THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

101

THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Timo Behr & Charly Salonius-Pasternak (eds.)

FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 101 ▪ April 2012

ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI
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THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Timo Behr
Researcher
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Charly Salonius-Pasternak
Researcher
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Antonio Giustozzi
Research Fellow, LSE IDEAS
London School of Economics and Political Science

Julia Jansson
Coordinator
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Stefan Olsson
Swedish Defence Research Agency

FIIA Briefing Paper 101
April 2012

- States which contribute to various international efforts in Afghanistan will find it increasingly difficult to balance a need to show long-term commitment with an unpredictable political and quickly changing operating environment.
- Recent events in Afghanistan are threatening to undermine the plans for an orderly transition of security responsibilities to Afghan authorities by the end of 2014. Countries must be ready to adjust contributions in both size and task during both 2012 and 2013.
- Germany has pledged to only gradually withdraw its forces and maintain its focus on partnering and training, despite an increasingly unstable environment. Current planning also foresees a German commitment in the post-2014 period.
- Finland will increasingly focus on civilian crisis management efforts and development assistance, and will stay engaged and committed as long as its closest partners also do so.
- Sweden is set to continue leading a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), but post-2014 commitments are unclear.
- The United States is set to return to 'pre-surge' force levels (though with a different force structure) of around 68,000 soldiers by autumn 2012. Further withdrawals of up to 30,000 soldiers are being discussed.

The Global Security research programme
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

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Building Afghan security muscle, overseen by the German Police Project Team . Photo: ISAF Media.

The international engagement in Afghanistan effectively moved into a new stage at the end of 2011. The gradual withdrawal of US combat troops and the phased transition of security responsibilities to Afghan authorities by the end of 2014 provide a new context for all countries involved in the international reconstruction of Afghanistan. Not only will all ISAF contributors have to adjust their own efforts during this transition process, but they will also have to carefully consider the extent of their engagement beyond 2014. All of this is being further complicated by the riots that rattled Afghanistan in the spring of 2012 and the murders of ISAF soldiers and advisers as well as Afghan civilians – all serious problems that have raised considerable doubts over the alliance's "partnering" approach. In this situation, an urge to rush for the door by the allies needs to be avoided.

During its May meeting in Chicago, NATO will set out the guidelines for its future cooperation with the government of Afghanistan. The European Union must subsequently decide under what conditions it can continue its police training mission, and other governmental and non-governmental actors must prepare themselves for radically reduced budgets for activities in Afghanistan. Negotiations leading to a tenuous peace may also impact the calculus of these organizations, as well as individual countries.

As contributors to international efforts in northern Afghanistan, Finland, Sweden and Germany must all decide how they will transition from their current force postures to a considerably smaller and more civilian-focused engagement by the end of 2014. In this process all three countries will have to contend with a similar set of challenges that result from an unpredictable and quickly changing operating environment. Moreover, given their joint responsibilities in Regional Command North, the way each country decides to adjust to these challenges is going to have some impact on the outlook of the others. Jointly, their decisions will have a tangible impact on the future stability of northern Afghanistan.

This paper considers the content and development of the engagement of each of these countries in northern Afghanistan and discusses the options and challenges that lie ahead as they approach a critical stage in the precarious Afghan transition.

Afghanistan towards and after 2014

Antonio Giustozzi

Trying to forecast what will happen in Afghanistan towards and after 2014 depends on whether we expect some kind of political settlement to occur soon or not. If we assume that there will not be a political settlement with the armed opposition, the conflict will continue during and after Western disengagement. Although contacts between the Taliban and the government or Washington are likely to

continue despite the recent wave of murders, the prospects for a successful settlement appear modest before 2014, chiefly because the opposition perceives Karzai's regime as weak and unworthy of major political concessions. Until that regime proves its staying power in a context of reduced Western support, it will find it difficult to negotiate a long-lasting deal.

