

Noref Policy Brief

Build-up of Afghan security forces ill advised

Helge Lurås

Executive Summary

A well-functioning government is a prerequisite for any successful counter-insurgency strategy and good governance is unlikely to be established in Afghanistan any time soon. As a consequence, the plans for the build-up of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) must be adjusted. This build-up is not only an exit strategy; it is a cover for a "graceful exit", serving a perceptual function in western publics. But in counter-insurgency theory a disconnect between governance and security is anathema. The end-state projection of 400,000 soldiers and police is unsustainable and ill-adapted to Afghanistan's socio-economic and political foundations. Furthermore, the continued growth of centralized and corrupt security forces could very well lead to increased resistance. The ANSF – like any armed force – is in dire need of a credible and motivating cause, simply to avoid disintegration.

President Barack Obama has taken some useful steps in readjusting threat perceptions emanating from Afghanistan. But this must be followed by a realignment of the current plans for the ANSF. US ambitions for the indigenous security forces must parallel General McChrystal's strategy of focusing coalition troops on a few population centres. The overriding concern of the Afghans continues to be general insecurity, which is caused by a weak and corrupt regime locked in competition with a resurgent Taliban. The focus on building the ANSF must be on quality and sustainability rather than quantity. Spreading out an ill-prepared force of semi-literate and abusive policemen and soldiers would do little to convince Afghans that they are better off without the Taliban.

Helge Lurås

Helge Lurås is an adviser with the Afghanistan and Pakistan Program at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). He served as a political adviser to the High Representative in Bosnia from 2004-2008. In this capacity he focused on intelligence and military reforms. Lurås has worked for the Norwegian Intelligence Service and has served with the Norwegian Armed Forces in Bosnia, Hungary and Guatemala. He holds degrees in Business Administration, Anthropology, Sociology and History of Ideas.

Key strategic requirement

Building up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is being presented as the key strategic requirement for a successful exit of foreign troops. In his speech at West Point on 1 December 2009, President Barack Obama stated that the 30,000 extra US troops would “increase our ability to train competent Afghan security forces and to partner with them so that more Afghans can get into the fight.”¹ General Stanley A. McChrystal’s Strategic Assessment says that to “execute the strategy, we must grow and improve the effectiveness of the ANSF.”² Anthony Cordesman claims that “No meaningful form of success can occur without giving the development of ANSF forces a much higher priority.”³

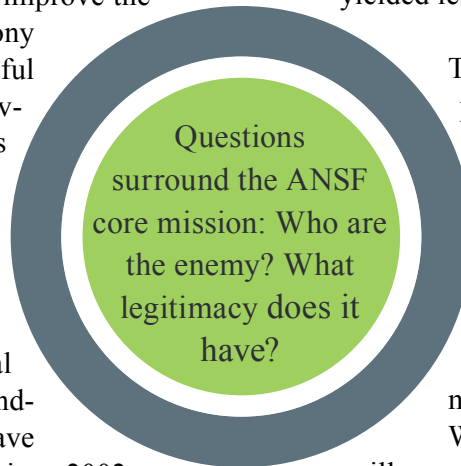
The ANSF has two main components – the Afghan National Army (ANA), currently totalling 92,000, and the Afghan National Police (ANP) numbering 84,000. End-strength projections for the ANSF have been revised upwards several times since 2002. General McChrystal proposes an increase in numbers of both ANA and ANP over the coming months and years, with an estimated total of 240,000 for ANA and 160,000 for ANP.

For a country with the fragile socio-economic base of Afghanistan, 400,000 is no small force. The end-strength force could cost between US \$9 billion and US \$13 billion a year to uphold.⁴ Afghanistan’s 2008 GDP was estimated at less than US \$13 billion, with domestic state revenues in the \$700m range. The ANSF would therefore be completely dependent on foreign funding for years and decades to come.

- 1 Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 1 December 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>, accessed 17 January 2010.
- 2 “Commander’s Initial Assessment,” ISAF, 30 August 2009, http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?hpid=topnews, accessed 17 January 2010.
- 3 Anthony H. Cordesman, “Afghan National Security Forces: Shaping the Path to Victory,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 27 July 2009, http://csis.org/files/publication/090727_ansf_draft.pdf, accessed 17 January 2010.
- 4 Cordesman, “Afghan National Security Forces: Shaping the Path to Victory,” July 2009.

