Shaping the tolerance of casualties: NATO, Afghanistan and the use of strategic narratives

Berit Kaja Børgesen & Jens Ringsmose
Department of Political Science
University of Southern Denmark

Paper prepared for the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshop
St. Gallen, Switzerland
April 2011

Work in progress – all comments welcome
As it has become increasingly clear that NATO’s campaign in Afghanistan is unlikely to result in the suppression of the Taliban insurgency any time soon, alliance leaders have predictably begun to pay more attention to the factors shaping the staying power of the Atlantic Alliance. NATO will never – so it is credibly argued – be defeated militarily in the Hindu Kush. But the alliance could very well fail to meet its stated objectives if the Western publics’ willingness to support the war efforts is further eroded. After all, as the great Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz taught us almost two centuries ago, military capabilities and political resolve are the two fundamental ingredients in any combatant’s warfighting potential. Even the strongest nation or alliance will thus face strategic defeat in the absence of the determination to endure the human and economic costs of war. And since political willpower is generally assumed to be closely intertwined with public opinion in Western-style liberal democracies, NATO-members have gradually come to invest more in public diplomacy directed at domestic audiences.\(^1\) In effect, the individual and the factors that determines his or hers attitudes towards the ISAF-mission has come centre stage. And accordingly, NATO has significantly stepped up efforts to persuade North-American and European publics that the mission is one of necessity (see for instance Obama, 2009; Watt, 2010; Hastings, 2011).

The main argument of this paper is that individual and public attitudes toward the use of military power are greatly shaped by the effectiveness of the strategic communication and narratives employed by national policy-makers when rationalising a given mission. How the use of military force is framed by leaders significantly affects the public’s stamina for human and economic costs. Compelling strategic narratives – including a consistent and clear set of objectives, convincing cause-effect chains, as well as a credible promise of success – makes for the sustainment of protracted and costly campaigns, and vice versa. Armed with a strong story-line about the why, what, and how of non-existential military interventions abroad, a government can sustain even significant domestic support for the operation in the face of substantial casualties. A persuasive framing of the use of military power can thus, to some extent, immunise public opinion against the conventional effects of a rising number of casualties. In fact, effective strategic narratives do, so we argue, provide for a surprisingly high degree of casualty tolerance.

\(^1\) See for instance NATO’s Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration (April 4, 2009), where it is stated that ‘it is increasingly important that the Alliance communicates in an appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive manner on its evolving roles, objectives and missions. Strategic communications are an integral part of our efforts to achieve the Alliance’s political and military objectives’.
As such, the aim of this paper is to add to the rapidly growing body of academic literature on the public’s sensitivity towards casualties in military campaigns (see for instance Gelpi, 2010; Casey, 2010). Building on John Mueller’s seminal work on the American public’s support for the use of armed force in Vietnam – and the idea that the relationship between the two is best accounted for by a ‘simple association: as casualties mount support decreases’ (Mueller, 1973; 2005:44) – this literature proposes that a number of factors are likely to influence the casualty averseness of Western publics. While for instance some political scientists have argued that particular domestic groups are less influenced by war losses than others (Jentleson, 1992), other scholars have called attention to the type of conflict that the nation is involved in (Mack, 1975; Feaver & Gelpi, 2004). The common denominator of this body of work is the identification and highlighting of variables that allegedly mitigate or amplify the causal link between war casualties and public support – i.e. the literature addresses the question: ‘under what conditions will the casualties cause public support for a given mission to decline more rapidly or more slowly’ (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009:11)? By emphasising the importance of strategic narratives – and examining our argument against four contemporary cases – we aim to bring some of the insights generated by the scholarly investigations of strategic communication in international politics and strategic studies into the study of casualty tolerance.

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part we briefly examine the ways in which variation in public support for the military mission to Afghanistan has affected individual NATO member states’ willingness to commit troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In contrast to what have been recently argued by for instance Sarah Kreps (2010), we find that systemic incentives for sustained alliance cooperation do not inoculate national leaders from a souring public opinion in the long run. As indicated by evidence from the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Denmark, public opinion on the use of armed force does, indeed, impinge on policy. Also, in this part, we describe the highly uneven effects of casualties on public opinion in the four abovementioned NATO countries that have all deployed troops to the troubled southern provinces of Afghanistan. We thus seek to display the significant national variations in sensitivity towards casualties.

In the paper’s second section, we examine existing theories on the formation of public preferences, variations in casualty tolerance and military conflict. While all of these explanations and approaches
add bits and pieces to our understanding of how individuals’ attitudes towards the use of military force are formed, we advance an alternative theoretical argument of strategic narratives. The gist of the argument is that national leaders are able to shape the public opinion by means of skilful framing and the use of compelling storylines. In this perspective, decision-makers are not just malleable victims of the wishes and whims of public attitudes, but actors endowed with the capacity to mobilise support for military intervention. We base this theoretical line of reasoning on the work of, among others, Lawrence Freedman.

In the papers third and final part, we conduct four brief case studies of Canadian, British, Danish, and Dutch ISAF-policies and the strategic narratives employed by the four national governments. We find that in the case of Afghanistan, staying power seems to be closely related to the strength and effectiveness of the strategic narrative used to rationalise the military efforts. While both the Danish and British governments crafted compelling and quite consistent story-lines about the deployment of troops to the Hindu-Kush, the Dutch and Canadian governments never got their strategic communication right.

**Public opinion, casualties and policy**

In a recent article in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Sarah Kreps opposes the currently widely accepted claim that national leaders are first and foremost responsive to domestic public opinion when they decide about the use of armed force. Allegedly, NATO’s ongoing efforts in Afghanistan bear witness to this critique of the conventional wisdom. Due to powerful systemic incentives and the institutional dynamics created by the Atlantic Alliance, so Kreps’ key argument runs, political elites from different political parties have converged around a commitment to international cooperation and ‘largely bucked public opinion’ neither reducing nor withdrawing troops from NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. Or to put it differently, the strong intra-alliance pressure for cooperation and continued commitment to the mission have generally trumped elite concerns for the electoral effects of ‘not running for the exits’. Indeed, in Kreps’ view, ‘public opinion hardly matters’ to the mission (Kreps, 2010:191).