Whether the current regime in Afghanistan can hold out or not in the event of the conflict continuing depends on a number of factors, mostly interrelated. The first is the effectiveness and cohesion of the Afghan army. Despite having been touted for years as the best functioning Afghan institution, the recent discovery of corruption on a large scale has raised serious questions over its viability. It is also increasingly clear that the mechanisms of political protection and patronage within the army are reducing its effectiveness. Furthermore, the army lacks training in small unit operations, needed to tackle the insurgency once it is on its own and unable to rely on NATO close air support.

The army will only succeed in its counterinsurgency tasks if the police force, which is in fact organized along paramilitary lines, is able to assist it and work alongside it. The problems in strengthening the command and control system of the police force, and improving its discipline and reliability are well-known; during 2010 some improvement was noted, but it now seems to have stalled. Corruption within its ranks remains widespread and deeply affects its functionality.

The sub-national administration has been making some progress in terms of appointing more capable governors at the provincial and, to some extent, at the district level; however, due to a staffing shortage, insecurity and widespread corruption, the actual impact of the sub-national administration among the population has improved only modestly. A more capable sub-national administration would help the security forces in driving a wedge between the insurgents and the villagers.

The cohesion of the political coalition in Kabul is also key to the survival of the current regime in Afghanistan. The rival factions within the government rarely confront each other with open violence; infighting, however, does occur, usually in the shape of manipulating the anti-corruption campaign, lobbying for the removal of hostile individuals, some occasional murders, the sponsoring of armed militias, the selective collaboration with elements of the armed opposition, and so on.

One would expect infighting to increase and become more overt as the foreign presence in Afghanistan starts waning. Various factors could lead to rising tension within the coalition, such as the emergence of new and younger leaders like Atta Mohammed in the north, who, as the new leader of Jamiat-i Islami, might try to expand his influence beyond the region surrounding Mazar-i Sharif. The centre would be likely to respond to his expansion by promoting rival leaders, such as Gen. Dostum, Haji Mohaqqeq and others.

The impact of the reduction in foreign funding and expenditure will also affect the chances of survival of the regime, which for the time being does not seem to be making any preparations for this development, despite the fact that its economy is entirely dependent on either foreign hand-outs or foreign expenditure (chiefly by the military contingents and their contractors). The massive recession which is likely to follow this reduction could undermine the residual base of support of the regime. It is also quite possible that, as in previous years, without close external scrutiny the Afghan government might not be able to ensure the timely payment of salaries to government officials and members of the security forces, with potentially devastating consequences for their morale.

The evolution of the factors causing instability will also be important in determining the post-2014 outcome. Ethnic friction is as strong as ever, particularly in northern Afghanistan among the Pashtuns and the various ethnic minorities. Political parties and politicians also increasingly try to mobilize support by exploiting this ethnic friction, as was plainly evident during the 2009 presidential elections. In some areas, the armed opposition also relied on ethnic friction to mobilize support.

Insecurity and the widespread availability of weapons have also caused a proliferation of armed groups, dedicated to banditry, throughout most of the country. A small percentage of these groups collaborates with the insurgency, but it is quite possible that Western disengagement might provide an incentive for more armed groups to drift towards the insurgency.

Ideological conflict also remains alive in Afghanistan, with the Taliban in particular drawing support from the reaction of the more conservative sectors of the population against the 'Westernization' of the country. The Taliban recruit their cadres from the madrasas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the refugee camps of Pakistan, the disenfranchised village youth of Afghanistan and increasingly from other social sectors as well. Over 90% of the insurgents are still Pashtuns, although in recent years the Taliban have been able to recruit significant numbers of Tajiks and Uzbeks.

The fate of post-2014 Afghanistan also depends on the ability of the Taliban to adapt to the new situation. Will the insurgency be delegitimized by the gradual departure of foreign troops? Possibly; the Taliban are likely to try to exploit the opportunity to gain ground and even overthrow the regime as soon as the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan falls to a negligible level. There are already signs that the Taliban are retraining their forces for more conventional operations, such as the taking of towns and cities.

