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THE CHALLENGES OF THE NORWEGIAN STRATEGY IN FARYAB

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By 2014 the Norwegian Army will have wrapped up its commitments to Northern Afghanistan after nine years of active operations. Although the full extent of our commitments to Afghanistan beyond 2014 are not altogether clear, it is clear that future commitments will be on a very different scale as far as size and responsibility are concerned. As the Norwegian army is looking towards different operations in the future this is perhaps an opportune moment to take stock of some of our experiences during the last nine years. In this article I will explore what the Norwegian Army's experiences in Afghanistan say about the state of Norwegian strategy.

This brief article will be based on some of the results from my studies at King's College, where I attempt to explore the strategic behaviour of three of the lesser coalition states in the NATO coalition in Afghanistan; the UK, the Netherlands, and Norway, between the years of 2003 and 2009. The arguments in this article are thus limited to these years, but as far as Norwegian strategy is concerned the challenges seemed to remain after 2009, until the termination of the Norwegian deployment.

The reasoning behind the study was the increased reliance on coalitions and thus on lesser coalition partners in contemporary strategy. The actual responsibility falling on the lesser partners of a coalition, that is not lead nations, is rarely emphasised, but before the US force increase of 2009 the lesser coalition partners constituted more than half of the troops on the ground in ISAF, and were in charge of more than half of the PRTs. This means that the strategy of these lesser coalition members, such as Norway, mattered and actually had an influence on a coalition's overall strategy and effectiveness.

The Norwegian Army that I joined in 1990 and the army I am serving in today are hardly the same organisations. Afghanistan has shaped the Norwegian Army into a serious organisation, focused on winning battles and engagements, and those of us who have served in Afghanistan are proud of the courage, valour and sacrifice that have been displayed on 'Afghanistan's plains'. But although the Norwegian Army and Armed Forces are vastly improved by its battlefield experiences the last twelve years, the question that remains is how this battlefield prowess was translated into political effect. As my title indicates I will highlight the main challenges of the Norwegian strategy and it is my argument that the Norwegian defence organisation had significant challenges in developing a coherent and working strategy that was to serve as a guide for the Norwegian use of force. The question of this article is not whether, but why we have had so many challenges in developing a coherent strategy?

It is a premise of this article that it was our responsibility to develop a strategy for the Faryab province although our main political purposes lay outside the actual conflict and that we were part of a coalition. This because we had the lead responsibility alongside our host nation in an entire province, we retained operational control over our armed forces and we chose to deviate from central aspects of ISAF's strategy. Furthermore, the nature of coalition warfare requires members to develop a rationale for their own forces and perhaps equally important, our allies in lead of other provinces developed their own strategies to supplement that of the coalition. Any state prepared

to utilise military force to realise political aims has to be concerned with the way it employs force both for ethical reasons as well as reasons of effectiveness. More importantly, Norway has elevated alliance and coalition warfare to a prominent place in Norwegian security policy, and it is thus crucial that we debate Norwegian strategy and its development within the framework of our most recent coalition experience.

The following brief article will highlight what I see as some of the challenges of the Norwegian experience of making strategy in Afghanistan. I will initially focus on two aspects of the understanding of strategy; first the neglect of the practical aspects of strategy and secondly the lack of adaptability to the conflict at hand, before I take a brief look at the organisation of the process of making strategy in Norway.

The theoretical approach of this part of my study is hardly revolutionary, as I am firmly set in a Clausewitzian paradigm as regards understanding the nature of war, the relationship between war and politics and therefore my understanding of strategy and tactics. This approach is hardly novel but rather one of the broad approaches available within the fields of military theory and strategic studies. This is also evident in the understanding of strategy that underpins my dissertation, as I see strategy as the process of using force to achieve political ends. From this basic Clausewitzian definition follows certain consequences. First of all, it is not strategy itself that is to realise the political aims, but rather that strategy is to serve as the link or a bridge between the use of force and the political aims. This in turn means that strategy has to describe how the use of force is to be used in order to realise the political ends. Strategy has to understand the political ends it is to achieve but equally important, and often neglected, it has to deal with the practical aspects of how, when and where force and forces are to be used. If strategy is to do this it has to resemble an overall plan.

