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## **BRINGING WAR HOME**

*The use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams by Norway and Denmark to construct strategic narratives for their domestic audiences*

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## **Bringing War Home**

*The use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams by Norway and Denmark to construct strategic narratives for their domestic audiences<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The merits of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan have been the topic of heated debate. The lack of credible measures of effectiveness has not stood in the way for some stark conclusions about the civil military teams to be drawn. They have been hailed simultaneously as the 'silver bullet' representing a new era in peacebuilding, and 'costly, wasteful and lacking in quality'.<sup>2</sup> This contribution seeks to explain why PRTs represent a central pillar of ISAF's strategy in Afghanistan by investigating the importance of PRTs in terms of strategic narratives, defined by Lawrence Freedman as 'compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn'.<sup>3</sup> The central hypothesis is that activities of PRTs are important to contributing nations for reasons beyond their immediate impact on the ground in Afghanistan. This hypothesis is explored by examining Norway and Denmark's contribution in Afghanistan and how it is portrayed to their domestic audiences.

Quintessentially, it is argued that the PRT concept fulfils the role of how Norway and Denmark want to convey their engagement in Afghanistan. As such, PRTs enable, what Betz (2008) has called the West's 'diffuse and internally contradictory strategic narratives' to operate in the same operational space. In other words, the PRT concept allows for multiple narratives of the same effort. Consequently, an attempt to 'control the narrative', or as it was described in the new transition strategy discussed at the Lisbon summit, 'assemble a coherent narrative', will be difficult.<sup>4</sup> The flexibility of the PRT concept itself fuels the generation of individual nation's strategic narratives.

### **Background**

In 2002, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) introduced PRTs to build and reconstruct the capacity of the central government throughout Afghanistan. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had adopted a 'light footprint' approach. This meant that its

presence was territorially limited to Kabul, and its operational scope was primarily security-focused, and did not encompass reconstruction and development operations. ISAF's restricted mandate thus created a security and governance vacuum in the provinces.

Afghanistan's weak state and volatile security environment gave rise to a nexus of mutually reinforcing political, developmental and security problems that required more than a narrow, military response. At a time when the international community failed to take the lead for the reconstruction process, the PRTs were launched by OEF to 'spread the ISAF effect' without changing ISAF's mandate. PRTs were introduced as a means to tackle political, developmental and security challenges simultaneously. A military component, together with political and development advisers and other experts, would form a PRT. The idea was that such an approach would have a more 'system wide' and 'multi-dimensional impact'.<sup>5</sup> When NATO took command of ISAF in 2003, they made PRTs the cornerstone of their phased expansion from 2003-2006. NATO considered the PRTs a vital component of success within Afghanistan. As the concept developed, each PRT varied in operational design, funding, scope, and perceived purpose.

The precise form, function and goals of PRTs are ambiguous. The mission statement of the 27 PRTs currently operating in Afghanistan is to:

*Assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority, in order to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operations, and enable Security Sector Reform (SSR) and reconstruction efforts.*<sup>6</sup>

Beyond this vague and aspirational mission statement, there is neither a consensus surrounding how PRTs should achieve these strategic objectives, nor what would constitute their successful realisation.<sup>7</sup> As such, the PRTs are symptomatic of the international community's inchoate approach in Afghanistan. Despite this lack of clarity over its mandate and purpose, the PRT concept has become NATO's 'leading edge' in Afghanistan.

It is imperative to acknowledge the complexities of the methods aimed at stabilising Afghanistan. This paper is not about Afghanistan

or the overall strategy and therefore does not cover these complex political and strategic processes that the PRTs were born out of and operate within.

The hypothesis 'activities of PRTs are important for reasons beyond their immediate impact' is explored in a three-fold manner. First, an analytical framework is presented which bridges the contextual backdrops that PRTs operate in: On the one hand the *physical environment of the security- development nexus on the ground* and, on the other hand, the *virtual dimension* that PRTs operate within. Second, comparative historical narratives present Norway and Denmark's strategic rationale after the Cold War. This provides the point of departure for the ensuing framing analysis. Third, the analysis answers the hypothesis by drawing together the findings from the case studies and the analytical framework.

In investigating the hypothesis, the tentative conclusion that emerges is that Norway and Denmark demonstrate that PRTs have elevated importance for contributing nations because they provide these nations with the flexibility to produce strategic narratives targeted at their domestic audiences. In other words, PRTs are part of a toolkit for constructing strategic narratives.

## **Analytical framework**

### *The security-development nexus*

Over the past decade, the so-called 'security-development nexus' has become a key concept in both development and war studies. The notion of a security-development nexus was born out of the Cold War, when an escalation of internal conflicts and humanitarian emergencies generated a growing international focus and recognition of civil wars and the nature of fragile or failed states. This sparked the 'new interventionism' and the 'humanitarian interventions' of the 1990s. Whether these political emergencies were coined stability operation, or peace-support operations, state building approaches were adopted to 'fix failed states'.<sup>8</sup> The complexities of these crises necessitated multi-agency responses.<sup>9</sup> This generated an increased institutionalisation of civil-military practices in so called 'integrated' or 'comprehensive approaches', which implied 'cross-ministerial interagency' responses across military, diplomatic, and economic

spheres.<sup>10</sup> Mark Duffield argued that this development, in which the military and civilian efforts became increasingly coordinated 'led to the merging of development and security'.

In Afghanistan, the security and development effort is taking place simultaneously. Depending on the lead nation, PRTs monitor both humanitarian and reconstruction programmes, in addition to quick impact projects. As such, PRTs have posed questions concerning 'the limits of military engagement' particularly what tasks armed forces should undertake in light of what they are trained for. Criticism of the current strategy in Afghanistan targets the consequences of such an approach.<sup>11</sup> The NGO community and scholars have pointed to the detrimental effects of politicised assistance operating with a 'quick fix' mind set with reconstruction, as opposed to humanitarian relief, as the point of departure.<sup>12</sup>

According to the NGO community, PRTs diminish the humanitarian space in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> They argue that PRTs conflate the line between the civilian and the military effort; they diminish the humanitarian space and inevitably put the security of aid workers at risk. This, NGOs argue, violates the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship. Meanwhile, multi-mandated agencies have faced the difficult balancing act of claiming a humanitarian space whilst operating with politicised agendas that can be associated with the intervention.