What is the core mission?

This policy brief will examine the political and socio-economic rationale behind the western strategy of building the Afghan security forces. It will start by establishing the overarching state-building logic within which ANSF force generation must be understood. The international community’s efforts at security sector reform since 2001 have been covered extensively by other authors and will not be analyzed here. But it must be recognized that past attempts have constantly yielded less than expected.



The brief will focus instead on current plans for the build-up, with a special emphasis on some of the less recognized assumptions. The most obvious is the ANSF core mission: What role is it supposed to perform in Afghanistan? Who are the enemy? What is the ANSF supposed to defend? On behalf of what polity and with what legitimacy does the ANSF exercise force? What guarantees exist that the ANSF will – on balance – be seen as a force for good rather than oppression in the regions where it operates?

Governance in post-2001 Afghanistan

The US military intervention in Afghanistan was legitimized by the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban was overthrown for its role in harbouring al-Qaeda and to this end the US forces cooperated closely with anti-Taliban militias and especially with the remnants of the Northern Alliance. These, in return, expected political influence. The Bonn conference in December 2001 established a political road map. An interim government was set up under the formal leadership of Hamid Karzai. UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi consciously created what was termed a “light footprint”. There was to be no intrusive international political presence, reflecting an initial lack of appetite to undertake ambitious state-building.

But the light footprint approach soon came under criticism. European governments in particular pushed for a civilian and political process to match the military approach. Good governance was seen as pivotal for long-term stability. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) gradually expanded outside Kabul in order, inter alia, to extend the writ of the Afghan government. Various internationally supported

projects undertook reforms in Afghan ministries both within and outside the security sector. But efforts remained self-contained, poorly coordinated and sometimes substandard.

In parallel with these attempts at institutional reforms, some elements of the US government and other partners collaborated with anti-Taliban power brokers to pursue their original counter-terrorism operations. These partners were often regional strongmen not favourably disposed towards the centralization, democratization and institution-building agenda furthered by other agencies of the same western governments. Consequently, the international community was building up and undermining the writ of the Afghan government at the same time.

Fragmentation and fraud

Most agree that a reasonably well-functioning government is a prerequisite for any successful counter-insurgency strategy. No single institution in a developed state exists or can be built in isolation. Therefore, a stable state is an integral set of institutions, culture and economics. A state-building agenda for Afghanistan might have been overambitious even in the absence of the parallel operations that funded regional strongmen. By 2001, Afghanistan was a country fragmented along a range of fault lines and torn apart by more than two decades of foreign intervention and multiple, fluid civil wars. In the Afghan 2009 elections, fraud was so blatant that little notion of fair play could be rescued. The very institutions of the state were used to prop up the incumbent, Mr. Hamid Karzai.

Merely acknowledging the lack of progress in democratic governance and state-building will hardly bolster what is in effect, if not in words, a counter-insurgency strategy for Afghanistan. It is highly questionable if building the ANSF will help achieve any enduring stability. Other aspects of “good governance” must improve simultaneously but there is currently no convincing dynamic ensuring such an outcome.

Conflict dynamics and the ANSF

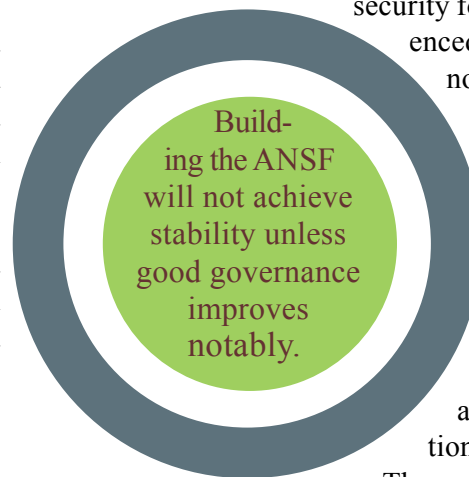
The ANSF force trajectory presented by General McChrystal seems based on an approximation of a force-to-population ratio for a counter-insurgency situation, albeit on the low side. For example, in Iraq there are at least 600,000 security personnel for a population

size equivalent to Afghanistan but with better-educated people, a history of strong institutions and easier, more urbanized terrain.