This was a challenge for the Norwegian strategy during the period as most of our so called strategies never dealt with the practical aspects of the use of force but instead merely repeated the political visions underpinning our deployment. Perhaps the most revealing lack of a practical understanding of strategy was displayed by the official Faryab strategy of 2009 which did not attempt to describe an overall plan that would have linked the challenges of the Ghowrmach district or the Faryab province to the actual Norwegian forces on the ground. The strategy did not provide guidance as to how Norwegian forces were to operate in order to achieve Norwegian political objectives. As further example, we readily adopted ISAF's objective of providing security in Faryab, but apart from the fact that we were to co-operate with the Afghans, there were no guidelines developed for how the Norwegian Army was to provide security in an insurgency, in practice leaving the problem to the heads of the PRT who rotated every six months.

This general problem of the lack of understanding of the practical aspects of strategy has been pointed out by more notable scholars than me, such as Hew Strachan and Antulio Echevarria, but perhaps more interestingly, some of our not too distant allies in Afghanistan were able to develop strategies that actually did bridge the gap between politics and force. The Netherlands' strategy guiding its Uruzgan operations between 2006 and 2010, although far from perfect, was in many ways a basic example of what a strategy for a lesser coalition partner in Afghanistan could look like. First the Dutch strategic leadership scrutinised the problems of the deployment and then carefully balanced its political ambitions against the available troops, before it then took the consequences of this analysis and set up how, where and when Dutch troops were to operate in order to meet its political ambition. The first Norwegian challenge is thus to begin understanding strategy as a practical undertaking and understand that Norwegian strategies must resemble a plan; or as Antulio Echevarria argues: '… when it comes to strategy amateurs debate theories while professionals discuss plans.'

The second main challenge of Norwegian strategy was the fact that our political aims and our strategy were rarely designed or adapted with the actual conflict and the conditions on the ground in mind. From our initial Clausewitzian definition of strategy

follows not only that strategy is a practical undertaking to guide force to achieve political objectives, it also follows that strategy is a process. Strategy as a process that bridges politics and the use of force has two complementary aspects: first that the use of force takes its logic and rationale from the political ambitions guiding it – the tail should never wag the dog - there is thus an instrumental relationship in the process of strategy.

However, almost as important is another relationship in the strategic process, namely that our political aims are to be realised in the shifting, volatile and unpredictable realm of war. In order to be relevant the political aims have to be adapted to the realities facing the use of force on the ground and be adapted if necessary. There is thus not only an instrumental relationship in strategy, but also a reciprocal aspect of the process of strategy. This is at the core of what separates strategy from most other human activities and this appeared to have presented a significant challenge to the Norwegian strategy. The main source of unpredictability in a conflict is of course the presence of an enemy that does what he can to violently thwart and render our plans irrelevant. The Norwegian political aims or strategies rarely mentioned, let alone discussed, the dynamic relationship between our actions and plans and their impact on the enemy, and more importantly our political aims and ensuing strategy were never adapted to the changing situation on the ground. Whereas the Dutch government discussed the developments of the Taliban and its impact on Dutch strategy before both its deployments in 2005 and 2007 in both the Dutch Cabinet and in its Parliament (Tweede Kamer), the Norwegian strategy and political aims rarely mentioned the Taliban and never tied it to the use of force and our own plans.

Now there is something to say for the Norwegian consistency and continuity in Afghanistan – we hardly changed our political aims and objectives after 2005, and the Norwegian overall commitment to Afghanistan and the NATO-coalition was never in doubt. However, as we have seen consistency did not necessarily amount to clarity, and the Norwegian aims and strategy went unchanged and un-adapted during a period which included the outbreak of an outright open insurgency in Faryab and the Norwegian take-over of the most unruly districts in Northern and Western Afghanistan.