Our objective here is not to challenge the view that foreign policies are chiefly shaped by factors at the systemic level (although we have less faith in the power of international institutions than has
Kreps). In fact, we subscribe to the belief that ‘the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities’ (Rose, 1998:146). However, we do believe that Kreps is taking the argument slightly too far in her attempt to challenge the conventional wisdom of contemporary research on public preferences – i.e. the view that public opinion is the key determinant of foreign policy decisions. While intra-alliance pressure and systemic incentives are, indeed, likely to insulate governments from substantial public opposition for a period of time (witness the cases of France, Germany, Spain and Poland), we argue that in most instances the political costs of ignoring the popular opinion, will become too significant in the long run. Eventually a hostile domestic environment will drive democratically elected leaders to downscale or quit ongoing military engagements that they would have otherwise continued. This is not to say that policy-makers are the powerless victims of shifting popular attitudes. Far from it – as we shall return to below, governments often have significant influence on the public’s willingness to pay the human and material costs of war.

To assess the impact of public opinion on national ISAF-policies, we collected polls from four NATO-countries that have all made considerable military contributions to the unstable southern provinces of Afghanistan: the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Figure 1 below summarises the cross-national public opinion findings (2006-2010) for these countries.² The figure shows that despite the lack of strategic success and the significant costs of the mission, Danish and British publics have actually become increasingly supportive of the mission in a long term perspective. Surprisingly, the general trend in the two data-sets is rising. In contrast, Dutch and Canadian publics have become markedly less sympathetic to the military commitment to ISAF over time. The empirical evidence from these four – in many ways comparable – NATO member states thus corroborates the view that national policy-makers will be swayed by persistent public pressure and the spectre of electoral defeat. Growing demands for withdrawal will eventually make governments end their commitment to the mission. While leaders in the Netherlands and Canada, confronted with constantly declining support for the war, have decreased or withdrawn their military contributions to the mission (BBC News Toronto, 2008; BBC News, 2010), policy-makers

² The four cases (Denmark, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Canada) have been selected for the reason that they have all contributed troops to the unstable provinces in the southern part of Afghanistan since ISAF’s mandate was extended in 2006. Furthermore, they are all known to be strong ‘Atlanticists’, which in turn means that they should all be subjected to the same degree of alliance pressure (i.e. systemic incentives in Kreps’ terminology).
in the United Kingdom and in Denmark – that have been faced with constant or increasing levels of support – have maintained or even reinforced their military commitment to ISAF. Notwithstanding the continued systemic incentives (identified by Kreps) to the contrary, policy-makers in Canada and the Netherlands have been unable to sustain a bipartisan consensus on the Afghan-issue, which has in both cases led to decisions to withdraw troops. Public opinion, so it seems, does matter after all.

Figure 1: Development in public support for the military campaign in Afghanistan

Support levels are based on available national and international polls on the military campaign in Afghanistan. Some polls have been left out due to a trade-off between comparing as many polls as possible and comparing polls with as identical question wordings as possible. We selected polls where the public were asked about support for their countries' military commitments in Afghanistan. Polls were accessed through several sources including, among others, Gallup, Capacent, Angus Reid Strategies, YouGov, ICM Research, The Strategic Counsel, the Dutch Ministry of Defence, and a number of newspapers. In the case of Canada and the Netherlands, support levels rest on polling results from August 2006 up until the political decisions to end the military engagements were made public. This scope is based on the judgment that the decisions can possibly influence public opinion in ways that would confuse our analysis, since one aim is to detect the effects of public opinion on the decisions to withdraw. Polls on the Danish and British public opinion are conducted between August 2006 and August 2010.
NATO’s decision to handover responsibility for the security of all of Afghanistan to the Afghan leadership by the end of 2014 (in NATO-lingo: ‘the transition’ or ‘inteqal’) also testifies to the claim that democratically elected policy-makers are unwilling to ignore public opposition indefinitely. Although Alliance leaders have gone to great length to emphasise that the plan for withdrawal and transition is first and foremost driven by progress on the ground, the still ongoing fighting and the somewhat mixed reports on the quality of the Afghan national security forces, suggest otherwise. In most NATO-countries public support for the war is fading fast (REFERENCE), and the decision by a number of major allies to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, or even before, regardless of the situation on the ground signifies that several national leaders are more preoccupied with domestic concerns than intra-alliance pressure for cooperation (see for instance Norton-Taylor, 2010; Dempsey & Saltmarsh, 2010; MacAskill, 2011).

Recognising that national leaders are not indefinitely inoculated from public pressure when fighting a war by alliance of course begs the more general question of what factors determine the public’s preferences in questions related to the use of armed force. In other words, how can we explain variations in the public’s willingness to bear the human and economic costs of war? As spelled out in more detail below, the most well-know determinant presented in the scholarly literature is the number of war-time fatalities suffered by a country. Increasing numbers of casualties are thus generally held to erode the public support for any given military mission. This conventional wisdom is sometimes referred to as ‘the body bag-syndrome’.

In this context, our four cases present an interesting puzzle: while Denmark and the United Kingdom have suffered far more casualties than have both the Netherlands and Canada (measured as a percentage of national populations, see Table 1 below), it is, as mentioned, Dutch and Canadian policy-makers that have been faced with the strongest public opposition to participation in ISAF. Paradoxically – and in clear contrast to the conventional wisdom – increasing casualties have been accompanied by rising popular support for the deployment of military forces to Afghanistan in the United Kingdom and Denmark; the higher the number of casualties, the stronger the support. Conversely, both the Dutch and the Canadians appear to be significantly more sensitive to war fatalities, as public opinion has in both cases been steadily declining following a relatively low number of casualties.
Table 1: Fatalities suffered by the international coalition forces in Afghanistan (1 April 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total number of fatalities</th>
<th>Fatalities per million inhabitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United Kingdom</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>5.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As the brief literature review in the following section demonstrate, a number of causal factors have been promoted as in- or decreasing the effects of casualties on public support for a given military engagement. But a gap seems to have found its way into the literature. In the paper’s second part we try to close this gap by presenting the missing link: the importance of an effective strategic narrative.

**Shaping the public opinion environment**

Public sentiment is everything… With public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statues or pronounces decisions (Abraham Lincoln).

