAF's total force structure surpassed 130,000 (NATO, 2021a).

8. To see through an anticipated future security transition, ISAF made capability development of the ANDSF a priority. By 2011, the training, advising, and assisting of the ANDSF became the central focus of ISAF's mission, with the goal of transitioning full responsibility for security across the country to the ANDSF by the end of 2014 (NATO, 2021a). As the ANDSF came closer to its goal, international forces in ISAF were reduced in parallel. In a coordinated manner, Allies and partners transitioned security responsibility in Afghanistan to the ANDSF by tranches – the transition of the fifth and final tranche was announced on 18 June 2013. The transition was completed in December 2014. NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) took over as a non-combat, train, advise and assist mission in 2015 and continued to help build ANDSF capacity until 2021. In this regard, many Allies have contributed to the mission in Afghanistan, for instance Türkiye had carried out the task of providing the safety and ensuring the operations of the Kabul International Airport between 2015–2021 as part of the RSM.

9. Both ISAF and RSM worked to create the security conditions necessary to allow for reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan. ISAF itself contributed to the effort via multinational Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) – led by individual ISAF nations – which secured the areas and assisted with reconstruction and development efforts directly when possible.⁴ More broadly, these efforts allowed the international community to work with the Afghan government to strengthen its governing institutions and to improve the broader socio-economic conditions throughout the country.

² ISAF was established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 and pursuant to the Bonn Agreement.

³ ISAF was technically not a UN force, but rather a UN-mandated international force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. A subsequent 18 UNSC Resolutions were issued related to ISAF's mission and mandate.

⁴ All PRTs were phased out or their functions handed over to either the Afghan government or an IO or NGO operating in the country by 2014.

10. The international effort to create an environment conducive to lasting security and stability in Afghanistan expanded far beyond NATO's ISAF. A broad international coalition worked in parallel to ISAF's attempts to develop and transition Afghanistan's security institutions to promote good governance, the rule of law and sustainable development practices. As such, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the World Bank, Allies' and partners' international aid and development agencies, the European Union and many other organisations and actors worked with the Afghan government and people to build a more prosperous future.

11. These efforts certainly paid significant dividends. Over the time horizon of NATO and partner forces' presence in the country, Afghanistan witnessed remarkable changes across all sectors: life expectancy rates soared under the health care system renewal, literacy rates also rose significantly and a vibrant media took root (The Economist, 2022a). Maternal mortality was cut in half, the share of girls enrolled in primary school moved from 0 to 85%, and women's participation in the labour force had reached 22% (Flacks & Burke, 2022).

12. These efforts, however, were undermined by several factors. Among the most significant were: poor quality of governance, the high levels of corruption that undermined institution-building efforts across all sectors; the persistence of insurgent-led violence which often degraded nascent development efforts; a domestic economy dependent almost entirely on foreign aid inflows; and a lack of clear objectives by Allies and partners for mission completion.

13. As such, development efforts never established deep roots, institutions were born deficient and public allegiance to the nascent democratic state was weak, if not hostile. As the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) noted in his August 2021 lessons learned report, pervasive levels of corruption throughout the nation's defence institutions undermined its effectiveness on the battlefield, which in turn allowed a consistent level of violence to disrupt progress in development initiatives – over time, this led to a hollowing out of the structure and capacity of the ANDSF, which only further fuelled the momentum of the insurgency (SIGAR, 2021). As US Ambassador Ryan Crocker said, "The ultimate point of failure of our efforts wasn't an insurgency, it was the weight of endemic corruption" (SIGAR, 2021).

14. In this setting, an increasingly resilient and capable Taliban gained ground against the ANDSF steadily from 2014 onward. Political infighting among Kabul elites demonstrated what critics called a wilful distraction from the genuine growing challenge to the state by the Taliban-led insurgency on the battlefield and the growing popular support behind it (CFR, 2021). By 2018, the Taliban controlled nearly 70 per cent of Afghanistan's territory, accounting for 50 per cent of the population (BBC, 2018). In the same year, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani began making overtures for peace with the Taliban. The United States also began its own peace process with the Taliban. This process, however, excluded the Kabul government and culminated in the signing of the Doha Accords in 2020, establishing a framework for the withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan in return for a Taliban agreement to prevent al Qaeda from operating in areas under their control and to continue talks with the Ghani government in Kabul.

15. One of the conclusions of NATO's lessons learned process conducted in late 2021 was a lack of more "meaningful discussions [among the Allies] on the negotiations of the US-Taliban agreement" (NATO, 2021d). The US did engage, however, in open and sincere consultations with other Allies in February–March 2021 (NATO, 2021d). Following these consultations in April 2021, US President Biden announced the withdrawal of all remaining forces by 11 September 2021 (NATO, 2021c). With waning international support, an unstable government unwilling to take the steps necessary to defend the country and a resurgent Taliban, Afghan security forces began capitulating en masse, leading to rapid Taliban advances across the country (Boot, 2021). According to the office of SIGAR, the dramatic reduction of US air strikes after the signing of the US-Taliban agreement "left the ANDSF without a key advantage in keeping the Taliban at bay" (SIGAR, May 2022). The Taliban were able to besiege towns where Afghan troops were

garrisoned and cut off all supplies of food, pay and ammunition. It is hardly surprising that they all either surrendered or reached accommodation with the Taliban. As a tragic dénouement to the almost two-decade venture in Afghanistan, Taliban fighters entered Kabul in August 2021, led by Mohammed Yaqoob, son of Mullah Omar, the deceased former leader and founder of the movement, and recaptured the state by August 15. The rapid deterioration of the security situation resulted in tens of thousands of Afghan citizens along with thousands of foreign nationals seeking to flee the Taliban.