When it came to forgetting the most fundamental aspect of strategy, that we use force against a living and reacting enemy, we were in good company. The United Kingdom struggled significantly to come to terms with the Taliban's move to the North of Helmand in the autumn of 2006. The Taliban's move upset their strategy and operational design, but as the British troops realised that the situation had changed, the British defence organisation started to change its aims to correlate with new situation created by its enemy. The British organisation reinforced on the ground (although underestimating the number of troops needed), and gradually changed its way of operating. In short, by the end of 2007 the British strategy had changed significantly. Admittedly the threat in Faryab was far less than in Helmand, but that is not to say that the situation in Faryab did not warrant a significant change of Norwegian ends, ways and means as we suddenly faced an insurgency in our province by the end of 2007.

The final challenge that this brief article allows me to address was that of the Norwegian organisation of its strategic process. The conflict in Afghanistan proved to be challenging for Norway, as the Norwegian government organisation operates on principles that are conducive to a system of peaceful distribution of power, with its principles of functional responsibility, proximity and similarity. Only in 2012 was co-operation added as a fourth principle. These principles, however, laid the foundations for an organisation that was ill equipped to co-ordinate policy across ministries as well as developing a practical strategy that was to be executed in a volatile theatre.

The problem of co-ordinating the various actors that go into developing and carrying out a multifunctional strategy has been much debated, but was in my view not the greatest organisational challenge. As is evident from the two preceding challenges, the main problem was the lack of political involvement in the

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practical aspects of the use of force. To make matters worse there was no debate within the Norwegian military organisation as far alternative strategies were concerned or in developing the military advice that was to support the political involvement. Part of this may be attributed to the reduction of military staffs involved with strategy and operations after 2003 and 2008, which in turn explains the lack of any Norwegian doctrinal development when it came to PSO and COIN, but there was also a general lack of debate within the army as to what our alternatives were for the use of force in Faryab. Whereas the Dutch and British officer corps actually debated alternatives, Norwegian officers were rarely heard on the issue of strategy and stuck to one single chain of command to voice its advice.

These organisational challenges were also encountered by our Dutch and British allies, but not to the same extent. Particularly the Dutch development of strategy had significant political participation, as the political situation for the governments was dire, particularly in 2005 and 2006 when the government had to make its case for strategy first within its own coalition and then in front of a reluctant parliament. The paradox is that the Dutch strategy, partly as result of political and institutional disagreement, was more detailed, coherent and relevant than the strategies produced in Norway where both coalition governments enjoyed solid support for its Afghanistan deployments.

This begs the question of whether one of our main problems when developing strategy is the lack of political and military debate that stems from the overwhelming consensus in Norwegian defence policy. Consensus is of course useful, but the process of strategy requires a constant testing of assumptions and premises and a constant development of alternatives to the existing thoughts, both within and outside the strategic organisation in order to remain relevant. When the Norwegian consensus on defence and security policy takes the form of not wanting to question assumptions made regarding the use of force and there are few procedures and institutions that encourage true political oversight and involvement as well as little competition between military ideas and alternatives, Norwegian strategy becomes neglected. This means that the Norwegian defence organisation is unable to produce strategies relevant as guides for the use of force, but perhaps more importantly, it makes it impossible to realise the political aims that necessitated the use of force in the first place.

This short article has briefly tried to address some of the main challenges of the development of Norwegian strategy in the context of our experiences in Faryab and Northern Afghanistan. Although there were many laudable aspects of the Norwegian deployment to the Faryab province, the Norwegian defence organisation faced and still faces severe challenges when it comes to developing strategies that are practical, adapted to the realities of the actual conflict, as well as having the level of political and military involvement needed to guide the use of force so that Norwegian political aims are realised.

Going back to my definition, strategy is conceptually easy – it is a matter of describing how the use of force is to realise our political objectives. However, as a practical undertaking strategy is immensely challenging. The question Norway faces now is whether we are willing to take on this challenge and develop strategies that meet the demands of the future in which Norway could become a valuable member of future international coalitions.

This paper is based on a speech given by the author at the 2013 Army Summit.

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