The first academic studies of the relationship between public opinion and the use of armed force portrayed the attitudes of ordinary citizens as altogether ill-informed, capricious, incoherent, and generally unimportant for grasping the substance of policy decisions (Almond, 1950; Lippmann, 1955; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Lipset, 1966; Verba et al., 1967; Holsti, 1992; Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009:1-7). According to this first-generation of public opinion scholars, foreign policy was, and rightly so, the domain of an educated elite unimpressed by mass moods; too much public interference in the formulation of foreign policies would only complicate and disrupt an otherwise perfectly rational decision-making process. Realist-inspired scepticism about the virtues of public opinion thus dominated the discipline. In the – exemplary – words of political scientist
Gabriel Almond: ‘For persons responsible for the making of security policy these moods impacts of the public have a highly irrational effect. Often the public is apathetic when it should be concerned and panicky when it should be calm’ (1956:372; see also Morgenthau, 1948[1993]:160-4; Wolfers, 1962:35). However, to the consolation of this first wave of scholars, the irrational public was believed to be unlikely to place serious constrains on the nation’s use of armed force as ordinary citizens allegedly would tend to ‘rally ‘round the flag’ in times of crisis. Consequently, the much praised principle of ‘Primat der Aussenpolitik’ could stand unchallenged.

This initial normative and analytical consensus did not survive the Vietnam War. As the number of U.S. casualties multiplied there and the public opinion came to be increasingly at odds with the official views of the American government, a growing number of scholars advanced a more pluralist understanding of the driving forces of foreign policy in general and the use of armed force in particular. In contrast to the elitists’ perspective advanced by among others Lippmann, Verba, Morgenthau, and Almond, these second-generation studies emphasised how domestic political groups and public opinion severely restricts the available policy choices of democratically elected leaders: confronted with a given policy-problem, politicians will – for better or worse – opt for the policies that is most likely to keep (or bring) them in office. In keeping with this line of reasoning, which quickly became the dominant scholarly interpretation, elected leaders are little less than windsocks blowing whichever way the public mood takes them. The causal link between public attitudes and policy, so vehemently denied by early realist-oriented scholarship, thus virtually came to be taken for granted (Holsti, 1992; Klaveras, 2002; Robinson, 2008:138-140; Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009:1-8; Kreps, 2010:193).

Obviously, the post-Vietnam consensus created a strong impetus for studying and understanding the formation of public preferences – if security policy was first and foremost the product of the popular will, clearly the determinants of public views on the use of military force needed to be better appreciated. In a pioneering work on public attitudes in the Vietnam War, John Mueller (1971, 1973) proposed a first-cut theoretical explanation of the variations in public support for U.S. armed interventions in Korea and Vietnam. According to this formula, popular backing for the U.S. military engagement in South-East Asia dropped reflexively and inexorably in proportion to the log of casualties: the first battle deaths generated significant decreases in public support, while losses at a later stage in the campaign resulted in smaller drops. The gist of Mueller’s argument was,
however, that increasing number of homecoming American ‘body-bags’ would slowly – but automatically – erode public support.

While taking Mueller’s basic assumptions – and the so-called ‘body-bag syndrome’ – as its main point of departure, later scholarly work have come to perceive of the public as more reflective and rational than did Mueller (Larson, 1996). Most of the current literature thus subscribes to the view that casualties have a negative impact on the public’s support for military missions. But in contrast to Mueller’s pioneering proposition, these newer studies contend that members of the public engages and evaluate casualties in a rather sophisticated ‘cost-benefit analysis – comparing the likely benefits of continuing to fight with the expected cost’ when deciding on whether to support an armed intervention or not (Klarevas, 2002; Gelpi, 2010:89). Thus, the causal effects of the human tolls of war are now generally seen to be dependent on a number of different factors. Or put differently, the public’s tolerance of casualties is perceived to be conditional: under one set of circumstances, a relatively limited number of causalities can have a fairly drastic impact on the public support for war (what is sometimes dubbed the ‘Somalia Syndrome’ or ‘casualty phobia’); under another set of circumstances, popular attitudes tend to be exceptionally resilient to war fatalities (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009:11-15).

The scholarly focus on casualty tolerance and the causal factors dampening or amplifying the effects of casualties on public support has generated a number of insightful and intriguing studies promoting different independent variables. Some, as for instance Bruce Jentleson (1992), Bruce Russet and Miroslav Nincic (1976), have highlighted the importance of the ‘Principal Policy Objective’ of a military operation. According to this line of argument, the public’s willingness to accept human costs is first and foremost dependent on the nature and extent of the threat to national security; others, as for instance John Zaller (1992) and Eric Larson (1996), have called attention to the degree of leadership division, claiming that public support will be robust – even in the face of significant humans costs – when domestic elites are united and vice versa; still others have emphasised the causal role played by multilateral support for the mission (Kelleher, 1994; Kull & Destler, 1999), the perceived national interests at stake (Ladd, 1980; Kohut & Toth, 1995), and the expectations of success (Record, 1993; Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009). Also, demography, societal norms, the technological development and the advent of near real-time media
coverage have been pointed to as determinants of casualty tolerance (for literature reviews see Klarevas, 2002; Feaver & Gelpi, 2004:149-183; Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009).

Taken together, the insights offered by existing studies present a multifaceted and comprehensive picture. Indeed, our knowledge about the relationship between public opinion and the use of military force has greatly expanded over the years. But for all its merits, the current literature is marked by a deplorable lack of attention to the role played by policy elites and their ability to shape and galvanise public opinion during armed conflicts. Almost no contemporary studies have paid heed to the fact, as did already Hans Morgenthau and other classical realists, ‘that public opinion is not a static thing to be discovered and classified by public-opinion polls as plants are by botanists, but that it is a dynamic, ever changing entity to be continuously created and recreated’ (Morgenthau, 1948 [1993]:164). Far from being defenceless victims of the ever changing mood of a volatile electorate, political leaders are, in fact, quite often themselves capable of mobilising and preserving public support for overseas military missions. In democracies, the causal arrow tends to go both ways: certainly, political leaders are influenced by polls and the mood of the electorate, but public opinion is also partly shaped by elites’ efforts to marshal support. Hence, domestic political elites have the possibility of framing a given military intervention in ways that – at least to some extent – immunise the public from the conventional effects of casualties. As demonstrated by for instance Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, national leaders can sometimes mould or even manipulate the electorate’s tolerance of war time losses.

In this vein, we propose an explanation of public support for the use of armed force based on theories of strategic narratives. In short, we posit that the public’s willingness to accept the human costs of war is greatly shaped by the kind of narratives that governments and foreign policy elites construct in order to convey ‘a sense of cause, purpose, and mission’ when the nations is at war (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001:328): strong and effective strategic narratives will reduce the public’s casualty averseness, while weak narratives will make the public support for the use of armed force sensitive to war fatalities. According to this logic, popular views of wars are certainly not irrelevant to the substance of policy-decision – in democracies public opinion clearly matters; but policy-makers are not as subservient to the attitudes of the masses as much contemporary scholarship on the relationship between foreign policy and public opinion suggests. With the right use of a compelling story line that ‘appeals to the values, interests and prejudices of the intended audience’
(Freedman, 2006:23) democratically elected governments can, in fact, stimulate significant public support for the use of military instruments. Thus, to some extent, policy-makers have the capacity to shelter themselves against the conventional effects of rising numbers of casualties by exploiting deliberately designed stories about the values and interests at stake. Public opinion is important to policy – but so are governments and the narratives with which they bequeath meaning to a military mission.

