

# The Politics of the Comprehensive Approach

## The Military, Humanitarian and State-building Discourses in Afghanistan

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## **Introduction**

Over the last years there has been an increasingly vocal call for improved coherence and coordination among the international community engaged in Afghanistan. Facing a surge in violence, limited developmental and economical progress and a corrupt and inept domestic political leadership, it is assumed that better coordination among the international actors will address many, if not all, these challenges.

These efforts are usually coined ‘comprehensive approach’, ‘unity of effort’, ‘integrated approach’ ‘whole of government approach’ or similar. However, it has become evident that such coherence is extremely daunting task to achieve. The various actors’ strategies, motives, resources, priorities, caveats, cultures and politics tend to differ significantly. Hence, despite the seemingly united call for coherence and coordination, the various initiatives and concepts do not necessarily pertain to the same thing, and as importantly, may hide strong competing political agendas beneath the surface. This article seeks to analyse these conflicts among the international actors with the aim of better understanding the obstacles as well as the potential for increased collaboration.

Besides this, the article seeks to analyse these conflicts more in depth by sketching the outline of a discourse analysis. It will study how three discourses I have identified, the military, the humanitarian and the state-building discourses, meet in the same physical space (the Afghan theatre) but have significant different perceptions of why they are there and what the ‘problem’ is in Afghanistan. I will argue that these deeper differences are the main impediments to a comprehensive approach.

These differences are part of the very identity of the different set of actors. They often refer to intrinsic or embedded attitudes, perceptions, identities and ‘truths’ about Afghanistan and the international engagement there. Hence, the often visible ‘turf-battle’ between the three sets of actors is not only a result of pre-existing and diverging mandates or resources, it is also a result of deeper differences. It is the dynamics of these processes the discourse analysis can highlight, as it studies the formation of meaning, of normalities and social ‘truths’.

## **Theoretical approach**

In the scope of this text I will define a discourse analysis relatively openly. I will consider it as an analytical tool designed to frame parts of the social world the researcher wishes to analyse. A discourse is therefore, just like any other categorisation, something we apply on the world in an attempt to re-present and analyse it in a specific way.

A discourse, as I see it, is the set of traditions, ways of thinking, perceptions and normalities that defines and usually limits the possible scope of political action. Patterns of similar behaviour over time may be a result of this.

However, the discourses are not fixed, there are no determinism this epistemology. Actors do break out of the general pattern of thinking and acting within a sector, sometimes they meet substantive resistance from mainstream sometimes not. What makes discourse an interesting analytical concept is that the mindsets, habits and traditions that makes a certain activity or way of thinking 'normal' also carries significant power. The discourse is powerful in that it shapes the mindset and patterns of behaviour of many actors engaged in the same field of work or expertise. In Neumann's (2008:63) words:

'Because a discourse maintains a degree of regularity in social relations, it produces preconditions for action. It constrains how the stuff that the world consists of is ordered, and so how people categorize and think about the world. It constrains what is thought of at all, what is thought of as possible, and what is thought of as the 'natural thing' to do in a given situation. But discourse cannot determine action completely. There will always be more than one possible outcome. Discourse analysis aims at specifying the bandwidth of possible outcomes'

A good discourse analysis may open up political space, by challenging the givens, the implicit precondition a certain political activity rest on, and thereby making alternative political courses of action thinkable. My ambitions here are somewhat less ambitious. In the scope of this article the space limitations prevents a full-fledged discourse analysis as it should be. Rather, I will attempt to make a sketch of an analysis. The aim is simply to put three sets of discourses in the (post)war theatre<sup>2</sup> simultaneously up for analytical scrutiny. I will base the analysis of a handful of sources which I consider to be relevant and representative for the wider discourse, but it will still only be a snapshot of the discourses in question.

What distinguishes this article from most other discourse analyses within IR, however, is the attempt to analyse three discourses at the same time. It is not about e.g. the 'Western' approach to a foreign country, such as Russia, to the 'Orient', or the Balkans.<sup>3</sup> It is about three (predominantly) Western discourses. As a result this is not a

<sup>2</sup> I use the term (post)war to indicate that in many of today's conflicts there appears to be a fluid distinction between war and peace. Peace agreements often fail, the conflicts often take the form of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies with no distinct beginning or end to hostilities, and even presumably peaceful post-conflict situations often contain political tensions that easily re-evaporate into violence.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Iver B. Neumann, *The Uses of the Other*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice*, London: Routledge, 2006.

study about Western identity, delineating between a Western Self and some kind of (Russian, Oriental or Balkan) Other. The focus is rather an intra-western struggle between three discourses all carrying a Western ballast of values, history and principles. The fact that they are analysed in Afghanistan is of less relevance, Afghanistan is more of a stage (theatre), of the interplay than the focus of the study. Obviously context matters, and the nature Afghanistan complex will impact on the analysis. One must therefore be cautious when drawing general conclusions about the relationship between these discourses from this study. That, however, is nonetheless the ambition. It is not primarily a study about Afghanistan, but about the challenges related to coherence and a comprehensive approach between the three discourses. Some of the traits and key elements analysed here are thus likely to be found in other (post)war theatres as well.

The three discourses share one feature; they see a need to be in Afghanistan, they see a role for themselves. As such Afghanistan is something outside themselves, a place one intervene or enter into, it is something that legitimises the activity one does. Each discourse read Afghanistan and its 'needs' and define a policy in response. In analytical terms one may therefore define Afghanistan as an Other, not necessarily as an radical Other (an enemy) but as a place and a condition which is different from the Western. As we shall see, the three discourses focus on different aspects of the Afghanistan Other, based on how they see their own role. Their policy in Afghanistan is thus framed by how they see themselves, their own identity. The identity frames the policy, but conversely, the policy (i.e. what they do in Afghanistan) is also reinforcing this very identity.

Borrowing a fraction of Lene Hansen's sophisticated discourse analysis structure, I will discuss the *spatial*, *temporal* and *ethical* dimensions of identity within each discourse. According to Hansen '...space, time and responsibility are the big concept through which political communities – their boundaries, internal constitution, and relationship with the outside world- are thought and argued'.<sup>4</sup> These three dimensions will thus be present in all discourses, but not necessarily at equal strength. The purpose is partly to better understand how each discourse functions and evolves, but also to be able to point out some tensions within each discourse. I will particularly highlight a few of these tensions in each discourse, thus indicating that while coherence and comprehensive approach may be far off today, developments within each camp may open for new constellations in the future.

I will start off with the Military Discourse, and compare three strands of the discourse, the conventional, stabilisation and counter-

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<sup>4</sup> Lene Hansen 2006:46.

insurgency approaches, which all differ in several significant aspects. In the Humanitarian Discourse the orthodoxy of neutrality and impartiality is still largely dominant, but even here some alternative voices are heard. Lastly, in the State-building Discourse, the Western template state remains dominant, but the huge discrepancy between words and deeds threatens to undermine it, paving way for alternative political developments.

### **The Military Discourse**

The military discourse in Afghanistan is by far the most dominant of the three. The military is a distinct category of actors, visibly different from everybody else in their uniforms, vehicles and weapons. The armed forces also have distinct histories, corps cultures, theorising, rules and procedures. Analytically as well as empirically it sticks out. When applying the term discourse on this group the idea is thus to capture both what they do and what they think, and attempt to briefly analyse the military identity, the meaning of being in Afghanistan for the troops. To understand that one needs to look at how it defines its opponent, the enemy.

