International Organization at War: NATO practices in the Afghanistan campaign
Olivier Schmitt, Center for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark

This article investigates the NATO campaign in Afghanistan through a practice-based approach. The structural distribution of power within NATO, which is obviously in favor of the United States, does not automatically lead to Washington’s desired outcomes, and American delegates must competently perform a certain number of practices for their power advantage to take its full effect. The article also illustrates how looking at practices helps to explain policy decisions, such as NATO’s decision to go to Afghanistan, the establishment of an ISAF strategy and the wording of policy papers. By studying a case of military diplomacy, the article contributes to the emerging scholarship aimed at bridging the gap between diplomatic studies and practice-based approaches to International Relations.

How did NATO manage the Afghanistan campaign? I argue that the “classical narrative” of the war in Afghanistan, which explains shifts in strategy as an adjustment to shifting US interests, does not fully explain the political dynamics at play within the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) and NATO. The problem is not that the classical narrative is wrong, but rather that it only tells a limited aspect of the story.

Most scholarship on the Afghanistan war has focused on strategic debates such as the utility and effectiveness of a counter-insurgency (COIN) approach or the soundness of the strategic conceptions behind the overall campaign (Farrell and Chaudhuri, 2011; Bird and Marshall, 2011). Research on multilateral war-fighting in Afghanistan observes that the United States’ reliance on coalition partners grew over time, and explains this change by: the government structure and party politics of NATO allies or principal-agent problems (Auerswald and Saideman, 2014); the larger time horizon of the United States which had thus more incentives to seek multilateral cooperation (Kreps, 2012); or the evolution of the way institutional design facilitates multinational military cooperation (Weitsman, 2013). However, few of these studies explain and illustrate how these incentives are translated into actual social dynamics and thus lead to outcomes. They often take for granted a linear relation between state’s preferences, power distribution and political outcomes. In short, little is known about NATO’s
management of the Afghanistan war. By this, I do not mean the tactical and operational dimension of the conduct of the military campaign by the ISAF, which is the subject of much analysis; instead, I mean the study of the social processes surrounding the political management of the campaign at the NATO headquarters (HQ) and capital’s levels.

As members of an international organization, NATO allies transact their business in particular ways, and those ways shape outcomes. Specifically, I study the nature of NATO-ISAF’s policy-making through a practice-based approach. How do allies agree or disagree on political decisions, and how does the specific social context within NATO influence such political events? This article analyzes the extent to which the conduct of the Afghanistan war is influenced by routine decision-making and procedural, linguistic and spatial practices at the NATO HQ, and illustrates the way practices shape the construction of the international security agenda. As such, this article contributes to the emerging scholarship aimed at bridging the gap between diplomatic studies and practice-based approaches to International Relations (Sending et al., 2015; Pouliot and Cornut, 2015), by studying a case of military diplomacy (Bueger 2013; Bichi and Bremberg, 2016; Mérand and Rayroux, 2016).

**Studying NATO policy-making in the Afghan war: the practices of campaign management**

*The emergence of practices as a research agenda*

Adler and Pouliot define practices as “socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” (2011a: 6). Practices have four main characteristics: they are a *performance*, are *patterned*, are *interpreted* along similar standards by groups of individuals and *weave together* the discursive and material world. Surveys of the field identify a number of different traditions of practice-based research (Bueger and Gadinger, 2014; Pouliot and Cornut, 2015), but there is a common minimal understanding of practices as socially meaningful patterns of activities. This article does not attempt to weigh-in on the debate by following one school or another. Instead, it uses practices as a “sensitizing concept” (Bueger and Gadinger, 2014: 78) for analyzing concrete empirical phenomena.
Practices can be considered as *explanandum* and as *explanans*- as the result of some driving force or as a mechanism of social transformation. In this article, I document cases of both situations: I refer to cases of practices resulting from previous social dynamics (*explanandum*), but I also illustrate how practices made possible some political outcomes that would have been otherwise impossible (*explanans*). As *explanans*, practices can trigger change in three areas: “subjectivities (e.g. preferences, dispositions, or intentionality), in practice themselves, or in social orders (e.g. structures, domination patterns, or discourse)” (Adler and Pouliot, 2011b: 18). The empirical portion of the paper distinguishes between practices considered as *explanandum* or as *explanans*.

Critics often claim that the causal power of practice is difficult to establish, as no single practice can single-handedly explain an event. In fact “strictly speaking, diplomatic practices do not ‘cause’ specific outcomes” (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 309). It is better to conceive of practices as creating a context in which things become possible, and others become impossible: “causality works on this terrain not in terms of clearly identifiable causes but in terms of conditions of possibility” (Kuus, 2015: 380). As such, it is pointless to require practices to explain a specific event (which is “caused” by a multiplicity of factors), but it is worth asking which practices made certain events possible, and how. The objective of the research is neither to give the ultimate explanation of all facets of the ISAF intervention, nor to pitch a practice-based approach as opposed to power-based or norms-based explanations. It is clear that power, norms and institutions are all important factors helping explain the ISAF mission. Yet, the analytical plane is the different: the point is to illustrate how those practices gave the intervention its specific shape.

