

NOREF Policy Brief

Continuity and flexibility advised: The case for Norway's future engagement with Faryab and Afghanistan

Executive summary

The future of Afghanistan is uncertain and dependent on a dynamic interplay of global, regional and local factors. The evolving political realities in turn must determine the future Norwegian role. For political and strategic reasons the engagement with Afghanistan should continue on a significant level within already established development sectors, provided that such involvement does not undermine other Norwegian foreign policy and security objectives. The key geopolitical importance

of Afghanistan within the Central and South Asia regions means that heavy Norwegian involvement will potentially entangle the country in conflicts and antagonisms with major actors of importance to Norway. But, handled competently, these risks are also policy opportunities. With peace and reconciliation playing a more central role, some space for Norway in this regard could open up, but it still seems likely to be some time off and outside the role Norway currently plays in the "regional approach".

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This policy brief forms part of a series of papers produced by the Norwegian Experts Group on Afghanistan and Pakistan (NEGAP), an initiative undertaken by NOREF. The project analyses the crisis and conflict in these two countries over the past decade, focusing particularly on the Norwegian experience.

Background

The liberally inspired intervention in and “rebuilding” of Afghanistan were initially undertaken in a relatively secure environment. But armed groups unaligned with or only nominally under the command of the central government began gradually to increase their presence. Preoccupied with the increasingly difficult occupation of Iraq, the U.S. and its NATO allies were slow to recognise, analyse and respond to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Elections did not ensure the legitimacy of the new government. In reality, the central government had little in the way of infrastructure, institutions, ready channels of communication, or indeed a sufficiently literate and empowered populace to place it on a stable path to modernisation. But all along, optimism informed Western analyses of the situation.

The Western political imperative of engaging with Afghanistan has receded in tandem with the weakening of al-Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas and the fading memory of 9/11 in the public's minds. Thus, in 2012 it is quite clear that the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops is an irreversible decision, barring some “black swan” event. There is still the residual hope/intention among Washington planners that a force of U.S. military personnel could carry out counter-terrorism operations from Afghan territory post-2014, but there are many obstacles to even this limited military footprint.

Transition to Afghan lead

Lowering expectations for human rights and democracy in Afghanistan and a forceful emphasis on strengthening and increasing the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have been the backbone of the exit strategy in place since roughly 2010. Various initiatives to lure the Taliban into negotiations have also been attempted. Underlying these initiatives is an idea of “Afghanisation”, i.e. the reduction and withdrawal of international military and civilian personnel while continuing to implement the current policy with Afghans.

The ANSF are being built up at breakneck speed: they lack domestic funding capacity and are not

immune from the political fragmentation in the country overall. Several factions compete on both the government and Taliban sides and they are likely to shift alignment at opportune moments. Western political initiatives, outside of counter-terrorism activities, are mostly of a “liberal” kind, such as women's rights, freedom of speech, secular education and democracy. But the country remains culturally and religiously conservative and the process of Afghanisation is likely to give a very different twist to current Western efforts.

Arranging “peace” solely between the Afghan factions of these protracted conflicts is not sufficient to establish stability when the U.S. and NATO draw down their forces and leave. It is an established fact that neighbouring countries for their own reasons “meddle” in Afghan affairs; and, one could say, so do more far-flung countries. The Iranian regime has a general contempt for the Taliban, but it is strategically worried about the presence and influence of the U.S., while the Pakistani army is uncomfortable with a fully independent Afghan polity. Neither trusts the U.S. Other than India and perhaps the Central Asian states, few see complete benefit from a drawn-out Western military presence in Afghanistan. Russia and China have so far tolerated the UN-backed International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), but are not keen on encouraging a long-term U.S. military presence in the heartland of Eurasia, although both may harbour the fear that Islamist radicals might become more powerful and create instability within their own territories when NATO and the U.S. leave.