A successful Taliban onslaught in the Pashtun belt in 2014–15 could realistically roll the Afghan state back to Kabul and the regions inhabited by the ethnic minorities. Could the current ruling coalition hold the line running along the Hindukush mountains? Perhaps, but a defeat in the Pashtun belt would have devastating effects on morale and embolden the armed opposition. That is why the final months of the Western troop drawdown, or of the withdrawal if that is the case, and the early months of the post-withdrawal phase are likely to be decisive.

Germany's small war in Afghanistan: Past & future

Timo Behr

A decade of military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan has severely tested the resolve of Germany's public and political elite and has transformed its military forces. Throughout this engagement, Germany had to contend with a number of obstacles. First, German public opinion, traditionally sceptical about foreign military interventions, has been both disinterested and hostile towards the mission of the German Bundeswehr in Afghanistan. Second, Germany's military forces, which have been ill-equipped and politically restrained to conduct the kind of counterinsurgency (COIN) and training operations required in Afghanistan, have been forced to go through a protracted process of adaptation. Finally, Germany's allies, unfazed by the political and institutional constraints of the engagement, have often been sharply critical of Germany's role and have consistently pressured Germany to take on greater responsibilities in Afghanistan.

Despite these various obstacles, Germany's ISAF contribution has persistently grown, from 1,200 soldiers deployed to Kabul in 2001 to 5,350 soldiers serving in ISAF's HQ and across Regional Command North (RC North) in 2011. As the lead nation for RC North, Germany is now ISAF's third largest troop contributor, the fourth largest provider of development assistance to the Afghan authorities, and a key player in the training of the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Army (ANA). Germany's military deployment has also become increasingly more robust and aggressive, as German soldiers have been forced to contend with a strengthening insurgency. This rapid adaptation has not been without costs, as shown by the fatal tanker bombing incident of 2009.[1]

Germany's ISAF mission in Afghanistan can be roughly divided into three phases. During the first phase, from the original deployment of German forces to Kabul until mid-2007, Germany's deployment was organized as a Balkan-like stabilization mission. Faced with a largely calm post-conflict environment in RC North, German forces focused on limited patrolling and CIMIC tasks that were severely constrained by a number of operational caveats, restrictive rules of engagement (RoE) and a lack of adequate force elements and equipment. This was partly a consequence of Germany's strategy of networked security (*Vernetzte Sicherheit*) which sought to prioritize civilian engagement, while keeping Germany's military presence "as limited as possible."[2] This in turn was based on an effort by Germany's leadership to differentiate the Bundeswehr mission in RC North from the deeply unpopular Operation Enduring Freedom in southern Afghanistan.

1 In an airstrike ordered by a German force commander on 4 September 2009 on two fuel tankers hijacked by the Taliban, up to 100 civilians were killed, triggering a large public debate in Germany.

2 Auswärtiges Amt (2003), Das Afghanistan Konzept der Bundesregierung, 1 September 2003.

However, Germany's nimble force posture and restrictive rules of engagement increasingly clashed with the operational reality in RC North. The German deployment irrevocably moved into a new phase in May 2007 when a suicide attack claimed the lives of three German soldiers. This phase lasted until early 2009 and saw a gradual ratcheting up of Germany's deployment and level of engagement, without any change to the original restrictive mandate and operational rules of the deployment.

As Taliban attacks increased in level and sophistication, the Bundeswehr gradually transferred new force elements and heavy weapons to RC-N in order to increase force protection. At the same time, German field commanders began to plan and participate in ISAF clearing operations, such as Operation Harekate Yolo I and II in autumn 2007, and took charge of RC North's Quick Reaction Force (QRF) in 2008. While these actions resulted in a gradual process of "mission creep", the insistence of the political leadership that Germany was engaged in a peacekeeping mission barred any adjustments to the rules of engagement.