According to Lawrence Freedman, ‘[n]arratives are about the ways that issues are framed and responses suggested’ (2006:23). Hence, strategic narratives are intended to help people make sense of events related to the use of military force in ways that are likely to give rise to a particular feeling or opinion (Roselle, 2010:6; see also Antoniades, O’Loughlin & Miskimmon, 2010). Strategic narratives are thus closely related to the concept of framing (Entman, 2004:5; Norris, Kern & Just, 2003). To be effective, narratives must both resonate with the intended audience’s core values and advocate a persuasive cause-effect description that ties events together in an explanatory framework. In other words, the story must contain both a normative and a cognitive dimension (Antoniades, O’Loughlin & Miskimmon, 2010:5). Freedman writes:

[Narratives] are not necessarily analytical and, when not grounded in evidence or experience, may rely on appeals to emotion, or on suspect metaphors and dubious historical analogies. A successful narrative will link certain events while disentangling others, distinguishing good news from bad tidings, and explain who is winning and who is losing. This usage reflects the idea that stories play an extremely important role in communication, including the ways that organisations talk about themselves (Freedman, 2006:23).

In order to carry out an appraisal of how the strategic narratives of different NATO member states affect the public’s tolerance of casualties in Afghanistan, we need, however, to establish exactly what an effective narrative implies. How do we recognise a strong or effective strategic narrative when we see it? We argue that strong strategic narratives are characterised by four basic elements:

- First, and most importantly, strong strategic narratives articulate a clear and compelling mission purpose. Convincing story-lines about the use of armed force in overseas interventions are thus distinguished by an unambiguous and coherent answer to the crucial ‘why-this-mission’-question. If a given strategic narrative fails to present such an
unequivocal explanation of the overall objective of the use of military force abroad, the public will be left in bewilderment and without a persuasive conceptual framework for rationalising and interpreting events. Hence, public support for the mission will evaporate rapidly as casualties mount. Not all mission purposes entailed in strategic narratives are, however, likely to have the same effects on the intended audience. Missions believed by the public to be a defence against vital national interests will generally enjoy greater popular support than will missions deemed to be humanitarian interventions embarked on to protect other people’s interests. Casualty shyness in the latter kind of missions will be particular high when the public finds it difficult to identify with the group that the mission is supposed to protect.

Still, national leaders cannot hope to frame any given use of armed force as an indispensable defence against core national values. Although foreign policy elites will sometimes succeed in portraying a military mission as slightly more self-serving than most independent observers and military analysts would agree to, there have to be some degree of correspondence between real-world events and strategic narrative. As noted by Lawrence Freedmann: ‘An effective narrative will work not only because it appeals to the values, interests and prejudices of the intended audience but also because it is not going to be exposed by later information and events’ (2006:23). Yet again, different national audiences with different values and different historical experiences (with the use of military power) might react differently to the same type of strategic narrative. What counts as a compelling and legitimate mission purpose is thus a product of distinct national values and national role perceptions.

Secondly, a strong and effective strategic narrative holds the promise of wartime success. Because popular support is highly dependent on the probability of accomplishing the mission, the overarching story told by incumbent policy-makers must, to some extent, be a narrative of progress. In the words of Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler: ‘If the public believes the mission will succeed, then the public is willing to continue supporting the mission, even as costs mount. When the public thinks victory is not likely, even small costs will be highly corrosive’ (2009:13) (emphasis added). Seen through the theoretical lenses of this paper, the important thing to note is that national leaders can design and cultivate strategic narratives
that affect the public’s perceptions of the likelihood of victory; national leaders can influence what the public believes and thinks. While the public often has plenty of access to information about how the mission is proceeding, the strategic narrative provides a framework that ties events together in a meaningful way. If policy-makers succeed in designing and disseminating a story-line entailing a credible prospect of success, the public is more likely to stomach wartime casualties than in the absence of a narrative of progress.

- Thirdly, to be effective a strategic narrative must be consistent. When waging war in the cognitive domain national leaders – and their overall framing of the military mission engaged in (i.e. developments in the physical domain) – will lose credibility if they alter the main ingredients of the narrative too often or if they fail to keep a few big ideas to the fore. Wavering between different types of justifications for the use of military force or moving back and forth between different mission objectives or military strategies is likely to undermine the public’s understanding of the war efforts. Inconsistency thus breeds doubts about who is winning and who is loosing as well as uncertainty about the mission’s key purpose. In a context like that, the public will have less stomach for casualties as the mission’s raison d’être is unclear to them (Betz, 2008:519-522).

- Fourth and finally, strong strategic narratives are characterised by having few and/or weak competitors. This element is, of course, closely linked to the general and parliamentarian support a given mission enjoys – if all major political parties and most non-parliamentarian foreign policy elites (intellectuals, editors, opinion makers, military analysts, etc.) accept and perhaps even bolster the strategic narrative proposed by government officials, the narrative will stand almost unchallenged and will thus be more likely to convince the public of the need to carry out the mission in the face of rising casualties (Larson, 2000). Yet, the strength and appeal of a strategic narrative is not only a product of the number of individuals proposing one of more counter-narratives (although that is an important factor). If a given competing narrative is consistent and does better ‘link certain events while disentangling others, distinguish good news from bad tidings, and explain who is winning and who is loosing’ (Freedman, 2006:23), the official strategic narrative will still be severely challenged – even if a parliamentarian majority supports the governments portrayal of the mission.
While these four elements are essential when evaluating the strength of strategic narratives, other factors may also affect the extent to which narratives will structure how the public understands and interpret the use of armed force abroad. It is, for instance, not without relevance who is conveying the narrative; personal charisma can sometimes make up for weak narratives. For all their merits, Winston Churchill was probably a better wartime ‘narrator’ than was John Major. Also, a strong narrative that resonates poorly with national values and norms might not translate into resilience toward the human costs of war. In the following section, we examine the above proposed understanding of casualty tolerance against the four cases of the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Denmark.

