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Harald Hoiback

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AFGHANISTAN'S LESSONS: PART II

Norway's Lessons

Harald Høiback

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ABSTRACT: This article argues Norway's minor role in the Afghanistan War (2001–14) included opportunities to learn about the evolution of military deployments over the course of a prolonged counterinsurgency-focused conflict, the civilian and military dynamics, and the political challenges of contributing to such a conflict.

After the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, Norway expressed sympathy for the United States and took precautionary measures to avoid being attacked.¹ Not knowing whether this had been a single burst of hyperterrorism or the start of a bigger wave, the United Nations Security Council, where Norway had a seat in 2001, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization soon expressed their support for the United States. Whether Norway should do anything concrete, apart from showing solidarity through words and resolutions, was an open question.

On September 10, 2001, the day before the attack, the Norwegian Labour Party of then Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg lost the general election. Two days after the attack, outgoing minister of defense Bjørn Tøre Godal, stated it was unlikely Norway would participate in any operations to find and punish the terrorists.² The government also said NATO's decision to invoke Article 5 did not automatically imply Norway would participate in any of the organization's missions connected to the attack. This surprisingly outspoken reluctance on the part of Norway was noted in the United States: the *New York Times* reported Norway had officially distanced itself from NATO's solidarity decision.³ Parts of the Norwegian media also criticized the outgoing Labour government for not standing by Norway's most important ally.⁴

The Norwegian government had several reasons for its reluctance in this matter. Primarily, it was unclear if the Americans would ask for assistance in Afghanistan. Perhaps, instead, the United States would request European nations increase forces in the Balkans to relieve American troops there. Second, Norwegian armed forces were rather stretched after another round of post-Cold War cutbacks. Most of

Lt.Col Harald Hoiback, deputy commander at the Norwegian Armed Forces Museum and visiting fellow at the Royal Danish Defense College, holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Oslo and a master's degree in history from the University of Glasgow. He served as the military member of the secretariat to the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan.

1 The author wants to thank Dr. Paal Sigurd Hilde, the head of the secretariat that supported the Afghanistan commission, for his help in preparing this article.

2 Olav Bogen and Magnus Håkenstad, *Balansegang: Forsvarets omstilling etter den kalde krigen* (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2015), 147.

3 Bogen and Håkenstad, *Balansegang*, 146–49.

4 Bogen and Håkenstad, *Balansegang*, 146–49.

Norway's expeditionary military hardware was, or had recently been, deployed to the Balkans. Third, it was difficult to imagine Norwegians fighting alongside American soldiers in central Asia. What was actually at stake for Norway in Afghanistan? Expeditionary warfare in that area would be unprecedented and completely out of the Norwegian character. All this changed, however, when the new government assumed control.

New Government and Political Determination

On October 19, 2001, the new center-right coalition government took office. The new government's primary security policy concerns became virtually the opposite of the previous Labour government. What would happen to Norway's interests and position in NATO if it did not participate in what could turn into a major undertaking involving all our closest partners? If the greater part of NATO supported the United States tangibly in the war against terrorism, it could be awkward for Norway to stay out in the short term, and even dangerous in the long run.

Norway's main worry since the Second World War has been its geographic isolation from the European mainland—contending with Russian maneuvers alone is not a comfortable thought. Hence, regardless of the feasibility of a coalition operation in Afghanistan, Norway had to participate. Even if operations ended in a quagmire, it would serve Norway's interests to be part of the debacle rather than stay home. A dysfunctional NATO with a tangible US presence was preferable to no NATO and the possibility of American isolationism.

Consequently, the new minister of defense, Kristin Krohn Devold, of the Conservative Party, saw it as her mission to get Norwegian boots on the ground in Afghanistan as soon as possible: "It was important to signal our support to the Americans by deploying forces quickly. To be relevant, we needed to be over there by Christmas."⁵ But in the fall of 2001, boots suitable for Afghan terrain and American needs were not available. After some months of preparation, the Norwegian government sent a small detachment of special forces to operate from Kandahar as part of Task Force K-Bar, a unit of mine clearers for the airports at Kandahar and Bagram, and a contingent of one C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft and six F-16 Fighting Falcons to be stationed at Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan.⁶ While small in number, the initial Norwegian contribution was significant in terms of skills and quality. Norway's first participation in an operation "outside the wire" occurred on January 15, 2002.⁷

5 Kristin Krohn Devold in John Inge Hammersmark, "Norske spesialstyrker-Fra skjult ressurs til politisk spydspiss," Forsvarets Stabsskole, *Militære Studier* 3 (2015), 71.

