

# Whom to Obey?: The Dilemma for the NATO ISAF Commander, May 2006–February 2007

By Brian Babcock-Lumish\*

*“True professionals, first and foremost, talk command and control, then logistics and then tactics”.*

British Army General Sir David Richards<sup>1</sup>

As the commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC), British Army General David Richards (hereafter, “Richards”) served from May 2006 to February 2007 as the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) on behalf of NATO and a wider coalition under United Nations (UN) auspices.<sup>2</sup> By the ARRC’s arrival in 2006, ISAF was a 37-member “coalition of the willing” built around a core of the then 26-member NATO Alliance.<sup>3</sup> As the Commander, ISAF (COMISAF), Richards reported solely to NATO in Belgium, despite wearing a British uniform and the United Kingdom controlling his appointment to the post and its duration.<sup>4</sup> Importantly for this article, little research has been done to explore the complexities of multinational chains of command from the perspective of a “single-hatted” multinational commander with “double-hatted” national contingent commanders (NCC’s) reporting in both national and multinational chains of command.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to Richards’ command, ISAF expanded its geographic responsibility in the first two of four stages from the Afghan capital Kabul to the north (stage 1) and west (stage 2) in 2004-2005. During Richards’ tenure, the expansion continued counter-clockwise to the south (stage 3) and east (stage 4) in 2006 (see Figure 1, next page). Commensurate with the geographic expansion, ISAF gradually grew in troop strength, with reinforcements coming from both outside the theatre and the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) coalition already in-theatre. During Richards’ tenure the majority of the American in-

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\* The views presented in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect those of the US Department of the Army or Department of Defense.

<sup>1</sup> Richards, 2014a.

<sup>2</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Commander Allied Rapid Reaction Corps” (no date given) ; ISAF, “Allied Rapid Reaction Corps Takes over NATO Mission in Afghanistan”, 4 May 2006 ; House of Commons Defence Committee, 3 July 2007.

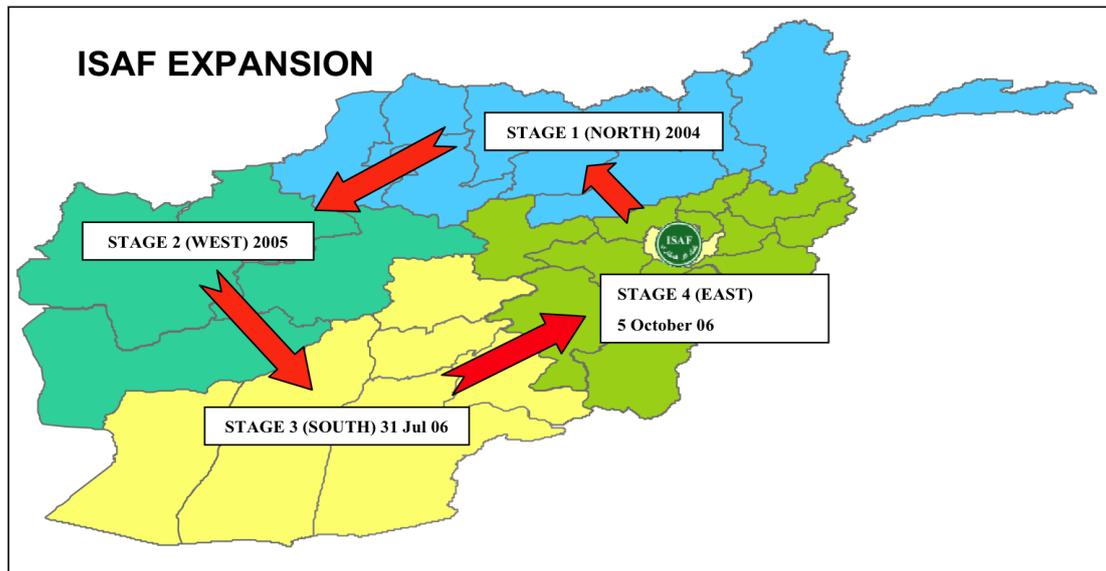
<sup>3</sup> ISAF had not, however, always been a NATO mission, despite NATO members having always provided the majority of ISAF troops : International Security Assistance Force, “ISAF Troops in Numbers (Placemat)”, 16 September 2006. More recently than the period in question, NATO subsequently expanded in April 2009 to include two further members, Albania and Croatia, bringing membership to its current 28. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO Enlargement” (last updated 10 August 2010).

<sup>4</sup> As Richards (2014b, pp.186-187) described in his memoirs : “*In terms of my relationship with Britain, I wasn’t actually in the British chain of command [as COMISAF]. I would command British forces in Helmand down a NATO chain through a subordinate Canadian-led headquarters in Kandahar*”.

<sup>5</sup> For a valuable account focused on the subordinate national contingent commanders, see : Auerswald & Saideman, 2014.

theatre military presence shifted from OEF to ISAF, presenting a unique study case in which the dominant member of an alliance – as measured by troop contribution to the mission at hand – was *not* in command. The research question this historical circumstance presents is: *when preferences among alliance capitals diverge, which will the commander in the field follow most closely ?*

Figure 1 : ISAF Expansion<sup>6</sup>



As a British Army General subject to sanction by his national capital, Richards ought to have followed the preferences of the UK most closely, because commanders are assumed to value employment first and foremost.<sup>7</sup> This article will explore Richards' behaviour in response to divergent coalition and NATO preferences – particularly British and American – in two broad areas: strategy and resources.

The framework upon which this article builds its theoretical contribution is principal-agent theory. This institutional approach has been employed in fields such as law, economics, and political science before its comparatively recent adaptation for civil-military relations. The sub-discipline of civil-military relations within political science is concerned with what political scientist Peter Feaver terms the ‘civil-military problematique’: “*a special case of the general problem of political agency*” in which “*one person has delegated authority to someone else to act on his behalf*”.<sup>8</sup>[BB1] The crux of the paradox is that the military is delegated authority to defend the State, but then has the capacity to threaten the State it defends. Feaver's scholarship provides an updated framework beyond Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, which has dominated the sub-discipline since its publication in 1957.<sup>9</sup>[BB2]

<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 is from “ISAF Troops in Numbers (Placemat)”, 14 March 2007.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of principal-agent relationships, see Babcock-Lumish, 2010, chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Feaver, 1996 ; Feaver, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Huntington, 1957. For the influence of Huntington's ideas on the practice of American civil-military relations in the Gulf War (and beyond), cf. Cohen, 2002, pp.188-199. Also see Strachan, 2010.

