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Mission Uruzgan

*Collaborating in Multiple
Coalitions for Afghanistan*

*Edited by Robert Beeres,
Jan van der Meulen, Joseph Soeters
& Ad Vogelaar*

PALLAS PUBLICATIONS

6 Military ethics and Afghanistan

Peter Olsthoorn and Desirée Verweij

Introduction: the military ethic and a changing profession

For many of today's armed forces, peacekeeping, humanitarian, and rebuilding missions are becoming increasingly important. In these missions militaries are duty-bound to exercise self-control, trying to practice a non-threatening style that is respectful with the local population, and characterized by minimal use of force (Van Baarda and Verweij, 2006: 8). Clearly, the rationale behind such *hearts-and-minds approaches*, and the restraint exercised, is to a large extent self-serving: winning over the local population is essential for the success of today's missions, something that as a rule can only be reached by limiting the number of civilian casualties as much as possible. A rising civilian death toll fuels resistance to one's own military personnel, while a restrained approach is thought to yield better information and more cooperation from the local population, and thus, in the end, increased security for the troops. That these rationales are self-serving seems to suggest that consequences to the local population might count for less if the expediency argument would no longer hold. At first sight, that might seem a rather unsatisfactory conclusion. Yet, as it stands, and notwithstanding all good intentions to reduce the number of civilian casualties, the largest part of military codes, military oaths, value systems, and culture seem antagonistic to the idea that the life of a local civilian counts for the same as that of a Western soldier; military effectiveness and the interests of organizations and colleagues still hold central place in the military ethic (Robinson, 2007).

This ethic took shape, however, at a time in which the interests of the local population played a lesser role, as the main task of Western militaries was the defence of the own territory. What we see today is that there is, as a result of the aforementioned shift of tasks, an increasing pressure on military personnel to take the interests of others than just the organization and colleagues into account, in recent years more so than ever before. This poses questions and dilemmas for them that they were not likely to encounter in earlier days. It is not always clear, for instance, how they are to deal with situations in which conflicting values – the safety of oneself and one's colleagues versus the safety of the local population, but possibly also between military virtues and more civilian ones – impose conflicting demands

on them. This article focuses on the battle of Chora, fought in the Afghan province of Uruzgan, and on the difficulty of having to balance the safety of colleagues with that of the Afghani. However, it also tries to give some clues for how to assess how well that balancing act was done in Chora. To do so, the following section describes the prelude, battle, and aftermath of the battle, and illustrates the restraints modern armed forces face these days. The subsequent two sections try to make sense of what happened in Chora in light of the just war tradition and our tendency to give priority to the interests of near and dear. The section after that focuses on the role of the conscience of military personnel, and is followed by the conclusion.

Chora: prelude, battle, and aftermath

From August 2006 to August 2010, some sixty years after the police actions in the Dutch Indies, the Netherlands military was involved in another counter-insurgency mission in Asia, again with the aim to restore order, although this time under the scrutinizing eye of the media, and with a public that is sensitive to both the number of Dutch casualties and (albeit perhaps less so) the fate of the local population. These sensitivities clashed when on 10 June 2007 the district of Chora was surrounded by three hundred to a thousand Taliban fighters. At the time, the district had Dutch (about 60) and Afghan troops within its borders, and was also home to 75,000 Afghans who depended on them for protection. Extra Afghan police forces were requested, yet the few reserves that were sent by the Minister of Interior to Uruzgan to help, in the end refused to go to Chora. After a suicide attack on 15 June, killing Private First Class Timo Smeehuijzen and five Afghan children, the Dutch and Afghan troops came under a coordinated attack on 16 June.

Just two months earlier, because of the limited progress with this restrained approach, the Dutch troops changed to a more outgoing approach – from an *ink spot approach* to a more mobile *amoeba approach* –, increasing the chances of encounters with the Taliban. The Minister of Defence, however, denied that a change of strategy had taken place and stated, in line with the restrained Dutch approach (a term policy makers have come to shun, incidentally, claiming that all countries involved use the same method), that Dutch military personnel in Afghanistan are ‘as civilian as possible, and as military as necessary’ (MoD, 2007). This remark pretty much captured the prevalent opinion in Dutch politics, in turn mirroring the popular sentiment that Dutch military personnel should only be sent to Afghanistan to rebuild, not to fight. Political support in parliament for the decision in early 2006 to send troops to Uruzgan was, in fact, on the condition that it should be a ‘rebuilding-mission’ and not a ‘fighting-mission’ – notwithstanding the fact that these terms, which were used a lot in discussions in parliament and in the media, were hardly used within the Defence organization; it preferred the term counter-insurgency, covering both aspects. The reality it faces, however, is that the majority of the Dutch population would like to see that its armed forces are used only for humanitarian

missions (Koelé and Ramdharie, 2004). In line with that popular sentiment, parliamentarians and journalists tended to closely monitor the ratio between the progress made in rebuilding and the time and effort spent in fighting the Taliban; something bound to have an influence on the way things are undertaken in Uruzgan.

