PARTNERS IN PEACE? UN-NATO CONSTRUCTIVE COOPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN, 2001-2012

Abstract:

International organizations (IOs) like UN, NATO and EU have been tasked with cooperating to provide security, distribute humanitarian relief and manage reconstruction in a number of conflict and post-conflict settings. These joint operations have triggered an emerging scholarship on the dynamics of inter-organizational cooperation, with competing theoretical explanations about the factors that facilitate and impede cooperation and, in turn, the success or failure of the mission. This paper focuses on the patterns of cooperation between the UN and NATO in Afghanistan in the decade after 2001 and argues that unlike IOs’ Headquarters, field staff is more responsive to the complexity of the task environment and can facilitate coordination among IOs more effectively. Similarly, strong leaders who possess knowledge about the process of post-conflict reconstruction process and have previous experience with similar settings tend to escape organizational constraints and impact positively cooperation among IOs. To this end, the case of Afghanistan validates previous findings that focusing solely on strengthening inter-governmental cooperation at institutional and intergovernmental levels cannot be effective without promoting field autonomy.

Key words: the United Nations, NATO, inter-organizational cooperation, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghanistan

IVAN DINEV IVANOV¹
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI
P.O. BOX 210375
CINCINNATI, OH 45221-0375
EMAIL: Ivan.Ivanov@uc.edu

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Introduction

The topic of inter-organizational cooperation is more salient today than ever before as the United States and NATO prepare to end its combat mission in Afghanistan and the continued political uncertainty about whether foreign troops will remain after December 2014.\(^2\) In fact, Afghanistan is only one of numerous instances in the last two decades when several international organizations (IOs) have been tasked to work together in order to provide a vast array of services in post conflict settings that vary from providing security and stability to delivering humanitarian relief and managing international reconstruction efforts. The UN members have directed the organization to partner with regional organizations including NATO, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), OSCE, OAS, ECOWAS and Arab League in various post-conflict settings that involve the restoration, enforcement, and building of peace in conflict areas in various parts of the world.

Post-conflict missions frequently involve multiple intervening organizations which must coordinate with one another and with local stakeholders in order to succeed, often making such coordination a challenging process. In fact, improving inter-organizational coordination has been a prominent theme among scholars and policy-makers of post-conflict reconstruction.\(^3\) What accounts for constructive cooperation between the UN and regional organizations like NATO involved in complex, multidimensional peace operations?\(^4\) In what instances was the United Nations more effective in coordinating these efforts with NATO and what factors have contributed to a more successful partnership?

\(^4\) Multidimensional peace operations include “a range of components including military, civilian police, civil affairs, rule of law, human rights, humanitarian, reconstruction, public information and gender.” They are coordinated by the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Organizations and Political Affairs. For details see *Handbook on UN Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations* (2003: 2).
While the United Nations partners with multiple regional organizations, the UN-NATO dyad is particularly interesting because two organizations have the longest track record of partnering with each other—they have been working together in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya. NATO has also provided assistance and capacity-building support to other regional organizations partnering with the UN—the EU and AU—for their post-conflict involvement in Africa.

Despite the increasing push for enhanced coordination among IOs, major constraints exist among these organizations, thus preventing them from partnering effectively in the post-conflict environment. First, international organizations are designed as bureaucracies comprising of multiple bounded and specialized units created to undertake discrete tasks. These bureaucracies are naturally inclined to compete among themselves for scarce resources rather than specialize and coordinate efforts, thus reducing the likelihood of constructive cooperation among different IOs partners in any post-conflict setting. Second, previous work suggests that centralized coordination leading to growing “interaction across a number of inter-institutional forums” including intensified coordination at highest level between the Secretaries-General can help IOs overcome organizational constraints. However, these centralized efforts often lead to a poorly coordinated cooperation that fails to advance common organizational goals on the ground. Therefore, scholarship on post-conflict reconstruction should distinguish between instances of

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cooperation where IOs overcome their bureaucratic constraints to cooperate more effectively and other instances of unconstructive cooperation as the latter have minimal impact on the post-conflict environment.

This paper surveys a decade of UN-NATO cooperation in Afghanistan to advance a broader argument that coordination among organizations operating in a post-conflict setting is more likely to succeed when it originates from the IOs’ field staff (i.e. the United Nations Assistance Mission and the International Security Assistance Force in the case of Afghanistan) that from these organizations’ headquarters (HQ). While centralized coordination among HQs is certainly helpful, there are two reasons why its impact is limited in the long term. First, officers in the HQ are not familiar with the local environment, the culture of their partners and local stakeholders. Alternatively, field officers have a better understanding of the needs on the ground, as well as resources and capabilities available to accomplish complex tasks. Second, IOs’ field staff also possesses the capacity to influence coordination among international organizations because they have detailed knowledge about the needs of various local stakeholders that include but are not limited to government officials, local communities, representatives of media, civil society, and others.⁹

The Literature of Inter-organizational Cooperation

By and large, there is a consensus among scholars that inter-organizational cooperation as a necessary condition to meet the explicit peacekeeping and peace building goals set out in modern