### **The Conventional Warfare Approach**

Without entering military theory or philosophy of war, one may say that the military discourse always is based on a binary relationship with an adversary or enemy. Without a perceived threat, no need for a military. The same applies to Afghanistan. The military is there as a result of a perceived enemy or security threat, usually labelled Taliban, Al-Qaida or insurgents. The military discourse in Afghanistan is based on the existence of this threat, and its organisation and conduct is a response to it. The military identity is therefore per definition in a *spatial* relationship with an enemy. The military is composed to face an Other which is physically located outside the military itself. Traditionally this has been considered to be the armies of other (enemy) states, but guerrillas, insurgents and renegade groups have also been part of the Other for Western military discourse for centuries. After the 9-11 terrorist attacks, the USA declared itself at 'war on terror', thereby defining terrorism as a military, not police matter.<sup>5</sup> Spatially the terrorist is harder to pin down than the traditional state-enemy, but Afghanistan was quickly pointed out as the location where terrorists had their 'safe haven' or 'sanctuary'. The 'war on terror' had a locus.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) began in Afghanistan in October 2001. Initially the aim of the war was to take control of Afghanistan

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<sup>5</sup> Jackson Maogoto Nyamuya: 'War on the Enemy: Self-Defence and State-Sponsored Terrorism', *Melbourne Journal of International Law*, Vol. 4 No. 2, 2003.



and oust the Taliban government. It was therefore in many ways a conventional invasion of a foreign country. After the coalition forces had ousted the Taliban's military and governing structures, the focus switched to root out the remaining elements and the Al-Qaida leadership which were hiding primarily in pockets in the mountainous border areas with Pakistan. The mandate of OEF included 'the destruction of terrorist training camps and infrastructure within Afghanistan, the capture of al-Qaeda leaders, and the cessation of terrorist activities in Afghanistan'.<sup>6</sup> In spatial terms, it was about gaining full control of the territory, by rooting out the remaining resistance. The enemy Other was harder to see but still discernible as a distinct entity which could be eliminated through conventional means.<sup>7</sup>

The conventional military identity has also a *temporal dimension*. In the conventional warfare as it was applied in Afghanistan, the enemy Other was clearly portrayed as being 'backward', 'barbaric', 'tribal' etc. Stories about the Taliban rule and its oppression of women, banning of music and pictures, conservative dress codes and other things were well known in the West prior to the invasion. The Western military was therefore fighting an enemy which was considered primitive and undeveloped, embedded in a medieval interpretation of Islam. The enemy was thus not only violent towards the US and the West, but also toward its own people.

Importantly, in this reading of the Taliban, they were considered unchangeable. These were not considered enemies that would surrender or negotiate a peace agreement, it could not become a less radical Other through rational dialogue. As a result, the response of the Self is conventional warfare; engage the enemy, kill or capture him, destroy his infrastructure and use all means necessary.

*The ethical dimension* is also an important foundation for the conventional approach. The very legitimacy of the war was based on 9-11, an attack which for the Americans was shocking in its cruelty. It was considered 'barbaric' and 'evil', by President Bush and numerous other commentators. Hence, the subsequent war in Afghanistan was a war in defence of national security and dignity. It was considered to

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Enduring\\_Freedom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Enduring_Freedom). The legal foundation of OEF is the national right to self-defense under Art. 51 of the UN Charter and Resolution 1368 passed by the UN Security Council.

<sup>7</sup> There are some nuances here between conventional warfare for territorial control and counter-terrorism or irregular warfare, where the aim is to kill or capture individuals in the terrorist-group's leadership. The so-called 'Afghan Model' applied in e.g. the battle at the Tora Bora mountains was of the latter kind, and required somewhat different means than in regular warfare. However, in this context I will consider both approaches as conventional as they are enemy-focussed, i.e. aimed at ridding the territory of enemy combatants altogether. See also Peter John Paul Krause, 'The Last Good Chance: A Reassessment of U.S. Operations at Tora Bora', *Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2008, pp. 664-684.

be just and necessary, a moral response from the free world against the 'enemies of freedom', to paraphrase President Bush.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the enemy was considered ethically inferior, by applying terrorism against innocent civilians as well as its own people. The above-mentioned backwardness was also reflected in an impression of them as religious fanatics without compassion or human features. In terms of war, they ignored Western rules of engagement, applied terrorism, suicide bombers and road side bombs.

It was indeed a radical Other. As a result the conventional military identity was reinforced, it had a mission, it was boosted nationally and politically, but also morally, the stark contrast to the enemy made the US military Self superior also ethically. Based on all this, the underlying theory for the conventional approach was that the enemy was beatable with conventional means. The military had a mission which was achievable, and which reinforced the military as an efficient, necessary and just force. Cooperation or coordination with other actors in the field was thus never considered a necessary endeavour, as in all conventional war it is fought by soldiers.

### **The Stabilisation Approach**

The Stabilisation Approach is represented by ISAF and in particular a number of European countries' which consider Afghanistan to be a limited threat to their own national security. Rather, they consider ISAF to be a matter of NATO solidarity, and are there in support of their most important ally, the US. Furthermore, they tend to regard Afghanistan primarily as weak state, where the role of ISAF is to support the UN and the government until it can stand on its own.

NATO and ISAF formally entered Afghanistan in 2001, but did only expand beyond Kabul in 2003-06.<sup>9</sup> Already from the NATO and ISAF's mandate one can distinguish a certain different flavour than in the OEF approach discussed above:

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Enemies\\_of\\_freedom](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Enemies_of_freedom). The UN Security Council did not authorize the war though.

<sup>9</sup> This expansion process took several years, and was only completed in July 2006, when ISAF formally covered the entire country, and some of the troops under OEF command were transferred to ISAF. Gradually ISAF has grown in troop numbers as well as in contributing nations. Today the numbers are about 71 000 troops from 43 contributing nations. However, 30 of these countries provide 500 or less troops. The second largest contributor, the UK, has 9000 troops, the third, Germany, have 4350 troops. In comparison the US have 35000 ISAF troops (and another 19 000 or so in OEF). So this needs to be taken into consideration when discussing approaches other-than-the-US; they are significantly smaller in number and impact.

'NATO's main role in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance.'<sup>10</sup>

Whereas the wording here is not in contradiction to the OEF approach, terrorists and insurgents are hardly mentioned in the key ISAF documents. The European approach represents a different view of the purpose of being in Afghanistan and also of the role of the military. Again we can analyse the identity along the three dimensions

To some extent the stabilisation approach is similar to the conventional one when it comes to space. The *spatial dimension* where the enemy is considered to be physically located somewhere 'out there' is therefore shared. The expansion of ISAF into the districts therefore made sense from a military point of view. The aim was to assist the implementation of authority of the central government through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), so that it one day will control the entire territory. The 'enemy' is therefore all those resisting this expansion of the authority of the government in Kabul, the governance and the security forces. These Others can be criminals, rival clans, warlords or the Taliban<sup>11</sup>. They are a threat to the spatial order ISAF seek to establish, but are more widely defined than the enemies in the conventional approach and therefore not so easy to single out in space. For the stabilisation approach, the spatial dimension is therefore sometimes troublesome. Where is the enemy?

