

# Noref Policy Brief

## Norway's strategic challenges in Afghanistan: how to make a difference?

Ståle Ulriksen

### Executive Summary

Norway may be a marginal actor in Afghanistan as a whole, but its troop contingent and development aid programmes mean that it does play an important role in the north-west of the country as part of a joint overall effort with its allies and friends. This role is now facing a twofold test.

First, President Obama's new security-centred approach implies a shorter-term timeframe for United States involvement in Afghanistan than was earlier envisaged, and there are strong signals too from Canada and the Netherlands that their forces may be withdrawn in 2010-11. This prospect poses serious questions to Norway's longer-term, statebuilding focus in Afghanistan.

Second, politics in the region where Norway's involvement is greatest are becoming polarised between two ethnic-based movements, Uzbek and Tajik, led respectively by powerful warlords with varying relations with the central government in Kabul: Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ustad Atta Mohammad. This complex and many-layered arena, where current tensions could explode into large-scale violence, presents Norway with a difficult challenge. Norway should respond with a focused political attempt to stabilise northern Afghanistan. This would imply that Norway, perhaps in cooperation with Sweden, takes on the role of mediator and facilitator in the region. Such a role could be implemented only in the context of close contact with Afghan authorities at all levels, with Isaf and with Unama; and it would require coordinated efforts in the fields of security, development and politics.

### Ståle Ulriksen

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## Background

Norway has few, if any, direct interests in Afghanistan. Its heavy involvement in the country is due entirely to al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States of America in September 2001. Almost nine years on, this presence continues, both alongside and as part of strong engagement from Norway's most important friends and allies. These include Nato and the United Nations, the international institutions that have been the pillars of Norwegian foreign and security policy for more than half a century.

Norway's interests and role in relation to Afghanistan are mainly general rather than specific. In broad terms, they concern both the maintenance and strengthening of the international community – and the promotion of certain ideals and values. Norway's current foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, has formulated the country's foreign policy as a whole in four words: "to make a difference". In practical terms, to deliver this objective amid the increasingly difficult international effort in Afghanistan means that Norway will have to choose between two options: either to contribute detailed points in the international debate on the "dos and don'ts" of statebuilding, or to improve the situation in real terms on the ground.

The context of this choice is tough. In northern Afghanistan – which includes the area where most of Norway's efforts in the country are concentrated – the relationships between actors that have supported the international efforts are rapidly deteriorating.

Tensions that have been latent for years have been resurfacing in recent months. If these tensions explode into the open, the resulting conflict may threaten the whole international effort in Afghanistan. These problems need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

This brief argues that while Norway is a marginal actor in Afghanistan as a whole, it is an important player in the north-west.<sup>1</sup> If Norway wants to "make a difference" on the ground, efforts should be concentrated there. Such a move, however, requires a shift in Norwegian thinking, policy and practice.

<sup>1</sup> This is the first of two policy briefs by the author on the challenges facing Norway in Afghanistan. The second brief is: "Norway's political test in Faryab, Afghanistan: how to lead?", Noref, April 2010. Both are based on research financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence.

## A question of concentration

Norway has sustained a presence of 500-700 troops in Afghanistan for the last several years (the official number normally given is some 500; this excludes special forces [SOF], up to 150 of which have been deployed in several periods). In 2008 the government promised to maintain civilian aid at NOK 750 million (around \$129 million) each year for five years. Norway's contingent of troops, at less than 1% of the international effort as a whole, makes it the fifteenth largest troop contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), but with 2.6% of the official development aid to Afghanistan it ranks as the ninth largest contributor of aid. In *per capita* comparisons, moreover, it does much better. These statistics show that Norway "punches above its weight" in Afghanistan – but they do not affect the reality that the country is nevertheless a minor player there.

The deeper reality, however, is that there is an increasing gap between international practice in Afghanistan and Norwegian ideals. Norwegian policymakers are not comfortable with the strategic goals and the organisation of the international effort, nor with its operational concepts and the corresponding expectations of allies and partners. The overall handling of Afghanistan, in short, is not easily compatible with Norwegian interests, values and practices.

It has been important for Norway to maintain the relevance of Nato through the operations in Afghanistan and to strengthen the role of the UN in the country.

Sadly, the operations have had a detrimental effect on Nato coherence and capabilities. The conduct of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (Unama) has highlighted many of the UN's shortcomings. The US has been the dominant external actor in Afghanistan since the regime change of November 2001 and the present increase in American troops and activities is likely to reinforce that position. The planned influx of American troops in the north may cause more direct friction between Norwegian and American perspectives on state-building.