Yet, notwithstanding this peaceful inclination, and contrary to the so-called body bag hypothesis (the assumption that public support for a mission dwindles in case of casualties), opinion polls also showed that more casualties will not necessarily mean the end of public support for the mission in Afghanistan. In July 2010, for instance, no more than 32 per cent of the population were of the opinion that in case of casualties Dutch soldiers should be withdrawn from Afghanistan, whereas 43 per cent thought the opposite (MoD, 2010). Apparently, there is a reluctance to resort to the use of the military in risk operations, yet also a wish not to shrink if the decision to deploy military personnel has been taken.

It is against this background that both journalists and military personnel who had been in the area during the battle for Chora later recounted having had associations with the Srebrenica tragedy of July 1995. On the evening of the 11th of that month, the day that the (in numbers and weaponry) superior Serbian troops had captured 'the safe area' thousands of Muslims had taken refuge to, the Dutch Minister of Defence and his colleagues in the cabinet in their bunker in the Hague at the time felt that the Dutch troops should show solidarity with the remaining local population and refugees. In retrospect this sounds somewhat hollow, seeing that, due to an insufficient mandate and a lack of men and weapons, the Dutch battalion had been unable to prevent either the fall of Srebrenica or the subsequent murder of 7,000 Muslims it was supposed to protect.

Something traumatic like that should not happen again in Uruzgan. The decision was quickly made not to leave the local population in the hands of the Taliban, and large elements of the 500-men Dutch Battle Group were moved in over the next two days. Howitzers, Apaches, and F-16s, not available in Srebrenica, were called in to assist the troops on the ground in Chora. After a three-day battle, control of the area was regained. About 200 Taliban were killed in the biggest battle fought by the Netherlands military since Korea, while one Dutch sergeant-major died due to an accident with a mortar. Next to this, an unknown number of civilians lost their lives. According to a report by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2007), estimates range from 30 to 88, with 60 to 70 being a more realistic estimate. About 15 had been tortured, shot or beheaded, and torched by the Taliban, yet about 35 to 65 others possibly died as a result of bombardments by Dutch artillery, despite efforts to warn the local population beforehand using loudspeakers.

According to that same report the methods used by ISAF were heavy-handed, and not always accurate. President Karzai and the ISAF Commander, US General Dan McNeill, criticized the Dutch for using a howitzer, positioned 40 kilometres from Chora, without a forward controller. According to McNeill, in a classified report, this last element was a breach of the law of war. In the view of others,

and among them Dutch Secretary General of NATO De Hoop Scheffer, a modern howitzer such as the one used in Chora (the PzH 2000), can do without a forward controller. Later, in October 2007, rumour had it that Australian troops in Uruzgan, operating under Dutch command, had refused to participate in the operation, worrying about the risks the operation would impose on civilians, and being of the opinion that participating in the operation would go against the rules of engagement. However, Karzai's, McNeill's, and, possibly, the Australians' misgivings notwithstanding, a Dutch district attorney decided on 30 June 2008 not to prosecute military personnel for what happened in Chora, as they had acted within the limits set by the law of war and their rules of engagement. A potential discussion on how far the Western militaries' moral obligations to the local population should go, and when force protection becomes risk aversion, was thus reduced to a dispute on technical and legal issues, with the disputants roughly divided along national lines.

Interestingly, these criticisms from McNeill, Karzai, and the Australians came some months after critique on the Dutch approach that at first sight seemed to be of an opposite character (i.e., that the Dutch approach was in fact not heavy-handed but, to the contrary, much too soft). In December 2006, some high-ranking Canadian and British officers testified to seeing this approach as essentially flawed, because it avoided doing what is a precondition for rebuilding Afghanistan: dismantling the Taliban. According to them the, at that time, relatively small numbers of Dutch casualties gave evidence to its exaggerated caution, cowardice even (critique that also brought back to the minds of many in the Netherlands the tragedy in Srebrenica and the following – and ongoing – debate in the media whether the Dutch lack courage). This censure also led to some debate in NATO and subsequent media attention in the Dutch newspapers, with the latter providing a forum for Dutch commanders in Uruzgan, assuring the readers that the Dutch soldier fights as well as any other. In fact, however, both accusations – too careful at first, too heavy-handed later – come down to the same thing: Dutch military personnel are not willing enough to run risks at their own peril.