Afghanistan displays multiple layers of grievances, fault lines and shifting alliances of a material, cultural-ethnic and ideological nature. The conflict dynamic and the existing modes of conflict resolution in Afghanistan are crucial in order to determine the optimal size and structure of the indigenous security forces. Some resistance might in fact be a direct response to increases in centralized power and forces of violence. Conflict is often a consequence of changes in relative power.

In addition, as a result of the international intervention, a dichotomy or internal dividing line has developed in Afghanistan corresponding to the “global war on terror”. This dividing line superimposes itself to some extent on the other conflict lines. The enmity-amity dichotomy in Afghanistan, and therefore the need for

security forces, is clearly influenced by the presence or not of international forces. The enemies of the US become the enemies of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). The Taliban as such are only an enemy by association, at least to the US. The real threat is al-Qaeda.



Weak government and militias

President Obama has now signalled an exit strategy starting in July 2011. How would Afghanistan’s enmity-amity picture thus be altered? The US seems to assume – or perhaps wishes – that the GIROA’s principal enemies remain the same. Obama would like to build the ANSF so that “Afghans can get into the fight.” The ANSF would presumably take over the current fight from US and Nato forces. Evidently, it would cost the US less to have the GIROA take over this fight than continue themselves.

There might be some flaws to these assumptions. Al-Qaeda is unlikely to be the main concern of most Afghans, even when foreign forces leave. Less than a hundred al-Qaeda members, which seems to be the

US estimate of those operating in Afghanistan, would hardly represent a major threat in a war-ravaged country of 30 million people, life expectancy of 43 years, and hundreds of indigenous armed groups.

US ambivalence towards the GIRoA clearly impacts on the role and prospects of success for the ANSF. Discontent with President Karzai could prompt the US to deal directly with provincial and district office holders. That would, at least in the short run, undermine the writ and cohesion of the central government in Kabul, and further weaken the GIRoA in its eventual negotiations with anti-government forces. There are also several ongoing US projects that encourage local, non-ANSF militias to perform certain security tasks locally. These militias operate outside the already fragmented build-up of the Afghan army and police forces.

Who can provide security?

The current situation is quite similar to the late 1980s. The GIRoA could end up much in the same situation as President Najibullah did when the Soviets left in 1989. The separation between friend and foe might become blurred resulting in realigned alliances when foreign forces leave. Because of the weakness of the central structures, Najibullah employed a strategy of incorporating former enemies into the governing structures; or rather, he let them rule their various fiefs with central government blessing. Eventually these mujahedin leaders, militias and war lords turned on each other, and on the remains of the central government. The resulting insecurity later paved the way for the Taliban.

All these potential developments would change the optimal role, size and composition of the ANSF. General McChrystal seems to recognize that such a shift, and a subsequent force reduction, would logically follow, either after a negotiated peace or with victory over the anti-government forces. But US and Nato forces must also be concerned about building up a security force that could in the future be at the service of an Afghan government influenced by and, in fact, composed of the Taliban. The Taliban are not likely to be strong, long-term allies or sympathizers of the West, even if a negotiated peace could be established.

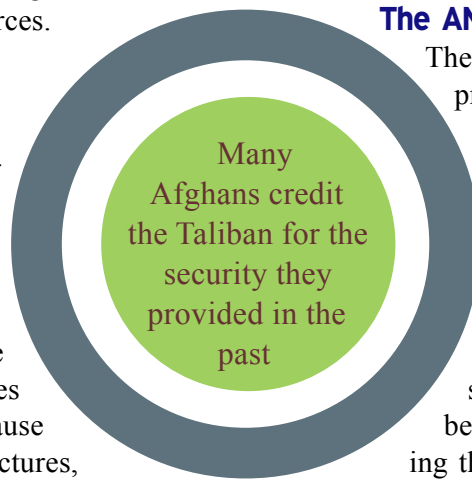
There are contradictions in the whole thrust behind the current build-up of the ANSF. If there is no idea, no ideology, in fact, nothing positive behind the GIRoA, or if it becomes defined simply by what it is not – the Taliban – its basis for survival is questionable. Many Afghans, in fact, still credit the Taliban for having in the past established something they value over all else, namely security. To them, the Taliban are not an unqualified and universal evil, if the alternative is an abusive and corrupt “non-Taliban” government. It seems unwise for the West to introduce weapons and materials into a “fight” in which the future poles, alliances and the eventual winners and their agenda are highly unpredictable.