Conversely, the military argues that the blurring of lines in the operational space is a political reality and that 'in the current age of asymmetric warfare and terrorism, neutrality no longer appears to hold protection.'<sup>14</sup> The majority of PRT literature focuses on these controversies. Whereas Jakobsen (2005) has coined the debate a 'dialogue of the deaf', others call for effective coping strategies to deal with this irreversible operational context.

While the PRT framework is understood in the context of this 'security-development nexus', it can be analysed in terms of the so-called 'new western way of warfare'. Shaw (2005) argues that the annexed 'humanitarianisation' of the military is there primarily to win hearts and minds at home by 'reassur[ing] Western publics about the minimal, civilian friendly character of the violence their armies have carried out.'<sup>15</sup> Hence, the humanitarian face of the military has the strategic function 'to compensate for violence against civilians'.

## The virtual dimension

The fundamental analytical premise of this paper is the notion that contemporary wars are fought 'amongst the people' and within the 'virtual dimension', which is the prominent feature of the 'new western way of war'. In line with Betz' (2008) definition, the 'virtual dimension' refers to global communications and the 'imaginary space of the mind', which influence strategy and tactics on the ground. In other words, in order to be perceived legitimate, contemporary operations must take into account media management, the 'body bag effect' and the domestic audiences influence, ultimately, on what is happening in theatre. In light of this, Norway and Denmark's Afghanistan portrayals are examined in terms of 'the global surveillance mode of warfare', in which information is accessible in a way unthinkable in the past. For example, this 'global surveillance' was illustrated by Wikileaks publication of the *Afghan War Diary* in July 2010.

Rupert Smith's seminal book *The Utility of Force* links counterinsurgency to the developments in the international system. Smith argues that today's wars cannot be categorised within the war and peace paradigm. Rather, they should be understood in terms of their confrontational nature, a premise that echoes Clausewitz' the clash of wills. Against this backdrop, Smith argues that modern conflicts are fought in the virtual battlefield. He reiterates that tactical successes in winning the 'will of the people' means little if you fail to communicate and control the narrative. In the same vein, Mackay and Tatham (2009) argue that contemporary conflicts should be considered behavioural in so far as 'changing behaviour of individuals, groups, governments and societies will be key to future successes'.<sup>16</sup>

This narrative, with the power to change perceptions, is what Freedman identifies as the strategic narrative. More precisely, strategic narratives 'are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current'.<sup>17</sup> Yet, 'they are not necessarily analytical...but can rely on appeals to emotion, or on suspect metaphors and dubious historical analogies'. In other words, success depends on how effectively the strategic narrative communicates the 'purpose, course and conduct' of the war and how this is perceived by the public audiences and in theatre.

According to Vlahos (2006), the strategic narrative is the 'foundation of all strategy' since it defines the nature of the war, every feature of the war, and its success or failure. Consequently, the strategic narrative has the power to be the 'organising policy framework' because it represents a 'truthful and existential vision that makes it culturally impossible to criticise'. This permits the narrative to be the 'rhetorical handbook for how the war is to be argued and described'.<sup>18</sup>

Scholarship on communication power provides another perspective to our understanding of how the strategic narrative can change perceptions and serve as the organisational framework for policy. In his book *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells explores the neuroscientific explanations for why narratives are effective. Castells argues that framing, strategic narratives or any kind of rhetorical manipulations essentially dip into 'neural networks of associations that can be accessed from the language through metaphorical connections'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the strategic narrative is born out of and accesses the audience through an intrinsically linked cultural- neuro-linguistic association. This is the 'cultural context in which the message is received' and Castells calls it 'the collective mind'.<sup>20</sup> This is in line with Ann Swidler's approach of culture as not defining end of action, but as the 'tool kit' that 'provide[s] the cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action'.<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, there is an increasing consensus that the strategic narrative ought to be regarded as a core aspect of contemporary warfare. The literature so far has been inclined to study strategic narratives in terms of winning the hearts and minds of the *local populace* in theatre. This study, however, argues that strategic narratives should be studied in terms of winning the hearts and minds, the legitimacy, of the *domestic* population. This position draws on work by *inter alia*, Betz (2008), Ankersen (2009) and Jones and Smith (2010). The latter argue that 'the political battles of ideas... is the most important theatre of combat...and [it] takes place within the domestic context'.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as several observers have pointed out, the West still seems to regard information operations 'an afterthought' and fails to incorporate the strategic narrative as a dimension in strategic planning. Kilcullen (2007) notes how the West seems to be stuck in a conventional war paradigm in which information operations are created as supporting



efforts after the physical operations, whilst contemporary operations require the reverse, or at least, parallel efforts. Against the same backdrop, Michael Waller (2007) urges the West to take on board the radical transformation in the media landscape, reconsider its messaging and '*Fight the war of ideas like a real war*'.

## **Norway**

### *Norway's strategic rationale after the Cold War*

NATO is the cornerstone of Norway's security and defence policy. As a non-EU member, NATO remains Norway's security guarantor and its arena for security cooperation. In the face of the new political climate and geopolitical backdrop following the Cold War, Norway did not change its conservative position regarding sovereignty and the use of force, and encouraged NATO's collective defence to remain within the Euro-Atlantic region.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, tectonic shifts took place within NATO as the *New Strategic Concept* of 1991 proposed a new force structure for the Alliance. It involved moving from a territorial defence isolated within the Alliance to an expeditionary defence trained for broad and complex tasks. This position was reinforced in the revised concept of 1999, which, highlighted by the Kosovo War, manifested the 'new NATO' with a proactive stand both in terms of operating 'out of area' and expanding the Alliance.

While Norway was active in UN peacekeeping, it became a 'reluctant interventionist' in NATO.<sup>24</sup> In spite of the new security environment, the Long Term Plan for the Armed Forces of 1994-1998 stated that, 'the objectives of Norway's security policy remain unchanged'.<sup>25</sup> This could be explained by Norway's geopolitical environment; it borders the Atlantic Ocean and Russia whilst also facing disputed maritime economic zones in the High North. The defining features of Norway's security policy thus did not change throughout the 1990s; the defence of Northern Norway was the strategic priority, and the US its most important ally.