## Diverging strategies

The activities of Norwegian authorities in Afghanistan have a strong statebuilding focus. In his speech at the West Point military academy on 1 December 2009, President Obama signalled a narrow set of security-related goals. He said there:

“[Some] call for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our war effort – one that would commit us to a nation-building project of up to a decade. I reject this course because it sets goals that are beyond what we can achieve at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests.”<sup>2</sup>

The implication of this approach is that Norway will have to adjust its goals accordingly. Norway may have wider and longer-term ambitions in the humanitarian and development fields than the reformulated allied strategy envisages; but in that case, those ambitions will have to be implemented in ways that take this strategy into account.

The question of the timeframe of involvement in Afghanistan is becoming crucial. Norwegian authorities have planned for a long-term engagement in Afghanistan. President Obama's West Point speech stated that the first US forces would start to withdraw in June 2011. Other allies, the Netherlands and Canada among them, have clearly indicated that they will downsize their contributions from 2010 and 2011 respectively; in the former case, political events could lead to a foreshortening of this process. This cannot be ignored. Norway will have to plan within the context of a revised allied timeframe. Norway may continue to support the development of Afghanistan; but if so, that support should be used to build sustainable structures.

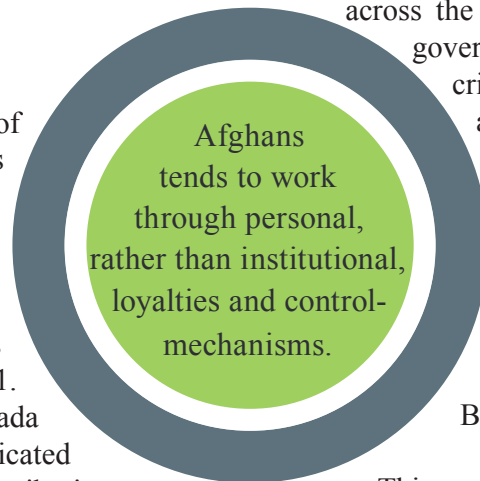
## Centralisation vs regional power

Most analysts believe that the centralised-state model chosen at the Bonn conference of December 2001 is less than ideal in Afghanistan. A confederation based

on strong regional political entities would have been more compatible with Afghan history and present realities. President Obama declared in his 1 December speech that the US “will support Afghan Ministries, Governors, and local leaders that combat corruption and deliver for the people”. In other words, effective leaders will be supported. But Afghanistan tends to work through personal rather than institutional bonds of loyalty and control-mechanisms, and regional and local leaders can in principle more easily “deliver” on such issues than the central government. This process in turn strengthens regional leaders while the central government grows weaker.

Norway has emphasised the importance of enabling Afghan authorities to become agents of their country's development. Thus, 80% of Norwegian aid is channelled through Afghan ministries, NGOs and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) to be used across the country in accordance with central-government planning. Norway has also been critical of the practice very common among most allied states: namely, focusing almost all their aid on their own forces' areas of responsibility. By contrast, the present Norwegian strategy prescribes that no more than 20% of the total Norwegian aid to Afghanistan may be used in Faryab province, where (along with Balkh province) its troops are based.

This approach has a twofold downside, however. First, Norwegian aid is spread thinly on many projects and in many sectors around the country, raising questions about its efficiency. Second, the channelling of aid through the central government can lead to problems; for example, a recent assessment of infrastructure projects under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) doubted their sustainability because of the lack of cooperation with the local authorities at the receiving end.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, a donor cooperating with both central and local authorities, and mediating between them, would be better placed to secure the sustainability of development projects. Could Norwegian efforts make



2 “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, White House, 1 December 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>, accessed 14 March 2010.

3 Assessment of Development Results; Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Evaluation of UNDP Contribution, UNDP 2009, [http://www.undp.org/evaluation/documents/ADR/ADR\\_Reports/Afghanistan/ADR\\_Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.undp.org/evaluation/documents/ADR/ADR_Reports/Afghanistan/ADR_Afghanistan.pdf), accessed 14 March 2010.

more of a difference if they were concentrated in one area? Such efforts are sorely needed in north-western Afghanistan, where a very dangerous development is taking place.

