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Norway's political test in Faryab, Afghanistan: how to lead?

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Executive Summary

Norway's five-year experience as the lead nation of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Meymaneh in Faryab province, north-west Afghanistan, has been marked by an increased level of violence. This violence is often attributed to the greater strength of the Taliban insurgency. But a close analysis suggests that it has other causes. They include traditional local feuds, struggles between different power structures, and competition over drug trafficking. The nature of politics in this part of Afghanistan – where institutions are weak, parallel power systems coexist, warlords exercise personalised control, ethnicised divisions are growing, and older men dominate – underpins these conflicts. The district of Ghormach in nearby Badghis province, for which Norway took responsibility in January 2009, illustrates the problem: here, a series of military operations in an area of extreme poverty and intense ethnic rivalry seems to have caused more problems than it has solved.

This complex pattern of conflicts in and around Faryab presents Norway with an acute test, which at present PRT Meymaneh is not equipped to handle owing to weak political direction and military and civilian efforts that are not coordinated. If this analysis is correct, Norway should refine its political approach in north-west Afghanistan. This could involve rethinking the separation of civilian and military efforts; deploying special operations forces; and acquiring deeper intelligence on the region's political dynamics.

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Background[1]

In September 2005, Norway succeeded the United Kingdom as the "lead nation" in Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Meymaneh in Faryab province in north-western Afghanistan. A few statistics convey some of the main trends of the almost five years that have followed, and indicate the nature of the predicament that Norway as the lead nation now faces.

At the time of the handover, the PRT had around 100 troops; by early 2010 this number had increased to 450 (Norwegian and Latvian). In 2005, the Afghan National Army (ANA) proper had no presence in Faryab; by 2009 it had a full *kandak* (battalion) that was mentored by almost fifty Norwegian officers. In 2010, around 700 United States troops are expected to arrive to mentor an expanded police force. In 2005, Faryab was considered a "safe" province; in 2009, Norwegian troops were probably involved in close to 100 attacks and firefights.[2] Violent incidents have continued in 2010. Norwegian troops have suffered serious losses, including four killed and nine wounded in action during May and June.[3]

This increase in violence is normally attributed to the increased strength of the Taliban insurgency. This policy brief, however, argues that a large part of the violence seems to be rooted in other factors: a mixture of traditional local feuds, struggles between old and new power structures, and competition over the control of drug-trafficking. If this argument is correct, the implication is that the current plans of the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) – involving enhanced military pressure and the attempted strengthening of Afghan security forces in and around Faryab – are unlikely to succeed. Rather, this increased activity is likely to prove counterproductive by activating latent conflicts and creating new ones.

The Faryab context

Faryab is one of nine provinces in the area of responsibility of Isaf's Regional Command (RC) North. RC North has its headquarters in Mazar-i-Sharif in Balkh province. It is commanded by Germany, which contributes most of the 6,000 troops in the region. The Afghan army's 209 Corps covers the same region. The corps has only one brigade, but two more are being formed. One of these will cover Faryab, Jowzjan and Sari Pul from its headquarter in Meymaneh. The 20,500 square kilometres of Faryab province are divided into fifteen districts; estimates of the population are unusually wide in range, from 1 million to 2 million (Norwegian authorities tend to use the lower figure, Afghan local authorities the higher). Faryab is one of the most ethnically diverse of all Afghanistan's provinces. The majority of the people are Turkic-speaking Uzbeks and Turkmen, but there are also substantial Arab, Hazara, Pashtun and Tajik groups.

In 2009, there was fighting in almost all districts, with the four districts in the Andkhoy area appearing the sole prominent exception. Faryab's three southernmost districts – Ghormach, Qaisar and Almar – have been problematic since 2007. (Four Norwegian soldiers were killed in Almar on 27 June 2010.) Throughout 2009 there was heavy fighting too in central Faryab, notably in Pashtun Kot and Shirin Tagab – a situation that has continued in 2010. The eastern part of the province, Bilchiragh in particular, also grew more unstable in 2009.