In 2000, Chief of Defence Sverre Diesen submitted a report describing an inherent crisis in the Norwegian Armed Forces. The report concluded that Norway's isolated focus on territorial defence was inadequate for solving future tasks and that restructuring the Armed

Forces was critical. Clearly, the report was influenced by experiences in Kosovo, which exposed Norway's lacking capabilities to engage in the complex tasks that were required by NATO.<sup>26</sup> In 1999, the government released a White Paper concerning adjustments of the armed forces for international operations, in which it established an expeditionary unit, The Norwegian Army High Readiness Force (FIST).

Hence, at the turn of the millennium, Norway did reform its military structure in line with *The New Strategic Concept* of 1991, as demonstrated by the Armed Force's Long Term Plan 2005-2008. There are two ways of looking at this process. The tardy change reflected a new direction in Norway's security policy as it gradually accepted NATO enlargement and the new NATO agenda. Above all, however, it illustrated a fear of being marginalised in NATO. This was described by Ambassador Leif Mevik as a fear of becoming viewed as the 'last Cold Warrior' in the Alliance.<sup>27</sup>

Norway's current security policy echoes its foreign policy: A 'policy of engagement' for positive development, peace and reconciliation. Thune and Ulriksen frame this policy in terms of 'pragmatic idealism', which aims to maximise international influence. According to some analysts, the policy of engagement is the product of unestablished national foreign policy interests after the Cold War. Helgesen (2007) notes, 'this policy has been considerably easier to articulate and initiate, it has been easier to 'sell' in the Norwegian public sphere'. Arguably, this is because it has been synchronised with Norwegian 'value based' policy. As Foreign Minister Støre states, 'a policy of engagement is a value-based policy...Norway's policy of engagement is based on values such as solidarity, respect for human rights, peace.'<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, Norway's reluctant position towards the idea of NATO as an assertive global actor cannot be separated from the stated objective of Norway's foreign policy: 'to have a clear profile as a nation of peace.'<sup>29</sup> This can be understood in terms of the Norwegian so-called self image as a 'peace nation'. Leira (2010) traces the portrayal, and identification, of Norwegians as a people of peace back to the 1900s, when the foreign policy discourse became synonymous with a peace discourse. Moreover, this self image included a moral duty to be

humanitarian, in which peace became 'a key practice in constituting ourselves as Norwegians'.<sup>30</sup>

### **Norway in Afghanistan**

Norway committed special operations forces in an immediate contribution to OEF in January 2002. In 2003, Norway sent additional military assistance to ISAF in Kabul. In September 2005, Norway took leadership for PRT Meymaneh in Faryab province. Norway has 500 soldiers in Afghanistan and has suffered 9 casualties

The nature of the Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan has not enjoyed an easy consensus. Opinion polls on the Norwegian engagement are inconsistent, and it has been a difficult issue for the governing coalition. The coalition, consisting of Labour, the Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party (SV), has been in power since 2005 and is led by Jens Stoltenberg (Labour). SV was founded on anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments, and Norway's military engagement in Afghanistan has caused these sentiments to resurface. When in opposition, SV strongly protested against the US led invasion of Afghanistan. While in the governing coalition, the official stand has supported Norway's contribution to ISAF. However, several local party units have demanded Norwegian withdrawal from Afghanistan. Clearly, the government's decision to decline NATO's request for a contribution to southern Afghanistan in 2007 was influenced by the controversy of this issue within SV. Meanwhile, the Norwegian contribution remains isolated to the relatively stable North.

Rhetorically, Norway's objectives in Afghanistan have not been consistent. Talking of OEF in 2001, to which Norway contributed, the Foreign Minister at the time, Thorbjørn Jagland, portrayed the overthrow of the Taliban as an 'humanitarian intervention'.<sup>31</sup> Norway's objectives were kept vague in terms of 'development, good governance and stability'.<sup>32</sup> A typical account of these objectives is provided by Foreign Minister Støre, 'we are not there to make war, but to help a state that is impoverished and broken down by war and violence to start on the difficult path towards peace and development'.<sup>33</sup>

Up until 2007, the Norwegian objectives in Afghanistan were unclear; they encompassed stabilisation, to give Afghans a better future and to enable Afghans to control their own development. Inevitably,

these vague objectives have been interpreted differently across ministries. For instance, Defence Minister Strøm-Erichsen has described the military engagement in Afghanistan as ‘a nation building task of great dimension.’<sup>34</sup> In 2007, the focus on the UN became more explicit.<sup>35</sup> In response to the question ‘Why is Norway in Afghanistan?’ the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) replied ‘we see our presence there as a part of our support of a UN led world order’. Even though this is followed by the acknowledgement of Norway’s inherent responsibilities as a NATO ally, Norwegian authorities clearly regard NATO an instrument of the UN in Afghanistan. In 2008, Norway again shifted the emphasis of its objectives to support the Afghan authorities in enabling stability, security and development, towards an ‘Afghanisation’ of this effort. This was reiterated in the long awaited Norwegian strategy document which was first released in 2009.<sup>36</sup> The strategy, criticised for being more of a vision than a strategy, showed a further shift from the initial nation building sentiment to a focus on training and mentoring security forces. The same year, MFA launched an online Afghanistan portal. Contrary to previous policy documents and discourse, it stated counter-terrorism among Norway’s primary objectives in Afghanistan, followed by peace, stability and development.<sup>37</sup> As this illustrates, Norway’s objectives in Afghanistan have been altruistic, but vague, inconsistent and shifting until 2009, when there was an evident effort to professionalise the communication strategy.

### **The Strategic Narrative**

Norway’s strategic narrative revolves around the collective idea, or myth some would argue, of Norway as a peace nation. This should be understood as the cultural context that Castell coined the ‘collective mind’. Foreign Minister Støre reinforces this cultural trait as he states how, ‘we [Norwegians] have a responsibility to be a nation that promotes peace.’<sup>38</sup> This responsibility is framed as a part of an altruistic and ideological UN framework, in which the rationale for Norway’s engagement in conflict situations is ‘to fight poverty and help people and countries to build a better future.’<sup>39</sup> Derived from this, Norway’s communication strategy in Afghanistan is a peace narrative, focused on Norway’s contribution to ‘...stability, reconstruction, democracy

and growth.<sup>40</sup> As will be discussed later, this narrative is not primarily strategic, but eschatological. Since it is employed, albeit vaguely, as the strategic narrative, it is referred to as such.