*Studying practices within NATO*

As an intergovernmental organization focused on military issues, NATO is composed of a number of bureaucratic routines and procedures. In particular, specific decision-making processes, which involve diplomats, military representatives and NATO civil servants are adopted and refined over time, and influence the conduct of the campaign. In their study of the Libyan intervention, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014: 895) observe how power works in
practice. They identify three different dynamics: claiming competence occurs “when players seek to establish their mastery of the game by framing particular issues and positioning themselves as leaders”; social negotiation refers to “other players challeng[ing] the skillfulness of a player’s moves as part of an ongoing struggle”; and wielding influence is when “Players cash out their socially recognized mastery in the form of non-coercive influence”. Below, I show how actors claimed competence, in particular the United States, and how this claim was challenged through various practices.

Other types of practices are also studied. First, while some practices involve military officers, most decision-making processes within NATO rely on diplomats. As Iver B. Neumann illustrates in his work, diplomats share a distinctive set of practices governing behavior: rituals, linguistic, stylized hospitality, etc. In particular, the diplomatic discourse is of great importance: “diplomats are specialists in meaning. They create, manipulate, convey and interpret words and symbolic actions. Such work is incomparably more complex than the mere conveying of messages, or even the negotiation of specific issues, though it encompasses both” (Gould-Davies, 2013: 1465). Hence, studying discourses and the use of language is particularly meaningful when studying the diplomatic work especially considering that the circulation of competing narratives about Afghanistan may have had a negative impact on the outcome of the intervention (Friis, 2012).

There is also a spatial dimension to social activities. Iver B. Neumann has illustrated the idea that new diplomatic sites beyond the traditional conference table or press conference shape the reconfiguration of global diplomatic activities. Neumann argues that “the ever-increasing density of global life keeps changing the old, familiar diplomatic sites and creating new ones by bringing in agents, bringing on new procedures and dismantling old ones” (Neumann, 2013: 3). It is then appropriate to observe how the spatial dimension affects practices and thus contributes to the shaping of the social world when it comes to the Afghan war.

These three dimensions (routine procedures, language, space) are found simultaneously in any activity performed by the agents involved in the management of the Afghanistan war. Yet, for clarity purposes, they will serve as organizing devices in order to illustrate how practices operate: while I am “slicing up” different events according to these three dimensions in order
to document a specific practice, it must be remembered that these dimensions are always simultaneously at play.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedures</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practices as explenda</strong></td>
<td>Decision by minority</td>
<td>Bilingualism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American primacy</td>
<td>Proper seating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practices as expleans</strong></td>
<td>Informing allies</td>
<td>Surprise announcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accommodating partners</td>
<td>Copy-pasting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Practices within NATO HQ**

The material for this research has been collected over six months of participant observation within the operations section at NATO HQ while I was working as a NATO civil servant with access to the Operations Plans Committee (OPC), a committee of junior diplomats preparing and tasked to adopt policy documents in relation to the Afghanistan campaign. Most of the time, policy documents were agreed upon at the OPC level, but in specific occasions, when a consensus could not be reached, the discussion would be brought up at the NATO Atlantic Council (NAC) level. The OPC can meet in NATO format (allies only) or in ISAF format (allies and partners). The OPC formulates recommendations, agrees on texts that are subsequently approved by the NAC and functions as the civilian oversight to the work of the military committee. While strategic decisions are made by the NAC, the OPC is responsible for the vast majority of routine policy-making decisions, and also has some shaping power regarding the strategic decisions. During these discussions, I was in charge of what is called the “live-editing”, which consists of displaying on a screen the modifications to policy documents suggested by diplomats, so that everyone around the table can see them. As such, I was not directly involved in the shaping of the documents themselves as I was not participating in the debate (which is not the role of a NATO civil servant), but I had the privilege to observe the
social dynamics at play during those numerous meetings. Parts of the daily work also included liaising with the NATO chain of command and with national delegations.  

During this assignment and after it ended, I have been able to conduct more than 100 semi-structured interviews with NATO policy-makers, as well as diplomats and military representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Canada and several other countries. The interview sample comprised individuals at all levels of the NATO chain of command: country capitals, headquarters in Brussels, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) in Brunssum and ISAF in Afghanistan. Interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity between 2012 and 2014. I use a standardized anonym classification for the interviews\(^1\).

