



# Security Brief 4-2009

## Norwegian participation in ISAF – reasons and challenges <sup>1</sup>

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On October 7, 2001, the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched in Afghanistan as a response to the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington September 11 the same year. The Taliban regime – believed to be providing a safe haven for al-Qaida – was overthrown within weeks, but neither the Taliban nor al-Qaida were eradicated from Afghanistan. OEF was continued, and is still an ongoing operation.

An additional operation has been deployed in Afghanistan since 2001 – under the authority of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC); the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). While OEF's mission can be characterized as counter-terrorism, ISAF was created as a stabilizing operation intended to assist the Afghan transitional government in maintaining security and exercising authority. Initially limited to Kabul and its surrounding areas, since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) took on command in March 2003, the mission has gradually expanded to cover Afghanistan's whole territory. As of April 2009 its troops number around 58.000 from 42 countries – including all 28 NATO members. It is NATO's largest and self-proclaimed most important operation.

Afghanistan has become the main operational theatre for Norwegian soldiers abroad. The current Norwegian government (Stoltenberg II 2005- ) terminated the OEF-engagement soon after coming to power, but made ISAF a top priority. At the time being, nearly 600 troops are deployed. Why is Norway so actively engaged in a country not even part of the Euro-Atlantic area? The purpose of this short essay is to give an overview of the main reasons why as supported by data from the Stoltenberg II-period, and on a more general level – discuss some of the challenges that surface when the domestic level is taken into account.

### NATIONAL INTERESTS?

The September 11 attacks caused NATO to invoke Article 5 on collective defence for the first time in the organization's history. The U.S. preferred to act outside the institutional framework of NATO, however, when launching their military campaign in Afghanistan autumn 2001. This was worrisome for countries being dependent on NATO, since the U.S. is the military and political core of the organization.

An increased American taste for unilateralism, an unclear NATO-role after the demise of the common enemy – the Soviet Union, and transatlantic frictions over the decision to go to war in Iraq are among the factors which made many question the Alliance's longevity. For countries troubled by the prospect of NATO being marginalized, ISAF can be regarded as a "window of opportunity". By taking on command of ISAF, NATO could potentially prove its relevance under changed strategic circumstances. Following this logic, it has often been claimed that the mission in Afghanistan is decisive for the Alliance's future. Since one of the major goals in Norwegian security policy is "keeping NATO as the primary arena in transatlantic security policy", contributing to ISAF can be interpreted as a means to that end. " [...] to underscore NATO's relevance" is in fact an often used argument for Norwegian participation. Why is keeping NATO important for Norway?

NATO continues to be the principal pillar in Norwegian security policy; the defence of Norway rests on an assumption of allied assistance. Although there's neither an imminent nor an existential threat to Norwegian territory, military pressure of a more limited character is not assessed as an entirely irrelevant scenario. Norway's responsibility for vast ocean areas with rich natural resources and the strategic interests of her militarily superior and somewhat unpredictable neighbour Russia are important factors in this regard. It is therefore in the Norwegian interest to secure a strong NATO as a



prerequisite for credible security guarantees (Article 5). In Defence Minister Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen's words: "We must not forget that the defence of Norway has been based on allied solidarity since the end of World War II. It must continue to be so".

A related motive for keeping NATO is regularized access to the decision-making process in questions concerning transatlantic security policy. It is easier for a small state like Norway to influence from within, as often remarked by Norwegian government ministers, and the non-membership of the European Union (EU) adds to the importance for Norway of NATO being the primary arena for consultations and decision-making in transatlantic security policy.

In addition to keeping NATO strong and relevant, Norway has an interest in being perceived as a loyal ally who takes on her part of the burdens. Allied solidarity is often stated as a value in itself and an important reason for participating, but is just as often mentioned in the same breath as concern for own security. NATO's military capacity is not a public good in the right sense of the term; the likelihood and threshold of allied assistance can be expected to depend on own contributions. While national defence served the common good in NATO during the Cold War, Norway has increasingly had to "export" security to avoid marginalization. Sharing the political risk of placing own soldiers on the ground in operations "out-of-area" is an important factor in today's burden-sharing debate: "Regardless of their other contributions, countries, who refuse to place troops in the field, do not accept a full share of the burdens", as Peter K. Forster and Stephen J. Cimbala state in their book *The US, NATO and military burden-sharing*. This claim relates to domestic concerns, which I will return to below.

However, the reciprocity-argument is rarely expressed directly – which might be due to an uncertainty as to whether the Norwegian public readily accepts a link between the ISAF-involvement and Norwegian security interests in the North. But when confronted in an interview by *Morgenbladet* in 2006 with the claim "the most important reason for participating in international operations is to secure the willingness of the U.S. and NATO to help Norway in a crisis situation", Defence Minister Strøm-Erichsen somewhat reluctantly agreed.