Before exploring the empirical evidence, background on NATO command structures is in order. NATO doctrine does not allow for any commander in his NATO capacity to have “full command” of NATO troops. The most expansive authorities possible are Operation Command, followed by the more commonly used Operational Control (OPCON) or more restrictive Tactical Control (TACON).<sup>10</sup> Capitals instead delegate those authorities between full command and any of the other three to their national contingent commanders (NCC), rather than to the NATO commander. Because Richards was serving solely in a multinational capacity, even the United Kingdom had an NCC below him, as did every other of the 37 troop contributing nations (TCN’s), 26 of which were also members of NATO. No NATO member granted Richards the full range of authority possible. The authority that was delegated to him as a NATO commander was limited, while national capitals instead delegated those authorities withheld from Richards to their contingents under him.

All capitals’ representatives under Richards – the NCC’s – would carry the so-called “national red card”, with which they could veto an order from him, should it exceed their capitals’ guidance. Equally, the NATO structure accommodates the possibility of “national caveats” in advance of a force’s deployment under multinational command.<sup>11</sup> Each NCC will have guidance (often formal and informal) from a capital on country-specific limits.<sup>12</sup>

## Strategy

Upon assuming command, Richards emphasized that *“ISAF’s main effort will be to extend and deepen the areas in which the Government of Afghanistan, international and nongovernmental agencies can safely operate”*.<sup>13</sup> A year later, he described his command retrospectively: *“The fundamental challenge lies in the ability to get at the proper strategic level, that is, at the national level in Afghanistan, a strategic overall campaign plan which is not an aggregate of every single country which has an interest in this, in other words*

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<sup>10</sup> Full command is “military authority and responsibility of a commander to issue orders to subordinates. It covers every aspect of military operations and administration and exists only within national services. Note: The term ‘command’ as used internationally, implies a lesser degree of authority than when it is used in a purely national sense. No NATO or coalition commander has full command over the forces assigned to him...”: NATO Standardization Agency, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The simplest examples are those such as the geographic constraints on a force’s employment.

<sup>12</sup> Virtually all of the non-NATO States contributing to the ISAF mission have prior formalized relationships with NATO, either as members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Georgia, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Malta, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) ; NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia) ; the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates) ; or, as “contact countries”, which “share similar strategic concerns and key Alliance values” (Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and New Zealand). Source : North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Partner Countries” (last updated 4 August 2010). As the Foreign and Commonwealth Office explained in its written response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *“The NAC works in close consultation with non-NATO nations taking part in ISAF and special meetings with these nations are held on a regular basis”* (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 22 March 2005).

<sup>13</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “New Chapter for NATO in Afghanistan”, 4 May 2006. Also see Richards, “Commander’s Intent”, May 2006.

*bilateral interests*”.<sup>14</sup> The first statement was Richards’ understanding of the task NATO delegated to him as its field commander. His statement of the “main effort” was unlikely to be controversial among NATO member-States with divergent views, because what was left unsaid was the controversial strategic piece: *how* to extend the further resources it might require. Germany had led the effort into the relatively peaceful north, establishing a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kunduz in 2003, the military portion of which then moved “*under ISAF command as a pilot project and first step in the expansion of the mission*”.<sup>15</sup> Stage one was completed in October 2004 with the establishment of four further PRT’s. The following year, ISAF expanded into the west, first in May with two PRT’s and a Forward Support Base (FSB) in Herat. In September, another two PRT’s became operational.<sup>16</sup> This expansion faced minimal US resistance because it did not impede the Americans’ ability to continue counterterrorism operations in the east and south under OEF, then the primary objective of the United States.

On matters of strategy in the east and south with stages 3 and 4 expansion, however, there was plenty that was controversial. NATO members had divergent preferences on how best to accomplish the “main effort” laid out by Richards. Those NATO members with troops in the north and west by the time of his arrival, for instance, “*were inclined to approach their work as peacekeeping*”, which they had been doing since NATO expansion into those areas in stages 1 and 2.<sup>17</sup> As the nationally-led PRT expansion suggests, there lurks a danger of balkanizing the theatre-wide area of operations into incoherent nationally-focused provinces. In the case of the United Kingdom, London risked myopic focus on “*Helmandshire*”, as the southern Afghan province of Helmand derisively came to be known.<sup>18</sup>

In advance of the UK assumption of responsibility for the ISAF mission in Helmand as part of stage 3 expansion, the British government developed its UK Joint Campaign Plan for Helmand.<sup>19</sup> The initial plan for the UK presence in Helmand had envisioned 3,150 troops, with their “*primary job to protect the Provincial Reconstruction Team and to create security*”, despite the task force falling under the command of counterterrorism-focused OEF for the first few months until stage 3 of ISAF expansion.<sup>20</sup>

Prior to Richards’ assumption of command, journalists were aware he wanted an extra 1,000 troops beyond the 3,150 from the UK for a regional reserve in RC-South. This

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<sup>14</sup> Richards, in testimony before the House of Commons Defence Committee.

<sup>15</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO in Afghanistan : How Did This Operation Evolve ?”, last updated 30 April 2007.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*; also, International Security Assistance Force, “ISAF Troops in Numbers (Placemat)”, 2 January 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Neumann, 2009, p.133.

<sup>18</sup> This was how Mr. Dai Havard MP referred to the province when questioning General Richards at a hearing before the House of Commons Defence Committee. This was not, however, a uniquely British problem. An American congressional researcher notes: “*RC-South effectively includes four provincially-based national campaigns – Dutch, British, Canadian, and U.S. – based on the provinces in which their respective troops are deployed*”. Congressional Research Service & Catherine Dale, 23 January 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Farrell & Gordon, 2009, p.669. Even the title of the campaign plan demonstrates the tendency of a given capital to focus solely on “its” geographic region.

<sup>20</sup> Farrell, 2010, p.574.

request had been overruled by the MoD because of force requirements in Iraq (Rayment, 2008, pp.39-40). British Army Brigadier Ed Butler, largely excluded from the planning in the MoD for the mission he would lead as COMBRITFOR (Commander of British Forces) privately considered the UK’s plan to be “barking” (*ibid.*). Richards himself did not know why the UK had ended up in Helmand Province, having expected the UK would assume responsibility for Kandahar and planned for that before the deployment.<sup>21</sup>

While Brig. Butler was COMBRITFOR, the UK’s NCC, initially he was *not* the commander of the British-led Task Force-Helmand (TF-H).<sup>22</sup> The command structure for TF-H was initially “*extraordinarily cumbersome and guaranteed to generate fuzziness and ambiguity*”.<sup>23</sup> Part of the challenge was that the Canadian commander of RC-South was a brigadier, and a decision was made that military protocol prevented a British brigadier from serving under another brigadier. Consequently, Brig. Butler was not in the chain of command, despite having political oversight of the operation and reporting directly back to the UK Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ). He was, effectively, an NCC who was neither a subordinate multinational commander nor a senior staff officer in the multinational HQ. The subordinate TF-H was, instead, commanded by British Army Colonel Charlie Knaggs, who took his multinational orders from the Canadian brigadier at RC-South and reported to Brig Butler in a national capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Upon arrival, TF-H, under pressure from Helmand Provincial Governor Daoud on Brig. Butler as COMBRITFOR, had to defend the four Afghan government district centres at Musa Qala, Sangin, Nowzad, and Kajaki, in what became known as the “platoon house” strategy.<sup>25</sup> The pressure from the Afghans was partly due to Gov. Daoud’s failure “*to understand that the task force contained only one battle group of deployable infantry*”.<sup>26</sup> British commanders were unable to manage his misperception that, as one senior British officer put it, “*there were going to be three thousand Paras running around all over the place*”.<sup>27</sup> When faced with unexpectedly heavy fighting, the British augmented their force with another 1,500 troops. Equally, the Danes embedded in TF-H “*rushed Special Forces into theatre to support [their] battle group*”, and the Canadians in neighbouring Kandahar Province reinforced with main battle tanks.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Fergusson, 2008, pp.171-172.