NATO in Afghanistan: the classical narrative

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States and a coalition of allies overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in retaliation for having sheltered Al-Qaeda. The quick victory led to the establishment of several international mechanisms to rebuild the country; one such mechanism being ISAF. The original ISAF mandate was fairly limited by the United Nations Security Council and consisted of maintaining security in Kabul and its surroundings. Nations manned ISAF contingents on a voluntary basis, but in 2003, the international community ran out of volunteers. NATO then offered to step into what was then perceived as a relatively easy mission, which would also help heal the wounds of a transatlantic community heavily divided by the 2003 Iraq War. The ISAF mandate was expanded in 2003 to provide security throughout Afghanistan, and NATO began a counter-clockwise expansion to the entire country, which was achieved in 2006. In the meantime, the US-led “Operation Enduring Freedom” (OEF) targeting terrorists was still ongoing, which prevented unity of command. Unfortunately for NATO, the Taliban had begun to re-infiltrate the country, and when the British and Canadian troops moved in 2006 to the South (in the Helmand and Kandahar provinces) to complete the

\(^1\) Each interviewee is assigned a code composed as follows. The first letter designates the interviewee’s position (nation capital, NATO HQ, SHAPE, JFC, ISAF). The second letter designates the interviewee’s status (diplomat, military, NATO staff), and the third letter designates the interviewee’s nationality. In cases where the three letters combination recovers several interviewees, I differentiate between them by adding a number to the combination. To respect the interviewee’s anonymity, I do not reveal to which position, status or nationality the letters are assigned. However, this coding helps giving the reader a sense of the number and the diversity of the interviews.
country-wide deployment, they faced a strong insurgency and between 2006 and 2008, NATO troops were on the brink of defeat.

Starting in 2008, a series of decisions by Western countries permitted a relative turn of events. First, the United States started pulling resources out of Iraq and refocusing on Afghanistan. This strategic reorientation was confirmed by President Obama’s 2009 strategic review, which increased the US military commitment and validated the shift to a counter-insurgency strategy. In the meantime, a series of NATO summits in 2008 (Bucharest), 2009 (Strasbourg-Kehl) and 2010 (Lisbon) showed an increase in the European allies’ commitment and the definition of a strategy for Afghanistan. The strategy was to fight the insurgency in order to regain a strategic momentum while training and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF, comprising both the Army and the Police) to enable them to take the lead in ensuring national security by the end of 2014. In short, an increased US leadership and the other allies’ willingness to take more risks resulted in greater strategic coherence. Whether this strategy will eventually prove to be successful remains to be seen (Woodward, 2010; Bird and Marshall, 2011; Chandrasekaran, 2012; Rynning, 2012; Fairweather, 2014; Bolger, 2014).

There is wide agreement on the above narrative of NATO’s campaign in Afghanistan. The problem with this narrative is that it considers the European NATO members’ preferences as an adjustment to the shift in American preferences. As I will show in the analysis below, it tells only a limited part of the story. A focus on NATO practices enables us to open up and interrogate the decisions taken in the conduct of the Afghan campaign. In the remainder of this article, I first consider practices as *explananda*, and illustrate how the US representatives can more or less competently perform the various practices reflecting the American domination of the campaign, which lead to this power distribution favoring the United States to reach its full effect or not. I then turn to practices as *explanans*, showing how certain practices triggered a change in subjectivities, practices or social orders.

**Practices as *explananda*: enacting the distribution of power within NATO**

In this section, I illustrate how the United States and other states claim competence, in particular through the domination of specific procedural practice or their military contribution on the ground. These dynamics lead to a hierarchical conduct of the intervention within NATO.
**Dominating the military campaign**

There is little doubt that the Afghan campaign was dominated by the United States. The US was the major force provider on the battlefield, engaged in some of the toughest combat activities and was perceived by the local and regional actors as the key political interlocutor. This predominance was translated in- and was the product of- a number of practices at the tactical/operational (ISAF, SHAPE) and strategic/political (NATO HQ) levels.

First, and foremost, American officers heavily dominated the chain of command. Since 2006, the Commander of ISAF (COMISAF) had always been an American, with some of the most high-profile generals of the last decade, such as David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, commanding in Afghanistan. COMISAF was designated by the President of the United States and approved by the US congress, leaving the allies with no control on the designation process. This process was accepted by other countries, which recognized that the US paid the greater price in Afghanistan and were thus entitled to exert domination, as long as it did not appear as such to the public. COMISAF also had a dual hat as, since 2008, he commanded American forces in the country (including special forces operating in Operation Enduring Freedom). As such, he was directly connected to the US Central Command (CENTCOM) through an American chain of command. There was a degree of communication between CENTCOM and the ISAF that was far from negligible, and aspects of the conduct of the ISAF campaign escape the control and oversight of the allies. This widespread feeling of American domination led to some resentment when McChrystal, and to a lesser degree Petraeus, were COMISAF. McChrystal, for example, was famous for very reluctantly allowing non-American or non-British officers in his office. General Petraeus and General Allen’s tenures improved this situation, and were more positively welcomed by the allies.