This inconsistency lasted until early 2009, when Germany's deployment began to morph into a more conventional counterinsurgency and training mission. This change was made possible by a successive broadening of the mission mandate in late 2008 and early 2010 and a revision of the rules of engagement in April 2009.[3]

These steps allowed for an increasingly more proactive and offensive deployment that saw German forces engage in "clear-hold-build" operations and establish a number of forward operations bases. This new approach, facilitated by bottom-up pressure and a change at the ministry of defence, also led to a marked adjustment in the political rhetoric about the mission, as politicians began to refer to Afghanistan as a "war-like" situation. The fatal airstrikes of 2009 played a sad, but important part in this process by forcing politicians to acknowledge the changing operational reality and to justify the continued German engagement.

This resulted in the adoption of a new strategy for a responsible transition (*Übergabe in Verantwortung*).[4] The core elements of this strategy were a surge in development spending, leading to a doubling of German ODA to 430 million euros per annum, as well as the adoption of a new "partnering" approach that focused on the provision of two 700-men strong training battalions and additional operational mentor and liaison teams (OMLTs). The adoption of this new strategy marked a transition from a passive and reluctant approach, driven by Germany's obligations towards the US and NATO, to a more proactive and targeted approach, based on greater political ownership. However, given Afghanistan's continuing fragility and lack of political progress, the main goal of this approach is to prepare the ground for an orderly withdrawal of combat forces by the end of 2014.

Following US plans for a phased withdrawal and a slight reduction in violent attacks across RC North in 2011, the German government has announced its plans to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan to 4,900 in early 2012. Given that the bulk of this reduction will be achieved by scrapping a 350 strong rapid reserve and the transition of Germany's PRT Faizabad to civilian leadership, this withdrawal is unlikely to have a considerable effect on the operational capacity of German forces. A further reduction to 4,400 troops is being planned by January 2013. While German planning envisages a full withdrawal of combat troops by the end of 2014, Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière declared that Bundeswehr soldiers are likely to play an operational role in Afghanistan thereafter.

Despite the slight decrease in troop numbers throughout 2012, German forces have actually widened their area of operations by taking on new responsibilities in the Ghormach district and maintaining an operations base in Baghlan. The outbreak of wide-spread riots in spring 2012, however, forced Germany to close a smaller military base in Taloqan, which had come under attack during demonstrations the previous year. Scepticism over NATO's partnering approach has also been rife after an Afghan recruit killed three German soldiers in early 2011. Nevertheless, for the time being partnering and

3 Timo Behr (2011), "Germany and Regional Command-North: ISAF's weakest link?," in Nik Hynek and Péter Marton, eds., *Statebuilding in Afghanistan*, Routledge: London, p. 53.

4 Deutsche Bundesregierung (2010), Auf den Weg zur Übergabe in Verantwortung: Das deutsche Afghanistan-Engagement nach der Londoner Konferenz, available at: www.bundesregierung.de.

Swedish King Carl XVI Gustaf visited Swedish troops serving in Afghanistan in April 2011. Photo: ISAF Media.

training will remain core elements of the German mission throughout the coming transition phase.

Looking towards the future, the German deployment will have to contend with a number of "known unknowns". These include the impact of the US withdrawal on ISAF and Bundeswehr capabilities in RC North and the effect that large US spending cuts will have on the capability of ANA and ANP forces. These measures are likely to limit the effectiveness of German forces, as key capability enablers will no longer be available. Moreover, while there is currently a broad cross-party consensus in favour of the measured gradual troop withdrawal, the debate is likely to become more heated and politicized as Germany approaches a federal election in October 2013. In this situation, the deployment decisions of other troop contributing nations in RC North will matter, even if their operational impact on German forces is relatively low. Finally, a number of "unknown unknowns", including a renewed uptake in violence, or an incident involving mass civilian casualties could have a serious impact on the future of the German mission.

Based on these risk factors, there appear to be two potential transition scenarios for the German Bundeswehr. An "orderly transition scenario" would require a measured withdrawal by the end of 2014 and might involve a more active operational role for German forces in the interim, as key enablers are being withdrawn, as well as greater long-term planning for Germany's role in Afghanistan beyond 2014. On the other hand, a dramatic increase in hostilities might generate a "disorderly transition scenario" with German forces either adopting a hedgehog-like force posture resembling the early stages of the German deployment or triggering a precipitous withdrawal. The risk of this scenario is likely to increase as Germany gears up for next year's general elections and politicians seek to control "bad news" from the front. The likelihood of either scenario is going to depend as much on events in Afghanistan as on the daily news cycle in Berlin.