<sup>22</sup> This structure was, in the words of retired British general who has studied and practiced multinational command extensively, “*not one of the greatest triumphs of the history of British arms*”. Author interview with Lt. Gen. John Kiszely, 19 August 2010. For his writing on the topic more broadly : Kiszely, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bishop, 2007, p.45.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.44-45.

<sup>25</sup> An account from an unnamed source present at a meeting between Daoud and Butler recounts that Daoud threatened to resign and then get President Karzai to tell Prime Minister Blair that Butler was not doing what the Afghans wanted and would allow northern Helmand to fall to the Taliban (Rayment, 2008, p.63). “*Daoud denies this, insisting it was a consensus decision made with British commander, Brigadier Ed Butler*” (Coghlan, 2009, p.129). Also see Farrell & Gordon, 2009, p.671 ; Farrell, 2010, p.575.

<sup>26</sup> Farrell, 2010, p.575.

<sup>27</sup> Bishop, 2007, p.50.

<sup>28</sup> Farrell & Gordon, 2009, p.673.

Richards opposed this move to spread the British contingent across Helmand, saying they were “magnets”<sup>29</sup> for the Taliban at small outposts. However, at the time of the decision, TF-H was still in the OEF, not ISAF, chain of command. Richards privately disparaged the strategy in Helmand as “dog’s dinner”.<sup>30</sup> Richards had OPCON of RC-South in early September; however, he fought against Brig. Butler’s impulse to unilaterally pull out of all the platoon houses in three days’ time (Richards, 2014*b*, pp.238-239). There was a view then that the Afghans would perceive a retreat as a defeat for Britain.<sup>31</sup> While militarily undesirable because of the high risk to British troops, the strategy had a strong rationale in Afghan domestic politics, in that Karzai believed “he could lose the Presidency if the northern districts of Helmand were to fall”.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, the platoon house strategy was immensely frustrating for US Army Major General Benjamin Freakley<sup>33</sup> (hereafter, “Freakley”). As Commander of Combined Joint Task Force-76 (CJTF), he retained command of all troops in RC-South, including the British-led TF-H, until stage 3 of expansion on 31 July, when command shifted to NATO.<sup>34</sup> It is clear from his journal entries how vigorously Richards disagreed with London on its policy toward Helmand, working at seemingly every turn to ensure London’s narrow focus on “Helmandshire” did not undo the work of the wider ISAF campaign plan (Richards, 2014*b*, *passim*). Despite being the nominal superior in the ISAF chain of command, Richards had to use less direct means than orders when it came to the issue of the platoon houses in Helmand. Brig. Butler had the support of London when he came close to the unilateral withdrawal from Musa Qala, and Richards had to persuade London to stay the course until the truce appeared as a way out of the impasse.<sup>35</sup>

At least initially, Richards reflected a “less kinetic” approach to the mission at the ISAF level, as evidenced by his first internal – though publicly available – message to the troops under his command in which he noted...

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, 1 October 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Fergusson, 2008, p.267. Seth Jones (2010, p.220) mischaracterizes Richards’ views on the deal in his account, based on a misreading of the original newspaper report. Rather than criticizing the British deal with the elders of Musa Qala for creating “magnets” for the Taliban, as Jones asserts, Richards’ was criticizing the Afghan president’s insistence that British troops guard the centers in the first place. Richards was suggesting it was the presence of British troops, not their departure, which turned Musa Qala into a Taliban “magnet” (Smith, 2 October 2006). The commander of 3 Para, who had a long-standing professional relationship with Richards, also offered this interpretation of Richards’ views on the platoon house strategy, based on multiple discussions with him : *cf.* Tootal, 2010, p.78 and p.192.

<sup>31</sup> Fergusson, 2008, p.191, p.267 ; Bishop, 2007, pp.255-256.

<sup>32</sup> Farrell & Gordon, 2009, p.671.

<sup>33</sup> Bishop, 2007, p.178.

<sup>34</sup> Tootal, 2010, p.52. The modification was noted in a June 2006 NATO communiqué, which suggests in the early months of Richards’ command there was *not* close coordination between ISAF and OEF: “While ISAF’s and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM’s missions will remain distinct, the recently agreed command arrangements will shortly be put in place to ensure close coordination between them” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 8 June 2006).

<sup>35</sup> That Richards believed he could do so without jeopardizing his career is unsurprising, given that he had been able to drive UK policy toward Sierra Leone in a British-only operation : *cf.* Little, 2010*a* and 2010*b*.

There will be fighting, for which we are all trained and prepared. However, fighting is not the only thing we shall be doing and, clearly, the less we have to do the better [Richards, “Foreword”, May 2006].

The Americans viewed Richards as “*too political*”, partly because of the way the press covered his explanation of his national strategy.<sup>36</sup> There was resentment among some American military leaders in Afghanistan, because the reporting “*created the impression that he was really saying the Americans had never understood the need for development over what the military calls ‘kinetic’ action and that now the war would be in better hands*” even though “*Richards specifically and publicly rejected the press interpretations*”.<sup>37</sup>

Even once TF-H shifted with the rest of RC-South from CJTF-76 control to ISAF, Freakley continued to experience difficulties in his relationship with the British contingent, among others. For example, when he requested reinforcements in September during the Canadian-led Operation MEDUSA near Kandahar, the British could only afford to commit a handful of troops because their entire task force was engaged in the defence of the district centres.<sup>38</sup> At this point, however, Richards shared Freakley’s frustrations: as he privately described at the time, “*The UK has been brought kicking and screaming to the party*” (Richards, 2014b, p.235). Even more frustrating for both ISAF and OEF commanders were the refusals of five nations, including Germany, to deploy any forces to support the beleaguered Canadians.<sup>39</sup> Frustration permeated American commands in Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup>

In private, Richards was effusive in his praise for the American contribution to MEDUSA: “*My abiding memories of [Tuesday, 19 September] are...the understated eloquence and sheer professionalism of US Colonel Steve Williams, who had gone from a broadly administrative job at Kandahar Airfield to brilliant command of an ad hoc battle group that had had a decisive impact on the southern flank of (...) MEDUSA*” (Richards, 2014b, p.244). For MEDUSA, Richards’ initial preference for UK-style reconstruction and development had shifted to that of the US tendency for more “kinetic” counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, owing to the shifting circumstances on the ground around Kandahar with the influx of Taliban fighters. In contrast, the main effort of MEDUSA, the Canadian contingent, had a much less positive view of Williams, later characterized as “*uniquely*

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<sup>36</sup> Quotation from Giustozzi, 2007, p.165. Also see Neumann, 2009, p.106.