Leaving aside that this critique might be undue (according to Anthony King (2010) fighting was, to the detriment of their mission, an end in itself for the British troops in Helmand), the criticism of being risk-averse could be launched against all NATO and US troops in Afghanistan. According to a recent report of the Human Rights Watch on civilian casualties in Afghanistan the number of civilian losses caused by airpower tripled from 2006 to 2007 as a result of the combination of light ground forces and overwhelming airpower" (Human Rights Watch, 2008: 2, 14).

The same report warns that airstrikes that hit villages 'have also had significant political impact, outraging public opinion in Afghanistan and undermining public confidence in both the Afghan government and its international backers' (Human Rights Watch 2008: 3). The rising civilian death toll is thought to increase support for, and facilitate recruitment by, the Taliban (responsible for 75% of the civilian deaths in 2010). Taking 'tactical measures to reduce civilian deaths may at times put combatants at greater risk,' yet is a prerequisite for maintaining the support of the

local population (Human Rights Watch, 2008: 5), which in its turn is something the mission in Afghanistan depends on.

It is probably for these reasons that the second half of 2007 saw a change in NATO tactics, reducing the amount of civilian casualties significantly, at least temporarily; the death toll rose again during the first seven months of 2008 (Human Rights Watch 2008: 6). The number of civilian casualties dropped again in 2009, most likely as a result of 'ISAF's declared strategy of prioritizing the safety and security of civilians' (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2009: 23), and then dropped even further in 2010 (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2010). Nonetheless, aerial attacks still caused 171 deaths in 2010, and worryingly 102 of them in the second half of that year (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2010). What's more, as a result of a lot of money and effort spent, Western militaries seem to get better at killing without getting killed than they already were. Today, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles reduces the risks for military personnel to about zero, but has in recent years taken many innocent lives in Pakistan and Afghanistan. With such a distance – physical, but also psychological – between a soldier and the horrors of war, it has to be feared that killing might get a bit easier. Such 'statistical' victims, however, in general seem to attract relatively little attention, especially when compared with the interest in the more visible and 'real' victims of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and Haditha.

Intentions and consequences

That civilian deaths, such as the 35 to 65 in Chora, seem to count for less – at least in the eyes of politicians, militaries, media, and most citizens – has at least two reasons: partly, the victims are often geographically and psychologically far removed from us, but, more importantly, their deaths were, although perhaps foreseen, certainly not intended – civilian casualties are an unhappy side-effect of otherwise well intended actions. One could say that the first reason (that nearness matters) is considered a fact of life that has to be accepted as such, while the second reason (the relevance of intention) seems to be a more principled one that is in line with basic moral intuitions shared by most people.

Regarding the second reason, the relevance of intention, some might argue that the difference between intended and unintended casualties is not that relevant, and therefore hold that a mission should not be carried out if civilian casualties are among the foreseen (or foreseeable) consequences – this is in effect the position taken by most pacifists, holding that the killing of innocent people in war is never pardonable. In modern warfare there are always innocent casualties, hence their conclusion that under the present conditions wars should not be fought (Fiala, 2010). As it basically rules out war altogether, this position is according to many authors too strict, as it forbids wars of self-defence and, more generally, does not allow war even in the cases that not fighting a war seems the immoral thing to do.

For that reason they tend to take a more realistic approach, and insofar as they do so without actually falling into the extreme of realism (holding that in war there is no room for moral considerations) they can find guidance in the just war tradition, which attempts to offer an alternative for pacifism and realism alike.

To address the unavoidable taking of innocent life, as said the main objection to war in the eyes of many pacifists, just war theorists have put forward the principle of double effect. That principle is formulated differently by different authors, but basically states that acts that have evil consequences are nonetheless permitted if four conditions are met:

1. the act is not bad in itself (such as the use of a howitzer against the Taliban during the Battle of Chora);
2. the direct effect is good (for instance the destruction of the Taliban);
3. the intention is good (the destruction of the Taliban and the saving of Chora are intended, civilian deaths are not); and
4. the intended good effects (the destruction of the Taliban and the saving of Chora) outweigh the unintended bad effects (civilian deaths), i.e., the chosen means should be proportional (Anscombe, 1961; Walzer, 1992: 153).