The ANSF identity vacuum

The ANSF is being built up regardless of progress or lack thereof in other complementary aspects of rule of law and governance. The ANSF build-up is not only an exit strategy; it is a cover for a “graceful exit”, serving a perceptual function in western publics. But in counter-insurgency theory a disconnect between governance and security is anathema. The discrepancy between the limited efforts put into building the “service providing”, administrative and judicial components of the GIRoA, and the intense and resource-rich efforts of building the ANSF will have consequences.

A strong security force in combination with a weak political structure could convert the ANSF into a relatively autonomous political force. However, the ethnic and tribally fragmented nature of Afghanistan makes it highly unlikely that the ANSF would ever attain the ideology, esprit de corps and interconnected set of material self-interests in the officer class sufficient for it to consider a successful coup d'état, as is the case in Pakistan. For a security force to take such a dominant political role it normally needs more than just tactical proficiency, soldiers and equipment.

The ANSF – like any armed force – is in dire need of a credible and motivating cause, not so it can attempt a future coup, but simply to avoid disintegration. Afghan national identity is weak, however, and the only other



significant common identity is Islam. There is neither a credible external threat that Afghans can easily agree on (except perhaps the West). This identity vacuum poses a significant challenge in the ongoing struggle against the Taliban. There are of course attempts at discrediting the Taliban neo-fundamentalist version of Islam but the Taliban seem currently to “own” the (sunnī) Islamic card, especially among Pashtuns. The ANSF will struggle with the perception that they are allied with “infidel” foreign powers. And even if the GIROA were able to wrest the Islamic card from the Taliban, western and also most regional powers would probably find it uncomfortable to have a strong, Islamic-oriented (military) regime in Afghanistan

ANSF current state of play

Opinions differ on the current quality of the ANSF. The police components are generally characterized as substandard. But the ANA also suffers from illiterate recruits, illegal substance abuse and low retention rates. Tajiks are overrepresented in the army.⁵ The ANA is also completely dependent on US and Nato forces for intelligence and logistics operations. Although some ANA battalions are said to be able to plan and conduct operations on their own, it is not altogether clear what that means in practice or how long they can sustain themselves, both logistically and ideologically.

With the current war fatigue among western publics the temptation is apparently to over-report progress regarding the ANSF – the very element that will “save the day” and facilitate exit. An imminent withdrawal by mid-2011 leaves little leeway. In order to achieve McChrystal’s force-generating ambitions there will be a push to churn out new ANSF recruits and units at a precariously high level. Afghan recruits often start out without any schooling whatsoever. And schooling not only involves learning to read and write. There is also the disciplinary element, including the ability to stay focused for a long period, and to subordinate to authority.

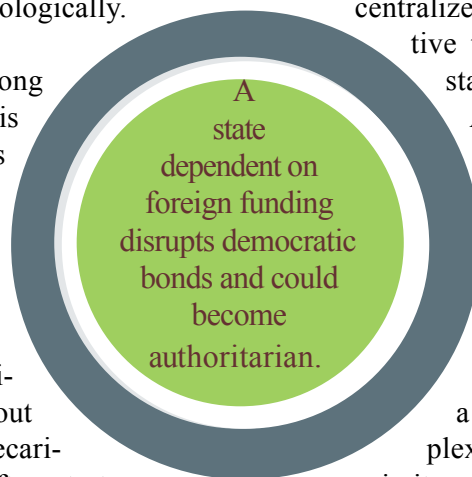
⁵ “The Long March: Building the Afghan National Army,” Rand Corporation, 2009, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG845.pdf, accessed 17 January 2010.

In more developed societies recruits are already primed to the rigors and routines of military life. To establish and sustain large and complex security forces is a formidable task even in societies with a corresponding complexity and development in their socio-economic structure. It must be asked how one can reasonably expect the ANSF to attain sufficient quality and robustness within a few years before they are “expected” to take over responsibility. The impatience of the West does not correspond to the challenges in Afghanistan.