6 Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan (NCA), *A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014*, Official Norwegian Report NOU 2016:8 (Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense, June 6, 2016), 70.

7 NCA, *Good Ally*, 55.

Increased Contributions and Success

With the call for convening a *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly) in Kabul in December 2003, US pressure on allies for further contributions increased. The Ministry of Defence recommended in October [2003] that Norway offer a company to carry out security and guard duty. This would be a high-profile assignment that would [further] demonstrate Norway's ability and willingness to support [the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and] alliance efforts in Afghanistan. The assignment was also well suited to the [newly reorganized] Telemark Battalion.⁸

Norway was willing to let the company stay in Kabul for one year after the end of the *Loya Jirga*. Moreover, in the summer of 2004, Norway also volunteered to take the lead of one of the three battle groups in the Kabul Multinational Brigade. The Norwegian Battle Group 3 (BG3) was a significant contribution to the mission. The headquarters staff comprised 40 officers including 31 Norwegians, 8 Hungarians, and 1 Italian. In the Norwegian context, this was a robust staff, resembling a staff for a Norwegian brigade.⁹ Furthermore, BG3 included three maneuver elements reflecting the composition of the headquarters staff—one Norwegian, one Hungarian, and one Italian company.

In many ways, BG3 was a success story. The Norwegian Army found the mission important, feasible, and militarily relevant, and experiences drawn from this mission could be utilized back home. It was soon evident, however, that Norway would have to get involved in establishing the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). As a result, Norway came to an important juncture where military considerations pointed in one direction, that is, stay the course in Kabul, while political considerations pointed another, that is, operate a PRT.

Failures and Complications

According to the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan, “in December 2003, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked Norway directly to participate in establishing new PRTs.”¹⁰ In essence, the choice was to join either a British or a German PRT in northern Afghanistan. For several reasons, Norway chose the British-led PRT being established in Meymaneh in the Faryab province in northwestern Afghanistan together with Finnish forces. Approximately 30 Norwegians deployed to the PRT in July 2004.¹¹

While the PRT deployment added to Norway's main contribution in Kabul, the NATO secretary general signaled expectations that countries such as Norway should not only participate in PRTs but eventually assume command of one. The Norwegian military leadership was highly critical of taking on such a responsibility and recommended,

8 NCA, *Good Ally*, 58 (italics in the original).

9 NCA, *Good Ally*, 58; and Lars Lervik, “Norwegian battlegroup 3/Kabul Multinational Brigade/ISAF: Erfaringer fra multinasjonal bataljonsstridsgruppe i Kabul,” *Norsk militært tidsskrift* 176, no. 2 (2006): 13.

10 NCA, *Good Ally*, 59.

11 NCA, *Good Ally*, 59.

instead, continuing efforts in Kabul with a brigade command element and a company-sized unit. According to the Norwegian defense staff, considerations involving budgeting, personnel, security, competencies, materiel, and profiling, all pointed toward continuing to concentrate efforts in Kabul rather than assuming responsibility for a PRT.

The military was also concerned that assuming responsibility for the PRT in Meymaneh would give rise to expectations Norway would take on further obligations in the event of the withdrawal of other actors, particularly Britain. Having responsibility for a province, such as Faryab, could make withdrawing difficult, if it became necessary. Moreover, the military had no previous experience mentoring, advising, and reconstructing on foreign soil while simultaneously defending against enemy attacks. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Defense saw it as politically desirable to take a more active role in the ISAF expansion by concentrating Norway's presence in the north while simultaneously reducing its presence in Kabul considerably in the spring of 2006.¹²

In addition to employing the PRT in Meymaneh during March 2006, Norway also “deployed a robust company battle group of roughly 200 troops, including a battalion staff, to Mazar-i Sharif in order to relieve a British force. This new company was a quick reaction force under German command in Regional Command North [the ISAF command with responsibility for northern Afghanistan].”¹³ Compared to the BG3, the quick reaction force was bigger and more mechanized. While BG3 had been based on foot patrols in an urban setting, the quick reaction force needed to be able to support PRTs and other units in the region, and thus be more resilient and mobile. This was also a deployment well-suited for Telemark Battalion, which was in a process of converting from a conscription-based unit to a fully professional unit, something new to the Norwegian armed forces.¹⁴ But in 2008, as the size of the PRT steadily increased, Norway terminated its contribution to the quick reaction force and concentrated efforts in Meymaneh and the wider Faryab province.