What is transpiring on the Afghan chessboard is a set of conflict and co-operation patterns that can be broadly positioned on four levels: global, regional, national (Afghan) and subnational (local). Many of the players transect these levels and are involved at various levels. What happens at one level often will influence other planes, and to “fix” any of the variables in a “peace process” is a difficult undertaking. Most likely, therefore, the Afghan situation will continue to be dynamic, shifting and conflict prone, both during and after the transition to an Afghan lead. Levels of violence might fluctuate and even recede, but any stability will likely be tenuous and in need of constant vigilance. Afghan peace is not guaranteed just with formal agreements. This overall political

reality is a key strategic parameter to consider in any kind of Norwegian involvement in the future of Afghanistan. The “game” not only involves players that are marginal to Norwegian interests, but includes Norway’s main ally, the U.S., as well as its neighbour and former cold war “enemy”, the Russian Federation, and the future economic and strategic challenger to the U.S., China. Furthermore, Iran, Pakistan and India are also key international actors and/or trouble spots.

Post-2014 Afghanistan

The Afghan and U.S. governments signed a so-called “Strategic Partnership Agreement” in May 2012. It is short on specifics, but signals both parties’ intention to continue a close relationship until 2024. Further discussions will be held on specifics, including U.S. access to a handful of major military bases in Afghanistan, immunity for U.S. troops, the right to conduct counter-terrorism operations within Afghanistan, and possibly the use of Afghan bases as launching pads for operations into neighbouring countries. There are many players within and outside of Afghanistan that object to such a close, militarily heavy partnership.

The outcome of the negotiations about the specifics of the Strategic Partnership Agreement is a fundamental element that would (and should) influence the future Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan. If the U.S. remains in the country and continues to conduct military operations with a force of up to 20,000 personnel, the guerrilla war by the Taliban is likely to continue in some form and regional players are likely to position themselves much as they do today. The U.S. expects Norway, along with other NATO allies, to contribute funds to bolstering the ANSF. The likely inclusion of NATO in a formal role in Afghanistan post-2014 would facilitate continued Norwegian involvement, but without a UN Security Council mandate underpinning the U.S./NATO presence, which would result in the legitimacy of deep Norwegian involvement being questioned more intensely by the Norwegian left.

However, despite the signed agreements and promises of support, the chances are that the Obama administration will tire of the Afghan

war and pull out completely, as it did in Iraq. In Iraq, the partnership agreement stalled on the question of immunity for U.S. troops. Such a complete withdrawal would have profound effects in Afghanistan, in the region and globally. It would also change the options for the Norwegian government. Many Afghans and, indeed, foreign observers find it hard to believe that the U.S. would abandon Afghanistan completely after so much “investment”, but the option of complete withdrawal might be more tempting to the U.S. than many believe.

Afghanistan seen from a Norwegian strategic perspective

The Norwegian military engagement in Afghanistan since 2001 is primarily one of managing its close strategic relations with the U.S. and Norway’s role within NATO. Even the high level of Norwegian development aid and Norway’s political engagement must be seen in this light. But the well-established idealism of Norwegian foreign policy, including the spreading of democracy and (UN) human rights, has also been easy to fit into Norway’s engagement in Afghanistan since 2001.

Since there are no significant movements within Norway to alter its strategic relations with either the U.S. or NATO, these relations will probably continue to be the main gauge of future Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan. However, Norway’s foreign policy is also heavily influenced by ideals. As the situation after 2014 will still be significantly lacking in terms of human rights, peace and reconciliation, Afghanistan would merit continued financial, diplomatic and political support by Norway in these areas. Furthermore, in order to justify the narrative of the post-2001 engagement, it would make sense to stay involved. Already the Norwegian government has indicated that it will continue its donor funding for Afghanistan until 2017 on roughly the same level as now: NOK 750 million a year.¹

¹ Jonas Gahr Støre, “Inn i Afghanistan – ut av Afghanistan?”, foreword to Gjert Lage Dyndal and Torbjørn L. Knutsen, eds, *Exit Afghanistan*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2012.

Points of engagement for Norway

The level of funding will itself likely become an important political goal, both for internal and external purposes. This would help convince sceptics of the continuity and consistency of the objectives and the underlying purpose of the Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan since 2001, while acknowledging that the means would need to be adjusted in light of previous failures and accomplishments. But as is already true for the previous years, spending the money according to established norms and goals for development aid will also be a major challenge in the future. Corruption is rife and the counter-forces to Western notions of democracy and human rights are powerful both in areas controlled by the Taliban and outside these zones. Lack of security is already an impediment and rapid improvements in this area are not very likely. Quite possibly, even more areas will become effectively out of bounds for Western personnel and Western-oriented NGOs up to and beyond 2014.