Delicate geopolitical balance

A state dependent on foreign funding rather than domestic taxation potentially disrupts democratic bonds between rulers and ruled, with the consequent danger of creating authoritarian, non-transparent institutions. It also affects the regional power dynamics. Through control of the funding, western powers would gain influence over Afghanistan in a manner some regional actors might find potentially troubling. This could again motivate some of these actors to sabotage the attempts to build the ANSF, and to sustain it after US and Nato forces leave, further undermining what is already a task conducted against most odds.

It should be kept in mind that by creating a strong centralized state, this state would become attractive to control. That could lead to higher stakes and increased fighting between Afghans, rather than stability. It could also increase regional tensions as these powers would fight over influence in Kabul rather than finding a more “harmonious” way of dividing up geographical spheres of interest within Afghanistan. It is not without reason that Afghanistan has served as a “buffer” for the regional security complexes surrounding it. To attempt a change in its geopolitical role might create instability.



Potential failure

Although the internationally supported Afghan state and its various institutions have become a growing source of power, and a fact for all other aspirants to take into account, the long-standing centre-periphery tension in Afghanistan is still a considerable factor, with several regions and power brokers likely to resist

increased control by the state over their domains. A relentless growth of centralized (and corrupt) forces of violence would infringe on local autonomy and could very well lead to increased resistance. Some of this would come from Taliban-inspired, anti-government forces but other forms could be tied to specific ethnic or tribal antagonisms.

It is hard to understand the socio-political and economic realism of the current attempts at establishing 400,000 security forces in Afghanistan to carry on the fight against al-Qaeda – and the “irreconcilable” Taliban – once international forces leave. The necessary civilian political structure is not showing signs of becoming established in a systematic and sustainable fashion. In fact, some of the West’s efforts have only served to undermine the GIRoA.

Under such conditions any assistance towards building the ANSF should be approached with extreme caution. Proceeding without regard for what is a potential – or indeed a likely – failure, i.e. an eventual breakdown in structure and discipline of the ANSF once international forces exit, might come back to haunt the Afghans and its neighbours as well as the West.

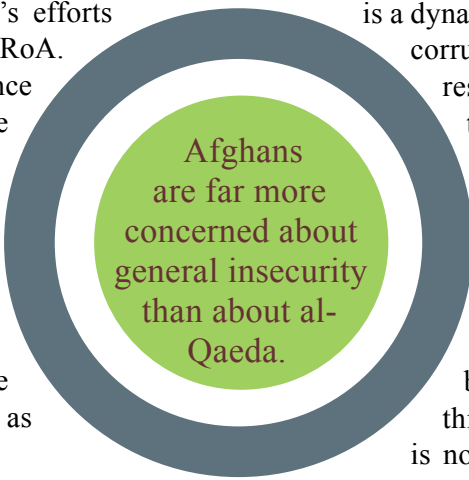
Strategic overhaul

The lack of options in Afghanistan is alarming. The projected Afghan security force fails to take into account either the local enmity-amity conditions or the socio-economic situation and this lack of realism must be acknowledged. Only a complete strategic overhaul, which includes rethinking how the West perceives the threats it faces from Afghanistan, can prepare for the necessary shift in policy.

Fortunately, President Obama has already taken some steps in this direction. The original intervention was driven by the fallout of the 9/11 attacks. It was the perceived threat of terrorism that drove popular and allied support for the war efforts and for the state-building that accompanied it. The Obama administration clearly began to fade out the Bush era’s alarmist rhetoric upon taking office in early 2009, not least by abandoning the use of the phrase “global war on terror”.

By September 2009, Obama had already started to indicate doubts over his previous insistence on the strategic rationale for the Afghan war, what some critics have called “dithering”. The parallel “leaks” of the number of al-Qaeda operatives considered present in Afghanistan (less than one hundred) are probably quite conscious efforts to start to limit the “overblown” threat perceptions. Some would see Obama’s West Point speech as a confirmation that his priorities lie elsewhere.