16. NATO Allies immediately responded to assist with the evacuation of at-risk Afghans, particularly those who had worked with Allies and their partners over the previous two decades, as well as the international community remaining in the country. Between 15–30 August 2021, Allies evacuated over 120,000 people from Hamid Karzai International Airport. Besides the US, many Allies, including most notably the UK, Germany, Italy, Canada and France (Reuters, 2021), helped evacuate thousands of their own citizens as well as Afghans out of the country during that period. Türkiye, the United States and the United Kingdom were critical to maintaining the security of Kabul International Airport (Bearden, 2021). NATO's close partner and aspirant country Georgia has also significantly contributed to the evacuation process and the Tbilisi International Airport has been serving as the transit hub for NATO aircraft engaged in evacuation activities. Other NATO partners including Qatar, the UAE and Australia also provided invaluable support to the evacuation operation (Reuters, 2021). The Kabul airlift serves as one of the largest and most successful airlifts in history (Lawrence, 2021; Bearden, 2021).

III- THE AFTERMATH: AFGHANISTAN IN 2022

17. The Taliban takeover may have brought to an end the high levels of fighting and violence that millions of Afghans, especially in rural areas, have been exposed to for years,⁵ but it also brought a rapid decline of political, socio-economic and human rights conditions in the country. Despite initial speculations that the Taliban, headed by its obscure leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, might be open to forming a more inclusive government, the group chose to rely on loyalists from its own ranks. The government is all-male and predominantly Pashtun. Many of its members are on a terrorist-related US sanctions list, including the acting interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, wanted by the US as the leader of the Haqqani network, responsible for numerous attacks against American and other international targets (CRS, 2022). The Taliban has staffed state institutions with unqualified loyalists over experienced civil servants, undermining the competence and effectiveness of the Afghan state (The Economist, 2022b).

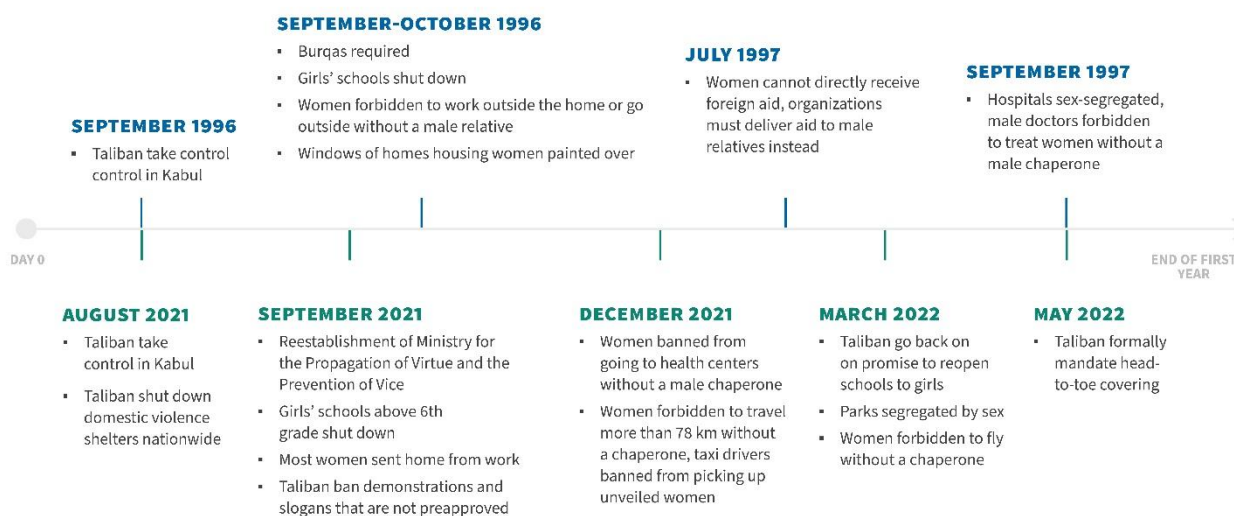
18. Since August 2021, the Taliban has also been accused of forcibly disappearing and executing former government officials and alleged militants. Human Rights Watch documented a canal in eastern Afghanistan where over 100 bodies – many displaying signs of torture and mutilation – were dumped between August and December 2021 (HRW, 2022). While, according to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, most attacks against former government employees appeared to be happening “at a local level” and were not “centrally directed” (CRS, 2022), the Taliban were unwilling and/or unable to counter these attacks. As technocrats and professionals continue to flee out of fear of retribution for working for the ousted Kabul government, the country's

⁵ According to Crisis Group, the number of violent incidents such as armed clashes and explosions, dropped fivefold during the first ten months of the Taliban rule, compared with the same period the previous year. - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/326-afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>

human capital is also diminishing rapidly, making effective, stable governance in Afghanistan an even more complicated task.

