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ARTICLE



A Good Ally - Norway and International Statebuilding in Afghanistan, 2001-2014

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the findings of the Commission of Inquiry established by the Norwegian government in 2014 to evaluate *all* aspects of Norway's civilian and military contribution to the international operation in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014. Concerned with the wider implications of the Commission's findings, it focuses on two issues in particular: (1) Norway's relations with the US, a close and long-standing strategic ally whose resources, capabilities and dominance of decision-making dwarfed that of all other coalition partners in Afghanistan; and (2) Norway's record in the province of Faryab, where, from 2005 to 2012, a Norwegian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team was charged with bringing security, good governance and development to the province. How Norway prioritised and managed relations with the US highlights and helps to problematise the challenges – political, practical and moral – facing small and medium-sized powers operating in a coalition alongside the US. Norwegian efforts in Faryab are revealing of the dilemmas and contradictions that plagued and, ultimately, fatally undermined the international intervention as a whole. As such, Norway's experience provides a microcosm through which the inherent limitations of the attempt to transfer the structures of modern statehood and Western democracy to Afghanistan can be better understood.

KEYWORDS Statebuilding in Afghanistan; stability operations; Norwegian security policy; alliance politics

As the activities of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan were drawing to a close in December 2014, NATO's newly appointed Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, chaired a session of the North Atlantic Council, specially convened to mark the end of ISAF's mission. Striking a bullish note, Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway from 2000 to 2001 and, again, from 2005 to 2013, insisted that thirteen years of international intervention had left Afghanistan 'more stable and prosperous than ever'.¹ It was a claim that rested on a self-exculpatory narrative of

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Disclaimer: Although both authors were members of the Norwegian Commission of Inquiry on Afghanistan, the views, arguments and judgements expressed in the present article are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of other Commission members or the Commission as a whole.

¹NATO Secretary General's Opening Remarks', 17 December 2014, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_116104.htm?selectedLocale=en.

developments in Afghanistan transparently at odds with realities on the ground. In the years since the Secretary-General made his dubious claim, NATO's original and desired end-state for the country – 'a self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government able to exercise its authority and to operate throughout Afghanistan'² – has receded still further into the distance. Indeed, since the end of ISAF's mission, a sharp country-wide deterioration in security, a faltering aid-dependent economy, political instability at the centre and no progress in peace talks with the Taliban, have all combined to bring the primary objective of the initial US-led intervention – preventing Afghanistan from again serving as a sanctuary for international terrorists – back to the fore.³

The Godal Commission: background and wider relevance

In spite of, or perhaps because of, this bleak and profoundly discouraging picture, very few of the 51 countries that contributed to the international coalition in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014 have undertaken comprehensive, properly resourced and critical evaluations of their own contributions to the mission.⁴ A notable exception to this pattern is provided by Norway, whose government decided, in late 2014, to establish a Commission of Inquiry to evaluate *all* aspects of Norway's civilian and military contribution to the international operation in Afghanistan.⁵ Led by Bjørn Tore Godal, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence, the commission was given a broad mandate, proper resources and extensive, if not unrestricted, access to classified sources and material.⁶ The final report, released in June 2016, explores the

²'Longer-term strategy for NATO in its ISAF role in Afghanistan', 8 October 2003, S/2003/970, UN Document, p.3.

³Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, 'Afghan Security Crisis Sets State for Terrorists' Resurgence', *New York Times*, 2 December 2016.

⁴Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands have all set up inquiries and/or commissioned studies into aspects of their Afghan involvement. In all these cases, however, the scope of officially sanctioned investigations has been hedged about by restrictions. In none of these cases, for example, has the contribution of Special Forces been critically evaluated.

⁵*En god alliert – Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014 (A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan, 2001–2014)*, NOU, 2016:8, 6 June 2016 (henceforth *Godal Report*). An English language version of the report is scheduled for release in late 2017. All references to the report in this article are from the original Norwegian version, available at <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/09faceca099c4b8bac85ca8495e12d2d/no/pdfs/nou201620160008000dddpdfs.pdf>.

⁶The Commission was *not* granted access to the verbatim records or minutes of Cabinet meetings, nor was it able to examine the records of the Cabinet Subcommittee (Underutvalget), which brought together a smaller number of key ministers and coalition Party leaders to resolve contentious and sensitive issues, including over Afghanistan. The workings of the Cabinet Subcommittee, which operated more informally under the government of Kjell Magne Bondevik (2001–5), became more regularised during Stoltenberg's second period in office (2005–13). Otherwise, the source material available to the Commission was rich and extensive, and included evidence from interviews and closed hearings with more than 330 individuals. See, *Godal Report*, p. 14 and pp. 209–212. For the increasingly important, if informal and unacknowledged, role of the Cabinet Subcommittee, see Kristoffer Kolltveit, 'Concentration of Decision-Making Power: Investigating the Role of the Norwegian Cabinet Subcommittee', *World Political Science Review*, 9/1, (2013), 173–195.

underlying reasons and drivers behind the decisions of successive Norwegian governments in relation to Afghanistan, assesses the results of the mission, and identifies lessons relevant to 'planning, organising and implementing future Norwegian contributions to international operations'.⁷ The present article examines the principal findings, as well as some of the wider implications that flow from the Commission's work.

As the Godal Report itself makes clear, Norway's overall contribution to the international coalition was small and, as such, of marginal relevance to the bigger picture in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014.⁸ Even so, in much the same way that the long-awaited *Report of the Iraq Inquiry* in the UK, released in July 2016, has raised questions relating to strategy, policy and planning for international interventions that transcend the story of the UK's involvement in Iraq, so the Godal Commission's detailed and comprehensive evaluation of Norway's involvement in Afghanistan raises issues that are of broader analytical and policy interest.⁹ In exploring the Commission's findings, we identify and focus on two sets of issues in particular.

The first of these concerns Norway's relations with the US, a long-standing and close strategic ally whose resources, capabilities and dominance of decision-making in Afghanistan dwarfed that of all other coalition partners. How Norway prioritised and managed its relations with the US serves both to highlight and to problematise the challenges – political, practical and moral – facing small and medium-sized powers operating in a coalition alongside one dominant, agenda-setting power committed to the pursuit of a 'global war on terror'. One of the central issues raised by the Godal Report in this respect centres on how much scope for manoeuvre and independent action Norway possessed in dealing with the US over Afghanistan. Similarly, and again of comparative interest, how did Norwegian governments reconcile and seek to balance domestic political pressures with US demands and operational priorities, especially when these were in obvious conflict with one another?

The second set of issues relates to developments in the province of Faryab in northern Afghanistan, where, from 2005 to 2012, Norway was responsible for one of 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT)

⁷'Government appoints commission on Afghanistan', Press Release, 21 November 2014 https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/commission_afghanistan/id2341692/.

⁸Some 9000 Norwegian soldiers served in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014. Norway spent 20 billion Norwegian kroner (NKR) on its involvement, of which 11.5 billion was spent in support of military operations. Although a modest contribution overall, in some areas, notably development aid, Norwegian efforts surpassed those of most comparable smaller and medium-sized coalition members. Norway's 2.3% share of the total ODA provided bilaterally to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014 exceeded that of Netherlands (2.2%), Sweden (1.8%) and Denmark (1.1%), and it compared favourably to larger donors such as Germany (6.9%) and the UK (6.3%). *Godal Report*, p. 78.

⁹*Report of Iraq Inquiry* (henceforth *Chilcot Report*), 6 July 2016, available in full at <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/>.

established, nominally under ISAF, to bring security, good governance and development to Afghanistan's provinces. In this capacity, Norway funded civilians aid programmes, interacted with local power-brokers, engaged with the political economy of the province, and, in theory at any rate, sought to impose its priorities and apply its approach to stabilisation and statebuilding within its area of responsibility. As will be argued more fully, Norway's activities in Faryab province, its effort to bring stability and extend the authority and reach of the central Afghan government to the north, are revealing of many of the dilemmas and contradictions that plagued and, in the end, fatally undermined the international intervention as a whole.¹⁰ As such, Norway's experience provides a microcosm through which the inherent limitations of the grand attempt to transfer the structures of modern statehood and Western democracy to Afghanistan can be better understood.