Most authors agree that the third proviso, about intention, forms the core of the principle (Michael Walzer calls it 'the burden of the argument'). Underlying that clause is 'the claim that there is a stronger presumption against action that has harm to the innocent as an intended effect than there is against otherwise comparable action that causes the same amount of harm to the innocent as a foreseen but unintended effect' (McMahan, 1994). Behind this idea is the even more basic distinction between 'what one does to people and what merely happens to them as a result of what one does' (Nagel, 1972: 131), for example between killing and letting die. Doing without this distinction would bring military personnel involved in unintentional killing on the same level as terrorists. Then again, the double effect principle requires little effort on the part of the military to minimize civilian casualties in its traditional understanding. As long as the latter are an unintended (and proportional) side-effect of legitimate attacks on military targets, and the use of a howitzer in the battle for Chora seems to be an example, these attacks are within the principle's limits.

However, although the intentional killing of a noncombatant is evidently evil, it is not so that unintentional deaths do not amount to a bad thing that should be avoided, if at all possible, and some might wonder if militaries sometimes invoke the principle of double effect a bit too easily. 'Simply not to intend the death of civilians is too easy,' writes just war theorist and political philosopher Michael Walzer (1992: 155). It is especially because of the principle's lenience that Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars* famously restated it, holding that soldiers have a further 'obligation to attend to the rights of civilians' (1992: 155), and that 'due care' should be taken. However, it is not enough to make efforts to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible; a soldier has to do this 'accepting costs to himself,' i.e., accepting risk

to his or her life if necessary (1992: 155). Writes Walzer: we tend to 'look for a sign of a positive commitment to save civilian lives' that says that 'if saving civilian lives means risking soldiers' lives, the risk must be accepted' (1992, p. 156). It seems that the use of a howitzer in Chora, although within the limits set by the doctrine of double effect in its traditional formulation, might fall short in light of the principle as reformulated by Walzer. Then again, the decision to stay in Chora to defend does testify to an acceptance of risk; clearly, leaving the population of Chora at the mercy of the Taliban would have been safer for Dutch military personnel but would have resulted in many civilian casualties – in all likelihood much more than now have died as a result of the artillery shelling.

A final remark to finish this section with: although Walzer addresses the principle of double effect's leniency, he stops short of actually putting the consequences to civilians to the fore; ultimately a sincere effort to avoid civilian casualties is deemed more important than whether or not that effort is successful. To return to Chora: it seems that, for Walzer, that acceptance of risk by Dutch soldiers in an attempt to reduce the amount of civilian casualties would have been more important than whether or not that effort was, in fact, successful. Why it is that in a military context the intention should matter *that much* is, however, still far from self-evident. The explanation probably lies in the principle's background: one of the purposes of the double effect doctrine was to reconcile Christianity's rejection of violence with the fact that in war innocent people are killed due to acts of Christian soldiers (Anscombe, 1961). Intentions are hence mainly deemed relevant because of the effect on the soldier's moral standing: if he or she kills a noncombatant unintentionally instead of intentionally, we hold him or her a better person for it. Ultimately the principle of double effect is more about the actor, and his ability to look at himself in the mirror, than about those at the receiving end.

Distance

Others have put the consequences to all parties involved to the fore, however; according to the Australian philosopher Peter Singer (1972), for instance, we have a moral duty to prevent the suffering of others if we are in a situation that allows us to do so 'without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance'. The fact that some catastrophe is happening far away does not exempt us in any way from our moral duty to act. If, for example, Westerners are in a position to somewhat lessen suffering in poor countries by opting for a more sober lifestyle, and donating what they thus save to those who need it so much more, they have a moral duty to do so. At first sight, it appears to follow from this standpoint that possible adverse consequences to the local population and the civilian casualties in Chora form an obvious example should count for a lot more than they do at present.