Case studies
As demonstrated in the above, war casualties in Afghanistan have had very different effects on public preferences in different countries. While relatively high numbers of British and Danish casualties impacted little on the public’s willingness to contribute to ISAF, somewhat smaller numbers of war losses have been followed by increased opposition to the mission in Canada and the Netherlands. In the following case studies we examine the strength of the strategic narratives employed by national leaders in the four NATO-countries that have all been heavily engaged in the four southern provinces of Afghanistan.

United Kingdom
The United Kingdom (UK) was one of the first countries to deploy troops on the ground in Afghanistan in November 2001, shortly after the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), as well as the first to take command of the ISAF mission. Currently, around 9,500 British troops are stationed in Afghanistan, the number only exceeded by the U.S. The majority of the UK force has been (since 2006), and still is, deployed in the south of the country, where they are in the lead of a Provincial Reconstruction Team in the Helmand province. In addition, the UK also provides service personnel in support of the Headquarters for the ISAF and for OEF in Kabul (MoD, 2011a). With the number of casualties having exceeded 360 the Brits have to some extent grown accustomed to the fact that their countrymen are putting their lives at risk by taking part in the mission in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the support for the mission in the public has not declined. In fact, as
figure 1 suggests, the opposite has been the case despite the fact that the bulk of the casualties have been suffered after 2006.

As will become evident, the official strategic narrative about the mission in the UK has some common features with the Danish case. First of all, the Labour government (until May 2010) has from the very beginning argued in a clear and consistent manner that the purpose of the mission is to protect the security interests of the UK: ‘Britain’s own security is at risk if we again allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven for terrorists. It is therefore vital to the UK that Afghanistan becomes a stable and secure state...’ (MoD, 2011b) So the argument goes on the Ministry of Defence’s website, which furthermore state that British troops are in Afghanistan to prevent the country from being used as a base for terrorists from which to plan attacks on the UK and its allies. The government has on several occasions made it clear that the war is not one of choice, but one of necessity (see for instance Ainsworth, 2009; Milliband, 2009) and, time and again, the main argument for fighting in Afghanistan has been one of defending the UK against international terrorism and Al-Qaeda (see for instance Blair, 2006; Brown, 2008; Ainsworth, 2009). Having been exposed to the major terrorist attacks in London in 2005, one would expect security arguments to be even more compelling to the British public. Thus, the case does suggest that humanitarian arguments have only rarely been used to vindicate having military troops in Afghanistan, and references to the need for reconstruction and development have been embedded in the argument of making sure that the Afghans can take care of their own security so that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda cannot return to the country (see for instance MoD, 2011b; MoD, 2011c; FCO, 2011).

Objections from the opposition parties as well as the media to this stated mission purpose of defending British security interests have also been very limited. To a large extent, leading opposition representatives have supported the government’s principal arguments for being in Afghanistan. ‘We are in Afghanistan today out of necessity, not choice. It was in Afghanistan that the 9/11 attacks were planned and put into motion, and we are in Afghanistan now to ensure that it does not become a launch-pad for terrorist attacks on the rest of the world’, the then spokesman for the Conservative opposition party stated in September 2009 (Fox, 2009). Backing for the purpose has also been given by the Liberal Democrats, who were in opposition until May 2010. For instance, at a visit in the war torn country, party leader Nick Clegg said that Afghanistan would

---

4 The strategic narrative of the present Conservative-Liberal coalition government (May 2010-present) is beyond the scope of this analysis, since the last accessed opinion polls in the British case are from the summer 2010.
revert to a pariah state, offering a safe haven for terrorism that would threaten global security, if the attempt to secure lasting peace and stability failed (Sky News, 2008). Also, the British media have been supportive of the reasoning behind the military operation. Hence, the bulk of the major printed outlets have throughout the mission expressed their agreement with the purpose of keeping Britain safe from terrorists (see for instance The Daily Telegraph, 2007; The Sun, 2006a; REFERENCES).

But despite the apparently clear and consistent official narrative regarding mission purpose, voices within the British parliament and media have been expressing some concerns that ‘the Government is not communicating key messages to the British public about the purpose of its operations in Afghanistan effectively enough’ (HC 408:41). For instance, a poll conducted in November 2009 showed that over forty percentage objected to the assertion that they felt they had a good understanding of the purpose of Britain’s mission (BBC News, 2009a).

Turning to the question of success, the government’s strategic narrative has – not surprisingly – been a story-line of progress and future success. In spite of heavy death tolls and tough combats on the ground in Afghanistan, key government politicians have continuously argued that progress was being made. At a time when 100 British soldiers had lost their life in Afghanistan within one year, then Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth stated that ‘there is a sense of very real progress in this mission and that we are putting things where they need to be’ (Meikle & Norton-Taylor, 2009). However, the story-line has changed during the turn of events. Whereas success was framed as relatively quick and unproblematic when the British forces went to the south in 2006 – for instance, then Secretary of Defence John Reid stated that ‘We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing one shot’ (cited in Pothier, 2008:88) – as conditions on the ground changed to the worse, the narrative changed as well. While still arguing that the military action did have suppressive effects on Al-Qaeda’s ability to operate in the region, reaching success was now termed as achievable, although not in the near future (see for instance CNN World, 2009; BBC News, 2009b).

Contrary to the mission purpose, the government’s narrative of success has been challenged from several sides. As troops were being deployed to the troubled south, critical voices in the opposition and the media were raised concerning, among other things, the equipment of the soldiers. From 2006 and onwards the public were constantly reminded that the government was not providing the
troops with the appropriate equipment and protection, possible leading to a failure of achieving success in Afghanistan and a high casualty rate. Also, the government was blamed for not doing enough to get their European allies in NATO to take on a fair share of the burden. For instance, several Defence Committee reports emphasized that proper equipment and greater contributions from the allies were necessary, was the mission to succeed and the British Armed Forces not to get over-burdened (see for instance HC 558; HC 408). Several newspaper editorials uttered the same concerns (see for instance The Sun, 2006b; The Sunday Telegraph, 2009b; The Times, 2009), and some were even more direct in their utterances, blaming the government for having the blood of British soldiers on their hands, due to their handling of the operation (The Sunday Telegraph, 2009a).

Consequently, a counter-narrative regarding the prospects for success can be said to have occupied some space in the public debate. Instead of holding a clear promise of success, the counter-narrative was a story-line of too few British troops and insufficient and bad equipment, as well as unequal burden sharing. The consequences, so the argument went, were a much greater risk of British casualties as well as a risk of failing to succeed in the mission in general. At some points even the military elite expressed concerns that the successes of the British Armed Forces were not explained well enough to the public (see for instance BBC News, 2009a).