This US domination was also reflected in the design of the Operational Plans (OPLANs) for the campaign. In theory, the OPLAN should be established by COMISAF, receive inputs from SHAPE and finally go to the Military Committee (MC) for approval by the nations. There should

---

2 Interviews with DCA1, DCA2, CCA3, CBA1, CBF2, CBG.
3 Interviews with AAF1, AAG, BAF2, BAG1.
thus be opportunities for planners at SHAPE and for nations to modify the OPLAN designed by COMISAF. In reality, this OPLAN was left practically unchanged by the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR, who heads SHAPE and is also an American officer), and arrived in Brussels for approval by the nations loaded with the symbolic weight of having been approved by the field commander and by the strategic commander at SHAPE. It was thus extremely difficult for nations to contradict what was supposed to be the military expertise of NATO’s structure. Moreover, the OPLAN was usually already being implemented in Afghanistan before being officially validated at the NATO HQ level, showcasing COMISAF’s confidence that it would be left unchanged. Many nations and desk officers within the International Military Staff (IMS)\(^4\) complained that SHAPE did not want to alter COMISAF’s plans and \textit{de facto} restrained its role as an “enabler” for the ISAF: this choice had the perverse effect of increasing COMISAF’s status and leaving little room for nations to criticize and amend the OPLANs prepared in Kabul\(^5\). The American domination over the establishment of the OPLAN was an important factor in the American claim of competence, through which the US positioned themselves as leaders of the intervention.

And yet, the OPLANs were under more scrutiny from ISAF nations when General McChrystal served as COMISAF than during Generals Petraeus and Allen’s tenures. McChrystal’s behavior was perceived as disrespectful and was resented by other countries, which wanted to have closer scrutiny at what was produced in Kabul before endorsing it. This led to a delay in the endorsement of an OPLAN, which was even sent back to SHAPE for improvement after some nations declined to endorse it\(^6\). In particular, those nations criticized the use of Special Forces and night raids by McChrystal, and succeeded in imposing an oversight mechanism of such missions. However, OPLANs produced by Petraeus or Allen never went under such detailed scrutiny. This suggests that practices can be performed more or less competently: McChrystal’s poor performance of the practice of American primacy led to a counter-reaction by other countries which had a tangible result in delaying the adoption of an OPLAN, and modifying it on an important issue. Conversely, those countries did not resent Petraeus’s and Allen’s performances, and the adoptions of OPLANs were smooth, which illustrates how the

\(^4\) The IMS provides the administrative support to the MC, and is the military counterpart to NATO’s civilian staff.

\(^5\) Interviews with BBC1, BBC2, BBF1, CBF2, CBG2.

\(^6\) Interviews with CCF1, CCF2, AAE, BAG, DAG.
imbalance of power distribution favoring the United States is not automatically translated into a desired outcome: it has to be performed in a competent way by the relevant actors to show its full effect.

*The political hierarchy*

In addition to the military domination, American political leadership shaped, to a large extent, NATO’s policy-making process. Policy decisions regarding the ISAF campaign (as well as other NATO operations) were made by one of the junior NATO committees, the Operations Plan Committee (OPC). As in every diplomatic circle, there was a hierarchy of status within the OPC, depending on the nations diplomats represented, their personal skills or their seniority within the committee. At NATO there was an established practice of “minority decision-making”, which left responsibility for important decisions to a small number of countries. This practice took several forms. All interviewees agreed that the key players in the OPC were the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and to a lesser degree Germany and Italy. The Netherlands, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Turkey and Australia belonged to a second circle of important nations. This means that out of 50 nations composing the ISAF, only 10 to 11 regularly spoke during the OPC meetings and actually shaped policy decisions. Some nations, be it because of a lack of diplomatic manpower or out of interest, did not even attend most of the OPC meetings. There is then a clear hierarchical relationship at the NATO HQ between nations, ranging from a small group of pro-active nations effectively shaping policies and a larger group that remained silent. This observation is consistent with and reinforces the observation that “the alliance’s decision rules would seem to encourage deal-making by powerful and/or passionate members who want to get their way” (Auerswald and Saideman, 2014: 35). Not only did decision-making rules favor powerful and/or passionate members, they also reified a social hierarchy within the OPC that was based on military contributions, and being a “good ally” (Pouliot: 2016). As was described by one diplomat from a small European country: “everyone knows his place: we do not expect a country to make an inflammatory statement when its military contribution is close to zero”7. Some countries were

---

7 Interview with BAF2, BAA1, BCB1, BBC2 conveyed the same impression in similar terms. When asked, BAG2, BAL and BBP agreed with this assessment.
expected to shape the outcomes, while others were expected to remain silent. This indicates that the formal hierarchy within the OPC is a function of the social recognition that comes with significant contributions on the ground.