Then again, some authors dispute that soldiers really have far-reaching obligations to strangers in times of war, and it has been a topic of debate whether or

not they can in fact be subjected to higher risks with the purpose of lowering the risks for foreign civilians (Walzer and Margalit, 2009). It seems, indeed, somewhat presumptuous to expect military personnel to run risks on the behalf of strangers, while most of us do not feel an obligation to donate most of our surplus money to, say, hunger or malaria fighting organizations. In that light, it is not so clear to what degree (if any) there was a moral obligation on the part of the Dutch soldiers defending Chora to risk their lives protecting outsiders. They were not confronted with the choice between one's own wish to lead a luxurious life and the right to life of those starving in faraway countries, but between one's own right to life and that of colleagues on the one hand, and that of a stranger on the other. In their case, giving priority to the safety of the local population is doing considerably more than what Singer asks for when he states that we are to help strangers if that can be done 'without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.' From this point of view (which already demands a lot more than most of us are willing to give) the Dutch soldiers probably did not have to accept these costs to themselves, which are so clearly of 'moral importance.' Most military personnel are, understandably, above all concerned about the safety of their colleagues, which they (similar to politicians and the public) rate higher than that of the local population.

At the same time, it is clear that this position seems somewhat at odds with the intent behind operations like that in Uruzgan, and the tactics employed: trying to prevent the population of Uruzgan from developing loyalties to the Taliban. One could therefore argue that, even if a truly impartial view may be expecting too much from soldiers involved in a regular war, soldiers and policy makers might be expected to take a somewhat more unbiased view of today's more humanitarian operations. That would have the beneficial effect that civilian casualties that are a result of reducing the risks for Western military personnel would be taken somewhat less lightly than at present sometimes seems to be the case. In *What We Owe To Each Other*, Thomas Scanlon described thinking about right and wrong as 'thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they, if appropriately motivated, could not reasonably reject' (1998: 5). Mere distance and the absence of intention certainly do not seem to be such grounds.

However, incidents in recent years have shown that the restraint required in today's operations does not always come naturally. Although most of us would like to see military personnel upholding high moral standards even when, for instance, the media are not present, it is the question whether that demand is realistic. It seems that especially for those who are led by how their behaviour might look in the eyes of others, what is only known privately and not out in the open does, in a sense, not even exist. This brings us to the matter of the conscience of the soldier.

Conscience in military practice

The ideal (conscientious) soldier or warrior resembles the ‘good cowboy,’ familiar from the John Wayne and Clint Eastwood Westerns, riding off in the sunset after finishing his job in a morally responsible way, leaving the viewers in the conviction that justice has been done. However, these westerns clearly tell us that there are not only good guys but also bad ones. In the same way we are informed by everyday military practice that there are not only ‘good’ soldiers in the military. Too many incidents have shown that a humanitarian ethos is not by definition part of their military equipment, or to put it differently, that not all soldiers are moral agents.

According to American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr ‘politics will, to the end of history, be an arena where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises’ (Niebuhr quoted by Doyle 1997: 383). In this statement, conscience seems to refer to both the individual and social aspects of conscience, and the political and military consequences of these aspects. They are all part of the process in which the monopoly of violence is put into practice. This process starts with moral outrage in society and politics regarding, say, the dire human rights’ situation in Afghanistan. This is followed by a political reaction (based on the shared moral outrage, but probably also based on serving the voters). The question is whether the moral outrage of the first, public phase in this process is (still) present in the political and the military phases that follow. Or, to put it differently, is the social conscience that produces the moral outrage mirrored in the conscience of the individual politician and soldier? This question seems relevant, for the presence of a well functioning conscience seems a prerequisite for morally responsible actions. In order to answer this question a closer look at the meaning of the concept of conscience can be helpful.

In his book *Conscience and Conscientious Objections* (2007), philosopher Anders Schinkel interprets conscience as a concerned awareness of the moral quality of our own contribution to the process of reality, including our own being. On the basis of historical and philosophical research, Schinkel describes conscience as a symbol with three core elements: (1) ultimate concern, (2) intimacy (3) presence of a witness (2007: 106). Ultimate concern refers to the experience that it is a necessity that something should be done. It is also clear that one’s own standards are deficient and that a superior standard is needed; Schinkel gives the example of Socrates’ awareness of falling short with regard to his own wisdom and his willingness to learn. The ability to be aware of and acknowledge one’s own limitations and fallibility is crucial in this respect; it seems the only protection against the hubris of decisions that are taken too quickly and without due reflection. It is clear that judgment plays a crucial role with regard to conscience (2007: 108). The second element (intimacy) implies a strong personal involvement; there can be no ultimate concern without it. It is important that one realizes: ‘this is about me,’ and that one feels one’s own responsibility. It is the experience that one’s identity is at stake. The third element