### The unstable north

The war against the Taliban and its allies is increasingly important in the north, but in this part of Afghanistan it is only one of several dangerous lines of conflict. Politics in the region are becoming polarised between two formerly multi-ethnic movements that have become ethnically far more homogenous: *Hizb-e Junbesh-e-Melli-ye Afghanistan* (the National Islamic Movement, which is dominated by Uzbeks) and the *Jamiat-i Islami* (now a predominantly Tajik party). Both Junbesh and Jamiat are in this region led by prominent warlords: the former by Abdul Rashid Dostum, the latter by Ustad Atta Mohammad, the governor of Balkh.

The two generals have clashed repeatedly over control of northern Afghanistan since the early 1990s. Their movements fought a civil war in the area after the fall of Taliban in November 2001, and as late as 2003 the two forces clashed in Faryab's capital, Meymaneh. The outcome of these conflicts was that Dostum, from his stronghold in Jowzjan, succeeded in securing *Junbesh* control both in Faryab and Sari Pul – making these three provinces the core areas of the movement's strength; but Atta managed to ensure that the Jamiat held on to Balkh province and its capital, Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan's fourth largest city and arguably the strategic centre of the north.

In 2004, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ustad Atta Mohammad successively used brute force to wrest control of their respective movement's core areas from the central government of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. In April, a dispute said to be related in part to the proceeds from drug-trafficking gave Dostum the pretext to send his forces against the governor and militia commander in Faryab. When Dostum's forces swept into Meymaneh and chased his rivals out of the province, the government responded by deploying troops to Faryab; but the affair ended with Dostum being made chief-of-staff of the Afghan national army (ANA).

In July, an accusation made by Balkh's police-chief that Atta was involved in drug-trafficking provoked Atta to deploy his troops to encircle his accuser's home and demand his removal. Atta too emerged from conflict with a promotion: in his case, as the governor of Balkh (a result that may also have reflected Hamid Karzai's need for Atta to act as a counterweight to Dostum in the north).

### Warlords in politics

Since that period both men have in different ways consolidated their gains. In 2005-06, Dostum's followers fought Abdul Malik's *Azadi* (Freedom) party in extended battles in the Shirin Tagab and Pashtun Kot districts of Faryab. In 2008, Akbar Bai – Dostum's intimate long-term ally and head of the Turkmen tribal council of Afghanistan – broke from *Junbesh*, accusing Dostum of preparing for another clash to destroy his Uzbek and Turkmen rivals in the north.<sup>4</sup> Dostum led fifty of his men on an assault on Bai's house in Kabul to inflict direct punishment, and as a result was forced to leave the country; but he returned just before the presidential elections in August 2009 in the guise of a close ally of Hamid Karzai, securing a major victory for the incumbent in the north-west. Atta, for his part, has used the last five years to transform himself into an effective administrator capable of delivering security, development and public services to the population of Balkh. Even so, he has been accused of backing political assassinations, intimidating journalists and of using his position to build a personal fortune.

Atta's support for Karzai's main rival Abdullah Abdullah in the presidential elections damaged his relationship with the president. In October 2009, residents of Balkh claimed that Kabul ministries had suspended development projects in the province because of their governor's stance<sup>5</sup>; and Atta accused Karzai and Afghanistan's interior minister Mohammed

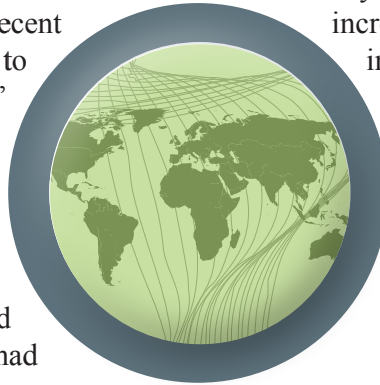


4 Ahmad Naeem Qaderi, "Dostum accused for insecurity in Jawzjan, Faryab", *Pahjwok Afghan News*, 8 January 2007, <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2007/01/08/dostum-accused-for-insecurity-in-jawzjan-faryab.html>, accessed 14 March 2010.  
5 Ahmad Kawosh, "Balkh Power Struggle Leaves Locals Fearful", *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, *Afghan Recovery Report* [ARR] No. 338, 29 September 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ac482c91a.html>, accessed 14 March 2010.