19. As was feared, soon after taking the control of the country, the Taliban began implementing its ultra-conservative social agenda, which had a detrimental effect on the rights and the status of women and girls. The Taliban forbade young women from returning to secondary school. Other regulations are now severely restricting or eliminating women and girls from public and professional life across the country (The Economist, 2022a). The regime also reinstated “the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice”. Afghan women's march on 15 August 2022 demanding economic rights and political inclusion was ruthlessly suppressed by the authorities. In June 2022, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet noted that the Taliban’s school ban affects 1.1 million secondary school girls. She also criticised other decrees, such as enforcing a strict hijab rule, barring women from taking part in public, economic and political life, severely restricting their freedom of movement and access to health services and humanitarian aid. She concluded that “what we are witnessing in Afghanistan today is the institutionalised, systematic oppression of women” (UN, 2022). Eliminating secondary education for young women has had consequences: the United States pulled out of talks in Doha, at which funding for education was to be discussed; and the World Bank has put USD 600 million worth of development projects on hold (The Economist, 2022a).

Timeline of Taliban Restrictions on Human Rights



Source: Authors' compilation based on multiple sources.

20. Following the departure of the airlift's last flight on 30 August 2021, the international funding supporting more than three quarters of the previous government's budget came to an abrupt halt. The United States, along with a significant number of its Allies and international partners, immediately imposed a range of strict sanctions on the Taliban and its leadership in Kabul, prohibiting direct financial transactions with it. In addition, the United States froze access to the majority of the almost USD 10 billion in reserves of the central bank of Afghanistan (Savage, 2022).

21. As a result of the Taliban takeover and the subsequent isolation of Afghanistan from the international economy and direct financial aid, Afghanistan plunged into economic chaos that unleashed a currency crisis, widespread poverty and the almost total collapse of other governmental services from health to education (Mellen and Ledur, 2022). The UN estimated that between August 2021–June 2022, the Afghan economy contracted by 30-40%, and warned that poverty level could reach 97% by the end of 2022 (UNAMA, 2022). Coupled with the worst drought in over 30 years, the World Food Program reported, in August 2022, that 92% of Afghans did not have enough to eat, up from the 80% on the eve of the Taliban takeover (CRS, 2022). According to UNICEF, more than 1 million Afghan children require treatment for severe acute malnutrition (CRS, 2022). The humanitarian crisis was exacerbated further by a 6.1 magnitude earthquake that struck near the country's border with Pakistan on 22 June (Reuters, 2022). The true extent of the devastation of the earthquake is unknown, but it is estimated to have killed over 1,000 people, injured many more, and destroyed thousands of homes in some of the poorest and most remote areas of Afghanistan (IRC, 2022). To escape the escalating poverty, more than a million Afghans fled into neighbouring Iran and Pakistan between October 2021 and January 2022, adding to the 2.2 million already registered in those countries by the UN prior to the Taliban seizure of power (Goldbaum and Akbary, 2022; UNHCR, 2021).

22. In early October 2021, the EU pledged more than EUR 1 billion in emergency aid to Afghanistan and to neighbouring countries hosting an influx of Afghan refugees (Crowley and Erlanger, 2021). The United States announced another USD 144 million in new humanitarian assistance on 28 October (SIGAR, 2022), and by August 2022, the US provided over USD 900 million in humanitarian assistance to the Afghan population since the Taliban takeover (CRS, 2022). To mitigate the impact of the spiralling situation on the Afghan population, the UN launched an emergency appeal for USD 5 billion in humanitarian aid in January 2022. According to the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, these multilateral measures helped to avert “our worst fears of famine and widespread starvation,” though the situation remains dire (CRS, 2022). After the June 2022 earthquake, the UN appealed for USD 110 million in emergency aid to support those in the affected regions (USAID, 2022). The US announced that it would provide an additional USD 55 million in aid, the UK an additional USD 3 million, and the EU an additional USD 1 million (Menon, 2022).

23. The United States and its Allies and partners across the international community have tried to hew to a delicate line – how to find the ways and means to funnel in support to avoid continued suffering by the Afghan population, while not supporting the Taliban leadership. The United States and some Allies and partners, for example, have made the lifting of sanctions on the Taliban conditions-based – a major set of which being the formation of an inclusive government, as well as full rights for ethnic and confessional minorities and women and girls (DeYoung, 2022). The United Nations continues to push a similar line but stops short of making its efforts in Afghanistan conditions-based. In December 2021, the Security Council introduced, through its Resolution 2615, a humanitarian exemption in the sanctions regime, in order to facilitate the delivery of aid, in accordance with humanitarian principles but without allowing direct support to the regime. of the Taliban (UNSCR, 2021). The Resolution 2626 of 17 March 2022 extending UNAMA's mandate states the importance of “the establishment of an inclusive and representative government” and “the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, and upholding human rights, including for women, children and minorities” (UNSCR, 2022).

24. In late February 2022, the United States government took a step away from its hard line on sanctions and allowed the US Treasury Department to issue a general license to permit the lawful transfer of money to Afghan government agencies and individual civil servants (Savage, 2022). The move is in line with recent US efforts to support more humanitarian aid into the country, as well as commercial and financial activity that would allow for economic activity – all done without the monies finding their way into the pockets of the Taliban leadership or its group activities (Savage, 2022). US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on 11 February 2022 releasing

USD 7 billion in frozen Afghan reserves to be split between humanitarian efforts for the Afghan people and the victims of September 11 attacks. After the June 2022 earthquake, it was reported that the United States also entered negotiations with the Taliban to discuss restoring partial access to the reserves of the Afghan central bank (Stein, 2022). However, following the detection and elimination of al-Zawahiri in Kabul, the Biden administration ruled out releasing USD 3.5 billion in funds held in the US back to Afghanistan's central bank in the foreseeable future, fearing that these funds could fall into terrorist hands (Baker, 2022). Despite reports that the negotiations with the Taliban to discuss the unfreezing of Afghan reserves were suspended following the elimination of al Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri in Kabul, the US administration announced the establishment of the "Afghan Fund" on 14 September 2022 in Switzerland, which enables USD 3.5 billion of Afghan Central Bank reserves to be disbursed to help provide greater stability to the Afghan economy.