(witness) implies the awareness that there is a spectator witnessing our actions and thoughts; the metaphor of the heart seems to fulfil this function as ‘an excellent witness’ (Schinkel, 2007: 112); the concepts *syneidesis* and *conscientia* (the Greek and Roman roots of our concept of conscience) refer to an *internal* witness. This also holds for Adam Smith’s ‘impartial spectator’ or ‘great inmate of the breast,’ for Hobbes expression (based on Quintilianus) that ‘conscience is a thousand witnesses’ (Schinkel, 2007: 113), and for the metaphor of the (divine) ‘voice of conscience,’ which refers to the experience of being spoken to, as is described by Socrates and in the Bible. This ‘voice’ carries a special authority and experiencing it has as such a transcendental quality. For Heidegger conscience is what constitutes the subject as an individual. Heidegger describes it as a call, in the interpretation of Staten ‘a call to Care’ (Schinkel, 2007: 120).

To put Schinkel’s analysis in a nutshell: our conscience tells us that it is crucial for us to do something in a particular situation, that it is our responsibility, even our obligation, to act, and that our actions are being scrutinized. Also in a military context, it is, ideally, our conscience that tells us to act, at times even to use violence. This is in line with the Just War tradition which, as mentioned in the above, teaches us that waging war is not, as such, a reprehensible act; it might even be a moral obligation. The willingness to bind war to rules has developed throughout the course of history, and the Just War tradition and the Geneva Conventions are examples of this attempt. They can be interpreted as the social and political conscience, discussed at the beginning of this section. However, rules never cover every situation and the ability to think and judge adequately are therefore indispensable; something which presupposes individual conscience. Yet, as indicated before, not every soldiers’ conscience is the same, neither is his or her level of moral development or moral professionalization. Nonetheless, today, in missions like the one in Uruzgan, the level of compliance with humanitarian rules seems higher than ever, and codes of conduct and military ethics courses testify to the fact that morally responsible behaviour is seen as a necessary prerequisite for professional (i.e., ‘good’) soldiering.

However, the conscience of the individual soldier, formed and educated in ethics courses and training sessions, is probably not the only factor here. It seems that the omnipresence of the media, social media included, have magnified the three core elements of the symbol of consciences discussed above. Knowing that the eye of the camera is focused on one’s actions and scrutinizes every move, makes one adamant to act in a morally responsible way. Foucault’s disciplinary gaze, described in his *Discipline and Punish* (1977), may have found a twenty-first century equivalent in the omnipresence of the media, which introduces, next to the old symbol of the heart, another symbol for conscience: the eye of the camera. That is not necessarily a bad thing; now and then, it seems to be that eye that stands between a soldier and a war crime.

Conclusion

In today's operations, the combined forces of law, politics, an increased moral sensitivity, public opinion, and extensive media coverage, both at home and abroad, not only pose considerable limitations on Western troops, but, notwithstanding the fact that these factors do not always work in the same direction, to a certain extent also help troops to make true their expressed ambition (that is, by some members of militaries) to be *a force for good*. The media, in particular, seem to play an important role here, but can only perform that function if they keep their independence. Recent years have shown that embedded journalists mainly write about their own military, and pay much less attention to the suffering of the local population than journalists working independently from the military.

Also in the case of Uruzgan the majority of the newspaper articles was about Dutch soldiers, while only a small minority pointed to the plight of the Afghani (HCSS, 2008). Yet, although in general attracting less attention than losses among Western military personnel and victim of war crimes, civilians killed unintentionally form the majority of those killed in today's conflicts. That their deaths are, although foreseen, not intended possibly explains why these civilian casualties are, in general, deemed less important than Western military casualties (Shaw, 2005: 79–88). It is perceived that way by both politicians and the populations at large in the West, hence the emphasis on relatively safe ways of delivering firepower, such as artillery and high-flying bombers.

Seeing that many of today's civilian casualties are foreseeable, one might wonder if the threshold should not be somewhat higher than it has been in recent years. It is likely that taking civilian deaths seriously as such (i.e., as something to be avoided independently of what is in it for us) would possibly result in the postponement or cancellation of particular missions in even more cases than the aforementioned reasons of expedience at present already lead to. However, as mentioned in the introduction, there is an expediency based argument here too: if tactics that put civilians at risk can drive the local population in the hands of the insurgents, a more impartial ethic will in the long run benefit outsiders, colleagues, and defence organizations alike.

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