

By Ali Durkin

As NATO prepares to withdraw its troops gradually from Afghanistan after 11 years of combat, the question becomes not only how the alliance can shape the future of the still-volatile country, but also how the mission will shape the future of NATO?

Many experts view the mission in Afghanistan as a decisive test for NATO, said Stephen Biddle, senior fellow for defence policy at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington D.C. If the mission in the long term is deemed a success, it will be said to be reflective of the alliance's relevance and strength. If deemed a failure, the mission will be read as a sign of a bleak future for NATO. Either way, the challenges faced and lessons learned in Afghanistan will shape the nature and role of the now-28-nation alliance for years to come.

ISAF was the alliance's first military action to result from the invocation of Article 5, which declares an armed attack on one member is considered an attack on all. Since 2001, 42 countries — the members and their partners — have deployed troops in Afghanistan. About 130,000 troops remained in late May, 2012. The exit strategy for NATO troops in Afghanistan dominated conversations at the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago. Leaders outlined a plan to transfer power to Afghan security forces and withdraw NATO troops by the end of 2014. Discussions also centred on the role the alliance should play in the country once transition is complete.

The mission in Afghanistan represented a new kind of mission — far away from the Euro-Atlantic territory — which brought to light new operational challenges for NATO. “If you had asked most folks in the defence community, would NATO as an alliance be involved in a complex, and in parts, heavy combat operation in Afghanistan at this level and for this amount of time, most people would have said you're crazy,” said Leo G. Michel, former director for NATO policy in the Office of the US Secretary of Defense and a scholar at the National Defense University, an elite graduate school for advanced military training in Washington.

Many countries found that their militaries were better suited for past missions, such as territorial defence or stability missions. “The NATO force as a whole, but especially the European partners, were shocked when they got to Afghanistan — and it took a long time for them to adapt to the operations on the ground,” said Matt Irvine, who focuses on defence policy at the Center for New American Security.

These countries were forced to re-examine and enhance their deployable capabilities to suit the environment and mission in Afghanistan, Michel said. The NATO mission also reflects the inherent difficulty in fighting a war as an alliance, a structure composed of multiple nations with various goals and capabilities. NATO troops came across language barriers and inconsistencies in the kind of equipment provided by different countries' militaries, said Isaac Hock, research analyst who focuses on Afghanistan at the Institute for the Study of War, also based in Washington, D.C.

Accustomed to working with former colonies, French troops excelled at “partnering with local militaries to promote security, whereas German troops brought a far more peacekeeping mindset,” Irvine said. Tension exists not only between member countries in the alliance but also between the needs of the alliance and those of individual countries. “When it comes to sending young men and sometimes women into harm's way, nations do get very nationalistic very quickly,” Michel said. “They balance their alliance commitments with their national concerns — both their political situation and their capabilities.”

Despite NATO's effort to encourage all member countries to maintain their commitment in Afghanistan until 2014, newly elected President Francois Hollande has said he plans to withdraw France's troops by the end of this year — a promise he stressed during his campaign. Many experts agree that the challenges of the mission in Afghanistan may lead to a transformation in the way NATO undertakes missions in the future, away from complex stabilisation missions towards policing missions and short-lived military action. "I think the most sweeping lessons are along the lines of 'don't do this again,'" Biddle said.

Many argue that future NATO missions will likely take on the form of the early 2012 mission in Libya, Operation Unified Protector, which lasted only 222 days. "I think NATO is going to be far more limited in what they agree to and commit to on the ground," Irvine said. "Libya is a lesson that they don't want to put as many boots on the ground. They don't necessarily want to own a conflict from beginning to end." Yet, as NATO readies itself for the complex 21st century security environment — threats now are not just conventional warfare but cyber attacks, nuclear proliferation and climate change — predicting the nature of future missions is tricky. "One lesson of Afghanistan is that we are actually pretty bad at predicting where and when the next occasion is going to arise," Michel said.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the EUISS.