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⁹ Empirical research emphasizes the importance of leadership in explaining change in international organizations (e.g. Howard 2008; Kille and Henrickson 2010; Schroeder 2012). Effective leadership is broadly recognized as a core principle underlying the design of integrated UN peacebuilding missions. For details see Cedric de Coning, “Mediation and Peacebuilding: the Role of SRSGs in UN Integrated Missions.” Global Governance 16, 2 (June 2010), 266-81.
operations. However, scholars differ as to what platform for cooperation would be most effective. Some highlight the importance of leadership to facilitate the peacebuilding process through their personality skills, knowledge and process tools, while others list the importance of strengthening information sharing and joint planning among headquarters (e.g. liaisons) in the field. Such measures include ‘triple hatting’ the mission leadership by including a Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, a Resident Coordinator and a Humanitarian Coordinator, as well as creating joint planning cells and, when possible, establishing formally Integrated Missions.

Overall, enthusiasm for cooperation has been tempered by recent studies of post-conflict interventions highlighting growing inability of peacekeeping actors to coordinate effectively. Several competing explanations have been suggested as to why these actors have failed to work effectively: First, cooperation can make the UN and its international partners less adaptable to changing circumstances and less inclined to coordinate with key national actors such as important civil society groups. Second, entrenched bureaucratic culture can impede additionally cooperation as organizations operating in the same field may often view each other


as competitors as discussed by Severine Autessere, Alexander Cooley and James Ron, and others.\textsuperscript{14}

In fact, scholars of bureaucratic politics agree that IOs will work together in post-conflict settings if cooperation supports their bureaucratic interests resulting in larger budgets and greater organizational autonomy.\textsuperscript{15} This literature approaches IOs as self-directed bureaucracies argue that they will work together more effectively when the Headquarters staff anticipates undertaking joint operations and invests in bureaucratic institutions that routinize joint planning, resource and information sharing and coordination among the field staff.\textsuperscript{16} In this view, competing IOs will lobby members to assign (or, if possible, assign itself) tasks that advance these interests and delegate less lucrative tasks to other organizations. Where IOs are not direct competitors, they will coordinate their activities if this coordination generates additional resources for both organizations. Alternatively, when there is scarcity of resources, then these organizations are expected to compete among themselves as they there are fundamental differences among them and even though these IOs may be “on the same river,” and possibly “rowing in the same direction,” they definitely are not “in the same boat” as eloquently explained by Simon Brooks, a representative for the International Committee of the Red Cross in London.\textsuperscript{17}

Neoliberal institutionalist scholarship offers a more optimistic perspective about inter-organizational cooperation in instances where IOs have interdependent goals and interests. These interdependencies help states to negotiate mandates that balance the distribution of resources across IOs and allocate tasks according to each organization’s expertise and capabilities. In turn,


\textsuperscript{15} Alison and Halperin, 47-48.

\textsuperscript{16} Kille and Henrickson, 40-44.

\textsuperscript{17} M. J. Williams, “(Un)Sustainable Peacebuilding: NATO’s Suitability for Post-conflict Reconstruction in Multi-actor Environments,” \textit{Global Governance} 17, 1 (2011), 124.
functional arrangements solve collective action and coordination problems so the memberships reduce transaction costs and effectively pool resources. In other words, cooperation depends on members having convergent interests in a particular outcome and developing mandates to bring together IOs with the necessary expertise to achieve that outcome. For example, Peter Viggo Jackobsen argues in the case of UN-NATO cooperation that NATO members would benefit from joint operations to address contemporary security threats because the UN confers legitimacy on the alliance activities and offers humanitarian and reconstruction expertise. For its part, NATO has the military capabilities to train a post-conflict military, and provide a sense of security for international workers and local populations.

Different theoretical perspectives have highlighted several important findings about inter-organizational cooperation. First, it is necessary to differentiate between constructive cooperation that supports common peacebuilding aims from other forms of cooperation that do not necessarily contribute toward effective progress on the ground. Second, scholars who have highlighted the importance of institutionalization, have also overlooked the important role of agency, particularly the importance of IO leaders in mobilizing widespread support for a peacebuilding framework and for adapting this framework if circumstances change. Third, much of the research dealing with inter-organizational cooperation has limited generalizability


due to the fact that they are inferred from research restricted to a single country or a comparison of a handful of organizations.  

Finally, prominent organization theories focus on different effects that key determinants of organizational behavior have on cooperation. Constructivist theories of IO find that organizations in the same professional field (e.g. peacebuilding) will collaborate to promote commonly-held norms. Similarly, resource dependency theory suggests that coordination emerges under symmetrical dependency and asymmetrical dependency. Organizational ecology approach subsequently finds that congested organizational environments make resources scarcer and intensifies competition among organizations interested in maximizing resources. Yet, greater density could also facilitate cooperation if specialized organizations take advantage of a growing pool of expertise and capabilities.

**A New Approach to Inter-Organizational Cooperation**

International organizations negotiate the intergovernmental mandate as a political bargain among central players to satisfy divergent member preferences. In the case of Afghanistan the initial framework for cooperation was laid out in December 2001, when representatives of the

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Many thanks,

-- Ivan Dinev Ivanov