<sup>37</sup> Neumann (2009, p.106) attributes part of the difficulty to the fact that Richards is “*an intellectual who liked expounding his views*”, which “[t]he press would repeat (...) in highly simplified fashion”. For an example of the press coverage, see Evans & Loyd, 1 November 2010.

<sup>38</sup> While there was internal debate about the danger of a “seam” between ISAF and CFC-A (Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan) in the autumn of 2006, the American ambassador for one was largely unconcerned, because “*cooperation between generals Eikenberry and Richards was good, particularly during Operation Medusa when US Special Forces under CFC-A had cooperated closely with ISAF troops*” (Neumann, 2009, p.114). This, however, does not capture the tensions further down the chains of command (Fergusson, 2008, pp.164-165).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. von Hammerstein *et al.*, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, 2010, p.xxiv. Singling out the British, an anonymous American officer complained to a reporter that “*British troops ‘established a series of strong points and then wouldn’t go out on patrol (...) It got almost comical when the Taliban would do drive-by shootings’*”, which in response a British diplomat could only defend by calling the information “*outdated*”. Cf. Wood, 7 January 2007.

*aggressive*,” and the Canadian subordinates resisted his orders to push forward to contact with the enemy at night (even though it met the ISAF commander’s intent for the mission).<sup>41</sup> Richards and Freakley, however, shared concerns about the Canadians’ plan (Richards, 2014b, p.237). Freakley’s worries about the Canadians tactically in NATO channels were echoed by his OEF chain of command, particularly his immediate American superior, Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) commander.<sup>42</sup>

Another reflection of how Richards’ preferences had come more closely to those of the contingent with the most significant resources – the United States – was his appreciation for Freakley’s willingness to keep American forces engaged in MEDUSA: “*The big coup is that the noble Ben F. has, without more than a gentle hint from me, which he probably did not need, kept the additional US company and two heavy guns in the fight. Despite the Dutch leaving – for at least four days to escort a convoy – we probably still have enough to succeed*”.<sup>43</sup>

After a summer of intense fighting defending the district centres, Brig. Butler – by then the commander of TF-H, as well as COMBRITFOR – negotiated an agreement with the local elders of Musa Qala. This allowed the British troops to withdraw based on assurances the Taliban would not be allowed to fill the security vacuum created by the UK departure.<sup>44</sup> The Americans resisted this negotiated settlement with the US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ronald Neumann, labelling it “*a long-running political controversy with the British*”.<sup>45</sup> Richards disputed that it was a “British” deal at all, protesting in interviews that “*the deal was an Afghan arrangement made by the local governor and agreed to in Kabul*”.<sup>46</sup> While Richards might have wanted to put an Afghan face on the deal to avoid causing friction with the Americans, one account suggests he had been developing it since early September 2006.<sup>47</sup>

Stage 4, with a large number of Americans under ISAF for the first time, caused much misunderstanding, even in some Alliance members’ parliaments, notably Richards’ own in London.<sup>48</sup> Richards as COMISAF was never expected by the UK government (or NATO) to have authority over the entirety of non-Afghan military forces in the country, even after completion of stage 4 expansion into eastern Afghanistan. The implication is

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Day, 26 January 2008. For additional reporting on Operation MEDUSA from the Canadian perspective, see : Day, 1 September 2007 and 1 November 2007.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.242-243.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, 2006 ; Coghlan, 2009, p.130. Richards had gotten Butler into the operational chain of command upon getting control of British forces in stage 3, despite the fact that it subordinated him to the Canadian Brigadier commanding RC-South. See : Fergusson, 2008, p.267 ; Bishop, 2007.

<sup>45</sup> Neumann, 2009, pp.128-130, p.171, quotation on p.128.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.129. Also : Burke, 4 February 2007 ; Smith, 2 October 2006. According to one source, the origin of the truce was the tribal leaders of Musa Qala themselves, who approached Daoud with the idea : Fergusson, 2008, p.267.

<sup>47</sup> Tootal, 2010, pp.201, 237.

<sup>48</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, 28 March and 13 June 2006.

that the United States had, and would continue to have, an alternative force to ISAF in Afghanistan in the form of those conducting OEF. The two forces would conduct different missions. Despite this residual reluctance to submit American forces entirely to NATO command, stage 4 was significant for ISAF and NATO more widely.<sup>49</sup> The stage 4 transition was, however, slower than Richards had hoped. His preference had been for both stages 3 and 4 to occur simultaneously, but this met with reluctance from the Americans, resulting in the more gradual timeline.<sup>50</sup>

At the time, Richards viewed ISAF having geographic responsibility for the whole of Afghanistan favourably.<sup>51</sup> Not only did it simplify allied and coalition relationships with the Afghans, but geographic responsibility gave COMISAF the ability to ensure all of the “*sub-regional campaigns (...) work together*”.<sup>52</sup> Eikenberry continued to lead the OEF mission after the transition of 12,000 American troops from OEF to ISAF under stage 4 expansion into eastern Afghanistan. The commander of those troops, Freakley, assumed three positions. The first two hats were both within ISAF, one as Richards’ DCOMISAF for Security and the other as Regional Command-East (RC-East) Commander, one of Richards’ five subordinate regional commanders.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Freakley continued to wear his US hat as CJTF-76 Commander and reported to Eikenberry in the OEF chain of command.<sup>54</sup>

Eikenberry maintained overall command of OEF in Afghanistan beyond the stage 4 expansion as CG, CFC-A until its deactivation in January 2007, but he was never subordinate to Richards in the NATO chain of command.<sup>55</sup> Freakley’s “*dual role [was] to provide coordination between the two operations*”, ISAF and OEF. His OEF troops were not restricted to the east (and had not been even prior to stage 4).<sup>56</sup>

Richards’ relationship with Freakley is one of the clearest indicators of the degree to which Richards came to share the American policy preferences. As Richards described his impressions in a “*very good visit*” with Freakley, “*In taking them under command I must be certain not to chuck out a hell of a lot of good baby with any necessary bathwater...Need to get them thinking long term and to seek non-kinetic alternatives*”.<sup>57</sup>

A few days later, Richards expressed concern in his diary that a recent press conference had upset the Americans, because they inferred a critique of American tactics, which Richards worked behind the scenes to smooth over with Eikenberry and Freakley.

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<sup>49</sup> *NATO Review*, “Interview : General James L. Jones, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe” (Winter 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Brown, 2013, pp.219-220.