In short, the British government has established a both clear and consistent strategic narrative regarding mission purpose, and the story-line of defending British security against terrorists has hardly met competition, although concerns have been raised that the government did not communicate the message effectively enough. The prospects for success, on the contrary, have been no way near as clear cut and unchallenged. This narrative has been accompanied by growing public support for the mission, and it seems plausible that the relatively low level of support (as compared to the Danish case) can be partly ascribed to the competing narratives on mission succeed.

**Canada**

The first Canadian troops were deployed to Afghanistan in February 2002 where a battle group was sent to Kandahar, but as part of the ISAF mission the troops were from 2003 to 2005 primarily stationed in Kabul. However, as ISAF’s mandate was expanded across Afghanistan, Canada’s

---

5 A naval task force was deployed to the Persian Gulf already in October 2001.
contingent was once again moved to the south. Today, the troops conduct operations in Kandahar City and the surrounding districts of Dand, Daman, and Panjwa’i (GoC, 2011a). The current size of the military contingent is 2,900, but already in September 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the combat troops will be withdrawn by the end of 2011 (BBC News Toronto, 2008). Beginning in 2011, however, a remaining of up to 950 forces will take on a training role for the national Afghan forces (NDCF, 2011). While the casualties have arisen, the number today exceeding 150, up until the decision to withdraw combat troops, the public support for the mission in Afghanistan was steadily declining.

The overall impression of the strategic narrative of successive Canadian governments is that is has been suffering from a mild sort of ‘personality disorder’ (Stein & Lang, cited in Boucher, 2009). According to many commentators, the public’s rising disapproval of the mission in Afghanistan has been ‘greatly influenced by the inability of Canadian officials to present a clear and transparent public message on Afghanistan’ (Boucher, 2009) (emphasis added). Accordingly, the three governments that have been in charge of the Canadian military mission (two Liberal and one Conservative government) have all emphasised different rationales for the country’s military engagement and, at the same time, one government has presented differing mission purposes. Jean-Christophe Boucher, in his analysis of relevant ministers’ public speeches on Canada’s military involvement in Afghanistan, found that whereas the Liberal Chrétien government’s main emphasis was on Canadian national security – defending against terrorism – and living up to international (alliance) responsibilities, the successive Liberal government headed by Paul Martin shifted between national justifications – especially preserving and promoting Canadian values – and international responsibilities (2009:724-730). None of the two Liberal governments presented a strategic narrative with a humanitarian mission purpose. Though building a safe and secure environment for the Afghans was part of the story-line, it was not the central element.

This fundamentally changed when the Conservative government took over in 2006. In fact, with Stephen Harper at the helm the security argument was not used nearly as much as did the previous governments. Instead the Conservatives established a narrative where the mission purpose was stated almost exclusively as one of improving the lives of the Afghans (Boucher, 2009:724-730, see also Fletcher et al., 2009:914-915). This is evident at the government website where Canada’s priorities in Afghanistan are listed. Security is a first priority, but it is related to a secure
environment in Afghanistan, not to Canadian national security. Other priorities listed are for instance providing humanitarian assistance and basic services to the Afghan people as well as building Afghan institutions (GoC, 2011b).

That the present government has put a lot of efforts into communicating the rationale and success of the mission to the public following the decline in support is beyond doubt. As a matter of fact, in late 2006 the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade commissioned a serious of focus groups in order to survey the public’s understanding and beliefs about the mission in Afghanistan, and much advise from the subsequent report was incorporated into the Harper government’s communication strategy (Fletcher et al., 2009:914-915). At the same time, however, the narrative seems to have been drifting away from reality. That is, from the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan. By 2006 the role of the Canadian forces had shifted toward a more active combat role and casualties began to rise much more rapidly than before. But according to commentators ‘The Harper government used a pervasive message-control tool to persuade Canadians their foremost purpose in Afghanistan was building schools and fostering democracy rather than waging a war that was turning bloodier by the day’ (Blanchfield & Bronskill, 2010). This mismatch between the nature of the mission and the government’s messages communicated to the public is just another indication of the weak strategic narrative they were able to produce.

To sum up, the empirical evidence in the Canadian case points to a weak and inconsistent narrative on the military mission in Afghanistan. Different governments communicated different mission purposes, and the present government has almost neglected Canadian security interests in the narrative. When Prime Minister Stephen Harper in September 2008 announced that Canada will no longer have combat troops in Afghanistan after 2011, it was done with specific references to the Canadian’s public lack of will to keep soldiers in the war torn country (BBC News Toronto, 2008). Needless to say, the polls had been highly fluctuating and declining. For instance, an August 2007 poll showed 51 percent support while the level one year later, in July 2008, had fallen to only 36 percent. Janice Stein and Eugene Lang were right in their assessment that ‘[n]o country can afford to go to war with…confusion of purpose’ (Stein & Lang, cited in Boucher, 2009:719).

---

6 Out of the 155 Canadian casualties only eight of them were suffered before 2006 (iCasualties.org).
The Netherlands

On 20 February 2010, the Dutch coalition government headed by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende collapsed when the two largest government parties, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, failed to reach a compromise on a possible third extension of the Dutch military mission in Afghanistan. The cabinet breakdown thus terminated the deployment of Dutch troops to the southern province of Uruzgan that took its beginning in early 2006. After four years, command of Taskforce Uruzgan (TFU) was transferred to the U.S. on 1 August 2010. The first Dutch rotations in Uruzgan were comprised of between 1,200 to 1,400 soldiers, but towards the end of the mission almost 2,000 Dutch military personnel took part in the efforts to stabilise the unruly province, making the Netherlands one of ISAF’s heavy-lifters at the time. At the time of writing, the Netherlands has approximately 200 troops left in Afghanistan. Most of these are part of the Dutch F-16 detachment stationed in Kandahar. In total, the Netherlands has suffered 25 fatal casualties.