25. The Taliban administration is not recognised officially on the international level. However, several important regional and global players openly maintain links with the new regime. These first and foremost include Pakistan, where the Taliban had historically been finding critical support. That said, there are concerns in the Pakistani political establishment that the Taliban's victory may inspire and galvanise Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups. Iran maintains contacts with the Taliban, primarily to ensure the protection of interests of Persian-speaking and Shia minorities. China, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have primarily economic incentives to engage with Afghanistan and signalled acceptance of the Taliban rule (CRS, 2022). Türkiye, the only NATO Ally which kept its embassy in Kabul open following the Taliban takeover, sustained gradual engagement with the Afghan Caretaker Government with a view to continue humanitarian activities and to open space for dialogue with Taliban authorities in order to encourage them to take concrete steps in terms of political inclusivity and fundamental human rights, including girls' education. India also kept some diplomatic representation in Kabul and engaged with the new authorities, not least to counter the Pakistani and Chinese influence in Afghanistan (Argwal, 2022). Although Russian legislation designated the Taliban as a terrorist organisation, Moscow has de facto embraced the Taliban takeover, not least because it perceived it as a defeat of its strategic rival, the US. Since, Russia has taken steps to increase economic and diplomatic ties with the new regime (Yawal & Greenfield, 2022) (RFE/RL, 2022). Of Afghanistan's neighbours, Tajikistan has the most concerns about the Taliban takeover, given its ties with the large Afghan Tajik community where the anti-Taliban sentiment has historically been noticeable (CRS, 2022).

IV- THE TERRORIST CHALLENGE IN AFGHANISTAN TODAY

26. It is estimated that between 10,000 to 20,000 foreign fighters went to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 to train in al Qaeda camps (UNODC, 2021). The common arena for training, indoctrination and planning allowed for a generation of international volunteers to unify behind al Qaeda's extremist agenda. It was the most effective safe haven for Salafi Jihadist terrorist groups seeking to export their violence abroad ever witnessed and one that modern groups have been unable to recreate ever since (Byman, 2021).

27. The February 2020 US–Taliban agreement mentioned above does commit the Taliban to break off all ties with al Qaeda and undertake some counterterrorism measures as part of the agreement for the withdrawal of US forces from the country. The degree to which the Taliban intends to honour this agreement is questionable (Clarke, 2021). As noted above, the Taliban and al Qaeda have a long history of cooperation, personal ties between the leadership of the organisations being long-standing sinews. Just prior to the collapse of the Ghani government in Kabul in August 2021, experts concluded al Qaeda was still present in at least 15 Afghan provinces (UN, 2021). Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was residing in an upscale

neighbourhood of the Afghan capital in 2022, and the Taliban was either unwilling or unable to disallow it.

28. A recent report from the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team to the Security Council found that terrorist groups in Afghanistan “enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history” (UNSC, 2022). The example of Sirajuddin Haqqani is often cited as a reason to be concerned as he has a long history of close cooperation with al Qaeda leaders. It is believed that al Qaeda’s numbers in Afghanistan have likely doubled since the Taliban takeover to approximately 400, with new members coming from the region and as far away as Myanmar (Jones, 2022). According to the UN, al Qaeda does not currently have the ability to conduct attacks abroad, but this could change as the organisation recovers under the Taliban regime (UNSC, 2022). The US demonstrated ability to target al Qaeda in Kabul lends weight to the Biden administration’s over-the-horizon approach – which is also shared by NATO – to tackling terrorism in Afghanistan. However, the ability, through this approach, to eliminate larger terrorist cells has yet to be demonstrated (Miller, 2022).

29. At this stage, ISIS’s Afghanistan affiliate, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), is considered to be a more capable and ambitious terrorist grouping operating in Afghanistan (CRS, 2022). Its suicide bombing on 26 August 2021 during the Allied evacuation of Kabul Airport resulted in over 170 dead, of which 13 were US armed service members and over 200 more injured, making it both the deadliest terrorist attack globally in 2021 and in Afghanistan since 2007 (GTI, 2022; Schmitt and Cooper, 2021).

30. Experts also believe the lack of persistent counterterrorism operations by the US and ANDSF has also allowed ISKP to recover (Jones, 2022). Several prison releases after the withdrawal of international forces are believed to have been instrumental in the doubling of the ranks of available ISKP fighters to approximately 4,000. ISKP is reported to have carried out over 70 attacks between mid-September and December 2021 (Jones, 2022). Attacks have continued in 2022 and often target Shia and religious minorities in Afghanistan – one example being an assault on a Sikh temple in June 2022 that killed several (Goldbaum and Rahim, 2022). ISKP’s effectiveness is limited, however, by it being the sworn enemy of both the Taliban and al Qaeda, which has largely forced them to turn their attention to attacking inside of Afghanistan (Byman, 2021).

V- ASSESSMENTS OF ALLIED EFFORTS IN AFGHANISTAN

31. NATO’s twenty years of engagement in Afghanistan revealed both strengths and weaknesses of the Alliance’s ability to organise, lead and conduct an international mission of the size and scope of ISAF. In 2021, after the fall of Kabul to Taliban forces, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proposed to the North Atlantic Council that NATO conduct a comprehensive analysis of NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan (NATO, 2021b). This assessment included both operational-military as well as political reviews covering the entire horizon of the Alliance’s engagement in Afghanistan from the invocation of Article 5 after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 to the last soldier’s departure on 30 August 2021.