In this part of Afghanistan, power is basically distributed and implemented through three systems:

1. The governor, the security chief and the district governors are appointed by the president. Policy is implemented in cooperation with the representations of the line ministries in each province. The Afghan

1 This is the second of two policy briefs by Ståle Ulriksen on the challenges facing Norway in Afghanistan. The first is "Norway's strategic challenges in Afghanistan: how to make a difference?", Noref, April 2010, http://www.peacebuilding.no/eng/Publications/Noref-Policy-Briefs/Norway-s-strategic-challenges-in-Afghanistan-how-to-make-a-difference, accessed 1 July 2010. Both are based on research financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence.

2 The number is an estimate. See the articles on www.mil.no; Åge Winge, "30-50 skarpe oppdrag siden nyttår", in *Addressa*, no. 11, September 2009, http://www.adressa.no/nyheter/utenriks/article1381802.ece , accessed 16 March 2010; and "Nordmenn i kamp hver tredje dag i Afghanistan", NRK News, 22 December 2009, http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/verden/1.6919407 , accessed 16 March 2010.

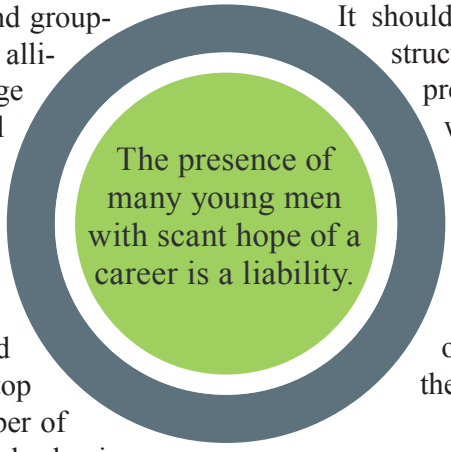
3 "Four Norwegian soldiers killed in Afghanistan", BBC News, 27 June 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/10430341.stm , accessed 1 July 2010.

national army operates independently of the provinces. Northern Afghanistan is the responsibility of 209 Corps. The relationship between the ANA and the Afghan National Police (ANP) is problematic. The police have been accused of corruption, illegal taxation and involvement in drug-trafficking (a situation discussed in more detail below).

2. Afghan politics are highly personalised. Institutions are weak, political parties and groupings are loose constellations, and alliances and allegiances may change quickly. Alongside the formal structures, an almost feudal system of power functions. Control is exercised through direct or indirect personal bonds to the warlord in charge. In Faryab, Jowzjan and Sari Pul the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum sits on top of a pyramid that includes a number of provincial- and district-level warlords; in Faryab itself, Fatullah Khan of Qaisar is the senior warlord after Dostum and the latter's closest ally. Dostum, the strongman of *Junbesh-e-Melli-ye Afghanistan* (commonly referred to as Junbesh), has over the last two decades crushed a series of Uzbek and Turkmen rebellions in Faryab. Indeed, the competition for control in northern Afghanistan between Dostum's Uzbek-dominated Junbesh and the Tajik-dominated *Jamiat-i Islami* (or Jamiat) seems to be resurfacing; this poses a major challenge to Isaf.
3. Public administration is very weak outside the larger towns.[4] Power structures do exist, however. The traditional system based on the *shura* (council of elders, at village or district council) is still strong in Faryab. In the districts, the *shura* represents the most common mechanism for the handling of conflicts and disputes. Indeed, the expansion of government structures may cause friction between old and new systems of power and generate conflict, especially if representatives for those authorities are corrupt. Thus there is a real danger that the planned expansion of the police's presence in Faryab will result in decreased stability.

4 Martin Årnæs, "The Hearts and Minds of Faryab – Afghan Perceptions and Civil-Military Relations", Master's thesis at War Studies Department, King's College, London, 2009.

There are strong tensions between the different systems. But many actors will work within all of them simultaneously at local, provincial, regional and national level. Most disputes and conflicts in Faryab are local, and the issue at stake in the majority of cases is control over water, land and grazing rights. If the parties to such disputes are bonded to the warlord system, conflicts may easily escalate.



It should also be noted that all these power structures are dominated by old men. The presence of a large number of young men with scant hope of a career in the existing formal or informal systems of power is a liability. They represent a huge recruitment pool for rebel groups and criminal bands, but they may also resort to violence on their own in order to carve out a position for themselves.