Approaching these issues, the article proceeds in two parts. Part one identifies and discusses the major findings of the Godal Report, focusing on the core objectives of Norway's mission, their implementation and the extent to which they can be said to have been met. It places Norwegian decisions and actions within the context of the US-led involvement in the country after 2001 and, in particular, the overarching priority given by successive American administrations to fight what they chose to define as a global and open-ended 'war on terror'. It emphasises how decision-making in Norway and policy outcomes in Afghanistan were shaped by conflicting domestic and international political pressures, by enormously complex and demanding Afghan realities on the ground, as well as by a machinery of government that was anything but 'joined-up' and by governments that failed to develop a clear strategy – as distinct from expressing a desirable end-state – for its engagement in Afghanistan.¹¹

The second part explores Norway's relations with the US in greater detail. It highlights the degree to which the perceived importance of being seen as a 'good ally' conditioned reflexes and structured Norwegian choices. It also, however, asks whether Norwegian concerns about the potentially damaging effects on US–Norwegian relations of choices made in relation to Afghanistan were in fact exaggerated, and whether, as a result, Norway's room for diplomatic manoeuvre and more independent action were thus needlessly constrained.

¹⁰For a systematic exploration of these contradictions, see Astri Suhrke, *When More is Less – The International Project in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011).

¹¹The regional context, discussed in the Commission's report, is also critical to an understanding of policy outcomes but is not directly related to the foci of this article.

The Godal Report: principal findings

Three core objectives: overview and score card

Norway's military, civilian and financial contribution to the international operation in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 was designed to advance *three* core objectives. Although these were officially presented as mutually reinforcing, their co-existence was fraught with tensions from the outset – a reality that became ever more apparent as the war intensified and the contradictions inherent in the international statebuilding project in Afghanistan deepened after 2006. Changes in the balance of international and domestic political pressures bearing on cabinet decision-making in Oslo ensured that the relative weight attached to each objective varied over time in the official discourse about Norway's role in Afghanistan. Even so, and as the Godal Commission makes abundantly clear, the objectives themselves and, crucially, the hierarchy of importance among them remained constant.

The first and single most important objective was to demonstrate Norway's reliability as a steadfast and dependable ally of the US, an objective also deemed vital to 'safeguarding' NATO.¹² The title of the Godal report – 'A Good Ally' – points to the centrality and consistency of this objective over time. The Commission noted that the determining influence of this objective on the character of Norway's involvement in Afghanistan was greater than the public discourse about that involvement would appear to suggest.¹³ The perceived need to preserve and strengthen the strategic alliance with the US framed deliberations and influenced all of the government's more specific decisions over Afghanistan. As such, it extended beyond the initial, perfectly understandable, and widely shared display of solidarity with the US following the attacks of 9/11. As a key factor in decision-making regarding military contributions to the international mission in particular, the Norwegian government's desire to demonstrate its political reliability as an ally overshadowed any assessment of the actual effect that a given contribution might have on the ground. As a core objective, the determination of successive governments to demonstrate Norway's credentials as a reliable and politically visible ally, and to reap benefits therefrom, was – in the view of the Godal Commission – very largely achieved: the closeness of bilateral ties at the political level was reaffirmed, while, at the operational and tactical levels, cooperation with the US in Afghanistan has translated into 'strengthened cooperation' in the fields of intelligence, counter-terrorism and 'other SOF operations'.¹⁴

¹²Godal Report, pp.193–4.

¹³Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 196.

The second major objective involved assisting the US in its 'Global War on Terror' by preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a sanctuary for terrorist groups and networks. Support for US-led counterterrorism (CT) operations provided the initial focus for Norwegian military involvement in Afghanistan, and assumed concrete form with the participation of Norwegian Special Forces (NORSOF) and fighter aircraft in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).¹⁵ Mounting evidence of prisoner abuse by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and controversy about the scope of, and methods employed in, the 'war on terror',¹⁶ contributed to the decision of the Norwegian government to downplay and, eventually, re-direct its contribution from OEF to ISAF, emphasising instead the latter's unambiguous mandate from the UN and its seemingly more benign state- and democracy-building role in the country.¹⁷ From 2010 onwards, however, the failures of exogenous-led statebuilding and the prospect of eventual ISAF withdrawal led to a renewed emphasis, also by the Norwegian government, on the achievements made, or so it was argued, in combating international terrorism. Addressing the Norwegian parliament in June 2013, the Foreign Minister, Espen Barth Eide, boldly declared ISAF's 'main mission' of eliminating Afghanistan as a 'sanctuary for international terrorism' to have been accomplished.¹⁸ The Godal Commission was much less convinced, concluding instead that the objective of preventing terrorist and militant groups from operating in and out of Afghanistan had only been 'partially met'. In retrospect, even this verdict stands out as overly generous. Since 2014, the activities of Al Qaeda operatives and ISIL-affiliated groups have both increased markedly, prompting US commanders to call for more troops and stepped up activities in the country.¹⁹

The third major objective of Norway's involvement was to help build a democratic, legitimate and properly functioning Afghan state along Western lines, a state whose legitimacy and authority ISAF would, from 2003 onwards, gradually seek to extend throughout the whole of the country.

¹⁵NORSOF deployed in support of OEF on three rotations (2002, 2003 and 2005). A detachment of 6 F-16 aircraft, operating out of Kyrgyzstan alongside Dutch and Danish aircraft, provided close air support for US combat forces operating in the border areas with Pakistan over a six-month period in 2002–2003. See Godal Report, p. 213. For the operations in the border areas, see *Operation Enduring Freedom, March 2002–April 2005*, US Army Center for Military History, 2016, p. 21.

¹⁶Craig Pyes and Mark Mazetti, 'US probing alleged abuse of Afghans', *La Times*, 21 September 2004; 'Senator Patrick Leahy to Hon. Donald Rumsfeld', 1 October 2004, Congressional Record – Senate, (www.congress.gov/crec/2004/10/09/CREC-2004-10-09-pt1-PgS10979-3.pdf).

¹⁷*Godal Report*, pp.196–97. A further, arguably still more important, reason for the government's shift away from OEF was that ISAF was operated by NATO and had an explicit UN mandate, both institutions seen as critically important in Oslo.

¹⁸Espen Barth Eide, 'Redegjørelse av utenriksministeren om utviklingen i Afghanistan og Norges engasjement i landet', Stortinget, 4 juni 2013.

¹⁹See, Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, 'A New US Front in Afghanistan?', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Nov. 2016 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-u-s-front-in-afghanistan-1479489075>); Michael Gordon, 'US General Seeks a "a few Thousand" More Troops in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 9 February 2017.