Hanif Atmar of mobilising forces against him and of arming his opponents.<sup>6</sup> In November, General Murad Ali, commander of ANA's 209 Corps, gave the impression that the ANA was willing to move against Atta when he warned that Atta was arming his supporters.<sup>7</sup>

In December, a report attributed a recent increase in violence in Balkh not to the Taliban but to “former warlords” positioning themselves for a renewed fight for power in the region. The latter were said to include, as well as Dostum, two other rivals of Atta: the powerful Pashtun warlord Juma Khan Hamdard, and the leader of the Hazara-dominated *Wahdat-e Islami* party, Mohammad Mohaqeq.<sup>8</sup>



Dostum and Atta would carry significant risks; for all their fearful reputations, both men would probably win elections in the regions presently under their control.

If northern Afghanistan should slide into conflict, international efforts to stabilise the country will certainly fail. There is thus an acute need for increased international political mediation in north-western Afghanistan. But the attention of the US and Isaf is mainly focused towards the country's south and east, while Germany, the lead nation in RC North, is increasingly occupied in the north-east, in Kunduz, Baghlan and Badakshan. Everyone else seems to have their hands full.

### Escalating ethnic violence

The north is increasingly unstable for several reasons. The Taliban have challenged Isaf in Kunduz and Baghlan, and there has been a dramatic increase in attacks on Isaf forces in Faryab and Sari Pul. But it is quite likely that many of the attacks attributed to the Taliban in Balkh and surrounding provinces are carried out by other actors. The main challenge in northern Afghanistan is to prevent the escalation of violence and, in the worst case, a civil war between ethnic groups.

The situation is serious. What is Isaf and Regional Command (RC) North to do if the 209 Corps moves against Atta? What can Isaf possibly do if Uzbek, Hazara and Pashtun warlords mobilise their militias to fight the Tajiks? How would a civil war in the north affect Isaf logistics? In posing these questions it is worth emphasising that any attempt to remove

### A refocused effort

Norway, as the lead nation in Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Meymaneh in Faryab province, is heavily engaged in north-western Afghanistan. Norway has 500 troops in Balkh and Faryab: it provides more than 300 of the approximately 450 troops in the PRT, including helicopters for medevac (medical evacuation), and most of the mobile elements. Norwegian officers also mentor a *kandak* (a battalion of 600 troops) of the Afghan national army in Faryab, and the country is the largest donor in the province. In Mazar-e-Sharif, a group of Norwegian officers is part of RC North, while another is mentoring at brigade and corps level in ANA's 209 Corps. Thus, Norway is a prominent actor in north-western Afghanistan and therefore in a key position regarding the country's highly dynamic and entangled national, regional and local power-struggles.

But Norway seems to be of two minds over how it regards the role of a PRT lead nation. On the one hand, the Norwegian authorities insist that Norway is not responsible for Faryab, but that the Afghan authorities, Isaf and Unama are. In this formalistic perspective, Norway is in Faryab as a representative of Isaf rather than as an actor in its own right. Norway, in short, has never wanted to make Faryab a “Norwegian” province. On the other hand, Norway has real influence in Faryab and has pushed through major strategic decisions in Faryab and RC North, which have had considerable impact in the region.<sup>9</sup> This is where Norwegian efforts can make a real difference.

6 Amin Saikal, “Bloody conflict looms in the Afghan north”, Guardian, 19 October 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/oct/19/afghanistan-north-hamid-karzai-government>, accessed 14 March 2010.

7 Yaroslav Trofimov, “Powerful Afghan Governor Challenges President”, Wall Street Journal”, 6 November 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125745832585731891.html>, accessed 14 March 2010.

8 “Warlords Re-emerging in the North”, Institute for War & Peace Reporting, ARR No 348, 17 December 2009, [http://www.iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=358349&apc\\_state=henparr](http://www.iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=358349&apc_state=henparr), accessed 14 March 2010.

9 Ståle Ulriksen, “Norwegian challenges as a PRT lead nation in Faryab province, Afghanistan”, March 2010, forthcoming Noref policy brief.

What is needed in the north is a focused political attempt to stabilise northern Afghanistan, which seeks to mediate between the different actors and the decision-making system as a whole. The aim would be to negotiate a new balance between the national government, and actors at the regional, provincial and local level.

As the tension between Kabul and the regions is likely to persist, such an effort raises a range of difficult questions, which are of fundamental importance for Afghanistan in general, but acutely so in the north. Among them:

- Are provincial and district governors still to be appointed by the president or elected locally
- Could other checks and balances be built into the system?
- Is the present system, with thirty-four provinces under one central government, a good solution, or should the system be based upon larger region? If so, how should the borders of those regions be drawn?
- Are the security forces to be controlled exclusively by the central government?
- What should the relationship be between governors and the security forces?