The ethnic-political contest

For two centuries, Meymaneh was the leading tribal chiefdom of a group of four such Uzbek *khanates* in the area presently covered by Faryab, Jowzjan and Sari-Pul. These principalities were conquered by Afghan kings in a series of bloody wars in the late 19th century. Meymaneh was the last *khanate* to fall. Afghan occupation was violent and oppressive; thousands of Pashtun settlers moved into the area to consolidate Kabul's gains, and local farmers and herders lost their land. The region was effectively colonised. This colonisation is still at the root of present-day disputes and conflicts in Faryab. Relations between Pashtuns and the other ethnic groups are characterised by mutual distrust and hostility.

It would seem that the new political system is in the process of being consolidated and institutionalised. Uzbek warlords have gradually changed their focus from blunt power based on violence to working politically through formal institutions; and Junbesh has been transformed from an Uzbek army to a political party. Even so, there is little doubt that the warlords are still capable of mobilising fairly large numbers of troops.

The creation of a different political system is a kind of success. The problem in Afghanistan is that any such progress can also breed new conflict. In this case, Pashtuns are being politically marginalised. Moreover, they have already been receiving less development aid than their Uzbek and Tajik neighbours; Norwegian attempts to distribute aid evenly meet heavy resistance from the major parties in the province.

Thus the strengthening of new political institutions is to the disadvantage of the Pashtuns of Faryab. Indeed, the consolidation of the new political system is likely to cause further polarisation along ethnic lines. The developments in Shirin Tagab district around the turn of the year may indicate such a process. On 31 December 2009, Norwegian forces fought rebels for seven hours in Ateh Khan Kwajeh, a large Pashtun village, and hostilities continued in the area during the spring of 2010. However, the largest Pashtun areas in the north-west are found to the south of these areas, in Ghormach and Bala Murghab.

Ghormach: the crucible

In 2007 and 2008, trouble was stirring in Ghormach, the northernmost district of Badghis province which borders southern Faryab. That border also separated the areas of responsibility of RC North and RC West. Violence originating in Ghormach spilled over into Faryab, which the Norwegians saw as a threat to the core area of their responsibility. Norwegian authorities responded to this situation by arguing that they should assume responsibility for Ghormach too; their justification was that neither the Italian-led RC West, nor the Spanish-led PRT Qala-e-Naw, could manage Ghormach, and that they were best placed to address the threat from it to Faryab.

Ghormach district was eventually transferred from Badghis to Faryab, from RC West to RC North, and from PRT Qala-e-Naw to PRT Meymaneh on 1 January 2009 – though only after a series of disputes between RC North and RC West, and between Norwegians and Germans in RC North. Simultaneously, Norway took over the responsibility for mentoring the 1st *kandak* (battalion) of the first brigade of the 209 Corps of the ANA. This battalion presently operates Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in Ghormach and Qaisar, and rotates companies between these FOBs and the ANA base in Meymaneh.

Since the transfer, the number of violent incidents in Ghormach has increased sharply. In the spring of 2010 the district governor fled Ghormach. Simultaneously, Acted, the only NGO operating in Ghormach was forced to terminate its activities in the district. On 2 May 2010 a Norwegian unit with 16 soldiers and 2 interpreters was assaulted in the Tutak area of Ghormach.[5] The fight lasted for hours, and when reinforcements arrived all the vehicles had been damaged and nine soldiers wounded.

Badghis is one of the most underdeveloped provinces of Afghanistan. Tajiks and Dari-speaking Aimak nomads make up some 60% of the total population of 500,000; but in Bala Murghab and Ghormach, the two northernmost districts, more than 90% of the population is Pashtun. Ghormach itself has an estimated population of 60,000 and Bala Murghab approximately 120,000. Politically, Badghis is controlled by the well-established, Tajik-dominated Islamist *Jamiat-i-Siami*, which has deliberately been marginalising the Pashtuns in the province. Whatever development funds have reached Badghis, they have certainly not reached Ghormach and Bala Murghab: they remain the poorest districts in one of the poorest provinces in Afghanistan.

But the overall Pashtun dominance is combined with great internal heterogeneity and lack of coherence within the group. In Ghormach alone there are three tribes with a total of seven clans, and mutual hostility and violence has been the normal state of affairs.