Nonetheless, this reading of the mission and the mandate fits well into the European stabilisation strand that considers itself to be less of war-fighters and more as robust peacekeepers. The identity is to a lesser extent defined in a dichotomy to an enemy. As the 'problem' is defined primarily to be the weak state, the objective is to help stabilise this state, support the reconstruction process and help building a security apparatus. The European countries in this camp typically have limited post-WWII war fighting experience, but have contributed in UN Peacekeeping missions and in the NATO and EU operations in the Western Balkans. These experiences form the main points of reference and identity for international operations for the armed forces, the government and not least the home public.

The stabilisation approach therefore carries with it an important element in the *temporal dimension*. They are in Afghanistan to assist and bring about change. It might recognise that there are 'backward' hard-line Taliban who never will change, but the focus is less on these than on the occasional 'spoiler', i.e. violent resistance to the order being

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_8189.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_8189.htm), accessed 17 July 2009.

<sup>11</sup> A global Al-Qaida threat does hardly exist in ISAF vocabulary.

implemented by ISAF and the local authorities and security forces. The stabilisation approach considers its role to support a transformation process, to help creating security in which civilian progress can take root. The military identity is thus founded on an idea of progress of the host-nation, of a transformation of a non-alien Afghan Other into an almost-Self. It is not about the elimination of a hard-line enemy of the past.

This contrast to the conventional approach is even more visible in the *ethical dimension*. While the conventional approach legitimises itself in dichotomies of ‘good’, and ‘just’ vs. ‘bad’, ‘unjust’ and ‘freedom haters’, the stabilisation approach seeks to play down such language and references to war, and instead emphasises support for the Afghan government and the UN.

The clearest example of this camp is the NATO country which perhaps is most sensitive to combat operations, namely Germany. While being the third biggest troop contributor to ISAF, it is deployed in the relatively calm Northern provinces, where the daily operations are mostly focussed on stabilisation and reconstruction. The main reason for Germany’s reluctance to war is the home public’s general aversion against war fighting.<sup>12</sup> Offensive military operations far away are often met with scepticism and resistance, war is often considered as something of the past, which is outdated or unnecessary in today’s world.<sup>13</sup> A *Der Spiegel* article summarises it like this:

German soldiers have carried sandbags in flooded cities like Dresden, helped Serbian mothers in Kosovo and built schools in Afghanistan. They serve as everything from medics to social workers, but what they are not, at least in the public conscience, are fighters trained to kill other human beings -- and who could possibly be killed in the process. They are content to let others do the killing and dying while they travel the world as social workers dressed in military fatigues.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, Germany and similar countries in Western Europe need to tread extremely carefully when legitimising its existence and operations. A small operational mistake of ‘ethical’ nature tends to attract significant political consequences at home. The engagement in Afghanistan must therefore be legitimised through ethics of civilian nature, not security. For example, the Chief of the Norwegian Contingent said the following when asked if the deployment was ‘worth it’:

<sup>12</sup> There is of course a particular historical reason for this, but similar currents are present also in other European countries.

<sup>13</sup> Timo Noetzel and Benjamin Scheer. ‘All the way? The evolution of German military power’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2008, pp. 211-221.

<sup>14</sup> Konstantin von Hammerstein, Hans Hoyng, Hans-Jürgen Schlamp and Alexander Szandar: ‘NATO Chaos Deepens in Afghanistan: “The Germans Have to Learn How to Kill”’, *Der Spiegel Online*, 20 November 2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,449479,00.html>, accessed 15 November 2009.

'Last year 400 000 girls was enrolled in the schools for the first time (...) this year 500 000 girls (...) by end 2009 2.5 million girls go to school. The child mortality rate is reduced with a quarter since 2002...90 percent of the population do today have access to healthcare, while only 10 percent did in 2001....I would like to hear someone telling me that 2,5 million girls in school is hopeless'<sup>15</sup>

The justification for the military operations is thus based on civilian progress, not military or even general security. It is furthermore based on basic human rights achievements, i.e. ethical topics, which are contrasted to the times of the harsh Taliban regime.

The stabilisation approach is also distinguishable from the conventional approach in its legal definition of the adversaries as 'criminals' not 'enemies'. While this probably is legally correct,<sup>16</sup> the contrast to the conventional warfare is obvious. As the adversary is considered a criminal and not a conventional enemy, he is not a legal combatant according to international law. An enemy combatant can be captured or pacified, be a Prisoner of War (PoW), but will retain his military rank and identity till the war ends. He is not expected to switch side or change his basic identity.<sup>17</sup> Criminals on the other hand can and *shall* be reformed, they can serve their time and then in principle be reintegrated into society again. The ethical consequences of applying the term 'criminal' on the adversaries is thus that he can change to the better if given a chance. All this is primarily in the Western tradition of course, but those are the principles the Western troops have to adhere to.

For the identity of the stability approach soldiers this can be confusing because it questions what soldiering is about. While the soldier remains ethically superior (in his own identity) to a criminal as he is to an enemy, in practice these are not always clear-cut distinctions. There are many kinds of criminals, and the spectrum from petty crime to local banditry to organised crime to local resistance to international terror may not be easily drawn. Can all be arrested and reformed? Most importantly perhaps, you cannot engage in war with criminals, you

<sup>15</sup> ' - Oppdraget er riktig, bra og verdt stor risiko' [The Mission was right, good and worth a great risk'], *Dagbladet*, 6 August 2009 (my translation), available on <http://www.dagbladet.no/2009/08/07/nyheter/innenriks/utenriks/afghanistan/isaf/7543536/>.

<sup>16</sup> From an international law perspective the fighting in Afghanistan is to be defined as a non-international or internal war from the moment the Karzai government was inaugurated in June 2002 (before then it was an international war). The same basic legal principles apply to all three approaches, even if the mandates have evolved over time. See e.g. *Peace Operations Monitor*: <http://pom.peacebuild.ca/AfghanistanMandates.shtml>, accessed 15 November 2009. See also State Secretary Espen Barth Eide: *Folkeretten og Afghanistan* [International Law and Afghanistan] <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fd/The-Ministry/Other-political-staff/state-secretary-espen-barth-eide/Speeches-and-articles/2009/folkeretten-og-afghanistan.html?id=565345>, accessed 17 July 2009.

<sup>17</sup> The Bush administration did not recognise Al-Qaida or the Taliban as enemy combatants either, though. See e.g. Jane Mayer: 'Outsourcing Torture The secret history of America's "extraordinary rendition" program', *New Yorker*, 14 February 2005, accessed from [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/02/14/050214fa\\_fact6](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/02/14/050214fa_fact6), 8 February 2010.

can only use force in self-defence. Should ISAF engage with all these, or only some categories, and where to draw the line between policing and soldiering?<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, the stabilisation approach appears not to be at ease with itself, its identity and thus role in Afghanistan. It is partly a soldier in denial, partly a police and partly a construction worker. It sees itself as an assisting force, which shall help build a self-sustained Afghanistan over time. It does not consider itself to have much national interests in Afghanistan, it is NATO success, continued solidarity and general progress in Afghanistan which are the core issues. The problem however, is that policing and development rarely is worth dying for.