Perhaps most detrimental to the Dutch popular support for the operations in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2010 was the government’s inability to define a clear cut and unambiguous mission objective for TFU. Hence, there were always doubts in the Netherlands as to the exact nature of the mission. On the one hand, key members of the coalition government openly acknowledged that the stabilisation of Afghanistan was in some way linked to the promotion of international order and the fight against international terrorism. National security interests were therefore implicitly (and at times explicitly) proclaimed to be at stake (Dimitriu & de Graaf, 2010). On the other hand, the government went to great lengths to frame the mission as first and foremost a stabilisation and reconstruction operation with little risk of getting involved in combat operations. Officially, the Netherlands was not at war. As pointed out by Beatrice de Graaf: ‘It was in the first place a question of promoting good governance, setting up efficient police and armed forces and assisting in the building of a constitutional state, as well as carrying out CIMIC and reconstruction activities’ (2010). These mixed signals immediately generated a heated debate in the Dutch parliament as a number of (mostly) left-wing parties accused the government for initiating a combat operation misleadingly dressed up as a reconstruction mission. According to critics, ‘Dutch soldiers were

---

9 The third and last party in the coalition government was the smaller Christian Union Party.
10 The Netherlands did contribute fighter jets to Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002, but until 2006 and the creation of Taskforce Uruzgan, there were no Dutch ground forces in Afghanistan.
supposed to build schools, promote women’s emancipation and invest in local government – and rather not fight too much’ (ibid).

Initially, the Dutch government reacted to this criticism by pointing out that it was unfeasible to categorise the mission as either a combat or a reconstruction operation. It would – if necessary – obviously have to be both. These early attempts of clarifying the nature of the mission to the opposition parties and the wider public were, however, not successful. And it did not help that the government refrained from labelling the mission what it really was – a counterinsurgency operation – but rather used the vaguely defined and somewhat non-martial concept of 3D – Development, Diplomacy, and Defence. It should therefore come as no surprise that the strategic narrative and communication employed by government officials created public expectations of little or no offensive and kinetic action. As these expectations came increasingly to be seen as incompatible with developments on the ground in Uruzgan, support for the mission quickly evaporated:

Yet it is essential that the mission be politically and unequivocally defined as a counterinsurgency, since other designations merely generate false expectations… Reconstruction suggests, on the contrary, that the foreign soldiers will be met with a warm welcome. Expectations in the Netherlands and the practical realities in Afghanistan therefore widened considerably – a divide further enhanced by the growing number of casualties (de Dimitriu & Graaf, 2010:434).

While the Dutch parliament did mandate an extension of the Afghanistan mission for one more year in October 2009, it did at the same time take note of the increasing public opposition. Although Prime Minister Balkenende and the Christian Democrats would have preferred to meet NATO’s – and Washington’s – requests for yet another extension of the mission, the Labour Party refused. The August 2010 withdrawal was thus made conclusive (NYT, 2010; Buruma, 2010). At that time, the level of support in the Dutch public had declined to only 27 percent (fallen from around 40 percent in the second half of 2006). The souring public opinion environment was, however, partly a result of the Dutch government’s own inability to communicate the essential why, what and how of the mission:

Still the right display of the goal and the nature of the mission and a clear and uniform presentation thereof to the people would have narrowed the gap between public expectations and the military reality. This would have sobered down the political and sometimes heated debate about prolongation of the mission (de Graaf, 2010b).

In sum, the Dutch coalition government failed miserably in communicating a consistent and coherent strategic narrative of the mission in Uruzgan. There was always confusion about the exact nature and objective of the mission; strong counter-narratives were offered by opposition parties; and the quite significant success that the TFU actually achieved (Economist, 2009) did never enter into the narrative. Thus, ineffective strategic communication went hand in hand with declining public support.

**Denmark**

Denmark has deployed soldiers to Afghanistan since January 2002 and is currently contributing approximately 750 troops to ISAF. In the initial phase, the Danish military contingent was composed of a rather limited number of Special Operation Forces assigned to the American-led OEF, but already in early 2002 the Danish Parliament (the Folketing) unanimously decided to supplement this force with a military contingent of about 100 soldiers assigned to ISAF and located in Kabul. Since spring 2006, the Danish contribution has been concentrated in the unruly southern province of Helmand where fighting has been particularly fierce and demanding. In all the years since 2002, Denmark has been among the countries with the smallest amount of so-called national caveats (Ringsmose & Schnaubelt, forthcoming). Despite relatively heavy loses (40 Danish soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan since 2002), national polls suggest that the military mission is supported – as described above – by about half of Danish electorate. This makes the Danish public one of the most sympathetic towards the use of military force in Afghanistan.

When arguing for a continued or augmented presence in Afghanistan, the Danish government (consisting of the two center-right-wing parties, the Conservatives and Venstre since 2001) has repeatedly and consistently depicted the mission as, first and foremost, a military defence of vital national and Western interests. What is at stake is national security. As stated straightforwardly on the homepage of the Danish Ministry of Defence: ‘Denmark is in Afghanistan to secure Denmark’.

---

12 As of August 2007, the Danish contingent in Helmand has been organized as a battle group within the British-led Task Force Helmand.
In the official strategic narrative, the purpose of the mission was thus always portrayed by government officials and ministers as a forward defense against Jihadist terrorism: Denmark must, so a much reiterated government sound bite asserts, confront the terrorists in Helmand in order not to encounter Al-Qaeda in Copenhagen (see for instance Møller & Tørnæs, 2008; Møller, 2003; Gade & Tørnæs, 2006; Møller, 2009). This clearly stated core mission objective has, however, on several occasions been supplemented with a goal of promoting human rights, development, and democratisation in Afghanistan (Møller, 2009; Gade, 2009). Although resonating well with a national self-perception as a pioneer in developmental politics, these more soft or idealistic elements of the Danish strategic narrative, were, never put centre stage in the official justification for the Danish contribution to ISAF. In fact, government officials have often represented the promotion of human rights and democracy as a means to promote peace and stability in the war-torn country and therefore, by extension, a measure to secure Denmark against terrorist attacks.

Also, the official Danish depiction of the mission has to a very large extent been a consistent narrative of success. Time and again, the government, key political figures from the two government parties, as well as military spokespersons have emphasised the progress in (among other things) building schools, setting up the Afghan National Army (ANA), creating security, and promoting basic human rights and democracy (see for instance DMFA, 2011). The official storyline has thus continuously advanced the perception that not only is the war in Afghanistan winnable – it is going well and success is within reach. Interestingly – but perhaps understandable – the Danish armed forces have been conspicuously active in conveying the narrative of achievements and progress in Afghanistan. In late 2009, the Chief of Defense General Knud Bartels, told reporters that unless things change dramatically, success is most likely to be achieved: ‘There are good chances of success, and with that I mean an Afghan able to govern and take care of its own security. Unless things change drastically… our chances are good’ (Pedersen, 2009) (authors’ translation). The military’s optimistic assessments of the effects of the use of armed force in Afghanistan should, perhaps, not come as an immense surprise. Because – as Stephen Walt has recently pointed out – it is in the armed forces’ cultural DNA to portray efforts at the front in a positive light. The lesson learned by armed forces in all Western countries over the last decade is that success ‘in modern war – and especially counterinsurgency – depends on more effective “information management” on the home front’ (Walt, 2011). Accordingly, when promoting its own
strategic narrative of progress the Danish government has found an enthusiastic and reliable ally in the Danish military establishments.