32. The review was done in consultation with Allies and operational partners, as well as 19 experts with a range of expertise on the issue. The Deputy Permanent Representative Committee (DPRC) held a series of meetings reviewing the drivers of the operation over its timeline, key milestones and events, as well as key takeaways (NATO, 2021). The Chairman of the DPRC produced a comprehensive report summarising the central findings of the entire review process.

33. There has been a range of reflection processes across the Alliance by individual governments and parliaments to digest the most significant military and political takeaways. Such reviews are crucial accounting not only to understand better the significant investments in blood and treasure made by each Allied nation and their partners, but also the Afghan personnel who served alongside them in the attempt to give Afghanistan a more inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous future for all Afghans. These records can serve to shape both political and military policy responses in the run-up to and during future potential crisis responses.

34. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly also played its part: it has been producing reports on various aspects of the mission in Afghanistan almost on an annual basis since 2001; Assembly delegations visited Afghanistan regularly until the end of the ISAF mission; Assembly members received regular briefings on the situation in Afghanistan from senior NATO officials and experts, including – more recently – from the NATO Head of Operations during the 2021 Annual Session and leading US experts at the annual Transatlantic Parliamentary Forum in 2021; finally, in its contribution to the new Strategic Concept, the Assembly recommends to better define the parameters of NATO's engagement and to set clear, achievable, realistic goals, benchmarks and timelines.

VI- WHAT WENT RIGHT

35. **Counterterrorism Mission:** after the collapse of the Western-backed government in Afghanistan in August 2021, Stoltenberg reassured the Allies that “NATO's mission in Afghanistan was not in vain... for over twenty years there have been no terrorist attacks on our countries organised from Afghanistan” (NATO, 2021b). The reduction of the terrorist threat in Afghanistan does indeed underscore the success of ISAF's counterterrorism mission.

36. The immediate military intervention led by the United States significantly disrupted and degraded al Qaeda's large-scale and successful base of operations in Afghanistan in a matter of months. The subsequent counterterrorism mission proved successful in denying the re-establishment of this base of operations, effectively curtailing the group's ability to plan and launch attacks against NATO Allies ever since. As noted above, tens of thousands of foreign fighters were welcomed to pre-9/11 Taliban-ruled Afghanistan for training and indoctrination by al Qaeda. The group's safe haven was well resourced with open governmental support, allowing for the undisturbed space and time needed to plan the most horrendous terrorist attack in history. As experts note, while multiple safe havens exist today, they are smaller, scattered, under constant pressure and as a result, incapable of rivalling pre-9/11 Afghanistan (Byman, 2021). As noted above, it is true no terrorist attack was planned or conducted from Afghanistan since 9/11.

37. **Crisis Response:** ISAF and RSM validated NATO's ability to conduct long-term, sustained expeditionary combat operations outside of Europe. In his address at the Riga ministerial meeting in November of 2021, Stoltenberg emphasised that only “NATO had the capacity and political will to conduct this massive and complex crisis management operation” (NATO, 2021b). Indeed, the existing structure of the Alliance and the degree of interoperability between Allied militaries proved a valued asset in an operation of the size and scope of ISAF.

38. Both ISAF and RSM also had the effect of significantly improving the political cohesion and military interoperability of NATO Allies and partners over the twenty years of engagement in Afghanistan (NATO, 2021a). As Allies have stressed, “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” (NATO, 2021d). As NATO enters the post-Afghanistan era, the ability to organise, lead and execute crisis response operations of this size and scope will remain a fundamental priority for the

Alliance. In the new Strategic Concept, Allies have committed to “build[ing] on the unique capabilities and expertise we have acquired in crisis management”.

39. Further, the expanded and deep partnership network resulting from the decades of cooperation in Afghanistan is an essential pillar of Allies’ broader efforts to project stability. Cooperative security outreach in Afghanistan, and the wide range of military interoperability benefits it generated, expanded networks to build better situational awareness and synchronised approaches to handle the complex array of challenges in today’s international security environment.

40. But there are two key lessons to learn from Afghanistan for future NATO operations.

VII- WHAT WENT WRONG

41. **Mission Creep:** After the success of the initial invasion and the counterterrorism mission that followed, NATO’s level of ambition grew larger than its original mandate. As Secretary General Stoltenberg commented, “the international community, including NATO, the UN, and the EU and other actors, raised the level of ambition to nation-building” (NATO, 2021b). Experts refer to this concept as mission creep, or the “gradual shift in objectives during the course of a military campaign, often resulting in an unplanned long-term commitment” (OED, 2022). When ISAF was initially deployed, its UNSC-mandated mission remained restricted to “maintaining the security in Kabul and its surrounding areas” (UNSC, 2001). By 2013, however, ISAF’s mission expanded to cover the whole of Afghanistan with more broad nation-building goals to “support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development” (NATO, 2021a). What began as a mission to establish security within Kabul in 2001, developed into nation-wide civil-military stabilisation, development assistance and counterinsurgency operations by 2013 (Beljan, 2013). It is easy to understand why the mission creep occurred: Allies and partners believed they could not withdraw their forces without the Afghan government establishing its authority throughout the country. The continued insurgency made this a significant challenge requiring a multitude of parallel tasks from counterinsurgency to capacity building to nation-building in order to create the secure environment necessary for the full transition.