Unlike the BG3 experience, the PRT endeavor was not a success. Neither the Norwegian government nor the military leadership initially knew what a PRT was or what it should do. And although at its strongest point the Norwegian PRT counted several hundred soldiers, this force was nonetheless insufficient to meet the demands of a province the size of Faryab, and no coherent Norwegian strategy was developed for it. Instead, the PRT commanders filled their six months in the theater with whatever they found reasonable. Moreover, the experience was not especially relevant for the Norwegian Army's tasks back home.

Complicating matters further, the Norwegian government instituted a clear separation between civilian and military activities

12 NCA, *Good Ally*, 59.

13 NCA, *Good Ally*, 60.

14 Arne Opperud, “Ledelse i strid-spørsmål om krig,” i *Intops, norske soldater-internasjonale operasjoner*, ed. Dag Leraand (Oslo: Forsvarsmuseet, 2012), 330.

in Afghanistan. Particularly, the major Norwegian nongovernmental organizations, heavily subsidized by Norwegian taxpayers, did not appreciate Norwegian soldiers doing their organization's work, arguing military personnel are not trained for development assistance tasks and therefore, tend to take a short-term view of development work.

Ultimately, this civil-military compartmentalization was inconsistent with the strategy of counterinsurgency operations that came to guide ISAF operations. The lack of clear guidelines from Oslo on how to bridge this gap led to frustration among Norwegian civilian and military personnel on the ground. The Norwegian government's 2009 Faryab strategy did not make matters any easier as it contained no clear guidelines for practitioners.

In total, Norway spent about 20 billion Norwegian kroner (approximately \$3.17 billion) on its engagement in Afghanistan. From 2001 to 2014, military expenditures accounted for about \$11.5 billion and civilian aid accounted for about \$8.4 billion. This amounted to a mere 0.26 percent of the estimated total international military effort, and 2.3 percent of the total international aid in the period.¹⁵ Norway was thus a relatively much bigger civilian than military contributor, ranking ninth among civilian contributions.

Major and Minor Contributions

From 2002 to 2009, Norway experienced two main stages in its deployments to Afghanistan. The first stage was Kabul-centric, which then evolved into a second, PRT-centric stage in Faryab. After 2009, the third and last stage took an Afghan security forces-centric approach where Norwegian forces concentrated most of their efforts on training and mentoring Afghan forces in support of ISAF's plans to transfer "responsibility for national security to Afghan authorities and security forces by the end of 2014."¹⁶ The main instruments for this effort were the operational mentoring and liaison teams.

Apart from these larger stages of Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan, Norway also contributed additional forces for shorter and longer periods, such as the commander of the then Kabul International Airport, provision of F-16s to ISAF, and support to different military staffs and field hospitals.¹⁷ The most important of these, however, was and still is the special forces training of the Afghan police Crisis Response Unit 222 in Kabul. The Norwegian special forces and the Intelligence Service also closely cooperated as part of the national intelligence support team to develop a concept where the full resources of the Intelligence Service were directly available to the special forces in the field.

15 NCA, *Good Ally*, 213.

16 NCA, *Good Ally*, 139.

17 NCA, *Good Ally*, 70.

Assessment and Lessons Learned

So far, this story about Norway's military contribution to the operations in Afghanistan presumably resembles that of many midsize European states. But in November 2014, the parliament decided to appoint an independent commission to evaluate the entire Norwegian endeavor. The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan, established by a royal decree on November 21, 2014, worked for 18 months with a broad mandate to evaluate and to draw lessons from all parts of the Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014.¹⁸

The ten-member commission was chaired by retired Labour politician Bjørn Tore Godal, who had been both minister of foreign affairs and minister of defense. Lieutenant General Torgeir Hagen was the only other nonacademic expert in the group. A Dane, Professor Sten Rynning, from the University of Southern Denmark served on the commission. And several members were well-known critics of the operations in Afghanistan. A full-time secretariat of five, later six, members supported the commission in its work.