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) connects the presence of Norwegian soldiers in Afghanistan to the strategic narrative of Norway as a peace nation by focusing on the military 'doing good'.<sup>41</sup> The 'collective mind' of Norway as a peace nation enables the MOD to portray Norwegian soldiers 'doing good' in Afghanistan. The relatively numerous stories which feature, directly or indirectly, Norwegian soldiers medically treating and schooling Afghans reinforce this portrayal,<sup>42</sup> stating explicitly how 'this story illustrates the reason for international operations in failed states. It is to facilitate development, relieve suffering and promote basic human rights'.<sup>43</sup> In this way, the operation in Afghanistan is legitimised through developmental motivations by emphasising how the use of military power enables the development of health care, education and good governance.

In line with Freedman's definition of strategic narratives, Norwegian authorities use historical connotations and dubious metaphors to enforce the narrative. The Government is trying to dip into the collective idea of Norway as peace nation, and, in particular, draws on the polar explorer and humanitarian Fridtjof Nansen to achieve this. The Defence Minister explicitly draws on the Nansen narrative both in relation to Norwegian soldiers' task to 'make the world a better place' and in emphasising how PRTs illustrate 'Nansen's ideas in practice'.<sup>44</sup> This is inherently linked to Norwegians expectations of what Norwegian soldiers should do in Afghanistan. According to the 'collective mind', these expectations relate to 'doing good', as opposed to fighting a war, they involve humanitarian and development projects, the education of females, medical treatment, and the protection of NGOs and aid. Consequently, there is a great effort to portray Norway's engagement accordingly. This entails giving the military operation a civilian façade. An important part of the strategic narrative is therefore to portray activities of highly skilled altruistic and idealistic 'humanitarian' soldiers.

Norway's peace and development narrative in Afghanistan is embedded both in the coalition's policy of engagement, and its overarching value based policy. Hence, Norway's responsibilities

as a peace nation involve the promotion of values that are 'worth defending'.<sup>45</sup> The promotion of human rights has been a priority, in which the MOD has emphasised that 'Norwegian soldiers contribute directly to the promotion of human rights in Afghanistan'.<sup>46</sup> There is a special emphasis on women's rights, a long-standing issue in Norwegian politics. Hence, the empowerment of women and women's rights have strong resonance in the Norwegian collective mind. The gender rhetoric is closely related to the strategic narrative of Norway as a peace nation.<sup>47</sup>

The PRT is fundamental for enabling the portrayal of Norway's vague strategic narrative of stability, peace, and reconstruction. This is clear from the description of the main purpose of the PRT by the MOD to 'facilitate and protect development activities, humanitarian aid, and to support the establishment of governmental control over the entire territory'.<sup>48</sup> The civilian element of Norway's military contribution is also emphasised in a White Paper (2006-2007), which, without referring to any measures of effectiveness, states that the Norwegian led PRT 'contributed to stability...this also enabled civilian NGOs to contribute. And [the PRT] played an important role in providing medical supplies...'.<sup>49</sup> The civilian activities of the PRT is emphasised because they are in line with the strategic narrative and portray Norway's policy of engagement which, as Helgesen (2007) argued, is 'easy to sell' to domestic constituents. On this issue, this study concurs with de Coning *et al.* (2009) conclusions about the Norwegian 'whole of Government approach', which argues that the lack of a clear Norwegian strategy implies that Norway falls back on an autopilot process aimed at 'looking good'.

Consequently, the PRT is fundamental in the Norwegian information strategy. First and foremost, the PRT allows the political establishment to portray Norway's engagement as civilian as possible, because the PRT model supposedly illustrates the comprehensive approach.<sup>50</sup> While the debate concerning 'no military solution in Afghanistan' is imperative, it has arguably been overstated domestically in Norway when considering Norway's military means in Afghanistan have been openly criticised by Allies.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the Government managed to use the 'no military solution in Afghanistan' mantra to

reinforce Norway's strategic narrative, as it allowed for a greater portrayal of the civilian activities of the PRT.

The military aspect of Norway's engagement is downplayed in the information strategy. This is accentuated by a consistent lack of military lingo in a communication strategy of a *military* operation. Furthermore, the MOD and the armed forces' communication is heavily dominated by the civilian aspect of the PRT, even though the civilian part of the Norwegian PRT model is led by the MFA.<sup>52</sup> The Defence Minister uses the PRT to demonstrate the result of 'how much good' soldiers are doing in Afghanistan 'I see more roads, I see more villages with water, I see women getting access to health care, and I see proud Afghan girls going to school for the first time'.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, the military is frustrated with the Norwegian peace narrative as it undermines the actual operational realities on the ground. In response to one of Defence Minister Strøm-Erichsen's Afghanistan visits, Lieutenant Tore Riise openly criticised her one sided portrayal of the humanitarian effort. Riise writes:

*To me, it seems like she [Defence Minister Strøm-Erichsen] is more concerned about portraying us like aid workers. It is more politically correct that we distribute chocolates than perform the profession the State has taught us, and the mission we have been given by our elected decision makers.*<sup>54</sup>

Until 2007, Norwegian authorities could freely indulge in this humanitarian framing when legitimising its contribution. In 2008/2009, two new changes appeared. First, the narrative shifted markedly towards a so-called 'Afghanisation' of the Norwegian effort, as perhaps too evident from the joint MOD and MOJ article, 'To Afghanise Afghanistan'.<sup>55</sup> Second, the Government's new Afghanistan web portal listed counter-terrorism amongst Norway's objectives. While this did not change the overall discourse, it echoed Foreign Minister Støre, who had been one of few counter-terrorism voices in the Norwegian debate.<sup>56</sup>