Much of the Norwegian statebuilding effort was concentrated in Faryab province. To the public, in particular, contributing to building a modern Afghan state was presented as a prime justification for Norway's unprecedented commitment of military and civilian resources to Afghanistan, a commitment that saw substantial infusions of development aid targeting education, governance and rural development, combined with a special emphasis on such crosscutting priorities as women's rights, anti-corruption and human rights. For all this, the Godal Commission found Norway's peace- and statebuilding efforts, viewed as a whole, to have proved the least successful aspect of Norway's involvement in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is difficult to classify them as anything but an abject failure. Very few of the achievements made between 2005 and 2012 have proved sustainable. This is true also in the field of education, which long has been a major aid priority for Norway. In Faryab alone, 177 schools had been built with Norwegian support. In 2014, the Godal Commission asked an Afghan monitoring team to assess whether and how the schools were functioning. The team was unable to reach almost half of the schools due to the security situation. Of the remaining schools, the team found that only 68 were in operation.²⁰

The steadily worsening security situation in Faryab showed that Norway's approach to stabilisation, which made a sharp operational distinction between civilian and military roles, was no more successful in stemming the insurgency than the dominant PRT model in ISAF that integrated civilian and military functions, the Godal Commission concluded.²¹ The very limited power of the PRT was also a function of other features of the mission. Military personnel rotated every six months, making for virtually no continuity. Consisting of 437 persons at its height (including civilians), the team was to cover a province the size two-thirds of Belgium with a population of about one million, mostly spread out in small villages that dotted the mountainous landscape. The uneven ratios reflected the lack of realism in the broader ISAF strategy to address the growing insurgency. The PRT could do little more than monitor developments, collect information and launch isolated offensives against the Taliban. The result typically was pin prick operations that did not significantly reduce enemy capabilities but increased the risks and cost for civilians, who were caught in the middle. In a case detailed by the Godal Report, village elders who had cooperated with the PRT during one operation were executed when the Norwegians withdrew and the Taliban returned.²²

²⁰Godal Report, p. 11.

²¹Ibid., p. 11.

²²Ibid., p. 126.

Since the drawdown of the international forces in 2014, the security situation in Faryab has continued to deteriorate. Taliban has twice closed in on the capital, Maimane. As of early 2017, Faryab had become among the least secure of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.²³ There is a certain, if cruel, irony to this development as the original Norwegian decision to assume responsibility for the PRT was taken, in part, because the province was viewed as a relatively peaceful and stable part of Afghanistan. A sure and telling sign of just how far that picture has changed came in October 2017 when the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), owing to the deteriorating security situation in the north of the country, announced that it was closing down its office in Maimane.²⁴

What, then, are the key factors that help explain this decidedly mixed and, as far as developments in Afghanistan are concerned, deeply disappointing record?

Determinants of Norway's record in Afghanistan

The reasons for Norway's failure to meet its core objectives, save that of demonstrating its reliability as 'a good ally', are, to a degree, inseparable from the reasons behind the failure of the international intervention in Afghanistan as a whole. The tensions and fault-lines that ran through the international project in Afghanistan framed and complicated Norway's military and civilian contribution in both direct and indirect ways. At the same time, the credibility and coherence of Norwegian efforts also reflected domestic dysfunctions, shortcomings and policy choices, some taken by default but many taken deliberately on the basis of untested assumptions and considerations extraneous to the situation in Afghanistan itself. Assessing the record of Norway's involvement requires, therefore, that attention be given to the interplay between international context and domestic political factors and pressures. Chief among the latter were: a notable absence of strategic thinking within government, the effects of coalition party politics and a lack of 'joined-up' government.

The international intervention in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014 was plagued by a fundamental and never-resolved tension between, on the one hand, the dominant strategic priority of the US to 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al-Qaeda and Taliban' as part of its open-ended 'war on terror', and, on the other, a more ambitious set of objectives, formally adopted by ISAF in 2003, which, in the words of Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defence from early 2006 to 2011,

²³Quarterly Report to Congress – Special Inspector General Report for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 30 October, 2016; UNAMA, Reports on the Protection of Civilians In Armed Conflict – 2017 Midyear Report (released July 2017) (<https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>) p. 72; "Mortar attack kills 13 civilians" in Faryab province', Al Jazeera News, 12 August 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/mortar-attack-kills-13-civilians-faryab-province-170812132524533.html>; Bill Roggio, 'Taliban Threatens another provincial capital in Afghan North', 21 October 2016 (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/taliban-threaten-another-provincial-capital-in-afghan-north.php>).

²⁴"Afghanistan: ICRC reduces its presence in the country", News Release, ICRC, 9 October 2017, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/afghanistan-icrc-reduces-its-presence-country>

'looked a lot like nation-building'.²⁵ The tension was institutionalised in the parallel activities and the uneasy relationship that existed between OEF and ISAF. Although the US was formally committed to ISAF's more expansive objectives, strategic priority was, in the final analysis, always given to CT premised on a broad and permissive definition of terrorists and insurgents.²⁶ This inevitably collided with the state- and peace-building objectives held by coalition partners and espoused by ISAF.

Of particular and lasting significance in this respect were the decisions taken and the tone set in the early OEF phase, before NATO, in assuming command of ISAF, committed itself to extending the authority of central government throughout the country. During this period, US forces – spurred on by the desire for retribution and revenge following the events of 9/11 – cultivated and formed alliances with local and regional strongmen and warlords, many of whom had risen to prominence in the deeply destructive civil war that followed the collapse of President Najibullah's regime in 1992. By restoring power at the provincial and district level to predatory, violent warlords and their tribally based patronage networks who had lost out to Taliban in the mid-1990s, US-led coalition forces laid the ground for Taliban's resurgence. Crucially, these actions also gave rise to a distinctive political economy of conflict that contrasted sharply with what Mike Martin has aptly termed the 'insurgency narrative',²⁷ which came to underpin NATO policy: the tendency to reduce the conflict in Afghanistan to a struggle between a supposedly legitimate government seeking to create a modern, democratic and liberal-looking State, supported in that endeavour by the West, and a backward-looking, ideologically driven Taliban insurgency, supported from across the border in Pakistan.²⁸

While the Taliban did include 'ideological' fighters, the 'insurgency narrative' grossly simplified the dynamics of conflict, failing to capture how the interaction of ethno-tribal grievances, local politics and power rivalries – set within the violent, deeply corrupt and criminalised post-Taliban political order that crystallised as a result of choices made in 2001 and 2002 – fuelled violence and insecurity throughout the country. As a result, ISAF's efforts to stabilise the country through aid, reconstruction and development assistance played into and frequently reinforced predatory and exploitative political economies.²⁹ This was equally the case of Norway's mission in the north.

²⁵Robert Gates, *Duty* (London: WH Allen, 2014), p.203.

²⁶Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy we Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2011* (London: Hurts & Co., 2012), p. 326.

²⁷Mike Martin, *An Intimate War – An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict* (London: Hurst & Co, 2014), p.195.

²⁸For the critical importance of local and historical context to an understanding of the patterns of violence and conflict in Afghanistan, see study by Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser – Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst & Co., 2013).

²⁹For the crystallisation of the post-2001 political economies see also, Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Afghanistan Affections – How to break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition', UNU Centre for Policy Research, April 2017, pp. 9–13. (<https://cpr.unu.edu/how-to-break-political-criminal-alliances-in-contexts-of-transition-afghanistan-affectations.html>)

There was also in Norway, as among her allies, a generalised failure to appreciate how cultural, political and historical factors distinctive to the Afghan context would, of necessity, condition society's response to a large, foreign and protracted military presence. This failure – evident in ISAF's costly neglect of the power of Afghan, especially Pashtun, nationalism, as well as in the importance of understanding the political economy and local dynamics of conflict – resulted in policy choices that, all too frequently, fuelled rather than mitigated violence and instability.

