

Comprehensive Study on the Strategic Lessons Learned from ISAF

Project Overview

For more than 11 years, under the mandate of several UN Security Council Resolutions, NATO has committed resources and considerable effort to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop the Afghan security forces to ensure the Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for terrorists.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Mission in Afghanistan terminated on 31 December 2014. The many challenges that have arisen in Afghanistan have provided fertile ground for NATO to learn, resulting in meaningful lessons to further the Alliance's transformation. To ensure these valuable lessons would not be lost, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation tasked the Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) with the analysis of the strategic lessons from ISAF mission. The goal of this study was to facilitate strategic military inputs to the on-going initiatives that are transforming NATO today.

The ISAF Periodic Mission Reviews formed the principal data source for this project. In addition, other documents of strategic relevance were analysed. From these data sources, the project team extracted over 600 observations and lessons, which were subjected to an in-depth analysis, allowing the project team identify the top eleven strategic topics related to ISAF, grouped into the relevant domains of the PMESII categories (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, and Infrastructure) as follows.



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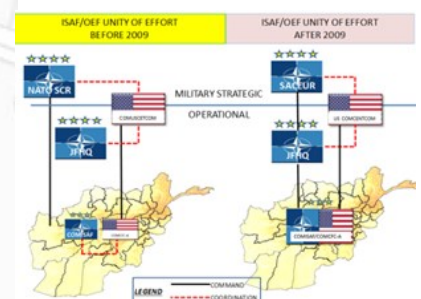


ISAF time line showing the different phases and key events of the mission

Political Domain

Nations Influence: Throughout the duration of the ISAF Mission, the ISAF Combined Joint Statement of Requirements remained persistently unfilled. The resulting capability shortfalls coupled with national caveats imposed on the forces had the cumulative effect of reducing the operational effectiveness of ISAF. There is little NATO can do to address this issue without the concerted effort of Nations to contribute the required resources free of caveats.

Comprehensive Approach (CA): From the outset of the ISAF Mission, NATO recognized the need to operate in cooperation with other International Community actors in Afghanistan. The evidence from the ISAF Mission demonstrates that NATO has made significant and worthy strides in developing its CA which has clearly made the Alliance more capable to deal with emerging crises.



Military Domain

Training: Pre-deployment training (PDT) has consistently proved to be an important factor for overall efficiency of NATO operations and missions. NATO PDT capabilities steadily evolved and improved over the duration of the ISAF Mission.

Unity of Command: The experience from the ISAF mission suggests that unity of effort between separate operations or missions can be achieved at the political and strategic level through out-of-theatre coordination, but to ensure operational unity of effort, more than just in-theatre coordination was required. This requirement was finally met by dual-hatting the ISAF and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom commander.

Command and Control (C2): The C2 structure for a mission needs to be adapted to match mission dynamics and complexity. Across the ISAF timeline, the operational commander in theatre was required to engage in non-operational and political-strategic level activities. This situation led to the reorganization of the ISAF in-theatre upper command structure into HQ ISAF, the ISAF Joint Command, and the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan.

Security Forces Assistance (SFA): SFA represents a mind-set change requiring a fundamental shift in how NATO thinks and operates. Lessons from ISAF clearly show the need for NATO to establish an appropriate and effective SFA capability as articulated in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept.

Transition from ISAF to Resolute Support Mission (RSM): The most important prerequisites for a successful transition from ISAF to RSM were the change from an execution mission focus to a mentoring mission focus and the early engagement of the Troops Contributing Nations (TCN).

Economic and Social Domains

Funding: A responsive NATO common funding policy and management is required to cope with an ever-changing operational environment.

Protection of Civilians: With reference to the earlier JALLC report on Protection of Civilian Casualties (13 February 2015), much was done during the ISAF Mission to reduce Civilian Casualties (CIVCAS) through the implementation of a deliberate strategy incorporating a range of measures designed to reduce CIVCAS.

Information Domain

Information and Lessons Sharing: Information sharing among TCNs, Nations, and NATO was a key requirement to ensure an efficient allocation and employment of NATO and national resources in theatre for both operational and logistical purposes.

Strategic Communications (STRATCOM): What ISAF actually achieved on the battlefield was less important in many ways than how those achievements were perceived by the public. Experience from the ISAF Mission has demonstrated the importance of using information for strategic/operational effect and to foster public opinion.

Project Team

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LTC Aguado joined the Spanish Army in 1985. He graduated from the Higher Staff College in 2003, and has served in a variety of positions and missions, including at HQ ISAF as a strategic planner in 2012. LTC Aguado was assigned to the JALLC as a military analyst in 2014.



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