## **Denmark**

### *Denmark's strategic rationale after the Cold War*

Defeats in the Napoleonic Wars and the Schleswig Wars left Denmark demilitarised, bankrupt, and demoralised in terms of 'the utility of force'. This was demonstrated by MP Viggo Hørup's famous questioning of the armed forces in 1883 'What's the use of it?'<sup>57</sup> This

sentiment persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was reflected in the limited public support for the military. In reality, the Danish Armed Forces were merely symbolic due to scant resources and limited personnel. Denmark increasingly became considered 'the weakest link' in NATO, despite being an original signatory to the Atlantic Treaty.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, Denmark's security and defence policy changed fundamentally after the Cold War. Denmark opted out of the EU's Security and Defence Policy, ESDP, in 1992 and reoriented towards the tasks and rationale prescribed in NATO's *New Strategic Concept* of 1991. Its commitment to NATO's transformation agenda was apparent in the Defence Act of 1993, which changed Denmark's threat perception, security definition and overall strategic rationale.<sup>59</sup> The Defence Act stated that 'there is no direct military threat to Danish existence, integrity, and sovereignty' and established the Danish International Brigade (DIB), a rapidly deployable expeditionary corps.<sup>60</sup> Thus, from being a questionable ally with only symbolic armed forces a decade earlier, Denmark began a strategic and ideological reorientation.<sup>61</sup> Whereas Norway was cautious and ambivalent towards NATO's *revised strategic concept* in 1999, Denmark continued to be assertive in its support for the 'new NATO' and stood side by side with the US in taking NATO 'out of area'. Denmark's newly found activism was demonstrated in Bosnia in 1994 which, according to Jakobsen (2010), was where 'Danish politicians found it advantageous for the military to punch above its weight internationally and become a point of national pride'.

In 2004, Denmark took the next radical step in its security and defence reform.<sup>62</sup> The Danish Defence Agreement of 2005-2009, signed in 2004, was based on the recommendations of the report 'The Security Policy Conditions for Danish Defence', which bluntly argued that since there were no longer any direct territorial threats to Denmark, territorial defence should be abandoned. The report emphasised the rationalist assumption for why small states, such as Denmark, should support the 'new NATO'; it enabled them to maximise their contribution through niche capacities and visible contributions. It made clear that 'the characteristics of the Danish Armed Forces' involvement in international operations in the future should be the will and ability to rapidly deploy short-term and focused contributions.'<sup>63</sup> The Defence



Agreement of 2004 made counter-terrorism an integral part of its threat perception and made international operations a top priority. It abolished long-term conscription and the traditional force structure, and created a professional and rapidly deployable expeditionary corps in order to make effective and visible contributions to international operations. The 2004 reform gained Denmark a substantial reputation in the Alliance, and US Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, has called Denmark's 2004 force structure a 'role model within NATO'.

Denmark's ambitious defence reform was part of an 'activist foreign policy' agenda introduced in 2001. The policy, coined 'super atlanticism', was undeniably associated with Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's close relationship with President George W. Bush. The policy was manifested in the invasion of Iraq, where, without UN authorisation Denmark contributed more than 500 soldiers to combat and reconstruction tasks.

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a comprehensive analysis of why Denmark's will to project military power changed so fundamentally in the 1990s. Clearly, however, it needs to be understood in the context of historical, cultural, geopolitical and military factors. While the geopolitical climate opened up new possibilities, these needed political assertiveness to be pursued. This was, among others, provided by Hans Hækkerup, Defence Minister from 1993-2000, and Uffe Elleman-Jensen, Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1982-1993, who made a 'dynamic duo' in transforming the Danish Armed Forces and foreign policy in line with NATO's global responsibilities.<sup>64</sup> Evidently, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Prime Minister from 2001-2009 and now NATO Secretary General, has also been a key figure in this dynamic.

This paper concurs with scholars who suggest that it was Denmark's strategic culture, 'the how and why of strategy,' that generated transformation.<sup>65</sup> Saxi (2009) argues that it was precisely the defeatist 'what's the use of it' mentality that opened up the strategic and cultural reorientation. The perception of the armed forces as merely symbolic enabled the political elite to reformulate the entire strategic and military culture.<sup>66</sup>

## Denmark in Afghanistan

In December 2001, Denmark sent a contingent to OEF, followed by a mine clearing team to ISAF. In 2006, Denmark sent its first squadron to Helmand province but was restrained from sending more by its deployment in Iraq. When Denmark withdrew from Iraq in 2007, deployable forces were made available. Denmark sent a flexible battalion followed by an armoured platoon, which was organised in a battle group. While most of the Danish effort takes place within Task Force Helmand/PRT Lashkar Gah under UK command, Denmark also has forces in Kabul, in PRT Chaghcharan and at the Kandahar airfield.

Denmark's current deployment to ISAF, 700 soldiers, constitutes approximately 5% of its entire military, which is among the largest per capita contribution in Afghanistan. Denmark has lost 36 soldiers in Afghanistan. Despite high casualties, the engagement has not been controversial in Danish domestic politics.<sup>67</sup> Consistent with preceding polls, TNS Gallup surveyed Danes in 2009 and found 53 % agreed or fully agreed that it is the right decision to have Danish troops in Afghanistan and think that Danish troops should remain in Helmand.<sup>68</sup>

The Danish effort in Helmand takes an integrated comprehensive approach. Thus, although the Danish contribution is predominantly organised in Task Force Helmand, The *Danish Helmand Plan* states, 'The Danish efforts in Helmand is part of the Helmand PRT'.<sup>69</sup> While under British command, Danish engagement is directed by the 'Helmand Road Map'. This encompasses both the Task Force and the PRT and has been described as a 'politically-led counterinsurgency effort'.<sup>70</sup> The joint Task Force/PRT effort has been recognised as one of the most 'civilian' PRTs in Afghanistan.<sup>71</sup> While Norway separated the civilian staff from the military in their PRT in 2009, Denmark and the UK further integrated their civilian advisors in 2008, when the chief civilian advisor was incorporated in the PRT leadership.

Denmark's primary objective in Afghanistan has been consistent over time, namely 'to contribute to national, regional and global security by preventing the country from once again becoming a free haven for terrorists'.<sup>72</sup>

## The Strategic Narrative

The Danish Defence media centre has published the film 'Along the River' on their Afghanistan web portal. Accompanied by dramatic music, it shows front line footage of the Danish counterinsurgency effort in the Green Zone in Helmand.<sup>73</sup> This is the most obvious illustration of Denmark's strategic narrative in Afghanistan: Danish forces are there to fight terrorism. This prominent strategic narrative has been consistent in the period 2006-2009.