Tensions between strategic priorities, and the primacy given by the US to CT broadly conceived, had other consequences too. In terms of operations, it resulted in a complicated and dysfunctional set of command and control arrangements that included multiple and separate chains of command, within theatre as well as between capitals and troop-contributing nations. While this gave PRTs considerable autonomy, it undermined overall unity of effort and resulted in the pursuit of conflicting priorities. In particular, the actions of US Special Forces, notably their 'kill and capture' tactics, repeatedly undermined the 'goodwill that the ISAF "hearts and minds" strategy aimed to develop', as Saikal noted in 2012.³⁰

The coalition context also influenced Norwegian policies and actions in more indirect ways. For example, the broad permissive definition of terrorists adopted by the US limited the 'scope for exploring a wider political settlement to end the war', something Norway, to its credit, began to explore as early as 2007.³¹ Nor could Norway insulate itself from the psychological impact of, and political fall-out from, the intensification of military operations from 2006 onwards, resulting in mounting civilian casualties and growing sense among Afghan civilians that ISAF was a hostile occupying force.³²

The Faryab microcosm

These tensions and dilemmas manifested themselves in the Norwegian engagement in Faryab in several specific ways. ISAF's mandate to extend the authority of the central government to the provincial level was resisted by local strongmen, above all General Abdul Rashid Dostum who had surged to power as valued ally of the US in 2001. This particular tension became embodied in the difficult and at times openly conflictual relationship between Dostum and President Hamid Karzai. When the Norwegian PRT deployed to Faryab in 2005, Dostum had placed his men in key

³⁰Amin Saikal, 'The UN and Afghanistan: Contentions in Democratization and Statebuilding', *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 19, no. 2, April 2012, p.227.

³¹Discussed more fully in Chapter 9 of the *Godal Report*.

³²*Godal Report*, p.29. See also Kate Clark, 'How the Guests Became an Enemy: Afghan Attitudes towards Westerners since 2001', Middle East Institute Viewpoints, Afghanistan, 1979–2009: In the Grip of Conflict, www.mei.edu, pp. 50–52.

provincial positions, including the police and the governor's office. Some were gradually replaced and Karzai in 2008 appointed a governor from the outside, but Norwegian embassy and other reports back to Oslo repeatedly commented on the ability of Dostum and his men to undermine the effectiveness of the formal governing institutions.³³ Dostum was in a constant state of rivalry also with another local strongman and later governor in the neighbouring province of Balkh, Mohammad Noor Atta. The triangular power dynamic had a strong ethnic dimension (Dostum is an Uzbek, Atta a Tajik and Karzai a Pashtun) that reinforced its conflictual nature. The PRT was caught in the middle of these power rivalries, which reverberated on the local level to create continuous instability and make development very difficult.³⁴

The local power structure around Dostum need not have been problematic if it had been a constructive agent in the statebuilding project. In fact, it was not. Dostum's record as alleged war criminal had been established early on, and the ruthlessness of the general as well as of his second tier warlords was a matter of deep concern to the Norwegian embassy and the PRT.³⁵ Local elders initially beseeched the Norwegian ambassador with requests for protection against abuse by local strongmen.³⁶ Yet there was little the Norwegians could do. Dostum was too powerful and close to the US forces, his militias were armed, and the PRT was small and exposed. The team's base had been attacked by a mob in early 2006, an attack that was widely suspected of being at least tolerated by Dostum.

During the second half of the decade, when Taliban became more active in the province, the military case for supporting Dostum and his militias became more convincing as well, enabling Dostum to strengthen his position further.³⁷ As it turned out, the military rationale was vindicated in the short run. It was Dostum and his militias, not the Afghan Army, that pressed back repeated Taliban offensives in Faryab after the international military force had withdrawn in 2014. Yet the Godal Report recognised a deeper contradiction in the engagement: trying to build a legitimate state in the middle of war was virtually impossible.³⁸

The 'insurgency narrative' had gained currency among the Norwegian military most closely involved in Faryab soon after Norway took over leadership of the PRT in 2005. This narrative formed the basis for a controversial decision to expand the PRT's area of operations to include a district in the neighbouring province of Badghis, which the PRT believed was a staging

³³ Godal Report, p. 115.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 114–115.

³⁶ See Suhrke, *When More is Less*, p. 91.

³⁷ Godal Report, p. 115.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

ground for Taliban attacks into Faryab. Because Badghis was located in NATO's Regional Command West, but more readily accessible from Faryab, which was in NATO's Regional Command North, permission for the PRT to cross into Badghis was a complicated matter. To gain access on a regular basis, high-level Norwegian officials engaged in a prolonged and eventually successful lobbying effort.³⁹ On 1 January 2009, Ghormach district was officially included in Faryab province and was thus incorporated in the domain of the Norwegian PRT.

The expansion was controversial for two reasons. Norwegian intelligence assessments had initially been divided.⁴⁰ While the Army intelligence unit posted to Faryab saw the Taliban factor as a systemic explanation for instability in the area, the Military intelligence service stressed the essentially local nature of the conflict dynamic, pointing to complex ethnic and parochial rivalries, including control over smuggling routes.⁴¹ The Army view, as we have seen, won out. Second, the expansion was followed by a sharp escalation in armed clashes, both in Ghormach and in the districts of Faryab proper.

As the escalation and Norwegian losses mounted, the intelligence picture contained more nuances that pointed to the underlying tensions in the engagement as a whole. When, in 2010, Norwegian intelligence analysts sought to explain why Pashtuns were attacking Norwegian troops, three main reasons were put forward.⁴² The first was immediate economic gains, namely to protect opium smuggling routes. The second stemmed from ethnic divisions that in this case, and by extension much of northern Afghanistan, caused problems in the statebuilding project at the provincial level. In Faryab, the Pashtuns formed a minority, were generally poorer than the rest of the population and had little representation in the formal institutions of governance. After 2001, these institutions as well as informal, de facto structures of power were dominated by Tajiks and Uzbeks. Sensing that the international forces were imposing Uzbek and Tajik rulers on them, the Pashtuns directed their grievances and anger at the PRT. The third reason offered for the insurgency was derived from the international presence itself: legitimacy was gained by fighting against what was seen a foreign occupation force.⁴³

³⁹The Germans (who were leading RC North) initially and strongly opposed the expansion of operations due to the political caveats on German operations imposed by the Bundestag. In the end, a solution was found that entailed changing the Afghan provincial boundaries. Karzai made clear, however, that including Ghormach district in Faryab as requested by the Norwegians was to be temporary and for military purposes only. *Godal Report*, pp. 123–124.

⁴⁰*Godal Report*, p. 123.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 130.

The absence strategy and strategic thinking

While conflicting policy objectives among key allies undoubtedly complicated Norwegian decision-making and activities in Afghanistan, the Godal Commission was clear in its view that this did *not* release the Norwegian government from the obligation to develop a strategic and joined-up approach to its own contribution. And yet, a striking feature of Norwegian decision-making in relation to Afghanistan – and a key finding of the Godal Report – was precisely the absence of strategy and strategic thinking: the absence, that is, of any structured and systematic effort to consider the implications of proposed courses of actions, to challenge untested assumptions, and continually to review, in light of developments on the ground in Afghanistan, the relationship between ways, means and ends. To be sure, there was no shortage of general statements setting out what the government wanted to see happen in Afghanistan. But, just as the Chilcot Inquiry found in relation to the UK's post-conflict plans and activities in Iraq, 'strategies ... tended to describe a desired end state without setting out how it would be reached'.⁴⁴ This tendency was, if anything, more pronounced in the Norwegian case, and it applied both to the activities of the Norwegian PRT in Faryab and to key decision-points for the intervention as a whole.

The failure to connect ways, means and ends was most evident in relation to Faryab. When Norway assumed lead responsibility for the PRT in 2005, no 'detailed directions' had been drawn up setting out what the PRT would actually do in the province.⁴⁵ While the *kind* of force to deploy and *where* it might be located within Afghanistan was discussed, there was no systematic discussion of what the force was meant to achieve once it had been deployed. The lack of any 'strategic debate at the highest political and military level' in Norway continued after 2005.⁴⁶ The attempt, finally, to develop and articulate 'a Faryab strategy' in 2009, against the backdrop of what was by then a much worsened security situation, resulted in a poorly crafted document that resembled a 'statement of ambitions rather than a strategy'.⁴⁷

Possibly, the most important decision made by the government in relation to Faryab – to incorporate Ghormach district into the formal Norwegian area of operations – reflected the absence of strategic thinking. The decision was a response to tactical problems on the ground without a consideration of broader resource and political implications, as well as likely consequences, of adding another and particularly unstable district to an area of

⁴⁴Chilcot Report – Section 9.8: Conclusions the Post-Conflict Period, p. 501.