The report, which was translated into English, gives an historical overview of Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 that includes chapters on military engagement, development aid, the PRT in Faryab, peace diplomacy, and international law.¹⁹ While neither Norwegian nor other attempts to negotiate a settlement were successful, Norway was one of the first countries to develop contacts with the Taliban, and peace diplomacy was an important Norwegian contribution. In the last part of the report, the commission spells out its conclusions and draws a range of lessons.

The commission argued Norway had three overarching objectives in Afghanistan: support the United States and NATO, help combat international terror, and assist in building a stable and democratic Afghan state. The commission found, by and large, Norway had achieved the first objective, that is, supported the United States and bolstered NATO's continued relevance. After a slow and reluctant start, Norway behaved like a good ally. The nation realized only partial success in achieving the second objective, fighting international terror. It failed to rid Afghanistan of international groups, and international terrorism is still an issue worldwide. The final objective, build a stable and democratic Afghanistan, was and continues to be a downright failure. Democratic institutions are still fragile, and the war continues.

In summary, the commission was clear the Norwegian contribution was a very small piece in a very large puzzle: Norway could make little overall difference in Afghanistan. There are many reasons why so many nations with so many resources achieved so little in Afghanistan. Presumably, the most important reason is too many of the objectives

¹⁸ NCA, forematter to *Good Ally*.

¹⁹ NCA, *Good Ally*, 21–47.

and approaches used in Afghanistan were internally inconsistent and contradictory.

The report did not stir much political controversy. All major parties in the parliament had been in the cabinet for the duration of the Afghanistan War, and as a result, there were no incentives for political finger-pointing in the parliament. The initial media response to the report's findings, however, was significant and concerned civilian engagement in Afghanistan to a much greater degree than military engagement.

As stated above, Norway was a bigger player on the civilian side of the Afghanistan engagement than it was on the military side, suiting Norwegian politicians quite well. But the Norwegian press persistently focused on the fact military expenditures in Afghanistan exceeded those of civilian expenditures. In order to counterbalance this publicity and the strong military footprint in Afghanistan more generally, in 2007, the Stoltenberg government decided to spend the same amount on civilian aid as it did on military activities in Afghanistan. Consequently, Norway poured 750 million Norwegian kroner annually into a system with low absorptive capacity.²⁰ Despite assurances to the contrary, aid had been pushed by political needs in Norway, not pulled by humanitarian end developmental needs in Afghanistan. When the commission's report described how Afghanistan had been turned into one of the world's most aid-dependent countries, and how the enormous amount of aid had contributed to widespread corruption, Norway's media responded harshly.

Even though the government invested time and money in the commission's work, the extent to which it had any impact on armed forces' doctrines and modus operandi is questionable. Few in the military showed any misgivings regarding the appointment of the commission, its members, or its findings. Most saw it as proper and reasonable to use time and money to look at the entire endeavor. Even though many recognized the important observations and recommendations made by the commission, the military had already identified lessons and implemented those relevant to future missions long before the publication of the report.

Changing Warfare and Cultural Shifts

Thus far, this article has investigated Norway's contribution to Afghanistan. The article will conclude by turning the table and examining what the Afghan endeavor did to Norway. During the 1990s, it was taken for granted in the armed forces that Norwegian politicians would not accept a big butcher's bill from far-off wars of choice. Norway had suffered casualties in Lebanon, the Balkans, and in UN operations elsewhere. But these were few and far between, and most were caused by accidents. That changed when Norway joined the coalition in Afghanistan.

20 NCA, *Good Ally*, 86.

In all, over 9,000 Norwegian men and women served with the military in Afghanistan. Ten lost their lives and 19 were seriously injured.²¹ Compared to countries like Denmark, 10 is not a big number, and the government and Norway could seemingly have stomached a lot more. Coffins draped with Norwegian flags were not a political liability, as we in the military previously thought. To the contrary: an important part of being a good ally was political willingness to pay the price in blood, not only in money.

In 1999, the Norwegian government had been uncomfortable with Norway's participation in Operation Allied Force against Serbia over Kosovo. One of the senior cabinet members, Valgerd Svarstad Haugland, was later harshly criticized for stating, "I don't like bombs" in the parliament, while her own government was sending Norwegian F-16s to the area.²² Still, the F-16s did not participate in the actual fighting, which was in-line with Norwegian traditions, equipment, and national character.