One day Sweden woke up and realized it was at war

Stefan Olsson with Julia Jansson

In 2002, 45 Swedish peacekeepers were sent to Afghanistan as a sign of goodwill and to support international efforts there. By 2011 Sweden was seeking an exit strategy for its 500 soldiers from a peacekeeping operation that had turned into an open war. What happened during these 10 years?

Sweden's self-perception has historically been that of a nation that never goes to war. The country prides itself on the fact that the last time it was party to an armed conflict was in 1814 against Norway. Active Swedish participation in international peacekeeping efforts has, however, received widespread approval

among the public. Since the end of the Second World War, Sweden has taken part in twelve UN-led peacekeeping operations in addition to several other missions such as the NATO and EU-led operations in Kosovo. As the support for these missions has been strong, the initial proposal to join the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation was passed without major debate. Thus, as it became evident that the peacekeeping mission had turned into a peace enforcement mission, the self-perception of a peace-seeking nation suffered and the debate began.

How Sweden sees itself and its role in Afghanistan will affect its future decisions regarding the operation there. If in 2001 Sweden had known how the situation in Afghanistan would develop during the coming 10 years, it most likely would have never participated in the operation. Sending soldiers to an operation involving open fighting does not match Sweden's self-perception. The war in Afghanistan has not been a success by any standards. Following the progress made at the beginning of the operation, the security situation in the country has been deteriorating. Sweden thought it was there to participate in making a peace agreement hold, not to enforce peace in a country where there is no agreement.

The change in the nature of the operation has happened gradually. Initially, ISAF had a mandate for guaranteeing safety around Kabul, but this mandate has expanded over the years. The transformation of the character of the operation has been relatively slow, and it went unnoticed in Sweden for years. After the operation had been underway for a few years, the first reports of Swedish soldiers participating in actual fighting appeared. These attracted some attention, but as the situation settled down, they were conveniently forgotten. In 2008 the situation on the ground in Afghanistan took a major turn, as support for the insurgents was growing by the day.

The coalition setbacks and the new rise of the Taliban insurgency once again brought Afghanistan to the attention of the Swedish political establishment, but it took almost two years before the current public debate began. This happened due to the parliamentary elections in 2010. Opposition parties raised the question of the future of the Swedish participation in Afghanistan as a part of their campaign strategy. As the discussion evolved, the armed forces were blamed for not providing information on the operation. However, it soon became obvious that no information had been shared because there had been no demand for it. Neither the media nor the Parliament had raised the issue in the general discussion.

The change in the balance of power after the elections provoked a shift in the Swedish government's Afghanistan strategy and it became a topic of public discussion. In addition, the press visited the war areas themselves, and thus brought the reality of war to the attention of the wider public.

The Swedish mission in Afghanistan has been characterized by a low level of awareness among the public and the media, a low level of military strategy, and scant knowledge about the concept of counterinsurgency and thus inadequate training for these kinds of operations. The relatively little attention paid to the operation has resulted in major decisions being made without extensive public debate.

The future of the Swedish participation in the coalition forces largely depends on the nation's self-perception. Is Sweden a nation that should be fighting a war in Afghanistan? In 2008 Minister for Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt still underlined a long-term commitment to commanding the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazar-e-Sharif and training and supporting the Afghan army until it is capable of dealing with the threat of hostile groups.

It now appears that the public's patience and the parliamentary support for the operation are eroding.

The visible consequence of Sweden's change of direction was the recent decision the country made regarding the withdrawal of 100 of its 500 soldiers in 2012 and the withdrawal of all troops by 2014, when the responsibility for Afghanistan's security will be completely transferred to Afghan hands. What will happen in the country after 2014 has not been discussed. Will the Afghan national security forces be strong enough to work on their own? What will the future hold for the government of President Hamid Karzai? The security situation in the South of Afghanistan might have spillover effects on the North where the Nordic troops are located. Such issues have yet to be discussed in Sweden.