⁴⁵Godal Report, p. 120.

⁴⁶Ibid., p.54.

⁴⁷Ibid., p.119.

operation that already was vast relative to PRT capabilities, even considering related ISAF/OEF assets that intermittently operated in the area. Rather, the decision was made with exclusive reference to immediate tactical problems facing the PRT, framed in a generalised counter-insurgency language penned by the Chief of Defence.⁴⁸ 'By taking responsibility also for Ghormach', the Godal Commission concluded, 'it appears that Norwegian authorities allowed immediate security concerns to take precedence over a realistic assessment of resources'.⁴⁹

A similar myopia characterised the Norwegian discussion of the relationship between the military and civilian components of the PRT. The division of labour between these elements and their coordination (vs. integration) absorbed an enormous amount of political energy. A running debate about the reasons for the lack of progress in Faryab – a debate that acquired an accusatory and bitter undertone as the insurgency gained momentum and Norwegian casualties mounted – tended to move centre stage in any discussion of the Norwegian engagement.⁵⁰ The issue continued to generate heated debate also after 2014. When the Godal Report was presented to the Parliament, the Minister of Defence mistakenly used the word 'integrated' rather than 'coordinated' to describe the PRT structure in Faryab. At that point, the near-unanimity that had prevailed in the parliamentary discussion was shattered.⁵¹ While concluding that the structure of the PRT did not significantly influence the outcome in Faryab, the Godal Report nevertheless gives the issue much attention.⁵² Whether the focus on the PRT structure actually crowded out the potential for strategic discussion of policy alternatives is unclear, and the Commission did not pose the question.

Key decision points provided in theory an occasion for a wider discussion and, if necessary, a reassessment of government policy. Yet strategic debate among ministers and senior officials at these junctures was also notably absent. These included: the decision to expand ISAF's mandate and role in 2003; whether or not to assume lead responsibility for an area of operations; whether to deploy troops to southern Afghanistan in 2005; and what stand to adopt in relation to the counter-insurgency strategy embraced by ISAF in

⁴⁸Ibid., p.125.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 125.

⁵⁰For the bitterness that sometimes broke through to the surface of the debate, see this Op Ed piece by a former PRT-chief. Rune Solberg, 'Bistand på Ville Veier', *Aftenposten*, 6 December 2010 (<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kronikk/Bistand-pa-ville-veier-202744b.html>).

⁵¹Redegjørelse av utenriksministeren og forsvarsministeren om Afghanistan, inkludert rapporten fra det regjeringsoppnevnte utvalget som har evaluert og trukket lærdommer av Norges sivile og militære innsats i Afghanistan for perioden 2001–2014', <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Saker/Sak/?p=67464>.

⁵²The Commission endorsed the principle of separation of military and civilian roles in stabilisation operations while, at the same time, recognising the importance of coordinating of civilian and military efforts.

2009. While these decision points plainly raised issues of major impact on the development of Norway's Afghanistan policy, they did not result in a systematic and structured process of assessing overall strategy. Instead, the driving principle which, reduced to its bare bones, seemed to underpin Norway's disparate efforts in Afghanistan was pithily summed up by the Godal Commission as 'in together, out together'.⁵³

Again, the parallels with the findings of Chilcot are instructive and illuminating.⁵⁴ In both cases, key decision points did not involve collective and substantive discussion among key ministers 'on the basis of interdepartmental advice agreed at a senior level',⁵⁵ aimed at identifying 'wider implications and risks' linked to different policy options and courses of actions. In Norway as in the UK, the purpose of a 'more structured process' would have been to provide 'a mechanism to probe and challenge the implications of proposals before decisions were taken'.⁵⁶ No such mechanism existed in Norway.

It needs to be added that the necessary basis for rethinking and adjusting strategy – an intelligence-led understanding of developments on the ground, drawing also on open sources – was not lacking, even though such understanding clearly also improved over time. Indeed, Norwegian intelligence invested significant resources and expertise in Afghanistan, and, to this end, collaborated closely with allies.⁵⁷ Over time, 'situational awareness' acquired through intelligence gathering, driven by force protection requirements and the operational necessity of coming to terms with local conflict dynamics, improved markedly.⁵⁸ Intelligence reports demonstrated a range of different and at times analytically conflicting perspectives, particularly regarding the nature of the insurgency, as in the aforementioned analysis of the situation in Faryab in 2010.⁵⁹ Such assessments constituted a potential basis for considering policy alternatives. Yet the Godal Commission was 'unable to ascertain' the extent to which political and military leadership at the strategic level drew on the findings of the intelligence community.⁶⁰

Coalition party politics

Coalition party politics provides another part of the explanation for the evident difficulties of developing a more strategic approach to Norway's

⁵³Godal Report, p. 10.

⁵⁴See in particular, Chilcot Report – Section 9.8, *Conclusions: The Post-Conflict Period*, pp. 501–505.

⁵⁵Chilcot Report – Executive Summary, p. 58.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁷Godal Report, pp. 66–70.

⁵⁸In much the same way that the UK PRT in Helmand developed a better and more sophisticated understanding of the political economy of Helmand over time. See, *Capturing the Lessons from the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team*, Wilton Park Report, WPR1322, March 2015.

⁵⁹Godal Report, p. 130.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 68–69.

engagement in Afghanistan. This was particularly true for the Red–Green coalition from 2005 to 2013, whose members were deeply divided over policy towards Afghanistan.⁶¹ The Socialist Left Party, then in opposition, had from the beginning criticised the OEF as a ‘war of aggression’. When in the governing coalition after 2005, the party resisted any deepening of Norway’s involvement in what it saw as a misguided militarisation of the international involvement in Afghanistan, even though it was not opposed to the ISAF/UN mandate.⁶² The political compromises and horse-trading needed to hold the coalition together resulted in policy choices that were poorly, if at all, linked to an evidence-based assessment of the likely impact of those choices on the ground.⁶³ The clearest and most striking example of this, highlighted by the Godal Commission, was the decision in 2007 substantially to increase the amount of development aid to Afghanistan in line with the principle that there should be parity between Norway’s military and civilian contributions to Afghanistan. The decision, as with others regarding the volume of development aid provided to Afghanistan, took no account of factors critical to aid effectiveness: the absorptive capacity of the local economy; the expertise and administrative capacity needed to monitor disbursement and aid flows; and the corruption-generating risks associated with the injecting large amounts of money into Afghanistan’s complex political economy. Unsurprisingly, the overall results were decidedly uneven and have proved to be of limited sustainability.⁶⁴

Absence of joined-up government

Studies of the fragmented and frequently ill-coordinated actions of donors engaged in peacebuilding in fragile and war-torn states over the past twenty years have highlighted the supply side of the problem, that is, the lack of effective cross departmental cooperation *within* donor governments. Specifically, the persistence of vertically organised, or stove-piped, divisions between ministries of foreign affairs, defence and development – working towards their own mandates and, usually, also within different time frames – have been found to undermine ‘policy coherence’ and ‘integrated approaches’ in post-conflict settings.⁶⁵ This lack of joined-up-government was also a striking feature of Norwegian policy towards Afghanistan. The

⁶¹The Socialist Left Party was the second largest party in the Stoltenberg II coalition after Labour, having received 8.8% of the popular vote in the elections that brought the coalition to power.

⁶²Part of the problem with this position was the blurring of the line between OEF and ISAF operations in the south, again an expression of the multiple and contradictory objectives of the engagement and associated complicated and obscure (at least to most outsiders) lines of command.

⁶³*Godal Report*, p. 88.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶⁵Stewart Patrick and Kaysie Brown, *Great than the Sum of its Parts? – Assessing ‘Whole of Government’ approaches to Fragile States* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2007).