After 10 years in Afghanistan, the situation had turned upside down. Norwegian politicians had softened toward bombs and combat, as demonstrated over Libya in 2011, and had reinvigorated the highest-ranking decoration for gallantry, the War Cross with Sword, in 2009. Only heroes from the Second World War had been decorated with the medal, which was shelved 60 years earlier in 1949.²³ Furthermore, the center-left government of Jens Stoltenberg reinstated the medal.²⁴

If it was surprising the way the Norwegian government tolerated casualties, it was not particularly surprising they practiced a form of hands-off strategy. As we saw above, former Minister of Defense Devold's main concern was to get Norwegian boots on the ground in Afghanistan. When they arrived, the political mission was accomplished, so to speak. Military activities in theater were not on the political radar back home. Every politician in Norway knew, regardless of the outcome in Afghanistan, it would not decide Norwegian elections. For Norway, Afghanistan was not a puzzle to be solved, and the challenge was left to others, particularly the Americans and the British. Our puzzle, as a medium-to-small participant in the operation, was how to be part of a solution in Afghanistan and not part of the problem.

This situation meant, in principle, Norway had no caveats. But in practice, it did, triggering tensions between the military and the government. In particular, parts of the armed forces deplored the government's decision not to deploy to the southern part of Afghanistan where the fighting was heavier than up north. Some in the armed forces believed we should have been where our closest allies were, not where Germans and Swedes were, so to speak. Additionally, the strategic *laissez-faire*, favoring presence over practice, left considerable

21 NCA, *Good Ally*, 12.

22 Erik Solheim, *Nærmere* (Oslo: N.W. Damm, 1999), 413.

23 NCA, *Good Ally*, 203–4.

24 NCA, *Good Ally*, 204.

operational leeway for Norwegian military units. Much of what we did in Faryab was, in fact, military activity in search of a strategic plan or political intention. And even though Norwegians like to be portrayed as citizens of a peace-loving nation, our soldiers had no problems filling their days with combat if they could find it, regardless of lack of strategy. As stated in the commission's report:

Frustration among some soldiers at never experiencing "troops in contact" (TIC) situations before returning home can serve as motivation to actively seek out combat, even though it may interfere with achieving strategic-level objectives. This was also pointed out by some veterans themselves: "The paradox is that all the shooting is what gets the attention," said Tor. "Exaggerating somewhat, one could say that we hand out medals and awards to soldiers when there is shooting, not when we complete our task in peace and harmony like we are supposed to." This was a widely held view also among soldiers in the field.²⁵

Often, less recognition was given to soldiers who successfully completed assignments with minimal or no use of force, although decorations were awarded for actions not involving force. Perhaps due to some form of bad political conscience, operations in Afghanistan also gave a considerable boost to Norwegian veterans. Long before 2001, Norway had produced veterans from foreign wars, particularly in Lebanon and the Balkans, but the veterans were not a very self-confident group. This changed during Norway's involvement in Afghanistan. Even the Norwegian officer corps changed. Until recently, Norway was the only NATO member without noncommissioned officers and other ranks. As a rule, every military member in Norway, except conscripted soldiers, has been an officer. This has changed too.

Transformation and the Way Ahead

Norway was initially a reluctant member of the coalition of the willing. Afghanistan was not a place anyone had imagined Norwegian soldiers would go. Nonetheless, Norway became deeply involved in both military and civilian matters in Afghanistan. For a while, Norwegian Kai Eide was even special representative of the Secretary General of the UN to Afghanistan (2008–10).

During the years in Afghanistan, the Norwegian armed forces were transformed, particularly the army. Traditionally Norwegians had been peace supporters, and most of the military casualties it suffered after the Second World War were traffic accidents and stray bullets. During the years in Afghanistan, however, the Norwegian Army indeed became a fighting force, but only in small and rather independent units. Accordingly, combined arms and joint operations were not on the agenda and have become something we have to relearn. Provincial reconstruction and military observation teams will not be the answer if we have to fight for our own country. It is obviously important to learn from our mistakes, but it is just as important to learn from the relevant mistakes.

25 *NCA, Good Ally*, 65.