Danish authorities have highlighted the link between international terrorism and national security. This is illustrated by former Foreign Minister Møller (2001-2010), consistently pivoting international terrorism's link to domestic security, stating how 'our engagement in Afghanistan is very concretely related to Denmark's and the Western world's own security'.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the counter-terrorism narrative has a strong 9/11 overtone. In a joint article in *Politiken*, Foreign Minister Møller and Minister of Development Tørnæs, argue that Danes questioning the significance of combating terrorism in Afghanistan 'should remind themselves of the pictures of the dismantling twin towers'.<sup>75</sup> This is also reiterated in the official information booklet 'Denmark in Afghanistan'. In answering, 'Why we are there', the official document states that Denmark's engagement in Afghanistan can be considered 'help to self help' against terrorism and 9/11 is repeatedly invoked.

In contrast to Norway, the PRT is not the starting point of the Danish communication strategy. The Danish Government focuses on its effort in Task Force Helmand, the UK led military 'component' of the PRT. The military assertiveness is illustrated by Foreign Minister Møller and Development Minister Tørnæs' legitimisation of the Danish presence in Helmand, one of the most insecure areas in Afghanistan, as they made clear that 'through the effort in Helmand, Denmark has chosen to put our force where it makes the most difference'.<sup>76</sup> In other words, Denmark's strategic narrative also induced the eschatological narrative of Denmark's newfound strategic culture in which it is both willing and able to exert military power in its foreign policy.

An evident feature of Denmark's communication strategy, derived from its strategic narrative, is to portray the engagement as a military operation. This is echoed in the news reporting, most obviously by

papers having dedicated portals on their web pages called 'Denmark at War'.<sup>77</sup> In the selection from 2006-2009 most story lines are framed around Denmark's assertiveness in Afghanistan. The featured articles tend to be descriptive, heroically framed and evolve around Danish soldiers sacrificing their lives, under headlines such as 'Comrades at War'. With rare exceptions, questions concerning the nature of Denmark's involvement are not debated. In general, the media emphasises that Denmark's effort in Afghanistan is in line with Danish foreign policy; an activist policy involving a proactive approach to the utility of force. Denmark's military operation in Afghanistan is highlighted and described candidly to the domestic audience.

Denmark's openness about its military operation and military capabilities is reflected in a highly results based communication strategy. Danish authorities have been transparent on their strategy, making the overarching objective, strategic goals and benchmarks open to the public through the Afghanistan strategy, Helmand plan and annual reports. Despite the dominance of the terrorism narrative, the Danish long-term objective in Afghanistan is, like Norway's, stability and development of Afghanistan. Unlike Norway, however, this long term objective is communicated through counter-terrorism and security policy arguments. The objectives communicated to the public remain focused on the military contribution toward meeting the counter-terrorism objective.

The Danish counter-terrorism narrative prevails in the portrayal of the Danish effort in Afghanistan. Still, in Afghanistan, and within the Government and military, Denmark has also advocated for the comprehensive approach and the necessity of flexible civil-military cooperation. While the comprehensive approach discourse has been established *internally*, it is not a strategic narrative. The comprehensive approach narrative has not been important in the domestic portrayal of the Danish effort. Yet, the PRT has allowed Denmark to manage this narrative on the ground and within ISAF. Danish authorities have made clear, however, that the civilian effort is subordinate the military effort, it is short term and aimed at confidence building. Danish authorities states, '[t]he main purpose of CIMIC activities is to support the military operation, so-called force protection'.<sup>78</sup>

While the rhetoric on the integrated approach is common *internally* to Denmark, the media does not question the blurring lines between civilian and military tasks, or the protection of the humanitarian space.<sup>79</sup> In general, this is not focused on, or even mentioned. The civilian effort is consistently portrayed as the product of military achievements. This demonstrates how effective the counter-terrorism narrative is, as it allows for otherwise problematic portrayals. Examples of this include headlines such as, 'Aid with guns in hand', 'Aid for counter-terror', and 'With schoolbooks and bullet proof vest'.<sup>80</sup> This illustrates the effectiveness of the strategic narrative in *explaining strategic action*, albeit questionable action. In this way, activities of the PRT have enabled flexibility in the management of the Danish strategic narrative.

## **Analysis**

### *PRTs generating strategic narratives*

The previous section illustrated that Norway and Denmark's engagement in Afghanistan is remarkably different. While differences can be ascribed to regional variances in the operating environment, Denmark's campaign was portrayed domestically in the same way during the early phase of its engagement.

Whereas Norway's involvement in Afghanistan is framed as an act of solidarity fought predominantly with civilian means, Denmark's Afghanistan mission is portrayed as a fight against terrorism with military means. Despite the different premises of these narratives, the PRT concept provides a way for Norway and Denmark to convey their engagement in Afghanistan. While it allows Norway to portray its effort with a civilian facade, it also satisfies the Danish predisposition to see themselves on the frontline.

The Norwegian strategic narrative depends upon the notion of Norway as a peace nation in which the military consists of idealistic soldiers that are there to 'do good'. The narrative is reinforced by dubious historical associations to Norway as a people of peace, which is linked to Norwegian values, all of which are in line with Freedman's definition of the concept. As Ankersen (2009) has pointed out, the altruistic annexation is there for strategic reasons, as it bolsters the legitimacy of missions that are, or at least portrayed as, humanitarian.

Nonetheless, as Oma (2009) has argued, one might also consider whether the Norwegian political elite designing the peace narrative possibly has a sociological need to recognise their actions according to the cultural peace identity.