Ministry of Defence and the Agency for Development Cooperation (formally under auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in particular had minimal interaction over Afghanistan policy. The lack of any precedent for an expeditionary mission of the scale and complexity of Afghanistan, not helped by very different institutional and bureaucratic sub-cultures among government departments and agencies, clearly provide part of the explanation for this state of affairs. Moreover, the fact that individual ministries, in Norway well as in other Nordic countries, are constitutionally responsible to Parliament has also encouraged a tendency towards 'departmentalism' and 'silos' in decision-making.⁶⁶ Indeed, this principle of ministerial responsibility to Parliament is one reason 'why Norway has strong line ministries while ministries with coordination responsibilities are relatively weak'.⁶⁷

More fundamentally, however, lack of 'jointness' was bound up in the aforementioned absence of overall strategic focus. This because, as Stewart and Brown perceptively note, true policy coherence can only emanate from a 'common, government-wide strategic vision on priority objectives'.⁶⁸ Without it, formal coordinating bodies, mechanisms and technocratic solutions designed to encourage coherence 'by themselves cannot compensate for disagreement on ends'.⁶⁹ The Norwegian MOD was instinctively and reflexively focussed on the core objective of preserving and strengthening ties with the US (discussed more fully below), while the development community was, unsurprisingly, more concerned about promoting development objectives in Afghanistan.

The resulting tensions explain the less-than-impressive achievements of Norway's *State Secretary Forum for Afghanistan*, formally established in early 2006, involving politically appointed state secretaries from key departments. Designed to coordinate policies across departments and assist in developing a 'coherent Norwegian Afghanistan policy', government officials were anxious to present the Forum to allies abroad as well as to the public at home 'as a concrete expression of Norway's willingness and ability to coordinate contributions to Afghanistan across national sectors'.⁷⁰ In reality, and as the Godal Commission swiftly concluded, the Forum acted as little more than a hub for sharing information among government actors. It did not coordinate policies, let alone provide a forum for substantive discussion of strategy.

⁶⁶We are grateful to one of our anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this point.

⁶⁷Kristoffer Koltveit, *Cabinet Decision-Making and Concentration of Power – A Study of the Norwegian Executive Centre*, PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2013, p. 8.

⁶⁸Patrick and Brown, *Great than the Sum of its Parts?* p. 6.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p.7.

⁷⁰Lene Ekhaugen, 'Central government coordination structures for international operations: The emergence and design of Norway's Afghanistan Forum', Research paper (unpublished), Institute for Defence Studies (Oslo), p.10. We are grateful to Lene Ekhaugen for kindly sharing this and other research findings with us.

'A good ally': Norway and relations with the US in Afghanistan

Norway's 'special relationship' with the US

The Chilcot Inquiry stressed the central importance of the UK's close and long-standing alliance relationship with the US as a 'determining factor in the Government's decisions over Iraq'.⁷¹ On all key decision points, Chilcot concluded, the UK had 'decided that it was right or necessary to defer to its close and senior partner'.⁷² The fundamental reasons for this were twofold: first, 'concern that vital areas of co-operation between the UK and the US could be damaged if the UK did not give the US its full support over Iraq', and, second, 'the belief that the best way to influence US policy towards the direction preferred by the UK was to commit full and unqualified support, and seek to persuade from the inside'.⁷³

As noted above, Norway's long-standing alliance relationship to the US was also the determining factor in the government's decisions over Afghanistan. Indeed, preserving and strengthening the relationship with the US was the 'first and most important objective for the whole of the period' between 2001 and 2014.⁷⁴ The first of the two reasons identified by Chilcot provide the key to also understanding Norwegian policy choices: for successive governments, concern that 'vital areas of cooperation' might be undermined if Norway did not support the US was, as with the UK over Iraq, a major consideration in policy over Afghanistan. This concern was held most strongly within the Norwegian MoD, for whom maintaining close working ties with the US was, and has long been, at the very heart of its mission. Unlike the UK, however, Norwegian governments harboured far fewer illusions about the extent to which 'full and unqualified support' would result in a greater ability to influence US policy. Indeed, although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued the case for opening a political dialogue with the Taliban to its counterpart from an early stage, itself a commendable initiative, the Commission found that, overall, Norway made little systematic effort to influence and shape allied policies.⁷⁵

That Norway's relationship to the US came to exercise a determining influence on decisions over Afghanistan is not surprising. Ever since the US replaced the UK as Norway's principal security guarantor in the 1950s, the strategic alliance with the US has been the bedrock of Norway's defence and security policy. Norway's position on NATO's northern flank, its sparsely populated and extensive land and maritime territories, combined with its proximity to the strategically vital northeast and arctic territories of Russia

⁷¹*Chilcot Report – Executive Summary*, p.51.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁴*Godal Report*, p. 193.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 9.

(and earlier those of the Soviet Union), ensured that *bilateral* security ties assumed special importance for both countries. For Norway, the result was and remains a particularly strong attachment – reinforced by the country's historical experience of defeat and occupation in the Second World War and its peripheral status in Europe – to the sanctity of NATO's collective defence provisions and, above all, to preserving US defence commitments to Europe in general and Norway in particular.

While the geopolitical changes spawned by the end of the Cold War necessarily altered the political climate and discourse around the content of Norway's security policy, it did not fundamentally change the importance attached to ties with the US, especially not for those concerned with the working aspects of that relationship. Indeed, if anything, its importance was seen to have increased as NATO allies in Europe were expected, not unreasonably, to take less of an interest in NATO's northern flank. To many, the closing of NATO's Atlantic Command in 2003 and the subsequent move away from geographic to functional commands within the Alliance provided evidence to this effect. Throughout the course of Norway's Afghanistan engagement, concerns among Norwegian defence planners and officials about any further weakening of collective defence provisions and ties with the US became, if anything, more pronounced.⁷⁶ Russia's adoption of a more 'forward-leaning stand both politically and militarily',⁷⁷ evidenced by the 2008 war in Georgia, did much to drive those concerns and provided a key background influence to decision-making over Afghanistan.⁷⁸ Added to this were also more immediate and concrete considerations relating to the defence and security relationship with the US.

In the event of crises or war, Norway has long been entirely reliant on reinforcements from the US. Preparing for this eventuality, US stocks of military equipment were first prepositioned on Norwegian territory following agreement concluded in 1981.⁷⁹ The agreement came up for renegotiation in 2005, and Norwegian authorities considered its revision and renewal vital to the future of the bilateral defence relationship.⁸⁰ In June 2005,

⁷⁶Paal Sigurd Hilde and Helene F. Widerberg, 'NATO's Nye Strategiske Konsept og Norge', *Norsk Militært Tidsskrift*, No.4, 2010, p. 14.

⁷⁷Svein Ejfjstad, 'Norway and the North Atlantic: Defence of the Northern Flank', in *NATO and the North Atlantic – Revitalising Collective Defence*, ed. by John Andreas Olsen, RUSI Whitehall Paper 87, (Abingdon: Routledge Journals 2017), 64.

⁷⁸In June 2008, Norway's Defence Minister, Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, presented a paper at an informal meeting of NATO Defence Ministers, which, in the words of her principal policy advisor Svein Ejfjstad, 'highlighted a sense that NATO was drifting in a direction where its relevance to the defence of member states was becoming questionable', Ejfjstad, 'Norway and the North Atlantic', p. 62. Ejfjstad served as Director General for Security Policy at the MoD from 1995 to 2013.

⁷⁹Rolf Tamnes, *The United States and the Cold War in the High North* (Oslo: Ad Notam Forlag, 1991), p. 250.