Finnish forces on patrol. Photo: The Finnish Defence Forces.

Finland in Afghanistan – as committed as its partners are
Charly Salonius-Pasternak

Finland has committed to remaining in Afghanistan beyond the end of 2014. Aside from some military trainers, Finland's contribution is likely to be focused on civilian experts and development assistance efforts. During 2012 Finland will withdraw some fifty soldiers sent to Afghanistan in 2010, leaving around 140 soldiers under ISAF command. In addition to this, over 30 police and civilian experts will continue to participate in the EUPOL-operation, and development assistance is slated to increase significantly between 2012 and 2014. Finland must now make decisions on how it will contribute to international efforts in Afghanistan during the next three years, while considering how it might contribute during the second half of the decade.

Finland's participation to date can be considered to include four phases. From 2002 to 2004 Finland's contribution consisted primarily of 50 soldiers focusing on civil military cooperation (CIMIC) tasks in Kabul. Development assistance increased from sub-one million euros in 2001 to 6.5 million euros in 2002. Overall, the operation was viewed as one of many peacekeeping operations in which Finland participated. As such, participation followed a decade-long tradition of peacekeeping-type operations not being politicized domestically.

In 2004 participation increased to nearly 80 soldiers, and expanded to include 19 soldiers and 3 civilians in northern Afghanistan. The expansion of ISAF's areas of responsibility overlaps with the second phase of Finland's participation, from 2004 through 2007. During this period Finland began to shift its efforts to northern Afghanistan and further increased the number of soldiers to 80. A part of Norwegian (initially) and Swedish-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), the Finnish soldiers focused on patrolling in small six-person Mobile Observation Teams (MOTs). Development assistance also increased to over eight million euros per annum.

The third phase of Finland's participation, from 2007 to 2009, saw the dawning of a more comprehensive and focused approach, a focus on northern Afghanistan and, in 2007, an end to activities in Kabul. Finland increased the number of soldiers to more than 140, ultimately fielding more than 200 as part of a temporary strengthening of forces for the 2009 elections. Finland also began participation in Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) and the EUPOL training mission. Development assistance was again increased, now to over 10 million euros annually. In Finland, the public and broader political establishment showed an increased interest in the operation, as its nature became more apparent through increased publicity in domestic media. The Left Alliance began to publicly demand an end to Finnish participation in ISAF, and by the autumn

of 2009 Finland's participation in a *de facto* war became a matter of public debate. In parallel, there were demands for increased participation in United Nations-led operations, which were perceived as both safer and morally more acceptable than the NATO-led ISAF operation.

The fourth phase of Finland's participation occurred from 2010 through early 2012, and would see the merger of Finland's comprehensive approach with the ISAF Counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. During this period the politicization of Finland's participation in ISAF increasingly affected the shape of Finland's contribution. The Finnish government wanted to increase its military contribution, partially because the military argued that to support the increased focus on partnering with and mentoring of local security forces, it was necessary to shift away from the MOTs to a more traditional military structure of squads and platoons. Finland's President Tarja Halonen opposed such increases, predominantly due to ideological reasons. Ultimately, the military contribution was increased to a maximum of 195, forcing the military planners to "plan backwards" from a number, and focused on areas west of Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan. Participation in EUPOL was tripled to 35, and development assistance increased to over 11 million euros annually. During this time, public support for participating in ISAF has decreased from 46% in 2010 to 30% in early 2012. In contrast, 70% of the population support continued participation in civilian crisis management efforts such as EUPOL, and 84% support continuing development assistance efforts.

Having decided to decrease the number of soldiers to approximately 140 during 2012, Finland must still decide what it will do in 2013 and 2014. Politically, the easiest choice is simply to continue down the current path of withdrawing troops so that by the end of 2014 only a few staff and trainers will remain. However, other options are available.