### Parallel power structures

It is necessary as part of this political effort to recognise the existence of at least three parallel power structures in Afghanistan: governmental structures; semi-feudal and ethnically-based structures built on the power of former warlords; and traditional systems of *shura* (councils) of elders at several levels. Ways must be found to integrate these into a sustainable whole.

A narrow focus on Faryab would not address this cluster of issues. When resources are scarce and time is short, rapid and fragmented efforts at coerced change at the district level may not be the smartest of methods. Thus, Norway should attempt to wind down PRT Meymaneh in a relatively short period of time in order to be able to address

problems in a north-western region consisting of four or five provinces. The planned 3rd Brigade in 2009 Corps is expected to cover Faryab, Jowzjan and Sari Pul. The situation in Faryab also cannot be separated from developments in the northern part of Badghis. Meanwhile, Balkh is the strategic core of the entire northern region.

Norway would need partners in such a role. Sweden, Latvia and Finland are already involved in the region. Latvia is Norway's partner in PRT Meymaneh. Sweden, in cooperation with Finland, is the lead nation in PRT Mazar-e-Sharif (which covers Balkh, Jowzjan, Sari-Pul and Samangan). Norway, Sweden and Finland recently signed a letter of intent for cooperation on the building of the aforementioned 3rd Brigade.

### Coordination with the US

Any new role for Norway in the north must be coordinated with the United States. Even if Norway counts the US among its closest friends and allies, it is obvious that the two countries do not see eye-to-eye on all questions concerning the handling of Afghanistan. Still, as the US is the dominant external actor in Afghanistan as a whole, and increasingly so in the north too, Norwegian strategy must be coordinated with that of the US; American officials and policy advisors, when questioned directly on this issue during interviews in Kabul in February 2009, said that the US would prefer Norwegian efforts in the north to be concentrated.

The initiative also requires tight cooperation with Afghan authorities and power-structures as well as with RC North and Unama. A prerequisite for success is likely to be the provision of significant funding for development that could create win-win situations for the involved actors. If Norway and other partners were willing to concentrate their efforts in the area, substantial amounts could be provided.

The Swedish position on the distribution of development aid in Afghanistan is in many ways similar to the Norwegian. A shared concentration and cooperation in a limited region could perhaps create a critical mass large enough to secure a sustainable impact for the ideals and values these states want to promote.

These suggested political efforts would have a security dimension, focused both on continued mentoring of the ANA and the provision of force-multipliers and specialised capabilities. This would probably ease some of Norway's difficulties in rotating infantry in Meymaneh. The most effective Norwegian contribution in this area would probably be the deployment of special-operations forces to north-western Afghanistan.

### Recommendations for policymaking

Norway is a small player in Afghanistan and is not likely to have a decisive influence on the major strategic decisions made over Afghanistan as a whole. However, Norway could make a difference in north-western Afghanistan. Norway, perhaps in cooperation with Sweden, could take on the role of mediator and facilitator in the region. Such a role should be implemented in very close contact with Afghan authorities at all levels, but also with Isaf and Unama; and it would require coordinated efforts in the security field, the development field and the political field.

In sum:

- The complexity of Afghan politics and the political landscape in the north-west means that such a role would have to be supported by an enhanced capability for political intelligence and analysis.
- A role as a mediator and facilitator would require teams specialised in such roles. Norway has a lot of experience from such work elsewhere.
- Norwegian aid should be concentrated in north-western Afghanistan, but in close cooperation with local, regional and national authorities. By concentrating its development efforts in this region Norway could also contribute to creating win-win situations for the involved actors, including the government in Kabul.
- In the security field Norway should focus its efforts on development of the Afghan national army, but not only exclusively in the military field. The political role of the army is absolutely essential to the future of Afghanistan.

- Norwegian military forces should step down from their "national roles" in Faryab and focus more on the north-western region as such. They should be dedicated to the support of ANA's 209 Corps in the north-west. The creation of the 3rd Brigade in 209 Corps should be reinforced.
- The deployment of Norwegian special forces to the north-west would ease many of these tasks. They would contribute to enhanced political intelligence and information gathering. They represent military capabilities that may act as force-multipliers for ANA.

### Further reading

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**Design:** Ivar Windheim and pikelus.no

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