<sup>51</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), 16 March 2006.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Freakley assumed the three hats gradually, first becoming double-hatted as CJTF-76 and DCOMISAF for Security immediately upon arrival of Richards and the ARRC HQ. It was only at stage 4 that Freakley’s third hat, RC-East Commander, was established under ISAF : Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), 16 March 2006.

<sup>54</sup> American Forces Press Service & Donna Miles, 4 October 2006 ; Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), 16 March 2006.

<sup>55</sup> “Eikenberry Ends Tenure as Head of CFC-Afghanistan,” *Stars & Stripes*, 23 January 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Congressional Research Service & Paul Gallis, 22 August 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Richards, 2014b, p.198.

When pushed by a reporter with a hypothetical “*what would happen in the event that (...) in the heat of battle there was a disagreement between yourself and General Richards*”, Freakley emphasized “*I’m a soldier, and I follow orders*”. He went on to explain that “*each of the nations of NATO (...) have laid out their national concerns (...) I think they’re fairly clear, and I think we can work this coalition warfare well. And it’ll be a positive outcome as we stay focused on not much national interests but the interests of the people of Afghanistan*”.<sup>58</sup> Freakley did not emphasize publicly the fact that he had an alternate chain of command to Eikenberry. Interestingly, Richards’ language in October 2006, describing ISAF as “*deal[ing] with the counterinsurgency problem*” and CFC-A as “*deal[ing] with the counterterrorist problem*”,<sup>59</sup> is a shift from the language of his July speech, suggesting ways he came to adopt the American perspective on NATO’s mission in Afghanistan. At that time, he described ISAF as “*primarily mandated to deliver security and facilitate the rebuilding of a country shattered by decades of war*” (with the caveat that ISAF must “*be ready at all times to take the fight robustly to the enemy*”). According to Richards, CFC-A was, in contrast, “*first and foremost, waging the Global War on Terror and is committed to the complete military defeat of the Taliban and their (...) supporters*”.<sup>60</sup>

In response to a question in 2007 about whether the “*aims and objectives change[d] while (...) [he] was there*”, Richards asserted they did not. He did note that “[a]ny military operation evolves and certainly ours in Afghanistan did, not least obviously in the numbers of troops that were committed to it”.<sup>61</sup> Eventually the American preference with regard to the role of NATO shifted, partially driven by a desire to reduce US resource commitments in Afghanistan in order to devote greater efforts to a deteriorating situation in Iraq.<sup>62</sup> When it seemed questionable whether the US intended to remain committed to Afghanistan in late 2005, other NATO members were publicly reluctant to assume greater responsibility for counterinsurgency operations, which raises the second theme of this article.<sup>63</sup>

## Resources

“*Force generation in NATO has never been a particularly fun time*”.  
US Marine Corps General James Jones, SACEUR/COMUSEUR<sup>64</sup>

Following the NATO assumption of responsibility for the Kabul-based ISAF mission, and at the encouragement of both the interim Afghan government and NATO, in October 2003, the UN Security Council (UNSC) expanded ISAF’s mandate in UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 1510, “*as resources permit, to support the Afghan Transitional*

<sup>58</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), 16 March 2006.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> David Richards (*RUSI Journal*), August 2006. In fairness, Richards did also use the term “counterinsurgency” to characterize the NATO campaign in the July speech, though his parsing of the mandate did provide for multiple interpretations for multiple preferences amongst the alliance capitals.

<sup>61</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Rohde & Sanger, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Dempsey & Cloud, 14 September 2005. ; Rohde & Sanger, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 5 October 2004.

*Authority (ATA) and its successors in the maintenance of security in areas of Afghanistan outside of Kabul and its environs*”.<sup>65</sup>

At the start of the NATO ISAF mission, an additional 10,000 troops over the established 5,000 were deemed necessary to expand ISAF beyond Kabul to the rest of Afghanistan. No NATO member was reportedly willing to lead such an effort, forecast at £1.5 billion per year.<sup>66</sup> Just under three years later, at the time Richards assumed command of ISAF in May 2006, the “*number of NATO-led forces (...[was]) set to rise from approximately 9,000 (...) to about 15,000*” in conjunction with stage 3 of ISAF’s “*area of operations expanding this summer to include six additional provinces in the south of the country*”.<sup>67</sup> At the time of Richards’ arrival, approximately 22,900 American troops were in the country. Virtually none served in ISAF, though 12,000 were expected to come under ISAF control in stage 4.<sup>68</sup> Troop levels by country (for those with at least 1,000) over Richards’ tenure as COMISAF are depicted below (Table 1).<sup>69</sup>

Country	Jul 06	%	Sep 06	%	Oct 06	%	Nov 06	%	Jan 07	%	Mar 07	%
Total ISAF	16,798		20,115		30,837		32,800		35,460		36,750	
Canada	2,300	14	2,000	10	1,800	6	2,500	8	2,500	7	2,500	7
France	742	4	1,000	5	1,000	3	975	3	1,000	3	1,000	3
Germany	2,200	13	2,750	14	2,750	9	2,700	8	3,000	8	3,000	8
Italy	1,400	8	1,600	8	1,800	6	1,800	5	1,950	5	1,950	5
Netherlands	1,700	10	2,000	10	2,100	7	2,000	6	2,200	6	2,200	6
Spain	1,400	8	600	3	625	2	650	2	550	2	550	1
UK	4,200	25	5,000	25	5,200	17	6,000	18	5,200	15	5,200	14
US (ISAF)	120	1	1,300	6	11,250	36	11,800	36	14,000	39	15,000	41
US (OEF)	20,880		18,700		7,840		9,296		6,947		9,845	
US (Total)	21,000		20,000		19,090		21,096		20,947		24,845	

**Table 1** : ISAF troop levels by country, July 2006–March 2007

<sup>65</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1510 (2003), emphasis added. The encouragement from the interim Afghan government was in the form of a letter to the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) from the Afghan foreign minister, included as an annex to UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 13 October 2003...”. Likewise, there were a pair of letters from the NATO SecGen to the UNSG, included as annexes to UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 7 October 2003...”. The caveat “*as resources permit*” effectively delegated interpretation of the UN mandate to NATO, which is why it, and not the UNSC, emerges as the focus for this case.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Evans, 12 August 2003; Associated Press & Todd Pitman, 11 August 2010; Ghafour, 12 August 2010. In the words of *The Economist* (16 August 2003), expansion beyond Kabul was “*a political non-starter*”.

<sup>67</sup> Quotation from North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “New Chapter for NATO in Afghanistan”.