### **The Counter-insurgency Approach**

The third strand within the Military discourse is the counter-insurgency (COIN) approach. It emerged as a result of the failures of the conventional approach where the killing of Taliban soldiers not lead to victory. As so often before, winning battles did not equal winning the war. The heavy reliance on airpower led to collateral damage and civilian deaths which contributed to alienating the population.<sup>19</sup> Gradually these experiences, plus the turn-over in Iraq, paved the way for the COIN doctrine.

From the COIN perspective, the ‘problem’ in Afghanistan continues to be the insurgents, but in contrast to the conventional approach they are defined not as a one unified or static enemy, but rather as a conglomerate of various loosely connected groups, with different motivations, ideologies and interests.<sup>20</sup> Some are considered more hard-line than others, and the aim is to marginalise the hardliners and win the more moderates over. To do this, the focus shifts from tracking the enemies, to undermine their support base. In the latest Counterinsurgency Guidance<sup>21</sup> from COM ISAF, the COIN principles are clearly stated:

<sup>18</sup> See also Donald J. Campbell and Kathleen M. Campbell: ‘Soldiers as Police Officers/Police Officers as Soldiers: Role Evolution and Revolution in the United States’, *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 36, No. 2; 2010, pp. 327 – 350.

<sup>19</sup> There are no data on civilian casualties from airstrikes prior to 2005, but several sources claims they were high in the most combat affected areas in south-western Afghanistan. See also Human Rights Watch: *Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan*, 8 September 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/09/08/troops-contact-0>, accessed 13 November 2009 and Human Rights Watch: *Return of the Warlords*, 6 June 2002, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2002/06/06/afghanistan-return-warlords>, accessed 13 November 2009.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. See COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>, accessed 30 Nov. 2009, p 2-5.

<sup>21</sup> COMISAF Counterinsurgency Guidance (undated) [http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official\\_texts/counterinsurgency\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf), accessed 17 November 2009

### **ISAF Counterinsurgency Guidance: Key Points**

The Afghan people are the Objective. Protecting them is the mission. Focus 95% of your time building relationships with them and, together with the Afghan government, meeting their needs.

Get rid of the conventional mind-set. Focus on the people, not the militants. By earning their trust and helping an accountable GIRoA gain the support of the people, you take from the enemy what he cannot afford to lose – the control of the population.

The US adopted a COIN doctrine in 2006 which states that ‘political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counter insurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate’.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the so-called ‘centre of gravity’ in COIN, i.e. where one needs to concentrate one’s effort to achieve results, is therefore the attitude of the population. The military, according to the COIN approach, cannot win the war in traditional sense, i.e. eliminating or entirely pacifying the enemy. All it can achieve is to control the situation by suppressing the insurgents to such an extent that others (civilians) can build a positive peace process. Conversely the military has to take extreme caution while conducting kinetic operations, as errors or collateral casualties actually may undermine the overall strategy (popular support).

*Spatially* it is still a contest for territorial control. The COIN approach is about building legitimacy in the already captured territories. A popular summarizing of the COIN tactic is to ‘clear-hold-build’, i.e. clear out the insurgents, hold the territory and build sustainable domestic political and security presence. It is therefore more political than the stabilisation approach and more careful towards the local population in its conduct than the conventional approach. COIN only captures territory it can hold and protect. It abandons sweeping campaign or random patrols and focus on building secure areas. The enemy is thus clearly defined spatially as outside the areas controlled by the COIN soldiers and its local allies.

Furthermore, as the shift changes from the enemy to the ‘rest’, knowledge about the environment, the culture and local customs have become crucial for the soldiers. So-called ‘human terrain teams’ are developed to better understand the local cultures, economy, politics, religion and conflicts. Increased awareness of the socio-political impacts of own activity (‘who benefits/weakens from the road we build?’) be-

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<sup>22</sup> *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency field manual (FM 3-24)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007:2

comes necessary.<sup>23</sup> The ‘battle-space’ thus develops into several layers or spheres, such as economics, agriculture and infrastructure, and the enemy is engaged in all of them. The spatial dimension is therefore not only physical space but also non-military sectors of relevance for the political struggle taking place.<sup>24</sup> This expansive knowledge of, and engagement with, the wider society were ignored in the conventional approach.<sup>25</sup>

The local security forces and authorities play an important role in COIN, as the task is to support their standing among the civilian population. As in the stabilisation approach, the key aim is to help develop a sustainable security situation through institution- or state-building. This *temporal* dimension of development is therefore crucial part of the COIN identity. The Afghan civilians, the authorities and the security forces are the Others, but not a hostile Other. They are the subjects and centre of gravity for the COIN approach, of which the COIN Approach mirrors itself and its own identity. The radical enemy Other, the Taliban, looms in the background and threatens to interfere, but the very logic of COIN is to degrade them into a secondary position. They shall be marginalised in space and in time, and as Afghanistan progresses, they are supposed to become less and less attractive and relevant for the local population. Over time, as political and economical marginalisation increases, former hostile tribes and groups are expected to seek to come to terms with the new Afghanistan, and will either succumb, negotiate or gradually integrate into the wider society. COIN is therefore built on a premise of change and progress for ordinary people.

The reduced focus on the enemy also has implications on the *ethical dimension*. Since the COIN doctrine is primarily American, the focus on the Taliban and the Al-Qaida has far from vanished from the political debates. However, in the Military Discourse the failure of the conventional approach and the emergence of COIN approach have shifted the emphasis away from the ethical dimension in the sense that there is less focus on ‘evil’ and ‘barbarian’ enemy as a contrast to the morally superior US soldiers. The dichotomy of good/bad has waned and legitimacy is instead built on American soldiers as ‘good-doers’ and not only as heroic and just warriors. The ethics have therefore shifted closer to the stabilisation approach, where assisting the locals becomes more central. As in the stabilisation approach the Other is the uneducated but friendly Afghan soldier which can be developed and trained into a certain modern standard. Success in COIN is largely measured

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<sup>23</sup> David Kilcullen: *The Accidental Guerilla*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> See *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency field manual (FM 3-24)*:156.

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of the flaws of conventional intelligence in Afghanistan, see Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger and Paul D. Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, Washington: Center for a New American Study, 2010.



in success in training and equipping local forces, and of making them capable of 'holding' territory and keep the Taliban at bay.

### **Conclusion: the Military Discourse**

The three approaches within the military discourse represents three ways of applying military force, it represents three distinct military identities. Along the three dimensions, the spatial, temporal and the ethical, one can discern the evolution of three conflicting or overlapping identities. That means that they perceive Afghanistan differently, consider their task in Afghanistan differently.

The conventional approach operates with a simplified us/them dichotomy and largely ignores the wider environment (local and international actors). The role of the soldier is very clear though, he is there to kill or capture the enemy and destroy his infrastructure. He is at war, and comprehensive approach and cooperation with civilians is logically not a priority.

The stabilisation approach has a rather opposite position. It consider the adversaries to be criminals and own role to assist the Afghan security forces in incapacitating them. Deadly force is thus reserved for self-defence. Much of the focus is on the non-military aspects of the presence in Afghanistan (supporting development). While often having a good understanding of the social environment they are in, the Self-perception is somewhat vague; partly military, partly police, partly mentor, partly reconstruction worker. The stabilisation approach is itself positive to cooperation with civilians, but as we shall see below, typically meets resistance from the civilian actors when reaching out.