Bowing to broader economic concerns, Finland could reduce its overall contribution in Afghanistan. This approach would see Finland rapidly decreasing the number of soldiers participating in ISAF, perhaps leaving a dozen soldiers in various staffs or contributing to a NATO Rule of Law Support Mission. Contributions to civilian crisis management, mainly through EUPOL, would remain at current levels, as would contributions to development assistance. This option is not preferred by a significant majority of Finnish politicians. Consequently, it would likely only be chosen if economic circumstances worsen, or if there is significant domestic pressure to withdraw soldiers, due to unexpectedly heavy casualties or other similar events. This decision would have a negative impact on the now civilian-led Swedish PRT, and while it would have a negligible operational impact, it would be a dramatic political signal.

Finland could maintain a similar level of overall contribution to Afghanistan, around 60 million euros per year, but refocus its efforts. For the military component, Finland could offer enablers focused on communications, logistics or indirect fire support (artillery), or take significantly more responsibility for high-level training in areas such as communications or engineering. Contributions on the civilian side (EUPOL) and development assistance would remain at current levels, with development assistance possibly increasing if the number of soldiers decreases.

Finland could also choose to increase its contribution across the board. This would involve adding an indirect fire (mortar) element to a strengthened version of the current company-sized unit. The 250 soldiers would then continue partnering with Afghan security forces in northern Afghanistan. Alternatively, Finland could take lead responsibility for high-level artillery training in Afghanistan. Finland would also mildly increase its contribution to EUPOL and double development assistance efforts. However, such an increase in efforts must be considered very unlikely in the current economic and political climate.

Ultimately, Finland is likely to maintain approximately the same level of overall contribution, around 60 million euros annually, through 2014. By 2014 development assistance is likely to take one third of this (20 million euros), with a small military component costing between five and ten million euros, and civilian crisis management efforts, support to humanitarian efforts (such as demining) and other financial contributions making up the rest. This approach should be supported by the government, the new President Sauli Niinistö and the population at large. It would also be in line with initial plans by Sweden and Germany. If Swedish and German plans change, increasing the pace of military withdrawal, Finland must consider what the minimum rational threshold is to continue a military contribution. When the contribution falls to below 60-80, it may

make sense to completely withdraw, except for some staff and training positions. This could be interpreted as a negative political signal, thus emphasizing the need for Finnish politicians to balance between military logic and political signalling.

In together, out together?

The countries contributing to Regional Command North will be facing a tough time, with both political and operational uncertainty steadily increasing. Withdrawal of forces, particularly by the United States, will result in 'security gaps'. The Afghan security forces will be unable to fill those gaps, at least in ways which RC North contributors would generally find satisfying. These countries will therefore face a tough choice between filling those gaps, or hunkering down – waiting for the ISAF operation to end. Filling the gaps would entail an increase in resources or at the least a refocusing of them by most RC North contributing states. In the current domestic and international political and economic environment this seems highly unlikely. Hunkering down seems more likely. The result of this choice could see the security situation regressing to the one that existed in 2009 and 2010, prior to the significantly increased resources which the United States brought to bear.

The potential for achieving any of the already significantly reduced goals for the intervention would decrease in the short to mid-term, but Afghans would finally have a bigger role to play in the development of their own country and regions within it. Most worrying, however, would be a situation under which a further destabilization of the security environment would trigger an uncontrolled rush for the exit amongst the allies. This could generate a dangerous domino effect that might undermine the efforts of Afghan authorities and doom the prospects of long-term stabilization.

To avoid such a dynamic, RC North contributors will need to closely align their plans for the transition period and hold steadfast to their commitment for a coordinated transition into Afghan responsibility. The NATO meeting in Chicago will provide strong evidence of whether this transition occurs earlier than initially planned, requiring Germany, Sweden and Finland to dramatically change plans regarding their participation.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
tel. +358 9 432 7000
fax. +358 9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi

ISBN 978-951-769-338-7
ISSN 1795-8059
Cover photo: Charly Salonius-Pasternak
Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen