

NOREF Policy Brief

Towards 2014 and beyond: NATO, Afghanistan and the “Heart of Asia”

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Executive summary

Two different and basically conflicting visions of Afghanistan’s post-transition future were discernible by mid-2012.

In one, Afghanistan’s security is anchored in an “enduring partnership” with NATO. The U.S. and its main allies maintain a much-reduced but not insignificant military presence in the country, and Western nations continue to provide development aid and technical assistance. This is designed to foster stability and prevent a repeat of the violence that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. It also gives the alliance a strategic foothold in Central Asia and expands the range of NATO’s “global partners”.

In the other vision, Afghanistan’s security and development are anchored in a regional web of co-operation among its

“near and extended neighbours”. The initiator of the 2011 Istanbul conference on Afghanistan, the group is assertively Asian. It calls the Istanbul process the “Heart of Asia” process and its members the “Heart of Asia” countries. This vision has no room for a forward NATO military position in Afghanistan, although Western contributions of other kinds are invited.

The two visions shape the political landscape that NATO allies, including Norway, must navigate as they formulate policy towards Afghanistan during the transition and afterwards. For Norway – a committed NATO ally and active supporter of Afghanistan’s development – the incompatibilities between the two visions raise potentially difficult dilemmas and trade-offs.

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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.

Two different and basically conflicting visions of Afghanistan’s future were discernible by mid-2012 as the Afghan parties, neighbouring states, other foreign countries, and international organisations positioned themselves to shape the transition up to 2014 and its aftermath.

In one vision – let us call it the Chicago vision after the NATO 2012 summit – Afghanistan’s security is anchored in an “enduring partnership” with NATO. The U.S. and its main allies will maintain a much-reduced, but not insignificant military presence in the country, and Western nations will continue to provide considerable development aid and technical assistance. The “enduring partnership” is designed to foster stability and prevent a repeat of the violence that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. It also gives the alliance a strategic foothold in central Asia and expands the range of what in NATO nomenclature are called “global partners”.

In the other vision – let us call it the Istanbul vision after the process on regional security and co-operation launched in Istanbul in 2011 – Afghanistan’s security and development are anchored in a regional web of co-operation among countries that identify themselves as Afghanistan’s “near and extended neighbours”. The group is assertively Asian. The 15 core members refer to the Istanbul meeting as the “Heart of Asia” process and in official communications call themselves the “Heart of Asia” countries. In this vision, there is no room for a forward NATO military position in Afghanistan, although Western contributions of other kinds are invited.

The two visions shape the political landscape that NATO allies, including Norway, must navigate as they formulate policy towards Afghanistan during the transition and afterwards. For Norway – a committed NATO ally and active supporter of Afghanistan’s development – the elements of mutual exclusiveness between the two visions raise potentially difficult dilemmas and trade-offs. To help assess these further, this policy brief examines the two visions in more detail and suggests their implications for NATO and Norway.

The NATO-Afghanistan “enduring partnership”

The main, formal stepping stone towards a NATO presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014 was laid at the 2010 summit meeting of the alliance in Lisbon, where President Hamid Karzai and Secretary-General Anders Fogh-Rasmussen signed a programme of co-operation to establish an “enduring partnership”. The agreement binds both parties to the principle of mutual assistance in the security field after the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission ends. NATO “intends to provide sustained practical support to Afghan security institutions” and the Afghan government promises to “be an enduring partner to NATO and provide NATO with the necessary assistance to carry out its partnership activities”.¹ The strategy was endorsed in general terms at the international conference on Afghanistan in Bonn in December 2011, which emphasised continued Western engagement for a decade after 2014. Meanwhile, the U.S. government – which would provide the main pillar of the partnership – disclosed that a number of military mentors, trainers and Special Forces personnel would remain after 2014, most probably in the order of 6,000-7,000 Special Forces troops. With support units, this would add up to nearly 20,000 military personnel. The contingent would have a counter-terrorist-plus function, operating both in Afghanistan and through drone warfare in Pakistan. U.S. forces would work with select Afghan counterparts, particularly the National Directorate of Security, the Afghanistan National Army and Afghan Special Forces.

The bilateral Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the U.S. and Afghanistan announced on May 2nd 2012 confirmed U.S. intentions to maintain a long-term military presence in the country well beyond 2014 when ISAF’s combat mission ends. While only a framework agreement, it fleshed out the principle of mutual support laid down in the Lisbon agreement. The U.S. would assist Afghan security forces with funds, trainers and mentors,

¹ NATO, “Declaration by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on an Enduring Partnership signed at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, Portugal”, November 20th 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68724.htm.

and would designate Afghanistan as a "major non-NATO ally". Afghanistan in return promised to provide U.S. forces "continued access to and use of Afghan facilities".² The details were to be worked out in a subsequent agreement, but the bottom line on the U.S. side was discussed in the media. The bases could formally fly an Afghan flag and be operated by the Afghans, it seemed, as long as U.S. forces had full use of the principal facilities they had built in the preceding years, particularly at Bagram and in Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-Sharif and Jalalabad.

Financial assistance to Afghan security forces and a revamped NATO mission were other main elements in the "enduring partnership". Both commitments were further specified in the formal declaration following NATO's Chicago summit meeting in May 2012. Earlier plans to increase the Afghan army and police forces to 450,000 had been scaled back to a "sustainable level", eventually down to 228,500, which the declaration precisely estimated would cost \$4.1 billion, and called on NATO members and partners to finance.

By the time of the Chicago summit it had also become clear that a NATO training and assistance mission would be put in place when combat units were withdrawn and the present ISAF mission ended. The size and mandate of the new mission were still to be determined, but NATO sources envisaged contributions from Britain, Australia and Norway, among others. Most of them would probably be special forces.

The "enduring partnership" was useful to the U.S. on several accounts. In political terms, it averted what could be interpreted as a humiliating withdrawal of a large power, dampened speculation that withdrawal would ignite a different kind of civil war in Afghanistan after 2014, and injected some confidence in the future to boost development co-operation and private investment.

There were significant military-strategic gains. The U.S. now had a long-term lease on a territory that facilitated the projection of strategic power in the wider Asian region. This is a valuable asset at a time when U.S. foreign policy is preoccupied with

the challenges and possible threats emanating from China's rising power, and the more imminent dangers perceived in Iran and its alleged nuclear weapons development programme. The overall changing strategic environment had already impelled the U.S. government to seek a closer relationship with India and strengthen its military presence in Australia.

A secure military foothold in Afghanistan had immediate operational value as well. The U.S. drone war against al-Qaeda and other suspected terrorists in Pakistan was in part run out of Afghanistan and was dependent on infrastructural support near the Afghan-Pakistani border. Some analysts argued that the pursuit of al-Qaeda in Pakistan was much more important to the U.S. than defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan, and that confronting international terrorism was the main purpose of the Strategic Partnership Agreement.³ The dynamics of negotiating the agreement certainly support this view. To conclude long and difficult talks, the U.S. made concessions that would constrain U.S. forces in the pursuit of Taliban and other Afghan insurgents inside Afghanistan, but hardly affect operations against targets in Pakistan. U.S. negotiators agreed to transfer responsibility for U.S.-held detainees in Afghanistan to Afghan authorities and to let Afghans formally lead joint night raids. Until then, U.S.-led night raids had been a relatively effective instrument in the "kill-or-capture strategy" that had taken a serious toll on the Taliban and their suspected supporters, but had also alienated a large body of Afghan opinion. Mindful as well of the recent failure to negotiate a long-term presence for a residual force in Iraq, the U.S. government was willing to compromise to secure a presence for the long haul.⁴

To what extent NATO as an organisation, let alone its individual members, had an equal interest in the "enduring partnership" is much less obvious. NATO clearly had an organisational

2 Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2nd 2012, art. 5(d).

3 This was widely reported in the U.S. press, both mainstream and blogs, e.g. see Spencer Ackerman, "One U.S.-Afghan security pact, two very different missions", April 23rd 2012, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/04/afghanistan-pact>.

4 The U.S. government demanded that American forces must be subject to U.S. criminal jurisdiction. The Iraqi parliament rejected this claim, citing past failure of U.S. authorities to prosecute their troops or contractors for alleged crimes, including suspected war crimes. In the end, the U.S. withdrew the residual force rather than submitting to Iraqi jurisdiction.

interest in preventing what might appear as a humiliating withdrawal. Acquiring more “global partners” in Asia was also consistent with a strand of organisational thinking that was expansive and argued that the alliance should have a global reach. NATO already had formal partnership agreements with several countries in Asia, including Mongolia, South Korea, Japan and Pakistan. Some of these agreements carried few commitments and, to critics, little benefit to the alliance. But a partnership with Afghanistan raised different and more controversial issues. It entailed a continued NATO military presence on the ground, which – given the relatively safe assumption that violent conflict in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region would not terminate by 2014 – would position NATO in the middle of two wars (the war against insurgents in Afghanistan and the U.S. drone war in Pakistan). This entailed the kind of commitments and risks from which the alliance had struggled to extricate itself during the past few years, although after 2014 the risks were admittedly on a smaller scale.

The NATO mission, moreover, would of necessity be associated with the activities of the U.S. covered by the bilateral strategic partnership. This meant in the first instance the controversial U.S. drone war in Pakistan. The war had by this time become problematic in several ways. While promoted as a low-cost, effective anti-terrorist weapon, it was also generating concerned discussion among the international public with regard to its ethical justification and legality under international law. In a regional political context, the drone operations clearly violated the “soft law” principle that Afghanistan should not be used for attacks on other countries. This principle had, of course, been the explicit justification for the U.S.-led intervention to remove the Taliban regime in 2001, and the idea that Afghan territory should never again be used to attack other countries had been restated as a mantra at virtually all NATO and other international conferences on Afghanistan in the past decade. Such statements often referred to “terrorist attacks”, but the principle was also affirmed without the qualifying prefix regarding terrorism, most recently in the communiqués from the Istanbul or “Heart of Asia” process. It appears as a foundational principle in several proposals for a negotiated settlement to the Afghan

conflict.⁵ Ironically, the principle is explicitly and unambiguously recognised in the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement. Here, the U.S. “reaffirms” that it “does not seek ... a presence [in Afghanistan] that is a threat to Afghanistan’s neighbors” (art. 6(a)) and “pledges not to use Afghan territory or facilities as a launching point for attacks against other countries” (art. 6(b)). Insofar as Article 6 applies to the use of Afghan facilities “through 2014, and beyond”, the current drone war may actually be in violation of the agreement.

More generally, as we shall see, a continued U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan has no place in the “Heart of Asia” vision for the region’s future. It is strongly opposed by Iran, which tried in vain to stop the bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement from being approved by the Afghan parliament, and by at least some circles in the national security establishment in China, Russia and Pakistan. Insofar as the U.S./NATO presence appears as an element in the strategic competition involving China, India and the U.S., the alliance will be drawn into a probable long-term, conflictual relationship in Asia. This is hardly in the interest of European members of NATO that have more narrow national security concerns, including Norway.

The “Heart of Asia” countries

The full name of the process launched in the Turkish capital in November 2011 is “The Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Co-operation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan”. The subtitle of the first meeting was “Security and Co-operation in the Heart of Asia”, and this became the brand name for the efforts by governments in Central Asia (and a bit beyond) to seize the initiative in a conflict that had destabilised part of the region, brought in foreign troops from 47 countries, given a boost to militant jihadists, stimulated the production and trade of illegal drugs, and hampered the growth of regional trade and economic co-operation. The process seeks to address this dismal situation by providing

⁵ See, for example, James Shinn and James Dobbins, *Afghan Peace Talks: A Primer*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2011, and the 2011 report by Lakhdar Brahimi and Thomas Pickering, *Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace*, <http://tcf.org:8080/Plone/publications/2011/3/afghanistan-negotiating-peace>.

"a new agenda for regional cooperation in the 'Heart of Asia' by placing Afghanistan at its centre and engaging the 'Heart of Asia' countries in ... cooperation for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, as well as a secure and prosperous region as a whole".⁶

The process has three important dimensions. Firstly, the purpose is dual – promoting peace in Afghanistan through a political settlement and, partly as a means to this end, but also valued in its own right, encouraging regional co-operation on a wide range of economic, technical and political issues. Secondly, efforts to institutionalise the process are under way, with the first follow-up ministerial meeting held in Kabul in June 2012, and mechanisms for practical co-operation in various sectors – from disaster management to combating terrorists and the illegal drug trade – are being established. Thirdly, the participants are self-consciously and assertively promoting this as an Asian process. The language from the ministerial meeting in Kabul makes the point already in the title: "The 'Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference". The preamble of the conference declaration continues: "We, the Foreign Ministers of the 'Heart of Asia' countries ...". The denomination "Heart of Asia" is used throughout the ten-page conference declaration, although in quotation marks.

Which countries form the "Heart of Asia"? All the Central Asian states are included (Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); as are India, Pakistan and Iran; further west, Turkey (which took the initiative) and Azerbaijan; Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates from the Arab world; and Russia and China. This powerful combination of Afghanistan's "near and extended neighbours", as the collectivity calls itself, signifies a new departure in international attempts to deal with Afghanistan. During the cold war, the principal combination was 6+2 (Afghanistan's neighbours plus the large powers); during the past decade it was the International Community (as capitalised in official conference communiqués) associated with the Bonn process and U.S./NATO involvement. Now it is the "Heart of Asia" countries' turn.

6 "Conference Declaration", "Heart of Asia" Ministerial Conference, Kabul, June 14th 2012, <http://www.afghanistan-un.org/2012/06/%E2%80%98heart-of-asia%E2%80%99-ministerial-conference-kabul-conference-declaration/>.

While the core coalition has invited other members of the international community to provide support, and several Western countries presently in Afghanistan under the NATO umbrella attended both the Istanbul and Kabul meeting in that capacity, the leadership is indisputably Asian and the language conveys claims to pre-eminence and exclusivity. For example, the conference declaration from the Kabul meeting "welcomes" the work of various Asian regional conferences and organisations, including conferences in support of Afghanistan held in Tokyo and Delhi, but only "recalls" the 2011 Bonn conference sponsored by the "International Community". The progress towards the transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan forces in the transition is "note[d] with satisfaction", but Afghanistan's need for further support to train, equip and sustain its security forces is only "noted", while pledges by NATO and the U.S. to provide such support in an "enduring partnership" are not even "noted", but ignored in a telling silence.

It has long been obvious that regional support – or at least tacit acceptance – is necessary for a political settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan to be achieved. The Istanbul process was launched precisely to generate such support and the formal language, at least, is strongly affirmative: "We emphasise the importance of a political solution as the surest path to lasting peace in Afghanistan, and agree to actively facilitate the current Afghan-led process of reconciliation in Afghanistan." To what extent the process can sufficiently constrain the internal conflicts that tear at the "Heart of Asia" coalition is another matter. The importance of Afghanistan in the difficult India-Pakistan relations has increased as the U.S. is reducing its role and India prepares to take up some of the slack in the economic and military field, including the training of Afghan troops.⁷ Similarly, entire conflict systems involving countries in East and South-west Asia and the Middle East appear to intersect in Afghanistan, to complicate the search for a peaceful settlement still further.⁸

7 In the Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Republic of India, signed October 4th 2011, "India agrees to assist, as mutually determined, in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for Afghan National Security Forces", <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530518343>.