The NATO bureaucracy also contributed to this hierarchical management of the campaign. The real power of NATO’s bureaucratic structure lies in the fact that NATO civil servants draft the documents that will subsequently be discussed by the OPC and the NAC. Drafters are usually very careful to accommodate nations’ concerns before the document is circulated to them, and key nations are then associated to the drafting process. However, civil servants know all nations’ preferences whereas an individual nation is typically uncertain about the others’ intentions: this asymmetry of information is in favor of the civil servant, who can exploit it to advance his own preferences while still being seen as a neutral expert figure. There was a habit of coordinating with key allies before the OPCs: the informal hierarchy of the decision-making process was then made explicit through the selective consultation of key nations. Interestingly, this consultation of key nations was not supposed to take place because this would acknowledge a hierarchy while NATO, like other international organizations, is based on the fiction of legal equality among member states. In fact, everybody knew that such meetings took place, but nobody mentioned them. Not mentioning these meetings is in itself a sign that keeping the fiction is important for NATO cohesion, hence showing that this cohesion is valued by the member states. There is then an established practice of leaving a minority of countries to handle policy decisions, either at the OPC or during the pre-OPC meetings, which all actors are aware of, but which shall not be named.

Among this minority of countries, the US was widely considered the most influential: this is another example of the practice of American primacy. The US have been the driving force within the OPC and the NAC regarding policy developments on topics such as strategic partnerships with Afghanistan, the size and format of the ANSF, funding schemes for the Afghan government or the post-ISAF operation. When drafting documents, the US proposal was routinely the first to be welcomed by the chairman, who then invited reactions from other

---

8 Interviews with BCB, BCH, BCF1, BAF2.
countries. Implicitly, this prioritization of the US proposal over those of other nations’ both represented and reproduced the American position as a *primus inter pares*.

The ability of American policy-makers to perform their leadership role in the Afghan campaign, suggesting policy developments at the NAC or OPC level, facilitated the acceptation of this domination by other countries. Yet, American representatives can perform their role more or less competently. For example, after a round of negotiations during which the American delegate did not seem to pay much attention to the proposal of a small European country’s delegate (although this delegate obviously had high hopes about his suggestion), the same delegate exceptionally asked to speak first during the next meeting in order to reiterate the same proposal which then constituted the basis for further discussions. Here, the incompetent performance of the practice of American primacy at the negotiating table by the American delegate led to another round of negotiations, in which the US representative was in an unfavorable situation as her proposal was not the first to be discussed and was, in fact, substantially transformed.

A linguistic practice reveals the underlying dynamics of coalition warfare. NATO is officially a bilingual institution, and work can be carried out in both French and English. In practice, since the arrival of Eastern European countries whose representatives usually don’t speak French, English has become the dominating working idiom. Yet, the French representatives (who are instructed to speak French) continue to use it during the OPC and NAC meetings. Other representatives, coming from countries such as Italy, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium or Turkey usually have a good command of French. Interestingly, depending on the position they want to advocate, such representatives will switch from English to French or back to English. All is determined by the position of the US representative. If those countries agree with it, they will express their agreement (or minor suggestions) in English. If they have a strong disagreement, they will express it in French, thus forcing the majority of diplomats around the table (including the US representatives whose command of French is usually minimal) to use the services of the live translation. What might appear as first glance as purely anecdotal is in fact significant because it is an example of the way the US domination of the campaign is either accepted or challenged. Speaking English is for those countries an acceptation of the framing of an issue by the US, while speaking French is a way to challenge the American preferred
policy positions. Moreover, this practice of bilingualism also formalizes an informal hierarchy between countries capable of formulating propositions in different languages and countries only able to speak English. It is no surprise that representatives able to speak both French and English usually come from countries deemed important within NATO (France, Italy, Germany, Turkey).

In terms of spatial practices, the observation of the NAC meetings revealed interesting dynamics. Because the ISAF comprised more than 40 different nations, meetings cannot be held in the traditional NAC meeting room, which would be too small. Thus, the meetings were located in a second meeting room, large enough to accommodate everyone. In addition to space at the table, it was also necessary to accommodate staffers (junior diplomats, etc.), but also the NATO civil servants who have an interest in attending the meeting. A number of seats behind each ambassador were reserved for staff from his/her own delegation, and NATO civil servants were supposed to sit on the non-reserved places. Yet, the sitting location embodied the hierarchized conduct of the Afghanistan campaign. First, not all nations had an equal number of seats assigned for staffers, although it should officially have been the case. Major nations (US, UK, France, Germany, etc.) received more assigned seats than others, thus physically showing the unofficial hierarchy at play. This practice derived from the pragmatic observation made by NATO staff that some countries had more staffers than others, and thus needed more seats. The NATO staff in charge of preparing the NAC meeting room are purely logistical and administrative assistants. Hence, it is particularly telling that they decided on their own initiative to adapt the spatial repartition of the NAC room to what they perceived was needed in order to facilitate the meetings, without realizing that they were breaking the NATO regulation stipulating that each country must have an equal amount of seats\(^9\): the reification of the social hierarchy at play in the conduct of the Afghanistan war has a spatial dimension which is both perceived and reproduced by the NATO logistical staff. It is even more interesting to observe that state representatives and NATO civil servants noticed this progressive rearrangement, without anyone complaining about it: the hierarchical nature of the policy-making process was translated into spatial practices, which in turn helped reinforce this social stratification.

