

Sten Rynning. *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-8238-8.



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Published on H-War (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

While a score of books have been written about the purpose and future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after the close of the Cold War, and an equally large number of monographs exam the ongoing war in Afghanistan, political scientist Sten Rynning provides a focused, thoughtful analysis of the intersection of these two topics in *NATO in Afghanistan*. Rynning claims that his study is the “first comprehensive assessment of NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan and what the war in Afghanistan means for NATO as an alliance” (p. 2). While somewhat of an overstatement given that Andrew Hohn and Sarah Harting covered similar ground in their 2010 RAND study, *Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan*, Rynning’s book contributes a valuable assessment of the performance and internal dynamics of NATO as a “benevolent alliance” subjected to the strains of responding to a protracted insurgency in one of the world’s most challenging physical, ethnic, and political environments. Rynning divides his study into two sections, first pro-

viding an overview of the theoretical debates between realists and liberals concerning alliance interests and values in Afghanistan, and then turning to an analysis of how and why NATO became involved in Afghanistan; why its mission teetered on the brink of failure by 2006-2008; and how NATO transformed its mission, organization, and purpose in Afghanistan as a result of this crisis.

NATO in Afghanistan is useful and enlightening in a number of areas. Its discussion of “Original Sins” serves to remind the reader of the heady days of the Bonn conference (November 27 to December 5, 2001) following the overthrow of the Taliban regime. At Bonn, a de facto *loya jirga* (grand council) of non-Taliban Afghan players agreed to the framework for a new Afghanistan, with an “international security assistance force” (ISAF) to provide support to the Interim [Afghan] Authority charged with convening subsequent *loya jirgas* to devise a constitution and conduct parliamentary and presidential elections. The ISAF initially was led by national commands (United Kingdom, Turkey) outside of the NATO

structure. One of the strengths of Rynning's analysis is his careful review of how NATO first assumed the limited ISAF mission in Kabul (August 2003), and subsequently expanded it to the relatively peaceful northern region of Afghanistan (2004), and then to the western, southern, and eastern regions over the course of 2005-2006.

Rynning unpacks the complicated reasons that led to two separate operations with distinct command structures, missions, and troop contingents: the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom mission (OEF) and the NATO-led ISAF. This dual command structure violated the military principle of "unity of command," with the distinct mandates and missions of the two operations causing much frustration over time. Efforts to de-conflict ISAF's mission of providing security assistance from OEF's broader mandate to conduct counterterrorist operations, counterinsurgency warfare, regional development, and prisoner interrogation proved problematic. Adding complexity to the matter were the tensions between NATO's limited mandate of providing security assistance to the Afghan government, and the realities on the ground where UN development teams were threatened when operating in areas beyond the effective control of the Kabul government.

The heart of Rynning's analysis rests on its examination of the crisis of 2006-2008, and NATO's subsequent transformation of the ISAF mission. Rynning lays out how NATO, once critical of American counterinsurgency concepts, such as civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams, came gradually to embrace the reality that it was fighting a war in Afghanistan even while building up Afghan national forces and stabilizing the country. Rynning views ISAF's expansion and the gradual folding together of the ISAF and OEF commands as evidence that NATO had the flexibility to transform once the gap between reality and aspiration became too wide. This seems to be making lemonade out of lemons: the initial effort to conduct a parallel, NATO-led security assistance

operation distinct from OEF gave way to an Americanized ISAF mandate that embraced the mix of combat operations, development, and training assistance inherent in the revised US counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine of December 2006.

NATO in Afghanistan provides a well-researched analysis of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan over the period 2001 to 2012, linking its findings to the broader debate about NATO's relevance, its ability to transform, and the challenges that a "benevolent alliance" faces attempting to uphold liberal values in the face of a well-armed, illiberal opponent. Yet several issues detract from the book's analysis. First, and this may be a stylistic quibble, the book is needlessly repetitive. The author provides an overview of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan in chapter 3, with subsequent chapters rehashing and repeating much of the material from the overview chapter. Second, the analysis includes too many buzzwords ("synergizing," "convergence," "unity in diversity"), and more troubling, adopts the tendency of the military to render all terms and titles, no matter how obscure, in the form of acronyms. While most readers will be familiar with the acronyms ISAF, OEF, OPLANs, and COIN, references to ADZs, the JCMB, and SCRs in a work lacking a list of acronym definitions makes for a needlessly ponderous read. (ADZ refers to Afghan Development Zones, JCMB stands for Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, and SCR is a Senior Civilian Representative.) Lastly, the central thrust of the book's analysis devotes too much attention to organizational issues, position statements, and operational plans. How these plans were implemented at the local level, and how a thinking, reactive enemy complicated and countered these plans and policies, remains in the background throughout the work. One wishes that the study had included more local color, and tangible examples of the difficulty of translating policy into practice.

Rynning concludes that NATO has demonstrated its adaptability in the face of adversity. He derives three general lessons from his analysis. First, he notes the importance of leadership, claiming that NATO's leaders were initially "too focused on liberal convictions," with European and American political traditions pulling in separate ways during the period 2001-2008 (p. 214). Second, Rynning recommends that NATO should enhance the office of the secretary general by giving him the power to appoint more subordinates and provide more strategic coherence to the political guidance that the North Atlantic Council furnishes to its military commanders. Lastly, Rynning maintains that NATO needs to ground its vision geopolitically. The institution is ill-suited to uphold vague notions of a global liberal order. While Rynning does not rule out the possibility of limited missions in the Middle East and Indian Ocean, he asserts that NATO remains a regionally anchored institution that needs to balance interests as well as values.

NATO's mission in Afghanistan is still ongoing, and if recent summit statements are to be believed, NATO will remain engaged in Afghanistan even after the 2014 transition of security responsibility to the Afghan government. In that sense, assessing the success or failure of NATO in Afghanistan is premature. Rynning provides a thoughtful analysis of NATO's near-failure and subsequent transformation during the period 2001-2012. Whether or not this transformational achievement will translate into the political end state envisioned at Bonn over a decade ago remains to be determined.

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Citation: Douglas Peifer. Review of Rynning, Sten. *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

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