<sup>68</sup> Figures derived from DoD reporting to Congress, cited in Congressional Research Service & Andrew Feickert, 27 March 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Derived from International Security Assistance Force, 10 November 2006; IISS, 2006. The July figure corresponds to stage 3 of ISAF expansion into southern Afghanistan when primarily non-American OEF troops moved under ISAF command. The October figure corresponds to the stage 4 of ISAF expansion into eastern Afghanistan, when 11,250 of the 19,090 total US troops fell under ISAF instead of OEF. Congressional Research Service, O’Bryant & Waterhouse, “US Forces in Afghanistan” (27 March 2007).

By October 2006, Richards’ forces had grown to “*approximately 31,000 men and women*”.<sup>70</sup> Much of the increase in ISAF troops, however, was arguably a bookkeeping exercise measuring national capitals’ commitment to the overall mission in Afghanistan, because it was essentially a shift of resources from CFC-A to ISAF. It was an increase in Richards’ resources, but not an increase in *countries’* overall resource commitments, with a few exceptions.

A murkier matter at the outset was which units from which countries would serve under Richards’ HQ as ISAF expanded counter-clockwise from the north and west into the south and east during ISAF IX. As early as the NATO SecGen’s first letter to the UN Secretary General (UNSG) in October 2003, a “*critical factor*” was “*a willingness to deploy additional resources*”.<sup>71</sup>

At the NATO defence ministers’ meeting in February 2005, the issue of generating forces for the expansion of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan was closely intertwined with the contentious issue of national caveats on member-States’ forces in Afghanistan. In advance of the meeting, SecDef Rumsfeld was expected to apply pressure on NATO allies to end their use of national caveats.<sup>72</sup> SecDef Rumsfeld was, to a degree, trying to have it both ways, criticizing other countries’ caveats while the United States maintained arguably the largest caveat of all, refusing to place its troops in Afghanistan under NATO command. NATO announced the future expansion of the ISAF mission into western and southern Afghanistan in February 2005. The force generation process was not complete until a year later when on 2 February 2006 the Dutch Government announced its commitment to deploy troops to Uruzgun Province in support of stage 3 expansion into the south.<sup>73</sup>

In July 2006, Richards publicly warned a British think tank audience of equipment shortages and that ISAF was “*running out of time*”, which was duly reported in the press.<sup>74</sup> Richards took a similarly cautionary tone on force generation: “*The difficulty (...) SHAPE (...) has sometimes in meeting the Minimum Military Requirement outlined within the (...) CJSOR (...) denies commanders some of the freedoms they require to respond appropriately to developing situations*”.<sup>75</sup> Even in September, NATO force requirements for ISAF that had “*been written at a calmer time*” were only 80 percent filled by member-States’ contributions.<sup>76</sup> A “*shortage of ISAF troops needed to win fights*” was a “*strategic problem*” in the autumn of 2006 (Neumann, 2009, p.116).

US Ambassador Neumann was outspoken in his exhortation to Europeans to contribute more troops to Afghanistan. In an interview, he addressed not only the force level, but also restrictions on their employment. He stressed that “*all NATO nations should*

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<sup>70</sup> Quotation from Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), “DoD News Briefing with Gen. Richards from Afghanistan.”

<sup>71</sup> UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 7 October 2003...”.

<sup>72</sup> American Forces Press Service & Banusiewicz, 9 February 2005.

<sup>73</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, 28 March 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Norton-Taylor, 22 July 2006. For an article based on his speech, see Richards [RUSI], 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Richards [RUSI], 2006. Emphasis added.

<sup>76</sup> Neumann, 2009, p.114. Also : *Spiegel Online*, 26 September 2006.

remove their caveats on their forces”. Simultaneously, Neumann diplomatically praised by name the efforts of those “*allies (...) accepting a full measure of responsibility...forces from Holland, Denmark, Canada, the United States and Afghanistan*”, while demurring on specifically criticizing countries the German interviewer labelled the “*axis of wimps*”. This ‘axis’ included, for example, “*the Germans [who] were treated with open contempt at ISAF headquarters*” (*Spiegel Online*, 26 September 2006).

Richards had been upbeat in his July 2006 speech about “*the agreement of partner nations that, where militarily necessary, troops may engage in pre-planned combat operations*”, as well as “*the removal of customary restrictions by nations for recent operations*”. This optimism would later be undercut by the reticence of some Allies to reinforce Operation MEDUSA in the south, which then became the impetus for Neumann’s complaints to the European press.<sup>77</sup>

During a news briefing at the outset of stage 4 expansion, Richards was asked whether ISAF commanded enough aviation assets. His reply illustrates the enduring position of field commanders vis-à-vis resources : “*every general wants more (...) of course I would like more (...) I’m always happy to take more*”. A particular asset apart from helicopters that he wanted, however, was a “*theatre reserve*”.<sup>78</sup>

One international forum in which every NATO member had the opportunity to lobby one another for ISAF resources was the November 2006 NATO summit in Riga, Latvia. At the summit, some of the leading European contributors – France, Germany, Spain, and Italy<sup>79</sup> – continued to resist efforts to allow their troops to deploy from the relatively peaceful north of Afghanistan to the more restive south. The eventual concession was that their troops could be deployed outside their own areas, but only in emergencies.<sup>80</sup>

In contrast, some States eased their national caveats, such as the Netherlands, Romania, Denmark, Luxembourg Hungary, Greece, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Czech Republic.<sup>81</sup> Despite these changes, the assessment from an American diplomatic October 2 perspective on the ground was of no “*visible change for us*”.<sup>82</sup> President George W. Bush had been at the NATO summit, but “*had gotten little extra help, despite NATO’s claim that success in Afghanistan was an existential issue for the organization’s future relevance*”.<sup>83</sup>

After the Riga summit, Canadian General Raymond Henault, the Chairman of NATO’s Military Committee, discussed both force generation and national caveats,

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<sup>77</sup> Richards [*RUSI*], August 2006 ; *Spiegel Online*, 26 September 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), 17 October 2006. Emphasis added.

<sup>79</sup> Calculations by the author based on contributions listed in International Security Assistance Force, “ISAF Troops in Numbers (Placemat)”. See Table 1, p.11.

<sup>80</sup> It is worth noting that the German forces on the ground, both conventional and Special Forces, were frustrated and angry in 2006-7 about the restrictions placed on them by their Parliament, because it prevented them from accomplishing the missions for which they had been trained. The caveats observed at the time included a general prohibition on offensive military operations, daylight-only patrolling in armored vehicles and a requirement that all patrols be accompanied by military ambulances : Jones, 2010, p.251.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249. House of Commons Defence Committee (3July 2007).