Recommendations regarding Norway's priorities are difficult, since the overall situation in Afghanistan post-2014 is an unknown factor. If the Norwegian government still views progress in the fields of human rights and democratisation as essential to peace and stability, a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan should not affect a continuation of financial, moral and political support, although the mode of support might have to change and some temporary halt might be called for. However, co-operation with official institutions in Afghanistan may diminish to the point that (even) more funding for human rights efforts needs to be channelled to the local and/or international NGO sector compared to the 2001-2012 period. If less trust is put in official Afghan institutions because of concerns about corruption, values and human rights, there might also be objections to continuing to support the ANSF directly. Indeed, planning for the future Norwegian engagement is a sensitive undertaking for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), since realistic scenarios might undermine the "talking points" that have been agreed to nationally and internationally.

Attempts should be made to reconcile the understandable official need to portray the intervention since 2001 in the best possible light with realistic planning for bleaker future scenarios in Afghanistan. Some of the sectors that Norway has assisted financially since 2001, in accordance with the predominant development and political paradigms, will still be worth funding after 2014, barring a complete collapse of the constitutional arrangements in Afghanistan, the rapid advance of the Taliban or an all-out civil war – all possible outcomes, but not foregone conclusions. These fields include human rights, education, health, capacity building, research and policy development, supporting civil society, and security sector reform. The support offered must be flexible and adaptive to a changing political, security and financial situation in Afghanistan and the region.

Peace and reconciliation: the Norwegian role

According to the current minister of defence, Espen Barth Eide, Norway has taken sides in an internal conflict in Afghanistan. However, although the country stands firmly on the side of one of the main geopolitical players (the U.S.), it remains true that Norway has few apparent geopolitical interests of its own in Central and South Asia. This means that Norway could play a facilitating role in reconciliation once the bulk of its troops depart, but it is not easy to determine whether any prominent role for Norway is helpful either to the peace and reconciliation process or to its foreign policy goals. Afghanistan would be an intensely difficult, but also interesting place for Norway to offer its experience and somewhat marginal geopolitical role for the benefit of bringing opposing parties to the negotiating table in a constructive manner. If Norway decides to contribute special forces post-2014, its potential role in peace and reconciliation might be affected, probably, but not necessarily, in a negative way.

But the challenges for Afghan peace, with or without Norwegian involvement, are enormous. The country is highly fragmented and neither President Hamid Karzai nor, probably, Mullah Omar commands his factions completely. Then there are the diverse interests among regional

powers, especially, but not exclusively, Pakistan; strong criminal groups with ties to political factions; and the question, raised in several countries, of why a geographically distant power like the U.S. should have any special say over affairs in the region. All or most of these elements would have to fall into an orderly line for any stable peace process to take hold.

So far, Norway has played a particular role in the regional dialogue about Afghanistan. However, it is not publicly known to what extent, if any, Norway or its various diplomats have been a key to any of the direct talks between the Taliban and the U.S., or between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and with the Pakistani security establishment. In order to play a role, the MFA would need to keep significant and qualified personnel engaged with the region well beyond the military withdrawal date. It would also help if other Norwegian government agencies were authorised and given the resources to follow Afghanistan's developments beyond the Norwegian Armed Forces' withdrawal date, and that researchers and NGOs in Norway stayed engaged and maintained their networks of local interlocutors.

Faryab – the Norwegian connection

The Norwegian government has announced that the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Faryab will close down by the end of 2012 and that responsibility for security in the province will be handed over to Afghan authorities. In parallel with the introduction of Norwegian military lead over the PRT in Faryab in late 2005, development and humanitarian aid followed suit as a part of the engagement. To a large degree, facilitating civilian development and governance was the rationale behind the PRT model. Even if some Norwegian entities, especially the Armed Forces, wanted more development aid to be delivered to the province, the allotment has still made Faryab into something of a Norwegian government priority since 2005, with around 20% of the total going to the province. Most decisions on the spending of funds were taken by the embassy in Kabul and the responsible section of the MFA in Oslo rather than by the PRT.