The information gap

The Taliban are believed to have restarted their activities in Badghis in 2006 or 2007, and were able to establish a stronghold in Bala Murghab and Ghormach. The analyst Antonio Giustozzi reports that the Tajik-dominated border police of Badghis raided Bala Murghab and Ghormach in autumn 2007, in the course of which the ill-disciplined force perpetrated a wave of

5 Rapport fra erfaringsgruppen etter angrep på norske styrker i Ghormach distrikt 2. mai 2010, http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00137/Erfaringsrapport__A_137270a.pdf , accessed 1 July 2010.

looting and raping in the Pashtun villages.[6] Between October 2008 and May 2009, international and Afghan forces mounted four operations in Ghormach. In "Harekate Yolo II" and "Karez", heavily armed Norwegian and ANA troops entered Ghormach and fought a series of skirmishes with rebels believed to be Taliban; in "Shaheen Sahara" and "Four Seasons", Afghan national police and their American mentors, operating out of Qaisar in Faryab, also moved into Ghormach.

These operations were, in effect, raids conducted by sizeable forces into an area they did not control. In counterinsurgency (COIN) terminology, the aim of the raids was to "shape" or "clear" Ghormach, though little attention was given to "hold" or "build" in their aftermath. It's true that alongside these operations, talks were held with local elders in which community needs were charted – and, in all probability, expectations raised. In practice, substantial aid projects took a long time to be implemented in Ghormach; Acted (an NGO) had moved into the area in June 2008, but delayed starting its work until Operation Karez had ended in order to avoid being identified too closely with the military forces.

It is very likely that those responsible for conducting the operations in Ghormach lacked accurate or unbiased information about conditions there; and indeed, that some of the information they did possess was provided by actors in Faryab who sought to promote their own agenda in the district.

The identification of the different armed groups is a major problem in the north-west. The Taliban and its allies have grown stronger in the north. However, the strength of the links between dissatisfied Pashtun groups in Badghis-Faryab and the Taliban is highly uncertain. The question is also controversial within the Norwegian armed forces, which tend to project onto the opposition a single indiscriminate category: "rebels".

6 Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's Marches: Heart, Farah, Badghis and Ghor", in Antonio Giustozzi, ed, *Decoding the New Taliban*, London, Hurst & Co, 2009.

Yet much of the fighting in the area is probably unrelated, or only loosely connected, to the Taliban insurgency. Some actors may have an interest in being seen as members of the Taliban, but that does not necessarily imply a shared ideology or close contact with Taliban command structures. At least two groups claiming to represent the Taliban are known to have fought each other in Ghormach and Bala Murghab.

The need for care

But other actors in this complex situation may seek to get Isaf support by labelling their enemies as Taliban – or as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a radical group active since the late 1990s. Their motivation may be connected to long standing local feuds over land, water and grazing rights, or over the control of drug-production and drug-trafficking.

Some actors may seek to get Isaf support by labelling their enemies as Taliban.

Fatullah Khan of Qaisar is an influential warlord in Faryab and the closest ally of Dostum there. Historically, there has been strong tension over water rights between the Uzbek rulers of Qaisar and the Pashtun clans of Ghormach. In July 2007, a feud broke out between Uzbeks and Pashtuns in the Balangur-Senjetak area on the Qaisar-Ghormach border. The assassination of one of Fatullah's commanders was avenged by the killing of a mullah in Ghormach. A few days later the governor called for an emergency security meeting. From that point, Ghormach came to be seen as a threat to Faryab. Ghormach is a major producer of poppy in north-western Afghanistan, which Faryab is not. But Faryab is an important transit area for drugs coming out of Badghis and Sari Pul, and this trafficking has provided major actors in Faryab with an important if contested source of income.

It is well known, for example, that positions in the police in many areas of Afghanistan are traded for substantial sums of money. This is also likely to be the case in Faryab, where the involvement of police (and perhaps other provincial authorities) in drug-trafficking has been confirmed in former

reports.[7] General Abdul Rahman Rahmani of the 209 Corps has even accused the police of cooperating with the insurgents: "I am only talking about what I have seen with my own eyes. The police, along with the Taliban, were collecting tithes from people in Faryab province. When the army arrived, the police started fighting against the army jointly with the Taliban."[8]

In light of all this, there is every reason to step very carefully in Ghormach – even more so now that the US is expanding its presence in Faryab and Ghormach. The experience thus far has been that an increased presence of the security forces has led to increased resistance. If it is assumed that the original trigger of intervention was not directly linked to the Taliban insurgency, the conclusion must be that this intervention has caused far more problems than it has solved.