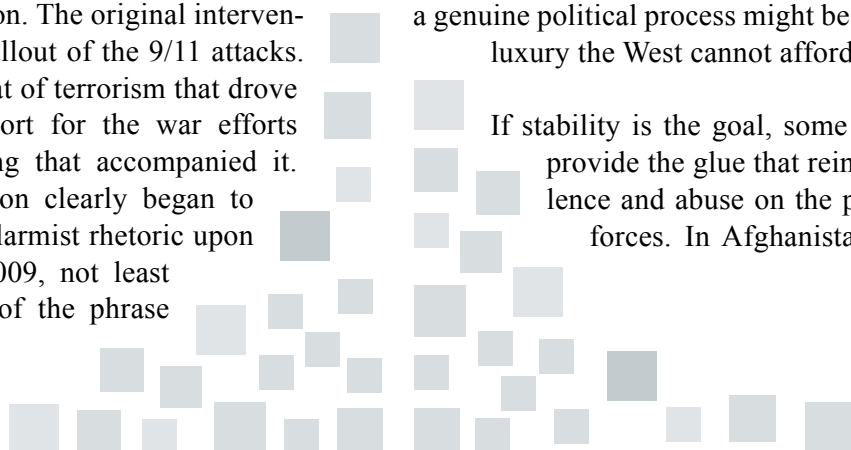
But Obama would be wise to follow through on his analysis concerning the plans for the ANSF. The al-Qaeda threat is not perceived similarly by the Afghans. Their concern continues to be general insecurity, which is a dynamic combination caused by a weak and corrupt regime locked in competition with a resurgent Taliban. And there are indications that at least the so-called Quetta Shura Taliban increasingly operates independently from al-Qaeda. Afghans principally compete (and fight) over local issues that are mostly unrelated to the ideological and global issues which underlie the struggle between the West and al-Qaeda. And in this complex Afghan conflict dynamic, it is not altogether clear who the good guys and the bad guys are. For instance, drug trafficking is not limited to the Taliban but seems widespread also among pro-government factions.



Involving the Taliban

Discussions have focussed on the need to separate the reconcilable (moderate) from the irreconcilable Taliban and draw the former into a process of reintegration with the GIRoA. There is assumed to be an ideological hard-core and high-level Taliban for which reconciliation is unthinkable. That might very well be true. But to disqualify the ideologically motivated Taliban from a genuine political process might be a non-starter and a luxury the West cannot afford.

If stability is the goal, some ideology needs to provide the glue that reins in unbridled violence and abuse on the part of government forces. In Afghanistan it is difficult to



prevent Islam from being precisely this glue. It is therefore questionable whether attracting only the presumed “non-religious opportunists” can provide a sustainable way forward.

So far those that have split from the ranks of the Taliban have not been properly protected by GIRoA nor have they been given jobs or other benefits to an extent that would serve as an inducement to others. To remedy this shortcoming will be an enormous task for an already hard-pressed government. One could argue that a political solution to Afghanistan’s problems needs to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

Recommendations

Elements of the ANSF could, through their corrupt practices, be creating more socio-political and military resistance to the GIRoA than they are able to remedy. Until the quality of the ANSF can be properly established, it might be worth letting rural areas handle their conflict resolutions without much interference by the Afghan state. In many places this will provide the various Taliban groups with an unchallenged foothold, and if they are able to provide security, people might not object too much. Neither, perhaps, should the West. And if the Taliban fail to deliver, it will be easier to gain the support of the people when and if the state security forces are able to take the lead in expanding “good governance” rather than bad.

It is therefore recommended that the ambitions for the ANSF parallel McChrystal’s strategy of focusing US and Nato troops on a few population centres. This means that the projected force for the ANSF should expand only incrementally, if at all, and that the focus needs to be on quality rather than quantity. If good governance could be established in the key population centres, that would be a much better selling point for the GIRoA than spreading out an ill-prepared force of semi-literate and abusive policemen and soldiers that would do little to convince Afghans that they are better off without the Taliban.

It should be noted that even this quality-first and “cautious” approach for the ANSF is just an interim measure until a more realistic long-term strategy for the general western (US) involvement in Afghanistan can be developed and, more importantly, accepted. Despite Obama’s intentions, the US has still not fully disengaged from the “war on terror.”

Further reading

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Author: Helge Lurås

Afghanistan-Pakistan Series Coordinator: Robert Matthews

Editor: Fionnuala Ní Éigeartaigh

Design: Ivar Windheim and pikelus.no

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The Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre

Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging (Noref)

P.O. Box 2947 Tøyen, N-0608 Oslo, Norway

Website: www.peacebuilding.no

E-mail: info@peacebuilding.no