The Danish government’s representation of the mission’s principal objectives and the chances of success have also found much support among the major opposition parties. Except for the two less significant left-wing parties (the Socialist People’s Party and The Red-Green Alliance) – that never played any noteworthy role in Danish security and defence policy – all political parties represented in the Folketing have to a great extent backed the government’s policies with arguments and narrative elements mostly similar to those employed by the government. Although to different degrees, all significant opposition parties have thus reinforced the official story-line by emphasising the need to confront the terrorists in Afghanistan militarily so as to avoid Jihadist attacks in Denmark. For the Danish People’s Party (a right-wing populist party), parochial security concerns have apparently been the sole motive for supporting the mission; likewise, for the Social Democrats, another major opposition party, the primary mission objective have been defence against terrorism – yet leading party members have tended to pay more attention to promoting human rights and development as well as the need for greater civilian assistance as has the two government parties. In the words of the Social Democrats’ foreign policy spokesman, Mogens Lykketoft: ‘We are in Afghanistan to contribute to national, regional, and global security and to avoid that the country will once again become a safe-haven for terrorists… It has been crucial to us that we strengthen our efforts, but gradually change the balance in favour of a more civilian and less military role’ (Lykke, 2008). Since 2008, the Social Democrats have increasingly – but only periodically – come to question the government’s emphasis of progress and success in Afghanistan. The somewhat different perceptions of how the war is developing, have not, however, caused any major political controversies, and the very broad parliamentary support for the military contribution to ISAF has been upheld. Consequently, the official Danish framing of the military involvement in Afghanistan has not been seriously challenged by strong counter-narratives in the Folketing.

Moreover, the government’s strategic narrative has been widely corroborated by the standpoints taken by most foreign policy experts, pundits, editors, and military analysts. With few exceptions, the wider foreign policy elite have therefore accepted the logic and prioritisation entailed in the official story about the deployment of Danish soldiers to Afghanistan. Editorials from the three leading Danish newspapers (Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, and Berlingske Tidende) published between
March 2002 and November 2009 bear witness to this claim: Out of a total of 60 editorials, only five (all brought in Politiken) are critical of the government’s depiction of the efforts in Afghanistan (Børgesen, 2010:36-39).

To sum up, the Danish government’s strategic narrative has been remarkably strong: the mission objective has been consistently and clearly stated in terms of national security interests; ministers and spokespersons from the two governing parties have repeatedly called attention to the alleged progress and successes in Afghanistan; and very few individuals within the foreign policy elite have questioned the official wisdom about the mission. Thus, significant public support for the mission has been accompanied by a highly effective strategic narrative.

Conclusion
Most recent research on the links between public opinion and the use of armed force abroad build on two basic assumptions: First, scholars tend to agree that public attitudes greatly influences foreign policy decisions – in this view, national leaders are merely windsocks reacting to the wishes and whims of the electorate; second, most studies take as their point of departure the belief that the public’s support for military missions is first and foremost the product of war casualties: as the human costs of war mounts, the public is believed to become increasingly frustrated with the mission. There is, however, a wide scholarly consensus that the degree and swiftness with which casualties erode public support is contingent upon several factors. This study challenges the literature’s first assumption by proposing an explanation of strategic narratives rooted in the literature’s second assumption. We applied this explanation to the cases of the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, and Denmark and found empirical evidence largely in support of the view that policy-makers can, in fact, be leaders and not only the unresisting slaves of public opinion. Whether they will be successful or not is, however, partly a product of their ability to communicate strategically. The study thus suggests that strong and consistent strategic narratives make for a less casualty sensitive public. Apparently, narratives can be employed effectively by political elites to give ‘meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives… and the rallying of public opinion’ (Antoniades, O’Loughlin & Miskimmon, 2010:5). Yet, more thorough and in-depth case studies of the formation of public opinion in individual countries are needed to substantiate the theoretical explanation further.
Obviously, the findings of this study should be of interest to Western governments trying to secure the approval of the public for its foreign policies. For better or worse, the public can often be moved to support even costly armed interventions by the use of convincing strategic communication. But the conclusions should also be noted by those who take issue with the projection and use of military power. Public support for a given mission might thus be eroded by compelling counter-narratives designed to expose internal contradictions or weaknesses within the official strategic narrative.
References


Ainsworth, Bob (2009), “We cannot let these 100 deaths deflect us; More lives will be lost in Afghanistan before we are through but it is a war of necessity not choice”, *The Times*, 9 December 2009.


Arquilla, John & David Ronfeldt (eds.) (2001), *Networks and Netwars: the Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, Santa Monica, Ca.: RAND.


Børgesen, Berit (2010), Kampen om befolkningens opbakning, Master-thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark.


Feaver, Peter D. & Christopher Gelpi (2004), Choosing Your Battles: American-Civil Relations and the Use of Force, Princeton UP.


Fox, Liam (2009), If Afghanistan will be lost, it will be lost at home, Address at The Institute for Strategic Studies, “Beyond the Smoke: Making Progress in Afghanistan”, 28 September 2009, http://www.iiss.org/recent-key-addresses/liam-fox-address/ (accessed 1 April, 2011).


Lykketoft, Mogens (2008), “Aftale om Danmarks indsats i Afghanistan”,
http://www.lykketoft.dk/?q=udenrigspolitik/aftale-om-danmarks-fremtidige-indsats-i-afghanistan


Meikle, James & Richard Norton-Taylor (2009), ”Afghanistan mission ’vital’ despite British troop deaths”, guardian.co.uk, 8 December 2009,

Milliband, David (2009), “Three vital steps to rebuild Afghanistan; The country’s new government must ensure that its people benefit from Britain’s sacrifice, says David Milliband”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2009.


MoD (Ministry of Defence), 2011b, “Operations in Afghanistan: Why we are there”, *Defence fact sheet*,


Norris, Pippa, Montague Kern & Marion Just (eds.) (2003), Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public, New York: Routledge.


The Times (2009), “A Statement of Purpose; There is a good case for British presence in Afghanistan. But there are troubling questions about the nature and conduct of the mission that now need clear answers”, The Times, 19 August 2009.