\(^9\) Interviews with the logistical staff at NATO.
Considering practices as *explananda* helps understanding how the imbalance of the distribution of power operates by reifying a hierarchy of social status, but also illustrates that the translation of the imbalance of power in outcome is far from automatic: US representatives have to competently perform their roles for their power advantage to achieve its full effect, and this unequal distribution of power can be challenged and circumvented in original ways.

**Practices as explanans**

*Going to war*

As was previously noticed, NATO became officially involved in Afghanistan in 2003 after a decision taken in April to assume command of ISAF by August. This decision was the result of two parallel sets of events. First, the gradual acceptance by NATO’s members of the potential necessity of intervening outside of NATO’s traditional geographical comfort zone. The 9/11 attacks triggered a new mindset within the alliance, institutionalized in the 2002 Prague Summit, during which heads of state and government launched a transformation process of the alliance, including the enlargement to new members and the creation of an expeditionary warfare capability called the NATO Response Force (NRF) (Moore, 2007). NATO’s bureaucratic structure adjusted to these new incentives, and the operations division started to grow in terms of numbers of employees and in terms of pro-activity: more and more proposals for change and reform (especially regarding expeditionary capabilities) began to circulate within the HQ.\(^\text{10}\)

In the meantime, in 2003, governments suddenly realized that the ISAF was running out of nations willing to take the lead. The first two nations to have assumed command of ISAF, the United Kingdom and Turkey, had deployed their own national divisional headquarters. However, Germany and the Netherlands, who took over ISAF command from Turkey in February 2003 and were supposed to assume it until August, wanted to deploy their NATO-

\(^{10}\) Interviews with CCA, CCE1, CCE2, CAB, BBE.
assigned multinational corps headquarters. According to Rynning (2012: 86-87), “Unless NATO stepped in, force generation and coordination, logistics, and operational command would all fall on the two host nations. They thus asked for NATO’s help”. This political desire by Germany and the Netherlands to involve NATO crossed paths with an established practice within NATO HQ: the sharing of information about the ISAF mission.

Only NATO countries had assumed command of the ISAF, and it had become usual for the UK and Turkey to report to their NATO colleagues in formal settings (such as the NATO Atlantic Council, NAC) or in informal discussions on their own initiatives: the ISAF not being a NATO operation at the time, no formal procedure required them to do so. This practice of informing allies created a habit of discussing ISAF issues within NATO, thus facilitating the transition to a NATO-led ISAF. The practice of reporting to the NAC and informing other NATO members of the nuts and bolts of managing the ISAF mission reified background knowledge on the opportunity of “out-of-area” operations by showing that it was, indeed, possible. Several interviews with diplomats from key NATO nations confirmed that they regularly reported to their capitals the positive impression about ISAF they had from their Turkish and British colleagues. I was shown by representatives of two of those countries the internal confidential documents advocating for NATO taking over ISAF that were addressed to their ministries of Defense and ministries of Foreign Affairs. Both of them mention the positive portraying of the ISAF mission at the NAC level by the UK and Turkey as an argument in favor of NATO taking over, and it seems likely that other countries’ internal documents mention a similar argument. What matters here is the fact that the practice of reporting to the NAC (although NATO was not yet engaged in Afghanistan) weaved together the discursive and the material world about out-of-area operations: while all NATO member-states were debating out-of-area operations, Turkey and the UK were actually conducting one and gave other allies a glance of what such operations would look like. In this case, the practice of reporting created a condition of possibility: it seems very likely that the NAC would have been much more reluctant to take command of the ISAF without the flattering picture displayed by the UK and Turkey11.

11 Interviews with CCF1, CCF2, AAE, AAF, BAG, DBG, DAG.
This finding is important, because it complements the purely power-based explanation of the decision to engage NATO in Afghanistan. The decision to go to Afghanistan is thus the result of a combination of political incentives (reconciling both sides of the Atlantic after the Iraq crisis and using NATO’s help in the case of Germany and the Netherlands) and a favorable context. This context consisted of a more intervention-prone organization that was already familiarized with ISAF through the practice of reporting to the NAC. This does not dismiss the political incentives that drove NATO in Afghanistan, but practices explain the establishment of the context that made possible the adoption of such a decision.