The COIN approach also has a sophisticated understanding of the local environment. It recognises the political link between activity of Self and the potential radicalisation of the Other. The Self is thus a constrained soldier, which shall refrain from excessive use of force, and turn away from the enemy and instead focus on the well-being of the civilian population. The COIN approach cannot succeed with military means alone, it requires civilian cooperation to prevail. If nobody can 'build' while the military 'hold', COIN will fail. Comprehensive approach or 'unity of effort' is therefore a necessity.

These three military identities coexist in the current military discourse in Afghanistan. It is likely to cause confusion and dysfunctionality within the military discourse, within ISAF, as the three have different perceptions of why they are there, what they are to do, how to do it and with whom. The COIN approach has become very 'trendy' over

the last years, but it also appears to be a far cry from the theoretical concepts to the reality on the ground. Also, while on paper most open to civilian cooperation of all three strands, it also presupposes that the civilian actors have the very same counter-insurgency priorities and objectives. That is not the case today.

### **The Humanitarian Discourse**

The differences between the military to the humanitarian discourse are striking. Humanitarians typically operate in small NGO's, have a strong humanitarian ideology and personal engagement in relieving civilian suffering, live close to the people they help and have limited resources. There is however, a wide range of actors who identify themselves as part of this camp, including governmental agencies (e.g. USAID, SIDA and DFID) and intergovernmental agencies (e.g. OCHA, UNHCR and ECHO). There are therefore some tensions within this discourse, and between NGOs, GOs and IGOs about the very identity and meaning of civilian engagement in Afghanistan. Is it primarily to relieve human suffering or is it rather to contribute the resolution of the conflict? How is one to relate to other actors, in particular the international military but also the local authorities? This discourse is about the identity of the Humanitarian Self.

As the *ethical dimension* is by far the most significant for the humanitarian identity formation, let us address that first. The humanitarian actors have a long history of operating in dangerous situations. The most prominent example is the International Committee and Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC/ICRC), which during the industrial wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century operated between the trenches helping civilians and wounded soldiers indiscriminately of the colours of their uniforms. This tradition has continued till today, and their and many other organisations approach and philosophy of work is embedded in the International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

This 'humanitarian imperative', often summarised as 'independence, impartiality and neutrality' has been the driving force which also has been put down into a shared document, the 'Red Cross Code of Conduct' where these are the four first Principle Commitments:<sup>26</sup>

1. The Humanitarian imperative comes first.
2. Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinc-

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<sup>26</sup> *Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 1995.

- tion of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.
  4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.

The identity of the humanitarian worker is strongly embedded in these principles. Independence, impartiality and neutrality is *the* common denominator for a whole range of otherwise different NGO's from which they define a common Self.

The self-perception of these humanitarian NGOs is one of 'purity', 'morality', responsibility', 'solidarity', 'understanding of the local context/culture', etc. The suffering civilian population (and sometimes the military) is their subject, and therefore also their Other. The existence of people in need is a precondition for the existence of the humanitarian actors, and thus their Self identity. However, the humanitarian discourse typically sees itself to be closely connected to these Others, particularly if they are victims of war and atrocities. The closeness with the victims, the rough conditions they themselves live in while in the theatre, as well as the voluntary and altruistic element of the work, all build up on this ethical dimension of the Self identity.

The ethical dimension is under pressure though, as it is based on a premise of respect and recognition of the neutrality from the warring parties. There have been an increased targeting and killing of humanitarian workers in Afghanistan the last years. Many voices in the humanitarian discourse accuse the military actors of being responsible for this (see below), but this has also to do with the nature of many of today's conflicts. The notion of 'independence, impartiality and neutrality' is harder to sustain when the population often is the subject or a deliberate target of a war. Even 'neutral' facilities such as food and water may be considered a political intervention by some of the worrying parties, such as local warlords or the Taliban. In certain places it is literally impossible to be neutral, as any engagement with the civilian population will be considered as political interference by some of the local actors. Targeting of humanitarian actors may therefore at times be a result of this, irrespectively of the interference of military actors in the humanitarian field. If Others do not recognise your identity as being of a non-political nature, your Self identity will quickly be weakened as well. This is a major challenge for the humanitarian discourse.

We see this also in the *spatial dimension* of the Humanitarian Discourse which not is about the control of territory, but about a concep-

tual space, called the 'humanitarian space'. Since the 1990's the use of force has been increasingly legitimised on humanitarian grounds, through concepts such as 'humanitarian interventions', 'Protection of Civilians' and 'Responsibility to Protect'. This is sometimes welcomed by the humanitarian community, who actively call for interventions to prevent genocides and war crimes. However, the entrance of the security actors into the humanitarian and development sector has also angered many, who fear that humanitarian assistance and development becomes a sub-set of a security strategy rather than a humanitarian needs-driven effort.<sup>27</sup> When military forces in addition have begun distributing humanitarian aid to win 'hearts and minds' and to gain intelligence, the tensions have risen.

ISAFs Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), have been a particular target for this criticism, as they have a range of civilian development personnel embedded in a predominantly military unit. This blurs the distinction between the humanitarian actors and the military, and represents a politicisation of aid, it is argued. As a result the neutrality is severely undermined and therefore also the security of civilian aid agencies which rely on trust of the population to be able to work in volatile areas.<sup>28</sup> The humanitarians are thus demanding that this 'humanitarian space' is left unpoliticised, both for ethical reasons and for the sake of the security of the aid workers.

The 'humanitarian space' is therefore an imaginary neutral 'no mans land', like the ground between the front lines or the trenches in World War One. The very identity of the humanitarian actors rests on the existence of such a space. If it were to disappear, everything will be political, including humanitarian aid. The white flag would lose its meaning. That is why it is so fiercely defended by the humanitarian community.

In a time when the trench war has been replaced by a 'war amongst the people',<sup>29</sup> the humanitarian space cannot any more be physically located and must be defended conceptually instead. There are many Others or threats to this dimension of the humanitarian identity:

Certain humanitarian actors go far in accusing the military and its 'interference in their field' for being the main challenge they encounter in the theatres they operate in. Statements such as 'it was easier during

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Cornish and Marit Glad, *Civil-military relations: No Room for Humanitarianism in comprehensive approaches*, Oslo: The Norwegian Atlantic Committee, Security Policy Library No. 5, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Victoria Wheeler and Adele Harmer (eds.), *Resetting the rules of engagement. Trends and issues in the military-humanitarian relations*, London: Humanitarian Policy Group HPG, 2006, p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Rupert Smith, *The utility of force: the art of war in the modern world*, New York, Knopf, 2007.

Taliban'<sup>30</sup> indicates that they consider the international military to be the main problem in Afghanistan, not the Taliban. They thus accuse the military of creating more problems than they resolve, due to collateral damage and insensitive behaviour, while simultaneously putting others (the humanitarians) in danger. In this respect the military is not only an Other but also a dangerous or threatening Other for the humanitarian Self.

Yet other humanitarian actors have resisted to be part of UNs integrated mission concept, and fought to keep OCHA physically separate from UNAMA, arguing that OCHA and thereby the humanitarian community would be politicised by being co-located with the more political UNAMA Mission (which is run on a UNSC mandate).<sup>31</sup> While the military represents a threat by their military activity, the UN does it by politicising the aid. UNAMA and other non-humanitarian UN organisations is therefore also Others in this view, actors that one needs to keep at an arms length' distance to affirm the humanitarian identity.