The PRT is fundamental to Norway's engagement in Afghanistan since it has enabled the Government to sustain its narrative; the PRT has allowed the Government to sell the campaign, and produce successes, in a way that the public, the media and analysts are comfortable with. Despite a fierce debate that has taken place between Norwegian NGOs and the military establishment, the PRT has allowed the Government to focus the strategic narrative solely on the civilian approach, or other non-military notions, such as 'Afghanisation'. This portrayal has been accepted by Norwegians insofar as the strategic narrative is 'indoctrinating' Norwegians to believe that Norwegian soldiers are noble peacebuilders 'doing good' in faraway lands - not unlike Fridtjof Nansen. The controversy was illustrated by the most heated debate on Afghanistan in Norway, which concerned the Government's refusal to accept that Norway was involved in a 'war' in Afghanistan, but involved in 'warlike actions'. As such, the Norwegian case study epitomises Mosko's 'warless society' in which the Norwegian soldier through political imperatives becomes Kilcullen's 'social working soldier'.<sup>81</sup>

The idea of Norway at war is incongruent with the peace narrative. Considering that the Norwegian PRT model already has been thoroughly criticised in the literature, it is questionable how long the Government can sustain their strategic narrative. Firstly, in order to be perceived legitimate, the government must start showing tangible results in line with their narrative. Lurås (2008) has argued that the government's 2009 decision to include counter-terrorism among the objectives in Afghanistan could be understood as an acknowledgment of this logic. Secondly, it is not a sustainable narrative because developments in military practice and Norway's responsibilities as a part of a security community are not aligned with the peace narrative. This study concurs with Haaland Matlary's (2009) analysis of the Norwegian peace rhetoric in the book *Warrior Culture in a Peace Nation*. Matlary concluded that the peace discourse overshadowed,

and systematically downplayed, the security policy arguments and the actual *conduct* of the Norwegian operation in Afghanistan.

Conversely, Leira *et al.* argue that Norwegian international operations illustrate that 'the Norwegian self image as a peace nation is as good as immune against empirical evidence of the opposite.'<sup>82</sup> In this way, the Norwegian self perception as a peace nation, and by extension its security and defence policy, can be understood in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's *doxa* – it is taken for granted.<sup>83</sup> The idea of Norway as a peace nation is so strong that the strategic narrative simply has to reinforce, repeat or embrace it to legitimise action.<sup>84</sup>

In his model of narrative coherence, Betz distinguishes the strategic from the eschatological and individual narratives. Betz argues that the typical 'democratisation/human rights' narrative, such as the Norwegian one, should be considered a cultural, as opposed to a strategic, narrative, since it does not explain all strategic action.<sup>85</sup> While concurring with Betz' model, the Norwegian strategic narrative, which is incoherent, illustrates another point Betz has made, 'strategic narratives need not be rational to be effective'. The Norwegian government and military can use the cultural peace and development narrative because it takes place within the *doxa*. Even though it does not explain all strategic action, it still functions as the strategic narrative because Norwegians have hitherto not questioned it. Meanwhile, the reality of Norway's operation in Afghanistan give reason to seriously question how long the peace narrative and its 'cognitive dissonance' can be sustained.<sup>86</sup> The deficiencies with the Norwegian narrative become evident when compared to the Danish, seeing as the counter-terrorism narrative is at least coherent, and exhibits more of what Betz coins 'truthiness', a concept similar to Vlahos' 'existential vision'.

In general, Afghanistan has had a low media profile in Norway, and both the media and the public have, despite debates, apparently accepted the strategic narrative.<sup>87</sup> It is important to understand this in the context of journalists' limited access to primary information and sources. Acknowledging this, data from this study show that no serious effort has been made, from a media perspective, to critically investigate 'the Norwegian model' in Faryab. Seemingly, the media has 'skipped' this step, which analytically supports the idea of the

Norwegian debate on Afghanistan taking place in Bourdieu's *doxa* in which the strategic narrative is simply passed on. Despite criticism, particularly from the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI),<sup>88</sup> Norwegian authorities were allowed to operate with diverging objectives, and weave them into its strategic narrative, which 'trickled down' through media, analysts, and observers. In this way, the Norwegian effort was unchallenged in its portrayal as a civilian reconstruction and development operation. Activities of the PRT were imperative for the realisation of this portrayal. Thus, the activities of the Norwegian PRT are very important for, or even targeted at, the domestic audience in order to keep the idea of Norway as a peace nation, thus the peace narrative, in check.

While Norway has portrayed its Afghanistan effort as an extension of its tradition as a peace nation exclusively through the PRT, Denmark's involvement is portrayed as a military operation. The primary objective is to fight terrorism, followed by the long-term objective for the Afghan government to sustain authority and governance. In line with this, the Danish strategic narrative is counter-terrorism. In this narrative the link between terrorism and Danish security has been skilfully crafted so that international counter-terrorism is perceived fundamental to Denmark's national security.

The Danish communication strategy in Afghanistan has from the onset been founded on the counter-terrorism narrative. It has also featured a strong focus on tangible targets and results that have been made publicly available in concrete plans and annual reviews. Comparatively, the strategy is marked by an entirely different inclination to use military force. Danes have in a very short time embraced its post Cold War status as a strategic actor and fighting nation. The predisposition to see themselves in kinetic operations was evident from this study, where Denmark, rhetorically, was aligned with the US. As the video with live footage from the frontline illustrated, the Danes have no problem seeing themselves at war and certainly no reluctance to portray it.

Denmark's operation in Afghanistan has not been controversial in Denmark. Based on the material in this study, Danish media has, even compared to Norway, been very uncritical towards the Danish mission in Afghanistan, and the propaganda discourse is apparent.



This supports Jakoben's argument that Danish activism in expeditionary operations has become '...an axiom that hardly anyone questioned'<sup>89</sup>. Jakobsen's (2010) explanation for the Danish consensus, even in the face of relatively high casualties is, 'an elite consensus that includes politicians in government and opposition as well as key opinion leaders'.

The nature of Norway and Denmark's diverging efforts in Afghanistan- and portrayals- can be traced back to their respective strategic rationales. As described earlier, Norway did not change its defence structure towards capable rapid reaction forces until 1999, while Denmark changed its force structure already at the beginning of the 1990s. Likewise, Norway did not make international military engagement compulsory until 2004, ten years after Denmark.<sup>90</sup> The reason for the difference between Norway and Denmark should be understood in terms of the countries' perception of the utility of force. While Norway legitimises international operations in terms of humanitarian and reconstruction needs, Denmark has reinvented its armed forces altogether, and considers international operations a primary task in terms of its self-perceived threat perception.