Defining a strategy for NATO

Summits are an important moment in NATO’s life. They are an opportunity for heads of states and governments to meet and to provide strategic guidance to the alliance. Ministers of defense or ministers of Foreign Affairs meet on a more regular basis ("ministerials", in NATO parlance), but summits are the real pulse of the Alliance: a relatively short moment (usually two days), prepared months in advance by capitals and NATO’s bureaucracy, during which important decisions are made. It has all the elements of a classical tragedy (unity of time, space and action) as well as a bit of drama: key issues that could not be solved at the levels of diplomats or ministers are held into reserve for the summit. Summits guide the alliance’s work and direct energies within the HQ for at least six months before the event.

I am focusing here on the linguistic practice of surprise announcements by Afghan President Hamid Karzai. In application of a carefully crafted protocol, the Afghan President was the first to speak during the summit sessions devoted to ISAF, and his introductory remarks were followed by NATO Secretary-General’s speech, before turning to the Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) and COMISAF’s presentations. In 2008, Hamid Karzai surprised everyone by announcing during the Bucharest summit that Afghan forces would be in charge of the Kabul Security Zone within a month, following the end of the French tour in the Afghan capital and France’s redeployment towards the Kapisa and Surobi region. This surprise

12 Interviews with BCA1, BCB, BBC1.
announcement triggered the drafting of a transition strategy that was designed primarily by Mark Sedwill during his tenure as SCR. But there is more to this story than meets the eyes. After having made a strong impression, President Karzai became accustomed to make surprise announcements during his opening remarks in 2009, 2010 and 2012, although not as surprising as in 2008. The net effect was a realization by NATO countries that the Afghans now had agency and would no longer be treated as faithful executants of orders on which they had no control. Of course, this must be put into the context of a gradual and mutual disappointment between Hamid Karzai and the United States, which culminated in the crisis over the results of the 2009 Presidential election. But nevertheless, the opening remarks by Karzai became a moment both expected and feared in national capitals in 2009, 2010 and 2012, as nobody was sure the Afghan president would not make the headlines with a new, and never previously agreed upon, announcement. As such, “accommodating the Afghans” became a mantra for NATO diplomats negotiating key policy documents such as the Chicago and Wales summits joint declarations with Afghanistan, or the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) for the “Resolute Support” mission, which replaced the ISAF as of January 2015. This is a clear case of practices triggering change in social orders, with the Afghans being gradually recognized as having agency, which implied wholly different negotiation dynamics (Cowper-Coles, 2012; d’Amécourt, 2013).

**Negotiating ISAF**

As mentioned, NATO decision-making procedures reify a hierarchy of states, and reward the most pro-active countries, as well as those more committed on the ground. This had an impact on the role Australia, New Zealand or Sweden started to play in both the OPC and the NAC. Through a recognized commitment on the ground and a valued contribution to policy developments, these countries managed to be considered as almost equals to the NATO allies in terms of prerogatives and status. For example, while in 2006 it was standard procedure for

---

13 Interviews with CCE2, CAB, BBE.
14 I do not reveal the content of such “surprises” as interviewees have requested to keep it secret until the official opening of archives.
15 During which President Karzai felt that the United States were favoring his rivals Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah
NATO allies to discuss and agree on policy papers in a “NATO-members only” format first, and then discuss it with partners, this habit gradually evolved and partners were routinely associated to the very early phases of a document, on equal footing with the allies. This new practice was institutionalized in the rewriting of the Political-Military Framework (PMF) in 2011, a guidebook detailing NATO procedures for dealing with crisis situations, which now associates NATO partners at every stage of the planning process. This important shift is a clear example of how practices of policy-making circumvent the official legal hierarchy between states created by the division between NATO members and partners. As mentioned above, another hierarchy based on contributions, skills and pro-activity was actually at play. As one interviewee explains: “back in 2006, nobody would have thought that Australia would be sitting at the NAC table on an equal footing with NATO countries. And yet, here they are”\textsuperscript{16}. This practice of gradually including partners within what should be a purely NATO decision-making mechanisms influenced the conduct of the the Libyan crisis, as Qatar and Jordan were quickly associated on a status similar to the one Australia or Sweden could enjoy in the ISAF context (Schmitt, 2015). This illustrates how practices established in the ISAF context were carried on in an other intervention by those already enacting them (OPC and NAC members), thus facilitating the swift inclusion of Qatar and Jordan in the NATO machinery. But this practice also had an effect on the partners, and is probably connected to the close links Sweden and Australia currently enjoy with NATO, Sweden even discussing membership in light of the current Russian behavior.