There are different opinions on the impact of and manner in which Norway has spent its funds in Faryab. There has been extensive use of NGOs to implement several individual projects throughout the province, most importantly building primary schools, establishing vocational training centres, setting up cold storage facilities to improve market access for farmers, building safe water wells and laying gravel roads. Feedback from provincial interlocutors on the effectiveness of the aid is mixed. There is recognition that many of the projects are beneficial to local communities, but complaints are made that the Afghan authorities were sidelined. This has meant that the provincial governor's Provincial Development Plan has failed to be properly reflected in the distribution of Norwegian aid and that the provincial authorities failed to get the credit from local communities for the implementation of the projects. Instead, the NGOs were credited with the benefits. According to PRT and MFA personnel interviewed previously, the dilemmas pointed out by provincial authorities have been recognised, but concerns about corruption and lack of implementation capacity have contributed to the significant use by Norway of NGOs.

After the departure of ISAF troops from Faryab, many difficult issues will still remain. The province is periodically affected by drought, poverty is rampant, and schooling and health coverage are still in dire need of improvement. Furthermore, the security situation in the province is not vastly improving and might even be deteriorating. The million-plus people living in Faryab belong to various ethnicities, which is the cause of tensions. But politics is not only ethnic; a conflict dynamic is clearly at play within the central government. Many rural communities have little or nothing to do with either the provincial authorities or the central government, while some local groups claim connections to the Taliban and other insurgent factions. Faryab's borders with Turkmenistan and its intra-Afghan road network make the area ideal for smuggling and other criminal activities, which also affects corruption and governance in general.

If other ISAF-contributing nations continue a special relationship with the provinces where their troops were once located, one could argue that Norway should also do the same. Indeed,

to continue privileging Faryab for funding makes sense from several perspectives. Firstly, Norwegian personnel know the province and many of its inhabitants after many years of engagement. Secondly, local knowledge of Faryab would still matter to Norway's main strategic ally, the U.S., should it remain with troops in Afghanistan under the Strategic Partnership Agreement. Faryab might also benefit from Norwegian "lobbying" of the central authorities in Kabul.

The political and security situation in Afghanistan overall and in Faryab specifically will obviously frame how and where Norway can provide continued development assistance. To continue with extensive use of NGOs can (still) make sense, but local authorities will likely continue to ask for direct funding. A frequently heard complaint is also that the Norwegian projects have been too many and too small. Preferences from the governor's office are for bigger and more visible projects that would "show progress". Especially prominent in the governor's wish list are irrigation projects to serve the agricultural sector, which is by far the most important occupational activity in Faryab.

When it comes to strengthening the ANSF it has already been announced that the operational mentoring and liaison teams that the Norwegian Ministry of Defence has been running in Faryab since 2009 will be withdrawn and that residual mentoring will be done at the 209th Corps level in Mazar-e-Sharif. In terms of security, this might make sense, but there is anecdotal evidence that Norwegian officers with their informal approach and flat hierarchy are quite good, comparatively, at mentoring Afghan forces. The Norwegian police-training mission will also be withdrawn in 2012. To rescind these decisions seems unrealistic, but possibilities for some form of continued Norwegian support to the ANSF in Faryab or elsewhere could be explored. Norway might also be asked by the U.S./NATO to contribute special forces post-2014.

A complex web of antagonisms and alliances criss-cross Faryab. Some of these are purely local, but a majority are reflections of and are tied to cross-border and wider regional issues. Since these conflicts in Faryab are not limited to the province, reconciliation efforts of a "local nature" would be difficult for Norway to pursue, at least

in isolation from nation-wide and even regional processes.

Conclusion

The uncertainties about how Afghanistan will proceed from its current trajectory are significant and dependent on local, national, regional and global developments. The Norwegian role in the future of Afghanistan must be predicated on some or all of these variables. While it is premature to strategise or lay out in detail how the engagement should look, the Norwegian government should seek opportunities for engagement at a significant level in Afghanistan, provided that the engagement is flexible and evaluated in the light of actual developments. Keeping up a spending level of NOK 750 million a year is ambitious, but would earn Norway a prominent role among down-scaling peers. But spending money should be accompanied by diplomatic and political engagement. A singular focus on key Norwegian priorities in the fields of human rights and democracy could pit the policy against wider foreign and security objectives to which Norway has committed itself. The key geopolitical importance of Afghanistan within the Central and South Asia region means that heavy Norwegian involvement will potentially entangle the country in conflicts and antagonisms with major parties. But, handled competently, these factors are also policy opportunities, because they will provide engagement points with significant global actors that are of importance to Norway in economic and strategic terms.

Further reading

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