⁸⁰See 'Redegjørelse av forsvarsministeren vedrørende EUs innsatsstyrker, forhåndslagring og den videre innsats i Afghanistan', Stortinget, 2 June 2005 (Statement in Parliament by Minister of Defence Kristin Krohn-Devold), p. 2005.

against the backdrop of NATO and Norway's deepening involvement in Afghanistan, and following six months of reportedly 'intensive' talks, Donald Rumsfeld and his counterpart, Kristin Krohn-Devold, duly signed a revised MOU 'governing prestockage and reinforcement of Norway'.⁸¹

US, Norway and Afghanistan

Norwegian concerns about the possible consequences for US–Norwegian relations were it not to extend support to the US, influenced policy calculations in two ways.

First, decisions about the *kind* of contributions to make were driven primarily by considerations – both explicit and implicit – of their likely political impact in relation to the US, rather than by a wider assessment of strategic requirements emanating from an analysis of developments on the ground.⁸² Thus, while Norwegian military planners and development officials expressed scepticism about the wisdom of assuming responsibility of the PRT in Faryab 2005, such misgivings were 'trumped', in the words of the Commission, by the desire to 'appear relevant and visible' to allies.⁸³ Appearing relevant and politically visible was also a key factor when it came to the deployment of Norwegian Special Forces (NORSOF), whose activities alongside the Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) in Afghanistan were identified by the Godal Commission as one of three 'central areas' of Norwegian involvement.⁸⁴

Second, concern about relations with Washington in practice limited the scope for questioning the wisdom of US and wider alliance policies in Afghanistan. In effect, the concern acted as a self-denying ordinance, restricting the government's room for manoeuvre, for registering constructive dissent and voicing principled objections to actions that were not producing hoped-for results. It also provides an important part of the explanation for why Norway never seriously subjected its contribution to a rigorous and regular process of strategic analysis and reassessment.⁸⁵

All of this raises an obvious question: were Norwegian concerns about the negative, likely lasting, consequences for US–Norwegian relations of not lending unqualified support in Afghanistan truly justified?

⁸¹'USAs militære forhåndslagre blir i Norge', *Aftenposten*, 5 June 2005. 'MOU Governing Prestockage and Reinforcement of Norway', 8 June 2005, (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/180656.pdf>).

⁸²*Godal Report*, p. 55.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁸⁴The other two being the Norwegian-led PRT in Faryab and the early (starting in 2007) and continuing involvement of Norwegian diplomats and interlocutors in various clandestine efforts to establish a meaningful political dialogue with Taliban in the hope of reaching an overall political settlement to the Afghan conflict.

⁸⁵*Godal Report*, p. 54 and 119.

The question of whether or not concerns about meeting US and allied requests would damage Norway's standing as an ally, possibly with long-term consequences, arose most directly in 2006 and 2007. As military operations intensified following ISAF's expansion southwards in 2006, Norwegian authorities came under growing pressure to deploy forces in support of combat operations in the south. Allied interest focussed specifically on the combat capable Quick Reaction Force (QRF) that Norway had sent to Mazar-i-Sharif in March 2006 in order to support PRTs operating in Northern Afghanistan, and which, it was now argued, could be used as a mobile reserve elsewhere in Afghanistan.⁸⁶ As fighting intensified in 2006 and 2007, Norwegian officials received numerous formal and informal requests for Norwegian forces to be made available for operations in the south.⁸⁷ These came from a variety of sources: from the UK, whose forces were meeting fierce resistance in Helmand, from SACEUR and COMISAF, as well as from the US government through its embassy in Oslo. Repeated requests placed the government in a quandary: given that Norway had formally endorsed the principle that ISAF contingents should operate without caveats and be available for deployment anywhere within the theatre of operation at COMISAF's request, it was felt that turning down allied requests would likely be politically damaging.⁸⁸ The MoD and the Chief of Defence, in particular, were concerned about the political consequences of repeated refusals, and called for a positive line to be taken if Norway wished to 'remain in good standing within the alliance'.⁸⁹ In the end, the government formally ruled out deploying its QRF to the south or to make other forces available in that area. The decision was designed to clarify Norway's position vis-à-vis NATO allies, but above all to keep the Red-Green coalition together.

And yet, for all this, and although UK and US officials at the time expressed frustration at Norwegian reluctance to deploy south, the Godal Commission could find no evidence to suggest that the refusal to do so 'had serious or lasting consequences for relations with allies or for Norway's standing within NATO'.⁹⁰

⁸⁶The US also raised the issue of deploying Norway's 'Telemark Battalion' – a company-sized and mechanised Task Force of which had been deployed to provide security during the Constitutional Loya Jirga in Kabul in December 2003 – to Afghanistan in 2008. See 'US Emb. Oslo to SecState', 31 May 2007 (https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/0705LO573_a.html).

⁸⁷This included request for Norwegian troops to relieve pressure on Dutch troops in Uruzgan.

⁸⁸*Godal Commission*, p. 33.

⁸⁹See 'US Emb. Oslo to SecState, 31 May 2007', https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/0705LO573_a.html; and Godal report, p. 33. In October 2006 and September 2007, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence both recommended that Norwegian forces be deployed to southern Afghanistan in order to support NATO allies. The recommendations were strongly opposed by the Socialist Left Party within government and rejected. *Godal Report*, p. 196.

⁹⁰*Godal Report*, p. 196. Again, there is an interesting parallel to the findings of the Chilcot Inquiry, which, in a similar vein, concluded: 'Had the UK stood by its differing position on Iraq – which was not an opposed position, but one in which the UK had identified conditions seen as vital by the UK Government – the Inquiry does not consider that this would have led to a fundamental or lasting change in the UK's relationship with the US....'. *Chilcot Report – Executive Summary*, p. 53.

There were several reasons for this. For one, it is clear that Norway's contribution would in any event have been very modest. Furthermore, the decision to extend the deployment of Norwegian Special Forces to Kabul in 2007 – whose impact was politically and operationally more visible to the US – may partly have compensated for the reluctance to assist in the south.⁹¹ Signs that the security situation was deteriorating also in Northern Afghanistan made the Norwegian argument that troops were needed in the north seem less self-serving. Arguably just as significant was the fact that Norway was *not* proposing to withdraw from ISAF and Afghanistan altogether. For the US Administration, this meant that the multinational character of the operation, however small or symbolic the contribution of individual allies, would not be weakened. This was an important consideration for an administration that needed to legitimise continued involvement in the war before Congress, which, after all, was paying for it, and probably outweighed the military value added by the actual contribution allies were prepared and able to offer.

In addition to these factors, however, and more fundamentally, the strength of long-established alliance bonds and the mutual benefits deriving from these were always unlikely to be ruptured by Norway's self-imposed restrictions. After all, Norway's decision not to support the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, in spite of US requests, had not adversely affected relations.⁹² As noted above, the benefits of the alliance relationship had always flowed both ways. If Norway looked to the US as its ultimate security guarantor, for the US, Norway's location had long provided – and continues to *provide* – a critically important window to monitoring military developments in northeast and arctic Russia (whose contiguous maritime areas in the Barents Sea form a 'bastion' for the bulk of Russia's submarine ballistic missile fleet).⁹³ These facts explain why a particularly close and long-lasting bilateral relationship has evolved in the field of intelligence, especially in the area of SIGINT – a relationship that, in the words of the Godal Commission, provided a 'solid basis' for further developing and deepening cooperation in Afghanistan.⁹⁴

⁹¹From 2007 onwards, Norwegian SOF played a central role, together with US and New Zealand forces, in building up, training and providing operational support to the Crisis Response Unit 22 (CRU 22), a counterterrorism unit of the Afghan police based in Kabul. 'Godal Report', chapter 5.

⁹²Although the government refused to support the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, it did feel compelled to provide a 'symbolic' contribution in the form of military engineers from June 2003 to 2005; a deployment which the government, in order to defuse strong domestic criticism, insisted was entirely 'humanitarian' in nature. 'Bondeviks fiksjon', *Dagbladet*, 18 November 2003, <http://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/bondeviks-fiksjon/65927698>.