This paper argues that the PRT concept has developed as the result of beliefs about what the military is and what role it has, or should have, in our societies.<sup>91</sup> Due to the PRTs' fluid nature, caused by the lack of clarity concerning their proper mission, each country adapts their 'tool-kit', in Swidler's terms, to the PRT that maximises their interest. In other words, the PRT enables countries to portray their effort in a single strategic narrative, according to their strategic rationale. In this way, activities of PRTs have a very important role, *beyond their immediate impact*, in terms of their flexibility in allowing multiple strategic narratives to operate within the same concept based on how the contributing nation wants to portray its engagement vis-à-vis its domestic audience.

In this context, it is highly relevant to include Ankersen's (2009) conclusions about the development of Canadian civil-military relations. Ankersen argues that there was a campaign to portray the effort in Afghanistan in a way that corresponded to the peacekeeping expectations of Canadians, despite changes in the nature of the military intervention and for conflicting internal narratives within

the Canadian military. In light of this, Ankersen suggests that the Canadian PRT could be understood as an 'attempt to come to terms with its identity as a fighting nation'.<sup>92</sup> Ankersen concluded that civil military cooperation, such as the PRT, to a large extent, was targeted at *Canadians*, the domestic audience.

This study shows that there has been a similar effort in Norway. Norwegian authorities legitimise their involvement in Afghanistan in terms of a peace and development strategic narrative, which is in line with the Norwegian peacekeeping tradition and the more eschatological self image as a people of peace. In light of this, activities of the PRT became highly important *beyond its immediate impact*, because it enabled and fuelled the portrayal of Norway's strategic narrative. It allowed the Government to focus on how Norway's military contribution resulted in, *inter alia*, girl schooling and hospitals, which matched Norwegians expectations. The PRT enabled the overall civilian façade. Conversely, the military regards counterinsurgency their primary task in Faryab.<sup>93</sup>

Meanwhile, the Danish case is more complicated. On the one hand, the Danes' 'gun touting' disproves the hypothesis, because the PRT is not essential for the Danish strategic narrative. On the other hand, the PRT has been equally important in giving Danes the flexibility to craft their strategic narrative, as it has provided the Danes the possibility to stand shoulder to shoulder with the UK in counterinsurgency operations, and to portray this effort in terms of its counter-terrorism strategic narrative. At the same time, the PRT has allowed the Danes to simultaneously manage the comprehensive approach discourse. While the comprehensive approach has not been prevalent in the strategic narrative, Denmark has generated the international process for institutionalising the approach in the Alliance. The PRT enabled flexibility, which Denmark could take advantage of in the management of its strategic narrative.

Thus, this paper supports the hypothesis 'activities of PRTs are important for reasons beyond their immediate impact' because Norway and Denmark, though in different ways, use the PRT as a part of their toolkit in constructing convincing strategic narratives targeted at their domestic population.

## Conclusion

The PRTs flexibility has normally been legitimised by Afghanistan's regional differences hindering a 'one size fits all' approach. A tailored PRT approach adapted to the specific needs and cultural setting is believed to be beneficial for the immediate impact of each PRT. While the existing literature has documented detrimental consequences of the PRTs unclear mandate and conduct, there has been little research on the 'bespoke approach' in terms of PRTs role in the virtual dimension vis-à-vis domestic constituents. This paper aimed to help fill this gap.

The case studies established that strategic narratives are fundamental in the study of PRTs in Afghanistan. This underpins Vlahos (2006) notion that 'war narratives need to be identified and critically examined on their own terms, for they can illuminate the inner nature of the war itself'. Strategic narratives are constructed with the expectations of the domestic population in mind. The case studies concluded that PRTs have enabled flexibility in producing strategic narratives according to contributing nation's strategic rationales. In response to the question of whose hearts and minds are being fought for, the studies of Norway and Denmark suggest that the domestic opinion is the real question. As such, activities of PRTs are important for reasons beyond their immediate impact. This study of Norway and Denmark's strategic narratives in Afghanistan showed that PRTs were essential in generating effective strategic narratives targeted at domestic audiences.

Norway's strategic narrative is a peace narrative. As opposed to Denmark, its objectives were kept vague in terms of peace, development and conflict resolution. To manage a peace narrative in the midst of war made that narrative's shortcomings emerge. It was contradictory because there was too much friction between what the Government was saying it was doing, and actual events on the ground. In this context, the PRT became vital in maintaining the Norwegian strategic narrative.

Denmark was less dependent on its PRT because the counter-terrorism narrative was more coherent. Nonetheless, the PRT has provided Denmark manoeuvrability in managing its narrative domestically and internationally. Although Denmark was not as dependent on the PRT as Norway in the conservation of its narrative, it suggests that

the PRT has been equally beneficial for Denmark's strategic narrative. Jakobsen (2010) argued that Denmark's engagement in Afghanistan should be understood in terms of the engagement's elite consensus. Still, elite consensus depends to a great extent on the degree of narrative coherence. As such, Denmark's consistent messaging in accordance with the 'rhetorical handbook' should be considered vital in creating a consensus in the first place. In general, the Danish narrative was remarkably coherent, both across ministries, the media and the military.

Though Denmark and Norway may appear like two small states with seemingly similar institutions, policies and practices, they are in fact not similar in this context. Broadly speaking, the Danish foreign policy discourse has become synonymous with an assertive security policy discourse. Conversely, Norway legitimises its *military* engagement in Afghanistan as an extension of its 'peace nation' tradition. This narrative is a cultural narrative that does not explain strategic action on the ground. The Norwegian strategic narrative is detrimental for both the conduct of operations in Faryab and for the developments of civil military practices. While Norwegian soldiers are in Faryab to undertake a mission given to them by their government, the same government is undermining their mission by sustaining a narrative that is detrimental for their operation *and* for the domestic audience's opinion of the role of the armed forces.

The transition strategy signed at Lisbon referred to ISAF's shared vision, and the documents revealed beforehand the stated aim to 'assemble a coherent narrative'. Meanwhile, however, Norway and Denmark's strategic narratives in Afghanistan illustrated how PRTs have enabled the West's 'diffuse and internally contradictory strategic narratives' to operate in the same operational space.<sup>94</sup> In other words, the PRT concept allows for multiple narratives of the same effort. The flexibility of the PRT concept continues to fuel the generation of individual nation's strategic narratives. In the long term, this will make a coherent narrative, or a shared vision, difficult to assemble indeed.

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