42. Because the mission evolved as it progressed, however, the Alliance struggled to develop a coherent strategy or to define what a successful mission would entail; in doing so, the Allies faced challenges in determining how much time and resources various nation-building projects required, how to staff and tailor each project to the specific Afghan context and how to account for the challenges posed by the highly dynamic security situation in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2021). As a result, while NATO served as the best standing multilateral organisation to organise and coordinate the military mission of ISAF, unchecked mission creep turned the Afghanistan nation-building project into a Sisyphean task. That said, the extraordinary multinational and multi-institutional effort to help Afghanistan turn into an at least partially functioning modern state with basic infrastructure and education and health care opportunities was a noble endeavour, even if ultimately unsuccessful.

43. **Inefficient Communications and Lessons Learned:** The demands of the ongoing mission detracted NATO, individual Allies and NATO partners from communicating effectively with one another. According to a study conducted by the professional journal of the US Army, bureaucratic processes within the Alliance resulted in a top-down planning approach that prevented effective communication between individual Allies (Bazin and Kunertova, 2018). Reaching a consensus within a diverse alliance of thirty members is no small task. But improving organisational processes and reducing bureaucratic obstacles may help better facilitate communication between Allies when faced with large, complex missions.

44. Further, inefficient communication between NATO, individual Allies and NATO partners prevented the development of an effective “lessons learned” framework over the course of the broader effort in Afghanistan. This prevented potentially beneficial and necessary in-mission adaptations from occurring over the years. As the Head of NATO Operations told Assembly members during the 2021 Annual Session, honest reports were emerging from the field in Afghanistan, but by the time they were processed by NATO bodies and placed in the hands of policymakers, their sharper assessments were smoothed out and their insights – upon which policymakers rely for decision-making – were unfortunately reduced.

45. Not all individual Allies engage in the lessons learned process. For the members who do, their approaches differ. For example, the United States regularly engages in lessons learned processes within the various branches of its armed forces and at the national level during operations (US Army Combined Arms Center, 2022). Other members wait until operations have concluded before starting the lessons learned process. NATO can help mitigate these differences and develop a unified, Alliance-wide approach to applying lessons learned, which would get the Alliance as a whole more involved in the collection and circulation of strategic knowledge on crisis management.

46. NATO does maintain a dedicated lessons learned process, as discussed during the 2021 Annual Session with leadership from the Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) (NATO, 2022). Experts argue, however, that elites within the Alliance and Allied states are more likely to opt for informal processes (e.g. interpersonal networks), rather than the established formal processes (Hardt, 2018). This is attributed to individuals seeking to avoid “reputational risk” and “career consequences” (Hardt, 2018). As a result, the lessons learned process is underutilised and institutional memory therefore largely fails to accrue. Developing more efficient communication processes and a common lessons learned approach that protects the individuals engaging in difficult discussions is essential to any future mission or operation.

47. Finally, as members of the Assembly also heard from the NATO Head of Operations during the 2021 Annual Session, in addition to the above, another lesson to be incorporated relates to the too accommodating deference military officers received in NATO Headquarters. While respect for the military leadership’s perspective and views is essential, he said, showing too much deference can unfortunately have the unwanted consequence of impeding the critical reflection for timely and necessary political decision-making in Afghanistan.

VIII-NATO’S MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

48. The comprehensive report published by the Chairman of the DPRC was presented at the 30 November–1 December 2021 NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Riga, Latvia. The whole report remains classified, but a factsheet outlining several principal recommendations for the Alliance’s political and military leaders to consider for future crisis management operations was released. The recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- First, crisis management should remain as a core task of NATO. The report highlights the importance of preserving the political power, unity and combined military power of Allies during their efforts over two decades in Afghanistan, especially as NATO faces a more “dangerous and complex global security environment” today and over the horizon (NATO, 2021d).
 - The report does conclude, however, that Allies should continuously reassess their strategic interests at stake in any future mission, with the understanding of the jeopardy of mission creep. Allies must, therefore, establish realistic and achievable goals and,

when necessary, seek greater assistance from those international actors more capable of achieving any ulterior desired non-military effects.

- This is a direct recognition of the challenges of the mission when it went beyond the degradation of terrorist safe havens, which, as noted above, can be considered a success. Expanding to nation-building and seeking to create lasting stability and prosperity in Afghanistan proved to be too much.
- Second, NATO should focus on maintaining the level of interoperability between Allied and NATO partner militaries, as well as the substantial gain of partnership cooperation.
 - As Assembly members have heard time and again during visits to NATO commands and operations and in meetings with NATO officials and commanders, the value of increased interoperability among Allied and partner forces cannot be underestimated. It serves as a significant force multiplier at the political and military levels. The longevity of the Afghanistan mission served as a kind of multigenerational learning instrument for Allied and partner forces on the how and how not of working together efficiently.
- Third, in future train, advise and assist missions, NATO should carefully assess the politics, cultural norms and national capacity to absorb nation-building projects of the host country.
- Fourth, NATO should develop its capability to conduct short-notice, large-scale crisis response operations, such as the Afghan airlift of 2021.
 - The Kabul airlift was supported by NATO, but was not under NATO command and control. This is a key element discussed often during the burden sharing debate – it is time for more Allies to either invest in these vital resources directly, or pool and share their resources to do so collectively.

49. At the Foreign Ministers Meeting, Ministers agreed with the report's assessment that NATO's engagement in Afghanistan demonstrated immense capacity and military capabilities and that in an increasingly complex security environment, crisis management should remain a core task for NATO. NATO Ministers also agreed to maintain efforts to fight terrorism, including through increased efforts at training and capacity building with partners.