8 See, for example, Kristian Berg Harpviken, *Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective: General Overview and Conceptualisation*, Oslo, PRIO, 2010.

Points of convergence

The competition for influence between the Asian and U.S.-led coalitions in Afghanistan nevertheless contains significant points of consensus. The public policy discourses on the nature and conditions for a peace settlement are strikingly similar. Both coalitions endorse a peace process that is Afghan led and leads to an "inclusive peace". With some variation, both speak of reconciliation with the militants based on the principles of a renunciation of violence, cutting ties with more extreme (or international) "terrorists", and accepting (or respecting) the Afghan Constitution, including its provisions for the human rights of men and women. The language of the Kabul ministerial conference and the Chicago summit are in this respect nearly identical. So is the emphasis on combating the international narcotics trade and "terrorists". To varying degrees, both sides also stress that Afghan territory must not be used for attacks on other countries in the future.

This convergence has produced models of peace settlements designed to attract maximum support from both the "Heart of Asia" and the U.S./NATO-led coalitions. The most elaborate, recent scheme comes from a team in the RAND Corporation led by a former George W. Bush appointee for Afghan affairs, Ambassador James Dobbins.⁹ The centrepiece in their report is a neutral Afghanistan based on declarations of mutual non-interference: Afghanistan agrees not to let its territory be used to destabilise its neighbours, while the neighbours and other powers agree not to interfere in Afghanistan. "The effect of [these] ... pledges would be to declare Afghanistan permanently neutral, and commit all others to respect that neutrality."¹⁰ Subsequent U.S. and NATO military withdrawals would make neutrality complete.

9 Shinn & Dobbins, *Afghan Peace Talks*, 2011. Citations here are from an abridged version presented by Dobbins at the 2012 Aspen European Strategy Forum: James Dobbins, "Launching an Afghan peace process", 2012, <http://www.aspeninstitute.de/en/publication/download/30/Sustainable+Strategies+for+Afghanistan+and+the+Region+after+2014-Conference+Papers.pdf>. A report by the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London came to broadly similar conclusions; see Toby Dodge & Nicholas Redman, eds, *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, Adelphi Series no. 425-6, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011.

10 Dobbins, "Launching an Afghan peace process", 2012, p 46.

The appeal of the neutrality scheme, Dobbins emphasises, is that it gives all the external parties concerned, including the U.S., a reasonable prospect of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. This would make it a lynchpin of regional stability, because all the states concerned have an interest in an Afghanistan that would not be a haven for violent militant groups, whether of national or international orientation. The scheme would go a way towards recognising Pakistan's interests, especially as a cap on India's presence in Afghanistan. Iran, Russia and China would welcome an end to the U.S./NATO military presence. Remaining al-Qaeda elements in the region would be isolated and could be contained or eliminated through ad hoc special operations in co-operation with national authorities or through police and intelligence co-operation. International co-operation to control the trafficking of drugs and people would be easier. Pipelines could be laid and railroads built through Afghanistan to boost trade and economic welfare for the region as a whole.

The difficulty of this scheme is not only how to get there, as Dobbins concludes. The main obstacles are twofold: (i) it does not allow for the more expansive ambitions of global powers to establish a privileged position in Afghanistan in order to project strategic power in Asia or for regional neighbours to protect their core national security interests; and (ii) Afghan parties need to agree to a settlement and not to use external alliances in ways that fuel internal conflict.

NATO and Norway

What are the policy implications of the above analysis for NATO as an organisation and for Norway?