Sayyad and Darzab: the danger

In 2009, fighting flared up in Darzab district of Jowzjan province and Sayyad district of Sar-i-Pul province, each of which shares a border with Faryab. Swedish forces have clashed repeatedly with rebels in Sayyad and Darzab since spring 2009. Mullah Mohammed Raheem, allegedly the Taliban leader in Sari Pul, claims that his forces coordinate operations with Taliban in Darzab as well as in Bilchirach district in Faryab;[9] and recent news reports claim that Uzbeks, Turkmens and others have joined the Taliban in Faryab.

The latter at least seems unlikely, as non-Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan tend to perceive the Taliban as a Pashtun movement (even though it does not project itself as such). But the escalation of violence in these two districts is a fact, and has been blamed by the chiefs of police in Faryab (General Khalilullah Andarabi) and Jowzjan (General Khalilullah Aminzada) on the renewed presence of the IMU in north-western Afghanistan.[10]

If true, the Taliban and its allies have established an arc of influence from Bala Murghab through Ghormach and Faryab to Darzab and Sayyad – and are now a serious challenge to Isaf in the region. At the same time, information on the exact nature of the increased troubles in Sayyad and Darzab is scarce. It may be relevant here that Sari Pul (like Baghdis) is a drug-exporting province, and that drugs from Sari Pul are believed to be trafficked through Sayyad to Faryab. Isaf should be careful not to attribute to the insurgency what are instead the actions of bandits.

Counterinsurgency and complexity

This brief sketch suggests that the pattern of conflicts and disputes in and around Faryab is highly complex. At present, PRT Meymaneh is not equipped to handle such complexity.

Modern counterinsurgency doctrine presupposes an intimate coordination of civilian and military efforts. Norway, in contrast to its closest allies, has chosen to separate these two aspects of COIN. The reason for the Norwegian "exception" lies in the country's distinct profile as a marginal military power but a substantial actor in international humanitarian aid and development. This is reflected in the domestic political

7 Petter Bauck, Arne Strand, Mohammad Hakim and Arghawan Akbari, *Afghanistan: An Assessment of Conflict and Actors in Faryab Province to Establish a Basis for Increased Norwegian Civilian Involvement*, Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), February 2007, http://www.cmi.no/pdf/?file=/afghanistan/doc/Faryab%20Risk%20Assessment%20CMI%20report%2002.07.pdf accessed 16 March 2010.

8 Ahmad Kawosh, "Afghan Army Questions Police Competence", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Afghan Recovery Report* (ARR), no. 348, 16 December 2009, http://www.iwpr.net/report-news/afghan-army-questions-police-competence , accessed 16 March 2010.

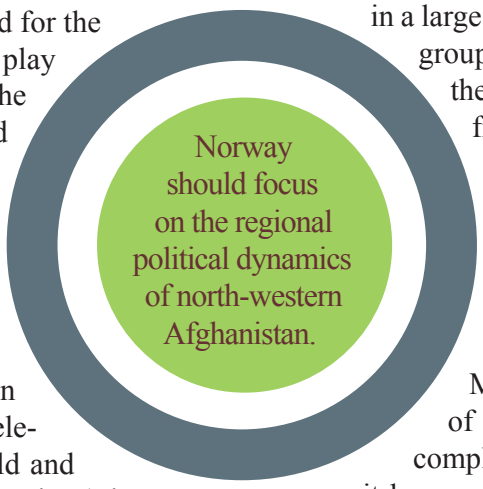
9 Abdul Hameed Bakier, "Taliban Issue Interview with the Jihad Leader of Sar-i-Pul Province", *Terrorism Monitor* , vol 7, 1ssue 39, 23 December 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35862&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=d16c7a4 , accessed 16 March 2010.

10 Jan Mohammad Habibi and Sayed Ahman Abedi, "Could IMU Chief's Death Curb Rebel Force in Afghanistan?", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Afghan Recovery Report* (ARR), no. 340, 7 October 2009, http://www.iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=356362&apc_state=heniarr2009, accessed 16 March 2010.

landscape, where the debate on the need to establish a "humanitarian space" in Afghanistan has been intense – and humanitarian arguments have proved more convincing than military ones.