However, the humanitarian space is also sometimes threatened from within the humanitarian discourse, when actors seek to stretch the humanitarian space to also include development projects. It is not uncommon that humanitarian actors are engaged in both humanitarian and developmental work. The latter, being (re-)construction, capacity building, education etc., provides a community with resources and capacities. It has a social impact and beneficiaries beyond mere survival and is therefore political. This is sometimes ignored in the discourse and development is conflated with humanitarian work. Such protection of the 'NGO-space'<sup>32</sup>, i.e. everything the NGOs does, has no foundation in the IHL, but is nonetheless defended in some NGO circles. The consequence is potentially that the humanitarian identity is undermined from within.

The humanitarian identity is also formed in the *temporal dimension*. Aid and humanitarian relief have an inherent element of progress in it, as it is aimed at helping people out of a state of humanitarian crisis. However, humanitarian work is not development work, and is in principle only redeeming suffering, not addressing its causes. As discussed above, in principle the humanitarians cannot engage in the

<sup>30</sup> The Norwegian Refugee Council has e.g. stated that it was easier to do aid work during Taliban than now, 'Lettere under Taliban' [Easier under Taliban], *ABCNyheter*, 28 December 2009, [www.abcnheter.no/node/10226](http://www.abcnheter.no/node/10226), accessed 29 December 2009.

<sup>31</sup> *The need for an independent OCHA in Afghanistan*, open letter to Mr. Bo Asplund, d. SRSG – RRR, Resident Representative for the UNDP and Humanitarian Coordinator, from 19 NGOs, 4 April 2008, accessed from [www.unamagroups.org/NeedforindependentOCHAfromNGOs-04040.pdf](http://www.unamagroups.org/NeedforindependentOCHAfromNGOs-04040.pdf), 23 September 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Sylvian Beauchamp, *Defining the Humanitarian Space Through Public International Law*, 2008:16, available at [http://www.redcross.ca/cmslib/general/obeoc\\_beauchamp.pdf](http://www.redcross.ca/cmslib/general/obeoc_beauchamp.pdf)

long-term questions unless they are of a non-political nature (which is rare in civil wars). The humanitarians can therefore be said to work *around* or *in* a conflict and not *on* it.<sup>33</sup> Their identity Others, i.e. the recipients of aid, will therefore continue to be so only as long as there is a need to fill. When there is no longer a humanitarian need, they will cease to be the Other, and the humanitarians go elsewhere. The temporal dimension is therefore rather short-sighted, measurable in human survival, access to basic needs and nutrition levels.

However, as mentioned above, humanitarian actors often engage in development programmes as well. In these cases they are deeply embedded in a temporal dimension of human progress, modernisation, poverty reduction and development. Many NGO's are also carrying out work defined and funded by national donors, some aimed at traditional development, others as a part of an overarching security agenda. These quasi-NGO's or 'quangos'<sup>34</sup> are also by their nature challenging the humanitarian discourse, at least when they claim to remain non-political and neutral. Development aid cannot be non-political.

Here the government-funded agencies such as the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID) development programme go one step further as they explicitly state that they working together with the armed forces to promote stability and human security to curb insurgencies: 'As long-term development cannot take hold in an unstable environment, USAID also supports the joint Afghan-U.S. Government Counterinsurgency (COIN) Strategy...'.<sup>35</sup>

These and other government aid agencies see itself as part of the overarching political process in Afghanistan, and are more likely to see the military as partners and the Taliban as the Other.<sup>36</sup> The meaning of their engagement is to contribute to the political struggle for a stable Afghanistan, and the main challenger to the order represented by the elected government in Kabul, is the Taliban. Their Self is therefore embedded in a belief that the development of a Western-like, liberal-democratic/economic society is the best bulwark against terrorists and politico-religious extremist.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Goodhand with Philippa Atkinson: *Conflict and Aid: Enhancing the Peacebuilding Impact of International Engagement*, London: International Alert, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> See Christopher Pollitt and Colin Talbot (eds.), *Unbundled Government: A Critical Analysis of the Global Trend to Agencies, Quangos and Contractualisation*, London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> USAID/Afghanistan Strategy, <http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Page.CountryOverview.aspx>, accessed 5 February 2010. See also Elisabeth Kvitashvili: 'Promoting Stability & Human Security in the Context of "Irregular Warfare"', *Liaison*, 4, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Japan, for example, promotes its civilian aid as: *Japan's Contribution to Afghanistan - Working on the frontline in the war on terrorism*, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle\\_e/afghanistan/pamph0703.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/pamph0703.pdf), accessed 5 February 2010.

The engagement of development actors and government agencies with a political agenda is often considered a threat to the humanitarian identity, but this is also because the discourse itself has stretched beyond its initial platform. Being explicitly political also indicate a Self-awareness of own power, influence and role, which may be lacking in the ‘quangos’. Development and neutrality never was compatible, particularly in the politically strenuous environment in Afghanistan. The temporal dimension is therefore very problematic for the humanitarian identity. In principle the notion of development and progress should be almost relatively irrelevant for the humanitarian identity, but in practice it is very much present – and may therefore also undermine the other dimensions.

### **Conclusion: The Humanitarian Discourse**

The humanitarian discourse is full of internal tensions as well as pressure from the outside. The Afghan theatre is complex and requires a delicate balance between IHL principles and situational realities. As the ‘trench war’ has been replaced with ‘war amongst the people’ the humanitarian discourse is in a struggle over its identity.

Some strands of the discourse seek to purify the neutral, humanitarian identity, working only *in* or *around* the conflict, not *on* it. For these comprehensive approach is not an issue, they shy it as much as the conventional warrior. Others seek to strike a balance between neutral humanitarian work and political developmental work, something which is a demanding exercise not least since others (local population as well as the military) may have another perception than those inside the discourse. But they may pragmatically engage with political actors like the UN, and sometimes even the military. The third group, the explicitly political actors may be better able to define their identity, and is open to cooperation, but will nonetheless often resist leadership from outside the discourse, particularly from the military.

### **The State-building Discourse**

The State-building discourse in Afghanistan is the process of establishing a political system and institutions after the fall of Taliban in 2001. Through international political conferences in places such as Bonn, London and Paris, the Afghanistan institutions were designed, and the direction forward pointed out.<sup>37</sup> The State-building discourse rests on an assumption of ‘liberal peace’, i.e. that liberal societies with

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<sup>37</sup> These were in 2001, 2006 and 2008 respectively. In addition major international political and donor conferences were held in Bonn and Brussels in 2001, Tokyo, Petersberg and Geneva in 2002, Brussels in 2003, Kabul in 2005, Wilton Park in 2005 and 2007, Rome 2007, the Hague in 2009 and London again in 2010, to mention some. Note that only one of these conferences were actually held in Afghanistan.

democracy and marked economy neither go to war against each other nor suppress their own citizens and thus create political instability and extremism.<sup>38</sup> The State-building discourse is based primarily on established UN peace-building principles, poverty-reduction and the Millennium Goals. Security, stability or resisting insurgents is not the primary objective. As a result perhaps, this process is primarily run by the UN and a few European states, while the US has stayed in the background. Again I will analyse the State-building discourse and the identity of the actors engaged in it through the spatial, temporal and ethical dimensions.