⁹³Rolf Tamnes, 'The Significance of the North Atlantic and the Norwegian Contribution', in *NATO and the North Atlantic – Revitalising Collective Defence*, ed. by John Andreas Olsen, RUSI Whitehall Paper 87, 2017, pp. 21–26.

⁹⁴*Godal Report*, pp. 70–71. For the history and intimate character of that relationship, see Olav Riste, *The Norwegian Intelligence Service 1945–1970* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), pp. 289–291; and relevant chapters in Tamnes' definitive account of US-Norwegian relations during the Cold War, Rolf Tamnes, *Cold War in the High North*.

Costs and Lessons – what are allies for?

These findings do raise the larger question of whether, and in what ways, Norwegian concerns about avoiding actions that might undermine relations with a key ally, however exaggerated, carried other costs as far as Norway's involvement in Afghanistan was concerned? Two, partly overlapping, issues stand out in this regard.

First, it is clear that the desire to remain a 'good ally' encouraged a passive and, generally, unquestioning attitude to issues relating to the prosecution of the war that might otherwise have been subject to more searching questions and critical scrutiny. The Godal Commission draws attention in particular to the legally and morally complex issues arising out of the US-driven targeting policies under the Joint Prioritised Effects List ('kill or capture') programme, most notably the US initiative in October 2008 to expand the category of targets to include 'facilities and facilitators supporting the insurgency'.⁹⁵ This controversial initiative, designed to disrupt Taliban's income stream and logistical chain, was resisted by several European allies, and resulted in 'night raids and house searches ... [that] blurred the distinction between farmers, "high-value targets" or Taliban operatives'.⁹⁶ Norwegian authorities, according to the Godal Commission, initially showed little apparent concern about the expansion of target categories and took little active part in NATO discussions on the subject.⁹⁷

Second, and more importantly, the determination to be a 'good ally' discouraged critical debate and regular reassessment at the highest level of government about the effectiveness of Norway's military, police and developmental contribution to the Afghanistan mission, even as developments on the ground pointed to the urgent need for such debate. The absence of any 'stabilisation effect' as a result of ISAF's expansion outside Kabul; mounting insecurity even as overall troop numbers increased; the complex political economy and the frequently localised nature of the 'insurgency' that defied conventional development initiatives and distorted aid delivery; the severe legitimacy deficit of the central government in Kabul; none of these factors prompted a reconsideration of basic assumptions about ISAF's chosen strategy, raising questions comparable to those

⁹⁵The decision in principle to expand ISAF's counter narcotics role was taken at the meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Budapest in 2008 and supported by Norway. *Godal Report*, p. 170. For details of the policy change, see Judy Dempsey, 'NATO allows strikes on Afghan drug sites', *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 2008 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/10/world/asia/10iht-nato.4.16856342.html>). For a background to the controversies surrounding JPPL and the focus on kill-and-capture more generally, see 'A Dubious History of Targeted Killings in Afghanistan', 28 December 2014, *Spiegel Online* (www.spiegel.de/international/world/secret-docs-reveal-dubious-details-of-targeted-killings-in-afghanistan-a-1010358.html).

⁹⁶Felbab-Brown, 'Afghanistan Affections', p.15.

⁹⁷*Godal Report*, p.170.

famously posed by Karl Eikenberry in a confidential cable to Washington where he challenged the wisdom and fundamental premises of US COIN strategy in 2009.

One should, of course, have no illusions about the ability of smaller allies to influence US policy in Afghanistan. Even more powerful allies, like the UK, appear to have had at most a marginal influence on the direction of US policy, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan.⁹⁸ There is nothing to suggest that a different and more independent approach by Norway would have influenced US policy in significant ways. Even so, developments on the ground should have fed back into an assessment of Norway's own contribution to stimulate a far more critical debate about what one was hoping to accomplish and a consideration of policy adjustments.

Concluding observations

The Norwegian contribution to operations in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 was plainly of marginal relevance to the overall outcome of the international intervention in the country.⁹⁹ Even so, the fine-grained analysis provided by the Godal Commission, especially of developments within Norway's area of responsibility in northern Afghanistan, offers lessons of broader interest regarding the role of small and medium-sized coalition members in international operations, about the limits of exogenous statebuilding and about the recent history of conflict in Afghanistan.

The first 'lesson' concerns Norway's decision to join, as well as its unwavering commitment over thirteen years to, the international project in Afghanistan. The initial decision to participate in coalition operations was powerfully motivated – as indeed it was for other allies – by the desire to demonstrate solidarity with the US following the attacks of 9/11. In the context of its time and given Norway's long-standing alliance relationship to the US, this was neither surprising nor unreasonable. Even for a small and historically close ally, however, the requirement of alliance solidarity does not absolve the government of responsibility for regularly reviewing and, when required, reassessing strategy in light of new developments and changing circumstances. In doing so, the option of withdrawing from coalition operations should never be ruled out, and concerns about the direction of policy, especially when it rests on questionable assumptions and weak analysis, must be probed within government and communicated to allies,

⁹⁸Sherard Cowper-Coles, 'Reflections from Afghanistan', in P. Lewis and H. Wallace (eds.), *Rethinking State Fragility* (London: British Academy Publication, April 2015), 20.

⁹⁹For an overview and comparison of the contributions made by different ISAF members, see Marion Bogers, Robert Beerres and Iren Lubberman-Schrotenboer, 'Dutch Treat? – Burden sharing in Afghanistan', in *Mission Uruzgan – Collaborating in Multiple Coalitions for Afghanistan*, ed. by Robert Beerres, Jan van der Meulen, Josphe Soeters and Ad Vogelaar (Utrecht: Pallas Publications, 2012), pp.267–281.

not papered over in the interests of alliance solidarity. At the same time, and as the Godal Commission also notes, the large-scale commitment of troops, civilians and developmental resources to an international operation of the complexity of Afghanistan requires greater openness vis-à-vis the public as well as Parliament about the objectives of involvement than was the case in Norway between 2001 and 2014.¹⁰⁰

Finally, two further and closely connected lessons merit attention on account of their wider relevance. First, as the Commission bluntly and candidly concluded, regime change and statebuilding activities of the kind attempted in Afghanistan 'are well-nigh impossible in contexts of on-going armed conflict'.¹⁰¹ Second, external involvement designed to help lay the foundations for durable peace must, as a matter of course, prioritise an open-minded and inclusive search for political dialogue and negotiated settlement as a pathway out of protracted conflict. The Norwegian government, as the Commission fairly acknowledges, deserves credit for recognising this and for being prepared – from an early stage and through active behind-the-scenes diplomacy – to explore *any* opportunity for moving the political process in Afghanistan forward. The fact that, in the end, nothing of substance was achieved on this front does not invalidate the central importance, in current and future international operations, of investing resources, time and effort in building the political foundation for peace.

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¹⁰⁰In 2016, Norwegian Special Forces deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Initially deployed to Jordan, Norwegian troops later joined Special Forces from the US and the UK at At Tanf in southern Syria to help 'train, advise and support local Syrian groups fighting ISIL in Syria'. The deployment confirmed the Godal report's findings about the increasingly close relationship developed with US in 'CT and other SOF operations' resulting from years of cooperation in Afghanistan. At the same time, the deployment also raised questions about the extent to which 'the aims of [Norwegian] involvement were clear and [had been] properly communicated to parliament and the wider public', as the Godal Commission, insisted should be done when deploying to active conflict zones. To many, being 'a good ally' was again the driving factor for becoming involved. Godal Report, p. 203; 'Pressemelding, 2 May 2016, Forsvarsdepartementet' (<http://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/nyyt-bidrag/id2499023/>); Nabih Bulos and W. J. Hennigan 'US Airstrike hit Pro-Assad Forces in Syria', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 2017.

¹⁰¹*Godal Report*, p. 12.

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