Having invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in response to the shock of 9/11, the alliance became gradually but deeply involved in both combat and stabilisation operations in Afghanistan.¹¹ In the process, NATO has gained considerable operational experience, but also experienced the problems of complex,

11 On the process of involvement, see Astri Suhrke, "Disjointed incrementalism: Nato in Afghanistan", PRIO Policy Brief no. 3, Oslo, PRIO, 2011.

unconventional out-of-area operations and the dangers of tying the status of the alliance to their outcomes. At present, it is difficult to see that NATO's organisational interest as an Atlantic-based defence alliance would be served by prolonging its engagement in Central Asia beyond 2014, although individual members may find that it serves the interests of their bilateral relations with the U.S. to do so if asked.

For NATO members whose interest in Afghanistan is primarily to promote peace and stability in the country and the wider region, the choice in principle is easy: prioritise negotiations towards a peace settlement. Further military pressure on the Afghan militants is no more likely to yield concessions than it did in the past. NATO troop withdrawals, on the other hand, may well take some of the wind out of the sails of the militants and encourage a localisation of the conflict. Evidence of local ceasefires and political deals is already mounting. Washington's apparent redefinition of the conflict that downgrades the Taliban to a subsidiary enemy, as al-Qaeda and its offshoots in other parts of the world seem to gain strength, may further improve the climate for negotiations in Afghanistan.

Here, time is of the essence. Since the key element of Western engagement – the troop presence – is a wasting asset with the clock ticking down towards 2014, reciprocal concessions will become progressively harder to obtain. For the U.S. and its allies this might mean accepting compromises that are controversial at home, such as a Taliban role in the government, curtailment of women's rights and a greater legal status for *sharia*.

The path towards negotiations will require supportive engagement with the "Heart of Asia" process. Points of converging interests can sustain a joint approach, but the underlying changes in the international power structure that underpin the Asian-led coalition's claim to pre-eminence need to be recognised. The failure of the U.S.-led coalition to achieve its principal military and political objectives in Afghanistan has in itself contributed to the emerging, new balance of power in the region.

A NATO policy towards Afghanistan that prioritises negotiations and gives due recognition to the

"Heart of Asia" process will require narratives that differ from those that have sustained NATO's military engagement over the past decade. Most importantly, it means casting aside the "abandonment narrative", which claims that the Western nations must not again abandon Afghanistan as they did after 1989. From this narrative flows the conclusion that Western military engagement has been, and will continue to be, a stabilising force.

In fact, it is hard to show that NATO's military engagement has stabilised either Afghanistan or the region. Arguably, it has had the opposite effect, as the scheduled withdrawal of combat troops implicitly recognises. A future slimmed-down mission with mentors, trainers and special forces is likely to have similar effects, although on a smaller scale. To frame an alternative policy that reflects the past experience of Afghanistan, NATO needs to construct a counter-narrative to show that disengagement from out-of-area unconventional wars is indeed a path to stabilisation and that a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan is urgent.

For Norway, these are also highly relevant policy considerations. Norway joined the military operation in Afghanistan primarily due to its long-standing ties with NATO and bilateral relations with the U.S. Earlier political and aid involvement in Afghanistan helped sustain the engagement. During the past ten years the Norwegian military establishment has gained some expertise in unconventional, out-of-area warfare and in the procedures of tactical co-operation with NATO allies. This experience may be useful in future military interventions called "stabilisation operations". Yet such operations are politically controversial at home and at least potentially at odds with the ambitions of successive Norwegian governments to position Norway as an active peacemaker on the international scene. Encouraging NATO to maintain a presence in Afghanistan and to take on similar out-of-area operations in the future also conflicts with core national defence priorities. For Norway, these relate to the defence of the northern region; therefore Norway's strong support for NATO has always been linked to the original focus of the alliance. Politically controversial out-of-area operations could revive earlier political concerns

about the net value to the country of Norwegian membership.

In this larger perspective, the most important Norwegian contribution to NATO’s future engagement in Afghanistan would be to intensify present efforts towards a negotiated settlement, thus making the most desirable option also more probable.

Further reading

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