In the *spatial* dimension, the initial instinct from the UN and Europe was that one not should build huge international state-building missions in Afghanistan similar to those of the 1990's in Bosnia and East Timor. Criticism had emerged that these missions not were successful in building neither peace nor local commitment and ownership.<sup>39</sup> Hence, this time the recipe for the UN was a 'light footprint'. The international community should engage mainly through 'facilitation, advice and subtle interventions',<sup>40</sup> while the majority of the reconstruction tasks should be taken care of by the Afghans themselves. In this discourse the Others are the Afghans, located in Afghanistan, whereas the Self is the wider international community who met them in international conferences, but otherwise kept physical distance.

The state-building discourse was initiated by the Bonn conference in December 2001, shortly after the fall of the Taliban.<sup>41</sup> The ambitions were high: 'to end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights'. In practice however, the aim of the Bonn process was to (re-) establish the basic state institutions and to get a legitimate central government in place. The Bonn document itself is relatively sober reading in this regard, with clear and achievable objectives. It created a road-map towards establishing an Emergency Loya Jirga, Interim Authority, Transitional Authority, Constitutional Loya Jirga, and later on, the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh: 'Conflicted Outcomes and Values: (Neo)Liberal Peace in Central Asia and Afghanistan', *International Peacekeeping* Vol. 16, No. 5 2009, and 'Liberal Peace Building and the Challenges to Enhance State Legitimacy', at <http://www.sak.se/arkiv/artiklar/artiklar/2009/peace/tadjbakhsh.pdf>, accessed 6 February 2010; and for a general criticism of the 'liberal peace', see Special Issue 'Liberal Peace-building Reconstructed', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 16, No. 5, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver Richmond and Jason Franks, *Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Statebuilding and Peacebuilding*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009; David Chandler: *Bosnia: Faking Democracy After Dayton*, London: Pluto Press 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Freeman, 'Introduction: Security, Governance and Statebuilding in Afghanistan', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2007:1.

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.afghangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm>, accessed 5 October 2009.



However, the Western actors also wanted to make sure Afghanistan got off on the 'right' track, making the de facto engagement in designing the democratic institutions rather strong. As a result, the 'entire government functions were (...) being assumed by international actors during the Bonn Process, including the arrangement of presidential and parliamentary elections...'<sup>42</sup> So on the one hand the international actors stressed the importance of the 'light footprint' and local ownership, on the other hand they had strong interests in how Afghanistan should develop politically and made sure to have at least one hand each on the steering wheel.

Nevertheless, at this stage progress had clearly been made, the Constitution was passed and many institutions were formally established, such as the Transitional Administration, Judicial Commission, the Central bank and new a currency, and not least the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. The key elements of a new (potential) Afghan Self were established.

The next step in the state-building discourse was the Berlin conference in 2004, prior to the first elections. This is also the stage when the ambitions expanded and when the *temporal dimension* becomes more visible. Until now, while there were clear international developmental ambitions hidden in the discourse, it had also been largely about building the very basic Afghan institutions, with at least a flavour of an Afghan identity, local ownership and culture (Loya Jirga etc). Now the state-building ambitions were accelerated, Afghanistan was to develop much further towards a liberal democracy, and the identity of the Western State-builders was reaffirmed.

Where the 2001 Berlin document is narrow in scope, the 2004 document expands into several other areas. Under the heading *Good Governance and Public Administration* it lists a range of plans regarding reform of the ministries, Civil Service law, merit-based recruitment, re-training of staff, Code of Conduct etc. This trend was reinforced in the 2006 London conference, which created the so-called Afghanistan Compact.<sup>43</sup> The Afghan Compact covers more or less all aspects of a comprehensive state-building, including security forces, counter-narcotics, public administration, statistics, gender, rule of law, land registration, infrastructure, environment, agriculture, health, refugee-return and finance, to mention some. It also lists benchmarks and timetables in all these sectors. All the objectives are to be achieved

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher Freeman, 2007:1.

<sup>43</sup> See *Afghanistan Compact*, <http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/Documents/AfghanistanCompact-English.pdf>, and *Afghanistan National Development Strategy, Executive Summary*, [http://www.ands.gov.af/ands/final\\_ands/src/final/ANDS%20Executive%20Summary\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ands.gov.af/ands/final_ands/src/final/ANDS%20Executive%20Summary_eng.pdf) p.2, accessed 30 September 2009.

between 2006 and 2011, which by all standards must be considered an overly optimistic estimate. This includes vetting procedures and performance-based reviews' in the civil service by 2010 and anti-corruption legislation in line with UN commitments by end 2006, just to mention two. The benchmarks appear to be based on a generic list of things to do to achieve good governance and human rights, with little reference to the specific needs and challenges of Afghanistan. It looks like a shopping list of good deeds, not a bottom-up analysis of the needs of this specific country. This indicates that the Afghan Compact is largely designed and written by the UN and other international actors, i.e. by outsiders but who had limited knowledge about, or interest in, the real-world challenges these benchmarks would face.

Furthermore, due to the 'light footprint' approach,<sup>44</sup> the discrepancy between these ambitions and the delivery in the field is considerable. Neither UNAMA nor the Afghan government was ever given enough resources to implement the ambitious plans, nor have they been delivered through third parties. In the UNAMA SRSG's words: 'Much of it has been said and written – and even agreed solemnly at international conferences over and over again. But it has not been implemented'.<sup>45</sup>

So what have been done in practice? It is a challenge to make an estimate or an overview over the degree of implementation of the oral and written commitments (what may be called the materiality of the discourse). The myriad of actors engaged, limited coordination and lack of transparency makes exact numbers of development aid hard to come by. However, some rough estimates can be found from OECD, the World Bank and NGO networks. Firstly, it is generally acknowledged that about international assistance constitutes around 90% of the public expenditure in Afghanistan. Still, in the first two years of the intervention, Afghanistan received only \$57 annually per capita whilst in comparison Iraq received \$206, East Timor \$233, Kosovo \$526 and Bosnia-Herzegovina \$679 per capita respectively.<sup>46</sup> Not only are the numbers low, but out of the \$25 billion committed by international donors for reconstruction and development from 2001 to 2008, only \$15 billion has been actually spent. For the period 2002-2011 \$39 billion has been pledged, but so far (2008) less than 40% has been spent, according to the umbrella-NGO ACBAR. At the same time, two-thirds of the foreign aid is bypassing the Afghan government, thus undermining efforts to build strong state institutions. This

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<sup>44</sup> As well as other distractions, like the Iraq war.

<sup>45</sup> SRSG Briefing to the Security Council, 29 September 2009, <http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/SRSG%20Briefing%20to%20SC/09sept29-security-council.pdf>, accessed 1 October 2009.

<sup>46</sup> See *The UN's Role in Nation-Building – From the Congo to Iraq*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation 2005:238ff.

particularly applies to the regional government institutions outside Kabul.

Even worse, ACBAR finds that about 40% of the funds spent have returned to the donor countries in corporate profits and consultant salaries.<sup>47</sup> There is also minimal transparency in procurement and tendering, and none of the benchmarks in the Afghan Compact are for donors, only for the Afghan government.