<sup>82</sup> Neumann, pp.136-137.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.146.

suggesting the outcome was far from ideal : “*We would like to see more troops first of all; and secondly, we’d like to see more and more of the caveats reduced or eliminated (...). The Statement of Requirement is not yet fully filled, but we’ve seen encouraging signs, and the same goes for caveat reduction*”.<sup>84</sup> UK Secretary of State for Defence Des Browne echoed Henault’s post-Riga assessment in testimony before the House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC), noting that...

caveats are a matter of political choice. (...) The political circumstances of countries are different and an appreciation of those circumstances sometimes helps one to understand why there are some limits on what they agree to do in terms of the plan.<sup>85</sup>

Recalling his previous public position from 2006 in testimony to the HCDC, Richards reminded them “*when I was asked last year do I have enough [troops] and I would say no, I never have enough, no general ever has enough and, as we discussed, it was a close-run thing on occasions*”.<sup>86</sup> Richards’ preferences on force levels diverged from those of NATO member-States in aggregate, which could not collectively generate the forces required to give their senior agent a theatre reserve. As Richards later recounted, “*I got so fed up with not having anything*” in reserve.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, he was pleased with the eventual outcome of efforts to convince NATO to send more forces for his COMISAF successor.<sup>88</sup>

That the request came to fruition had as much to do with the changing personalities in Washington, particularly SecDef Rumsfeld’s replacement with Robert Gates as the new Defense Secretary after the Republican defeat in the mid-term 2006 election. On SecDef Gates’ first visit to Afghanistan with his military counterpart, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) US Marine Corps General Peter Pace, Neumann noticed a change in tone from the leadership in their willingness to consider additional resources for Afghanistan, to the point of even questioning whether the requests from theatre were “*self-limiting because of what [Ambassador Neumann and General Eikenberry] think are force availabilities*”.<sup>89</sup>

Richards asserted he was less concerned with caveats than with total numbers of troops when questioned by the Defence Committee after his tour had concluded:

...troop numbers were the real issue rather than caveats. If we just pursue it slightly, without wishing to sound like some sort of apologist for what, for example, the Germans or the Swedes or any nation you like were doing in the North, or the Italians in the West, simply being able to move their troops from

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<sup>84</sup> *NATO Review*, “Interview : General Ray Henault, Chairman of the Military Committee” (Spring 2007).

<sup>85</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, 3 July 2007.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, Ev 59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, Ev 52 ; Richards was equally emphatic in a newspaper interview at the end of his command, stressing that “*we need to put more military effort into the country (...) including that all important Reserve force that we NATO commanders first asked for 18 months ago*” : see Norton-Taylor in *The Guardian*, 22 January 2007.

<sup>88</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, “UK Operations in Afghanistan...” (3 July 2007).

<sup>89</sup> Neumann, 2009, pp.160-161, quotation from p.161.

the North to the South would not have been a solution to me at all because we have got just about the right number of troops in the North to contain the situation there, which is broadly stable. I had no incentive to move them out; what I was always after—going back to your question—which has now been fully accepted was an increase in the overall number of troops, it was not really caveats because within the area where we were doing the fighting we were able to fight.<sup>90</sup>

Some subordinates on the ground did not share Richards’ views. For example, in September 2007, a senior NATO official in Kandahar described the proscription against many contingents’ participation in combat operations: “*It was like fighting with one hand tied behind our backs*”.<sup>91</sup> While there might be some truth to Richards’ assertion that he would rather have more troops with caveats than the same number of troops but with fewer caveats, the fact remains that the caveats he had in-theatre prevented him from deciding in which parts of the country to assume risk overall.

Richards’ optimism was also belied by his American counterpart, Eikenberry, who immediately after leaving the theatre from his post commanding CFC-A, in testimony to the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) implored that “*NATO must fulfil its commitments to provide sufficient forces and capabilities to the mission (...) and must eliminate operational restrictions, or so-called caveats, that some nations have placed on units that they have deployed to Afghanistan*”.<sup>92</sup> Richards’ replacement in-theatre, US Army General Dan McNeill, graphically depicted the continuing problem of caveats in 2007 by pinning on the wall of his office a chart full of red and yellow blocks :

Each block shows the restrictions that national governments have placed on their forces under his command. Red blocks represent tasks a country will not do, like hunting Taliban or Qaeda leaders. Yellow blocks indicate missions they are willing to consider after asking their capitals for approval.<sup>93</sup>

Richards himself noted as early as July 2006 that “*the United States remains the biggest and most powerful constituent [of NATO]*”.<sup>94</sup> Thus, even when the United States was not the dominant troop contributor under Richards as the field commander, he was keenly aware of the larger picture of total contribution to the mission in Afghanistan with an understanding of the evolving context in which the US contribution soon would be the most significant. His testimony to the committee echoed earlier public praise for the Americans at the end of his tour:

I have a huge admiration for what the US are doing in Afghanistan. They are pouring billions of dollars into the country, gripping issues other countries should and often putting the rest of the IC [international community] to shame

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<sup>90</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, “UK Operations in Afghanistan...” (3 July 2007).

<sup>91</sup> Jones, 2010, p.239.

<sup>92</sup> House Armed Services Committee (13 February 2007), “Statement of Lieutenant General Karl W. Eikenberry...”.

<sup>93</sup> Rohde & Sanger, 2007.

<sup>94</sup> Richards [*RUSI*], August 2006.

in the process. We do not agree on everything, inevitably, but have a good enough relationship to discuss things robustly and constructively. Unsurprisingly we have an excellent relationship too with the US military; I am a huge admirer of most of what they do and again, where we may not agree (which is not very often I have to say) they do as they are told in a proper soldierly manner. They are much maligned and I often tease them that they must do more to explain to a sceptical world how nuanced and multi-dimensional their approach has become. At the low level, few armies string together more efficiently and effectively operations that include lots of non-kinetic elements like road building.<sup>95</sup>

In his post-command testimony, Richards used every opportunity to effusively praise : “*I would like to say (...) we would be nowhere without the USA in every respect, both in the amount of money they are putting in, through the bravery of their troops and their preparedness to take risk and to fight when not every nation yet has that offensive spirit*”.<sup>96</sup> Later in the same testimony, Richards spoke favourably of the relationship between OEF and ISAF.<sup>97</sup> Richards was cognizant of the significance of the American contribution to the overall mission in Afghanistan, whether under the ISAF umbrella, through CFC-A conducting OEF, or other mechanisms. He appeared willing to downplay the tensions between ISAF and OEF in order to secure maximum support from the Americans, arguably because they had become the contingent with the greatest contribution to his power as the ISAF commander, trumping both the immediate UK contribution and London’s long-term control over his career progression.

In contrast, the impact of NATO members’ refusal to allow their proportionally significant ISAF contingents to be shifted from the relatively peaceful north and west of Afghanistan to the more violent south in the late summer and autumn of 2006 was a serious restriction on Richards. Such geographic national caveats made the battle around Kandahar, in his own words, “*reasonably close run*”.<sup>98</sup>

Surprisingly, Richards’ behaviour did not most closely match the preferences of the capital with the most control over his personal employment. Richards’ subsequent career trajectory – becoming Chief of the General Staff (CGS), then CDS, and retiring to a peerage in the House of Lords – suggests that he suffered no adverse consequences with regard to his own career trajectory as a result of his role as COMISAF. That being said, at the time of his command, Richards’ diary reveals he certainly paid attention to his post-command career prospects and worried that his performance might jeopardize them. One of the members of the UK Chiefs of Staff Committee...

felt I was exaggerating the need for more troops and better equipment...the senior officer [said] to me, “*If you don’t stop making such a fuss about what you think you need in Afghanistan, I cannot guarantee you a fourth star*”.

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<sup>95</sup> Norton-Taylor, “Full Interview : General David Richards” (22 January 2007).

<sup>96</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, “UK Operations in Afghanistan...” (3 July 2007).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, Ev 59.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, Ev 49.

Effectively, he was saying to me, if you don't shut up your career's over...I felt very let down but resolved not to stop saying whatever I felt was right to get the operation properly resourced.<sup>99</sup>

Just a month into his command in Kabul, Richards met with General Richard Dannatt, then the Commander in Chief, Land Forces, who “*refused to confirm what lay in store for me next, although hinted that it would be his position, if I produced the goods here. Understandably, perhaps, he will not wish to commit himself until the last moment*”.<sup>100</sup> Even as late as mid-December 2006, Richards continued to inquire with colleagues at MoD about his next posting, to no avail.<sup>101</sup> While London could use uncertainty about future career progression as an incentive to keep Richards on-side, it had limited effectiveness when compared with the immediate contribution from the Americans.

On the issue of the relationship between the ISAF commander and the subordinate COMBRITFOR, in explaining the relationship to the HCDC, Richards offered a positive assessment.<sup>102</sup> This is unsurprising, however, given that he was returning to service directly under those to whom COMBRITFOR had been ultimately reporting. They now held control over his long-term prospects for employment and promotion. Understandably, Richards was unlikely to offer an assessment to the House of Commons that UK Ministry of Defence command structures were not fit for purpose immediately before returning to the Ministry, despite his disagreements with London over its reticence to commit greater resources to Helmand in summer 2006. This was likewise despite London's willingness to resource the “*platoon house*” strategy that limited Richards' ability to manoeuvre his force and engage the Taliban.

Richards was unabashed in his calls for greater resources from NATO writ large, but he was circumspect in that he never at the time *publicly* singled out the United Kingdom, which had responsibility for RC-South. This suggests that he was cautious and avoided forcefully attempting to challenge the capital able to fire him. The furthest he ever went was when he stated after the fact, specifically about the British operation, “*we couldn't [minimize the use of firepower and maximize the number of boots on the ground] during Herrick 4 because we didn't have enough troops*”.<sup>103</sup>

Exchanges between the UK government and the HCDC suggest the challenge faced by a multinational commander in securing the resources needed for the task delegated by an alliance. Even Whitehall was unlikely to respond positively to requests for further troops from a British general in his capacity as COMISAF, despite Richards stating that

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<sup>99</sup> Richards, 2014*b*, p.186.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p.205.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p.267.

<sup>102</sup> “*The Commander of British Forces is in the ISAF command structure ; he is double-hatted (...) He is a NATO officer and the British National Contingent Commander, I think or COMBRITFOR, so he answers up two chains. I think it works*”. House of Commons Defence Committee, “UK Operations in Afghanistan...” (3 July 2007). Emphasis added.

<sup>103</sup> Fergusson, 2008, p.286.

there were “*less troops than are really needed*”.<sup>104</sup> His whole-of-Afghanistan concerns as the multinational commander were unlikely to persuade any individual capital, concerned primarily with the state of the campaign in the provinces in which its own national contingent was active. The only exception was likely Washington, with its similar country-wide focus.

Richards himself recognized the concern of capitals’ narrow focus on the area in which its forces operated, rather than at the national-level, especially amongst countries unwilling to fight in the south.<sup>105</sup> Operation MEDUSA near Kandahar was an example of Richards’ inability to change the preferences of certain capitals, particularly those in with contingents in the north and west that were unwilling to allow their troops to fight in the south. In testimony to the HCDC, Richards captured the difficulties :

I suppose the most important one [lesson I learnt] is that as a NATO commander, and I think I could say as a commander of any coalition operation, you have to learn how you can exert a decisive influence on the campaign when you do not actually have all the levers to pull. I was just one of many influences, yet I and my headquarters probably had the most critical role to play, and I did not pull the levers. There are 37 nations in ISAF ... So all these different influences must be brought to bear in a coherent way, we might say in the military into something that reflects unity of effort, unity of command, yet you cannot just order it. When asked to compare others in my position people often mention Templar in Malaya. Well, he was in charge of a single nation’s campaign there, and basically he ran it; he did not really have to go and ask anybody. I either had to ask or to co-ordinate and influence a whole host of actors.<sup>106</sup>

## Implications

The NATO ISAF campaign in Afghanistan under Richards in 2006-2007 highlights the complexities of multinational chains of command and the difficulties concerning strategy and resources, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the multinational commander in the field. Each country will only care about the strategy in *its* region of the country, while the commander feels responsibility for the entirety of the campaign. Likewise, the collective action problem of providing resources for the campaign is a source of continual friction between the commander in the field and the capitals of the coalition or alliance.

A commander is likely to consider both short-term and long-term factors in how closely he follows the preferences of capitals. While Richards’ early months included few US troops under his command, so long as those American-led OEF troops were working toward a shared goal, he was likely to align with the United States, rather than with NATO members providing him troops, but with severe restrictions on their employment. Thus, from the perspective of a capital with a significant contribution to a wider (but parallel)

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<sup>104</sup> *BBC News* : “Profile: Gen Sir David Richards” (28 August 2009).

<sup>105</sup> Norton-Taylor, “Full Interview...” (22 January 2007).

<sup>106</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee, “UK Operations in Afghanistan...” (3 July 2007).

mission, forces do not necessarily have to be under the multinational commander in-theatre to influence his preferences. They appear, however, to have even more influence when under him, such as once Freakley became Richards’ subordinate with nearly 20,000 American troops at his disposal, whether under the ISAF or OEF banner.

Importantly for London, the lesson of ISAF is that it is very difficult to use long-term employment prospects as an incentive for compliance with capital preferences when there is another capital providing near-term resources for the mission at hand. Because of the prestige associated with the UK holding the ISAF command billet, it would have been difficult for London to carry out a threat to fire Richards for anything short of gross misconduct. The only way London could have shaped Richards’ preferences would have been to allow him greater latitude to use the troops in Helmand as he desired across the whole of Afghanistan, rather than restricting them to “Helmandshire”.

It is intuitively appealing to assume the commander would automatically follow the preferences of the capital with the ability to fire him. However, when the choice is between the preferences of the capital with control over resources necessary to accomplish the delegated task *versus* the capital with control over long-term employment, the commander’s preferences become more complicated. They are more complicated because following the short-term preferences of the capital with control over long-term employment could backfire if, by displeasing the capital with control over resources, the commander fails in the delegated task and still ultimately gets fired by the capital with control over long-term employment.

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