The result is that the civilian and military aspects of Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan are separated: both types of personnel are co-located in the PRT, but their efforts are neither synchronised nor coordinated at the tactical or operational level, and Norwegian troops are forbidden from performing humanitarian and development tasks.[11]

This separation of functions might not have been a problem if the PRT had been designed for the political role it is actually intended to play in Faryab. It is not. The PRT lacks the vital leadership elements that could have provided overall political direction to its civilian and military elements.



The issue is compounded by the fact that counterinsurgency is a fundamentally political activity, which in principle requires a strong civilian element that can be deployed in the field and (as is the case with most PRT lead nations) is integrated with the military staff.

Norwegian ministries lack such a civilian apparatus; most of the country's development aid and humanitarian assistance is channelled through NGOs or United Nations agencies, and Norway's foreign affairs ministry even has difficulty in staffing its Kabul embassy. When it comes to the few civilian positions available in PRT Meymaneh, these problems are magnified. Yet Norwegian officers continue to use counterinsurgency-generated concepts like "shape-clear-hold-build". The distance of such language from practice on the ground creates a double gap: between theory and practice, and between how military and civilian personnel relate to Afghan society. The Norwegian army, by not adopting a comprehensive COIN doctrine, is still operating within a "manoeuvre warfare" mindset in which training and practice are very much focused on combat and the mental focus is strictly on the enemy.

There is little doubt that in terms of combat the Norwegian forces have done well. They have been successful in a large number of clashes with hostile armed groups, inflicting many casualties while themselves avoiding large losses, except from IEDs. The Norwegian mentors also seem to have enhanced the capabilities of their ANA partners. It is not possible to be nearly so certain about whether the PRT has succeeded as a political instrument. But on reflection, how could it have? PRT Meymaneh, after all, has just a handful of civilian experts. It operates in a very complex political environment about which it has very little information. The PRT rotates most of its staff, including the whole military leadership every six months. Clearly this is not sufficient to learn and adapt to an important political role in Faryab.

Passing the test: four recommendations

If the foregoing analysis is sound, the increased violence in Faryab is primarily brewed at a local level, and has weaker links to the Taliban insurgency than is often assumed. In that case, its tensions, disputes and conflicts – though still dangerous – may be easier to manage locally. But the same logic dictates that intensified military confrontation may cause more harm than good. The practical conclusions that follow are fourfold:

First, what happens in Faryab is heavily influenced by developments elsewhere: events in neighbouring provinces (Badghis, Jowzjan and Sari Pul); and wider tensions involving regional actors in northern

11 Cedric H. de Coning, Niels Nagelhus Schia, Helge Lurås and Ståle Ulriksen, *Norway's Whole-of-Government Approach and its Engagement with Afghanistan*, Oslo, NUPI, Security in Practice report no. 8, 2009, http://english.nupi.no/Publications/Books-and-reports/2009/Norway-s-Whole-of-Government-Approach-and-its-Engagement-with-Afghanistan , accessed 16 March 2010.

Afghanistan, and between these and national authorities. Norway should thus consider changing its focus to the regional political dynamics of north-western Afghanistan (see the accompanying policy brief "Norway's strategic challenges in Afghanistan: how to make a difference?", Noref, April 2010). Such a shift would require that the territorial responsibility for Faryab be transferred to Afghan authorities (or to American forces who now make up the majority of Isaf forces in the province). As has been argued above, Norway is not well suited for territorial responsibility within an overall COIN framework. Rather Norwegian military and civilian assets are designed to be plugged into an institutional effort.

Second, every expansion of government structures into violence-affected districts is likely to cause substantial friction, with a high risk of increased conflict. Norway should be cautious in backing such actions, and should support them only after having conducted a deep political analysis of the districts in question and a thorough vetting of the government elements they choose to back.

Third, Norway should consider deployment of special operations forces (SOF) to north-western Afghanistan. That would enhance information gathering capabilities as well as the ability to act decisively against criminal elements. A shift to SOF operations would also facilitate a move away from manoeuvre warfare tactics towards more context sensitive activities.

Fourth, Norway should increase its means for producing political intelligence and analysis in north-western Afghanistan. Norway should, like Denmark and the UK, contemplate setting up an integrated stabilisation unit in order to provide such a capacity. The present practice does not suffice to meet the great challenges posed.

Further reading

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