The State-building discourse has thus been full of words and pledges but not much action. The extremely high ambitions indicate a discourse largely detached from the realities on the ground, and the limited resources spent indicate a limited understanding or interest in the Afghan problems. The international state-building Self is largely absent from the Afghan people, it communicates with the international UN and diplomatic circles, but it often creates huge unfulfilled expectations and political failures on the ground. It has reaffirmed an international liberal Western Self, disguised as genuine Afghan desires and universal UN standards. Ironically the failure of the Afghans to meet these high expectations, to transform from an underdeveloped to a modern state, reinforce and confirm the Western Self and its perceived need to continue to assist Afghanistan.

If we look at this process through the lenses of the *ethical dimension*, the same pattern is reaffirmed. The ambitions are high, based on moral and presumably universal values, as represented by the UN and other international state-building actors. The ethical Other is the Afghan institutions, legislation and value system which is to become liberated and liberalised. The language in all the mentioned declarations put huge emphasis on the importance of liberal values such as good governance, gender and women's rights, anti-corruption, education, human rights etc. The benchmarks lists e.g. separate juvenile and women prisons by 2010 and a National Action Plan for Women to be fully implemented, also by 2010. But there is hardly any reference to Afghan traditions, positive and negative developments, particular obstacles or priorities. Also, the liberal idea of local ownership often abandoned, e.g. when the Afghans step 'out of line' and pass laws that run

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<sup>47</sup> According to the 'Afghanistan Compact Procurement Monitoring Project', in the period March 2005 to March 2006, the official development assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan was \$1.5 billion. But of this only about 31% had any local economic impact, i.e. used to buy locally produced Afghan goods and services. The report finds that funds channelled through international companies or NGO's only had a 20% local economic impact. Funds provided directly to the local authorities (through e.g. trust funds) on the other hand, had an impact on about 85%. Still, in total only 25% of the aid went to the trust funds, 58% to international companies or NGOs and 15% to UN agencies.

counter to the liberal values of the State-building discourse. Then Western political actors quickly interfere to prevent it.<sup>48</sup>

Despite this the State-building discourse typically considers itself a positive force with no political agenda, only assisting in the implementation of 'universal' values. These are typically UN human rights' documents which are formally recognised by the Afghan authorities, but which not is recognised outside the liberal circles in Kabul. The Western State-builders tend to ignore the political role they play also in the ethical dimension while promoting liberal values.

### **Conclusion: State-building Discourse**

The presumption of the State-building discourse is that the Afghan Other, through the development of liberal state institutions, can become more like the Western Self over time. The role of the Self is to assist this transformation. But the State-building discourse has simultaneously demanded and denied the Afghans local ownership of the political process. On the one hand it has been declared that the Afghans themselves should do the bulk of the work in the creation of their own state, and that the international community should only 'oversee', 'facilitate' or 'assist' the process from the outside. On the other hand, to 'make sure' this process goes as it 'should', the discourse has been deeply embedded in indirect rule. It is talked about liberal rights, sovereignty and freedom, but there is also constant illiberal interference in the Afghan institutions and political life. The whole range of requirements, expectations, milestones and demands of the authorities, keeps it tightly in control of the Western State-building actors, who also keep full *de facto* control of the finances of the state.

Hence, the State-building Self appears to be an outsider with limited own interests, a well-intended assistant, aimed at modernising and developing Afghanistan. It is, to borrow a term from David Chandler, an 'empire in denial',<sup>49</sup> a Self perception of a de-politicised helper, in denial of own power and influence and with no accountability towards the Afghan population.

For the State-building discourse modernity is the future, the 'violent and barbarian past' embodied as the Taliban is the Other from which Afghanistan must be saved. The Taliban Other is defined entirely out of the discourse and is nonexistent as a political player. Through state-building one is to ensure that they remain marginalised and never re-

<sup>48</sup> See 'Pressure on Hamid Karzai to scrap Afghan women's law', *The Guardian*, 1 April 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/01/afghanistan-womens-rights-hamid-karzai>, accessed 1 October 2009.

<sup>49</sup> David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: the Politics of State-building*, London, Pluto Press, 2006.

turn. The question is however, if one can get rid of a political-cultural actor through institution- and state-building. Can Afghanistan be expected to become a liberal state in the foreseeable future, or will Taliban or other non-liberal actors continue to be a political factor that needs to be taken into account? The State-building discourse appears to have ignored real-world politics and the so-called realities on the ground, and built a generic concept that has reinforced the identity of the Self but fell short on transforming the Other.

Lastly, the State-building discourse in its introvert and largely European focus appears to be relatively ignorant of the Humanitarian and Military discourses. Both security and humanitarian needs are integral parts of all the state-building documents, but state-building sphere it is nonetheless a field executed in separation from the others. There is e.g. no reflection of a COIN tactic in the state-building discourse, even if the former relies on political settlements to succeed. The ANDS has become a standard point of reference on the development and humanitarian projects, but the Kabul government has limited influence of its implementation. Furthermore, the State-building discourse focuses predominantly on the central government, and less on the rural provinces where both the Humanitarian and the Military actors operate. The common ground for a comprehensive approach is thus limited.

### **Conclusion**

The three discourses analysed in this paper meet in the same physical space, the (post)war theatre, but appears at times to be at three different conceptual and perceptual planets. Their view of themselves and their roles, as well as the view of the local actors and the main reason for being in Afghanistan, differ significantly. In addition there are striking differences within the discourses, several strands with competing visions and identities of own role and vision, Lastly there is often a huge gap between words and deeds, in all three discourses.

The power struggles or competing world-views are most visible in the Military and the Humanitarian discourses, which both are struggling with coming to terms with their role in the (post)war theatres. The transition from conventional 'trench-war' to 'war amongst the people' has complicated roles which used to be clear-cut, and forced them both to re-define themselves.

The Humanitarian discourse actively seeks to prevent other actors from entering their 'humanitarian space', whereas COIN discourse appears to expand way beyond the military sector. The Humanitarian discourse, in its most puritan version, seeks to elevate itself above the politics of the (post)war theatre. The State-building discourse is also

consider it self to be more technical than political by building institutions, but it fails to recognise what enormous constraints it puts on the Afghan authorities. It is a neo-colonial 'empire in denial'. What is worse is that despite the enormous political interference, the amount of money spent on political projects is rather modest, with limited impact and with large chunks returning to the donor country.

The West is far from 'one' in Afghanistan. Perhaps it never was 'one' when operating in war-torn operations overseas, but there is reason to suspect that the ambiguous and volatile situations that characterise the (post)war theatre exacerbates the differences further. The instruments applied, being military, humanitarian and state-building appears to be designed for another task in another time. The military does not have its equivalent adversary, the difference between civilians, militaries and criminals are being blurred, confusing both military and humanitarian actors. The conflicting politics in the theatre are being addressed by imposing our Western political institutions, the rule of law, government and administration, but they appear to be designed more to meet abstract international standards than to resolve the conflicts in Afghanistan.

The purpose of this paper was to illuminate the – at times – strikingly different approaches to the engagement in the same theatre. Calls for a comprehensive approach in crisis management which ignores these differences are unlikely to succeed. There are, however, developments and power-struggles taking place within each discourse which could alter the picture as it looks today. New identities may emerge over time. A more thorough analysis of each discourse's basic premises, the underlying philosophy, mandates and traditions, as well as the limitations, the unspoken topics, may provide for a detailed analysis of the key challenges and possibilities to achieve increased coherence. If successful, it could contribute in opening new political spaces for co-operation which today are closed by the frames of each respective discourse. This paper is only scratching the surface.