



CENTRO STUDI SUL FEDERALISMO

AFGHANISTAN: AN EU FAILURE, NOT A NATO ONE

Domenico Moro *

Some political analysts have included NATO in the general failure of Western intervention in Afghanistan (e.g. [NATO has failed in Afghanistan](#); [Europe at the crossroads between strategic autonomy and irrelevance](#)). However, this judgement is not entirely correct, for two reasons. The first is that a distinction must be made between the North Atlantic Treaty (NAT) and its military *Organisation* (NATO). The Atlantic Alliance, based on the American political guarantee (and a substantial number of nuclear warheads on European territory) has served its purpose very well: to defend Europe from possible Soviet aggression and to ensure peace on the European continent, an essential condition for the start of the European unification process. The second reason NATO could not fail militarily in Afghanistan is simply because it has no autonomous military force. The only military forces with which it can be equipped – apart from those provided by the US – are those of the EU (plus Turkey and a few other non-EU countries).

When, following the signing of the NAT, the latter was provided with a military arm, the reasons for its establishment were the same as those underlying the signing of the Treaty of Brussels (1948), which founded the Western Union (WU, later to become the Western European Union following the failure of the EDC): to establish a single command at European level, to standardise armaments and to make the armed forces of the individual European countries interoperable, although, due to British opposition, not a true European army (L. S. Kaplan, *The United States and NATO: The Formative Years*, 1984). The WU quickly became obsolete not only because it failed to achieve its aims, but because, in the meantime, NATO had come into being, and the problem of a single command was solved by the presence of the United States, which ensured its operation.

Coming to the present day, and to give a few examples, the US single command took on the management of the *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF, December 2001-December 2014) and the subsequent *Resolute Support Mission* (December 2014-July 2021). European countries took part in ISAF, de facto, as individual countries that, moreover, were bound by commitments dictated by their national governments. After the first five years of an unconvincing alternating of command among the Alliance countries – except, perhaps, the Eurocorps command – and the lack of a European operational command, the management of the next eight years of the mission was entrusted to American generals, to coordinate its presence with the US contingents. In the case of the second mission (*Resolute Support Mission*), the command was always entrusted to American generals.

But even NATO has come to a standstill here, as the establishment of autonomous military forces and the interoperability of European armed forces has not been realised and the standardisation of armaments has only taken place through American supplies to several European countries. NATO has an autonomous endowment of military assets which, although limited, concerns infrastructures that are decisive for the management of operations in the field. In fact, it [directly owns](#), among others, a fleet of 14 Boeing E-3A *Airborne Warning & Control System* (AWACS) aircrafts and five Global Hawk drones which, together, integrate the national *Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance* (ISR) capabilities. Indirectly, through the *Strategic Airlift Command* (SAC), it operates a fleet of three Boeing C-17s for troop transport. These are exclusively American supplies, as EU industry is not yet able to provide – in the absence of specific European public procurement – the same military platforms.

When European countries have tried to directly manage military operations on the ground, as in the case of Libya [and Mali](#), France and the UK have used NATO command and control (C2) structures for the intervention in Libya, but for ISR and *Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, Reconnaissance* (ISTAR) activity, the US has had to step in. However, in the case of Mali, the US stepped in to make up for the main French shortcomings, such as troop transport, where much of the work was done by rented Russian Antonov aircraft; in-flight refuelling; and the provision of a permanent ISR service.

In recent weeks, some [European governments](#) have resented US President Biden's sudden decision to leave Afghanistan. However, it is also worth remembering that the greatest toll, in terms of casualties, for the intervention in this country – and the mistakes made – was borne by the United States: at the end of May 2020, 2,355 out of 3,508 casualties were American, 456 from the United Kingdom and 422 from the 25 EU countries that, out of solidarity with the US, participated in the mission. If the EU had wanted to seriously participate in the goal of *nation building*, influencing its American ally through a more concrete content to this aspect of the Western presence, it should have made a greater contribution to the military side. In fact, as a [recent work](#) has pointed out, the objectives set, even if never fully specified, would have required a military presence far greater than what was provided. Given America's commitment in other parts of the world, the only US ally that could have deployed sufficient military resources was the EU, but it resoundingly failed to do so, even refusing to mobilise the '*battle groups*' that it had already decided to set up in 2005.

A few days after the announcement of the US withdrawal, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [Josep Borrell](#), announced that the European Commission would propose the establishment of a 5,000-strong European intervention force. The commitment, if it is fulfilled, is undoubtedly important, even if it comes more than twenty years later than the proposal presented at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, by the working group in which Gen. Vincenzo Camporini took part on behalf of Italy.

There is now only one way to honour the European victims in Afghanistan, and that is to fulfil the commitment that European governments made more than 70 years ago: to allocate the necessary military resources to a European planning, command and control structure, so as to create an autonomous European armed force in addition to the national armed forces. The planned summit between Prime Minister Draghi and President Macron seems to be moving [in this direction](#).

** Member of the CSF Board of Directors and Coordinator of the Security and Defence Research Area.
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