50. The new Strategic Concept retains crisis management (and prevention) as one of the three core tasks for NATO. The Allies committed to allocating "the resources, capabilities, training, and command and control arrangements to deploy and sustain military and civilian crisis management, stabilisation and counterterrorism operations, including at strategic distance". Terrorism was identified as a "threat" – the only other threat to NATO next to Russia's aggressive actions. In the Strategic Concept, NATO reaffirmed its resolve to "continue to counter, deter, defend and respond to threats and challenges posed by terrorist groups", including through enhanced cooperation with the international partners. That said, prominent experts such as Thierry Tardy, Director of the Research Division at the NATO Defense College, argue that the new Strategic Concept prioritises the Russian threat over the threat of terrorism and the task of collective defence over the task of crisis management, while struggling to "convey a clear message regarding NATO's added value" in these areas (NDC, 2022).

Allied Parliamentary Assessments Of Afghanistan

51. In January of 2022, the Dutch Parliament, in cooperation with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, conducted a survey of how various Allied parliaments are reflecting on their countries' participation and contributions to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Twenty Allies responded to the

survey, revealing significant variation in the involvement of national parliaments in the reflection process. The level of comprehensiveness of individual reflection processes tends to correlate with the degree to which a country contributed to the NATO mission in Afghanistan.

52. In most cases, the reflection process only took place on the governmental level. Judging from the responses, only the US, Germany and Canada established dedicated parliamentary bodies to investigate their country's experience in Afghanistan. The US stands out in particular, establishing the Afghanistan War Commission with a mandate to "study [...] all matters relating to combat operations, reconstruction and security force assistance activities, intelligence activities, and diplomatic activities of the United States" in Afghanistan (United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2022). The Commission consists of 16 congressionally appointed members – on a bipartisan basis – and is tasked to produce annual progress reports to the appropriate congressional committees, as well as a final report within three years, containing findings, recommendations and lessons learned.

53. In some cases – Bulgaria, France, Italy, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Slovenia, the UK and the US – relevant parliamentary committees held discussions or hearings on lessons learned from Afghanistan. The British parliament has been particularly active in this regard and the House of Lords' International Relations and Defence Committee published a comprehensive report several months before the withdrawal of UK forces, where legislators warned that, inter alia, "There is a real risk that the principal national security challenges still posed by Afghanistan, namely terrorism, narcotics and regional instability, could worsen, and the gains made since 2001 could be lost" (UK House of Lords, 2021).

54. The US and UK legislatures' highly competent research services have produced important analytical papers on the lessons learned from Afghanistan. The Congressional Research Service's (CRS) initial analysis published in September 2021 highlighted the problem of "campaign continuity": while most observers agreed that Afghanistan would likely require a long-term approach, the focus on morale and welfare of servicemembers resulted in short deployment cycles. As a result, "the United States did not fight one 20-year war, rather, it fought 20 one-year wars". Congressional researchers recommended US policymakers to consider "alternative methods to mitigate the US structural bias toward short-term campaign mindsets" (McInnis and Feickert, 2021).

55. In the UK, the House of Commons Library produces regular reports on Afghanistan, objectively reporting on the positions of relevant stakeholders, while refraining from offering policy recommendations to decision-makers. The authors of the research brief published on 17 August 2021 present not only the UK or Western assessments of the Taliban's return to power, but also note that "the Taliban is not entirely isolated on the international stage" and cite the positions of Pakistan, Russia, China and India (Mills, 2021).

56. Although Canada ended its military presence in Afghanistan in 2014, the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan produced a report outlining how the Canadian government can learn from the 2021 evacuation and ensure that it responds quickly and effectively in times of crisis overseas. The report focused in particular on enhancing cooperation between different government agencies and how to streamline immigration and resettlement during emergencies (Dhaliwal, 2022).

IX- CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR NATO PARLIAMENTARIANS

57. Undoubtedly, NATO had to withdraw from Afghanistan at some point, and the goal was to leave the elected government in place supported by the Afghan Army. However, despite the deeply

disappointing ending of the NATO mission in Afghanistan, these 20 years will have left their mark on the Afghan society and beyond. A new generation of Afghans has been introduced to an alternative vision for their country, which entails universal education for girls and empowerment of women, selecting leadership through elections and the possibility of free media. This experience may provide basis for future transformations of the Afghan society and statehood.

58. In the immediate future, however, the operating and political environment in Afghanistan, as well as the region, is likely to remain highly complex and challenging. The Taliban has been disrupting, degrading and denying the gains made under the decades-long nation-building efforts by Allies and their partners. Economic collapse is driving systemic failures across all sectors of public governance, amplifying an already disastrous humanitarian situation, with more than half the population subjected to acute food insecurity. In addition, Taliban restrictions are choking off access to schooling and professional life for women and girls and effectively silencing the previously growing media in the country.

59. While some emergency humanitarian assistance is flowing in, it is a stopgap measure for a country, once again, seemingly in free fall. UN appeals for increased aid have only been half filled, as international attention has been largely diverted, principally to Russia's war in Ukraine. The detection and the killing of al-Zawahiri in Kabul increase the level of mutual distrust between the Taliban regime and the US and its Allies, which raises additional complications for the international community as it continues to wrestle with finding the most effective ways to direct aid to those most in need in Afghanistan, without it supporting the sanctioned Taliban leadership. The regime's continuation of draconian domestic policies, and especially the oppression of women, further deters foreign aid. It is increasingly questionable if Afghanistan will be able to bear up against the next phase of the humanitarian catastrophe without substantial international assistance. The fallout of the potential implosion of the country could have dire consequences for regional security and beyond.