The way issues were framed and negotiations conducted also had an impact on the final political outcome. One of the most defining features of any policy document agreed upon by the OPC or the NAC is the extent to which a specific text is “recycled” from other policy documents. Because multilateral diplomacy with more than 40 countries is difficult, it is a standard practice to cut bits and pieces of already agreed-upon policy documents in order to avoid endlessly reopening contentious issues. As such, it is very frequent to hear diplomats explain: “this is already agreed-upon text” when they are suggesting modifications to a document under negotiation. “Already agreed-upon text” is supposed to be the magic formula avoiding endless and repetitive debates. Because the Afghanistan war has produced several

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with DBC1.
hundred policy documents over the years, it is not unusual to find a specific formulation that suits a specific state’s preference. And the practice is not limited to NATO policy documents: diplomats routinely refer to texts adopted under the framework of the United Nations for example. The craft of the diplomat is then her capability to master a large body of policy documents and extract the specific formulation that would favor her state’s political preferences while in the meantime presenting this formulation as consensual, since it is supposed to be “already agreed upon language”. Of course, other diplomats are engaged in the same activity, and the OPC meetings are often a battle for the perpetual re-definition of the meaning of past documents to suit the needs of the present.

This practice of “copy-pasting” from other documents has consequences. Documents are re-interpreted to suit a diplomat’s purpose, but the frame for re-interpretation is limited (not every meaning can be attached to any word), which thus constraints the way issues are framed, and has political consequences for the political management of the campaign. For example, the final communiqué of the 2012 summit mentions the following sentence: “We also underscore the importance of our shared understanding with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan regarding the full participation of all Afghan women in the reconstruction, political, peace and reconciliation processes in Afghanistan and the need to respect the institutional arrangements protecting their rights” (NATO, 2012: 9). The mention of a full participation of all women in the reconstruction process was opposed by the Afghan government, with the support of the United States and the United Kingdom which did not want to have another bone of contention with Kabul while their priority was the transition process. Yet, the Norwegian representative insisted on the fact that this language was drawn from the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, and that it was as such “already agreed-upon language” which carried strong political importance: this is how para. 9 made its way to the final communiqué, and is now used by women’s rights organizations in their campaigns. Similarly, para. 6 mentions the following sentence: “(...) ISAF shifts from focusing primarily on combat increasingly to the provision of training, advice and assistance to the ANSF (...)” (NATO, 2012: 6). ISAF’s role during the transition to Afghan-led security was heavily discussed and no consensus could be found on the degree of assistance it should provide: some countries wanted to keep an active role including combat missions while others were more reluctant and wanted to take the transition as an opportunity to withdraw their troops.
The compromise was found in recycling the language “provision of training, advice and assistance to the ANSF” from a policy document related to the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A), which was deemed vague enough to accommodate everyone. But this language suggests a continuous involvement in the ISAF in one way or another and, for example, played a role in France’s decision to keep a number of trainers in Afghanistan despite the withdrawal of the combat forces after President Hollande’s election in 2012: the recycled language was more committing than initially thought by some nations. Numerous classified documents are negotiated in similar ways, and it thus critical to take into account the “shadow of the past” when analyzing documents produced by NATO, as the practice of recycling “already-agreed upon language” has political consequences.

**Conclusion**

This article had two objectives: illustrating how politics works “in practice”, thus showing how the role of power cannot be studied independently from the competent performance of agents; and documenting how a number of practices within NATO made possible what would have otherwise been impossible.

I contend that by studying the practices of war-making within NATO, a complex picture emerges. It is indubitable that power politics plays an important role in the policy-making and the conduct of the campaign. This article has shown that a practice approach captures dynamics differing from those emphasized by the conventional story. These various practices all played a role in socializing actors, influencing their preferences, reifying social hierarchies and making possible important events. Conceived as *explananda*, practices illustrate how the American primacy is exerted, and challenged. Understood as *explanans*, practices show through which social mechanisms certain events (going to war, integrating partners, negotiating texts, recognizing agency, etc.) became possible.

This article opens interesting perspectives for future research. First, the practice of copy-pasting texts could be further conceptualized by borrowing the concept of “translation” from authors belonging to the “Actor-Network Theory” tradition. Second, the practice of surprise

---

27 Interviews with CCF1, CCF2, BAE, ABA.
announcements, which led to the realization that the Afghans had agency, could be of interest to authors from the English school, looking at processes of recognition of sovereignty and integration within the international society. More generally, it would be interesting to study whether the practices analyzed in the NATO/ISAF context are observed in other multinational negotiation frameworks. This would help more accurately distinguishing between what is specific to military diplomacy, and what is common to all forms of multinational negotiations. The practice approach could also be used to analyze a critical issue within NATO: burden-sharing, along the lines of what Mérand and Rayroux (2016) have observed in the European Union. This would also contribute to the research agenda studying the overlap, similarities and interactions between the two institutions. Finally, adopting a practice approach could facilitate the exchange of knowledge between scholars and policy-makers by creating a common frame of reference for further discussions, including opening the possibility of critical dialogues between both communities.

References


Sending O et al. (eds) *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