60. Experts have raised concerns about the degree to which the Taliban-Haqqani governance partnership will permit al Qaeda and its affiliates to re-flourish under their watch. It remains to be seen the degree to which armed terrorist groups will be allowed to re-establish themselves in the country. In parallel, squeezed for revenue, the Taliban is not delivering on its promise to crack down on narcotics, despite having issued a decree in April 2022 banning production and sale of illicit drugs. Reportedly, drug production and trafficking are as high, or even higher, since the Taliban takeover (Stone, 2022). Afghan poppies supply over 85 per cent of global opium consumption, the UNODC estimates this generated approximately USD 1.8–2.7 billion in 2021 (UNDOC, 2021). It is imperative for Allies to continue closely monitoring the terrorism-narcotics nexus in Afghanistan, including redoubling efforts to tackle the demand side.

61. In its assessments of its almost two decades in Afghanistan, the Alliance views the maintenance of crisis management as a core task as essential. Maintaining and building upon the political cohesion and interoperability accrued throughout is also essential. Rather than disavowing large-scale out-of-area operations, Allies must, however, continuously assess future crisis management operations to understand the degree to which they continue to align with strategic interests – a key being able to distinguish between vital and peripheral interests – which is essential to mitigate the risks of mission creep. As the internal lessons learned process revealed, while Allies made significant gains in their fight against terrorism, the wider ambition of nation-building in Afghanistan was far more challenging. In the future, such non-military effects are likely best left to those partner international organisations with the resources and experience to deliver them. In addition, the Alliance is recommended to investigate the ways it can develop the capabilities to not just support, but command and control large-scale crisis capabilities. To get there, Allies must invest more in heavy-lift capabilities necessary to accomplish such tasks akin to the Kabul airlift and exercise the ability to use them in future contingency operations.

62. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly's 2021 resolution "[Learning the Lessons from NATO's Engagement in Afghanistan](#)" strongly urged member state governments and parliaments "to conduct thorough and comprehensive assessments of the Alliance's 20-year engagement in Afghanistan". It also encouraged the lessons learned from the various assessments to be reflected into the 2022 Strategic Concept, as well as the broader NATO 2030 agenda.

63. In addition to agreeing with the central findings of NATO's lessons learned reviews, this report recommends the following for NATO Parliamentarians to take forward as Allies continue to wrestle with the lessons learned from their collective efforts in Afghanistan.

- NATO Parliamentarians must consider how to incorporate a role for stronger national and parliamentary oversight within the civil-military nexus in NATO missions and operations. This would help drive an expanded democratic focus on civil-military relations during operations, which can often be too slanted toward the executive.
- Increased legislative oversight of military operations should adhere to what has often been called the "Powell Doctrine", after the late US Secretary Colin Powell, who enumerated eight essential questions for political leadership to ask itself prior to taking military action. The most essential ask:
 - Is a vital national/organisational interest threatened?
 - Is there a clear obtainable objective?
 - Have the costs and risks been fully and frankly analysed?
 - Is there a plausible exit strategy, to avoid endless mission creep?
 - Is there broad public and Allied consent?

These questions should guide Allies as they consider any future crisis management operation.

- Allied parliaments should consider weighing in to oversee the development of a meaningful system of lessons learned that can be used by the Alliance to absorb the necessary lessons from the successes as well as failures of any future crisis management operation. Parliamentarians must be more assertive in demanding from their governments and militaries honest, unembellished information on the situation on the ground – this is indispensable to making accurate, well-informed decisions, including on the parliamentary level, and to avoiding costly miscalculations.
- As noted in the Assembly's resolution, member governments and parliaments should "harness the NATO Parliamentary Assembly as a forum for open discussion on the Allied engagement in Afghanistan, where Allied lawmakers can debate difficult questions, agree on necessary next steps, and maintain cohesiveness while the Alliance undertakes next steps."

64. Further, it is not just the Afghanistan operation that should be examined to learn how better to deploy future crisis management operations – and the new Strategic Concept makes it clear that the Alliance intends to stay in the business of crisis management. NATO has a longer history of crisis response in the post-Cold War era than its efforts in Afghanistan. Allied efforts to respond to the Balkan wars in their near neighbourhood in the 1990s and fulfil the UN Security Council mandate to intervene in Libya in 2011 lend a necessary, broader perspective to crisis management. As such, a comparative approach reviewing all crisis management operations would likely be the most clarifying to draw up some form of future doctrinal approach.

65. Tackling the complex threat of terrorism, highlighted in the new Strategic Concept, must remain a priority for NATO. It must be recalled that NATO invoked Article 5 for the first and only time following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. As this Assembly noted in its contribution to the Strategic Concept, terrorist groups operate today in several parts of

the Alliance's neighbourhood, particularly in Africa and the broader Middle East. While the detailed analysis of the evolving threat of terrorism is carried out in the [report](#) of the Assembly's Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Defence and Security Cooperation, your Rapporteur fully supports the report's recommendation that "Allied governments should not lose focus on counterterrorism efforts as they turn their attention to the broader global challenge of great-power competition." The Allies must reinforce their collaboration in areas such as intelligence sharing, surveillance and reconnaissance, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats, capacity-building of partners, and the ability to project military power when needed.

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