In a more general manner, by portraying herself as a loyal ally the receptiveness for Norwegian interests and viewpoints can be expected to increase. Norway

benefited from a high degree of reception among allies during the Cold War due to her position as a "watchtower" in the North, but has had to cope with reduced interest and concern for Norway's geopolitical location and also increased two-way communication between the U.S. and EU inside NATO. The last factor must be seen in conjunction with the development of a common European defence- and security policy (ESDP). In order to increase receptiveness, placing troops in the field is a mean which is highly visible among allies. As the Defence Minister has put it: "[...] when we accept the costs of contributing militarily [...] we get listened to [...]". However, her remark was not confined to security policy interests. Military contributions give Norway "[...] general influence and credibility [...]". As previous research has shown, international military participation has since the second part of the 1990's increasingly been a question of how to strengthen Norway's reputation abroad, as a prerequisite for influence in a wider range of foreign policy areas.

Finally, a broader definition of "security" might be relevant. Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre has on several occasions defined export of heroin as a threat to the Norwegian society. A threat from international terrorism has been especially emphasized: "The assignment is rebuilding a country which is no longer a place where terrorists can thrive". The argument is perhaps not entirely convincing; in trying to deny territory to the terrorists, it can be claimed that Norway makes herself a more likely aim for terror. The focus on "stabilization" as opposed to the more offensive "counter-terrorism" when addressing how to face the threat can possibly be interpreted as a way to avoid perceptions of there being a paradox. Anyhow, and out of domestic concerns which will be treated below, it has clearly been important for Stoltenberg II to convince the public of the differences between OEF and ISAF.

#### DOING GOOD?

Clearly most emphasized by the government ministers are ideal reasons for participating: "Norway contributes militarily because "development is not possible without security"; "[...] we wish to contribute to conflict-resolution and peace [...]". Defence Minister Strøm-Erichsen has even stated that it would have been an ethical wrong to not participate: "[...] we have a moral obligation to support those in a less privileged situation". The substantial civilian component in Afghanistan and the strong Norwegian emphasis on a better coordination between civilian and military efforts can also be seen as an expression of idealism.



The focus on “doing good” can be related to the much beloved domestic image of Norway as a “humanitarian superpower”. There is a widespread perception among Norwegians of being a part of a “peace-nation”, and even international military engagements in the sharper end of the spectrum are readily seen as a continuation of the “peace-tradition” in the country’s foreign policy. One can of course question if Afghanistan would have been a priority on the Norwegian political agenda if “9/11” had never happened, but a sincere wish of improving the everyday life of the civilian population cannot be discredited.

Finally, the Government’s strong emphasis on ISAF being UN-mandated can be seen as belonging to the idealism strand of thought; supporting international law and the promotion of human rights. However, contributing in line with the UN’s wishes is not entirely without significance for narrow national interests. Foreign Minister Støre has often underlined the importance for Norway of supporting “[...] the further development of an international legal system, where the use of force is regulated and the advantage of the stronger invalidated”. Being a small country, Norwegian security is dependent on the relationship between states being regulated by law.

#### COMPATIBILITY WITH DOMESTIC CONCERNS

Why has the Stoltenberg II Government refused to send troops to the southern parts of Afghanistan? Although attacks on ISAF have increased in other parts of the country as well in the last couple of years, the most intensive [combat] operations have taken place in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Not contributing where other allies suffer a disproportionately large part of the total losses is clearly not in line with Norwegian security policy interests; one risks being perceived as a “free-rider”, which can have consequences for allied receptiveness to Norwegian interests and their willingness to help, and one too many “free-riders” may lead to an undermining of alliance solidarity and the credibility of Article 5.

A possible interpretation of the refusals to send troops to the South might be that the Government has perceived the strategy there as not being purposeful, especially out of concern for the Afghan people. Foreign Minister Støre has for example said that “[...] combat operations which demand high civilian losses may help the Taliban and other insurgent groups to recruit more people”. He has also said that “for much too long now there has been an exaggerated belief in

what can be achieved with military means”. However, in light of the pressure on Norway from important allies and the stakes at play for Norwegian security policy interests, this might not be the whole story. A view to domestic concerns of re-election and power may bring additional insight.

A government must increasingly pay attention to actors like parties, media, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) and public opinion when making security policy decisions; “public diplomacy” has grown while the traditional “foreign policy prerogative” has weakened in many countries. Of major importance is also the absence of an existential threat; it opens up for more differing perceptions of threats and the best ways to handle them. Furthermore, when the use of military means is more of an option than a necessity, questions traditionally treated by a privileged elite to a higher extent becomes a part of the general political process. A government must take domestic risk into consideration when deciding on whether to contribute militarily or not.

In light of concerns of re-election, the public at home has the potential of being a decisive factor. The public may have a hard time accepting the connection with national interests, and can be expected to be very reluctant to accept own losses – especially in states without a strong military tradition of operating “out-of-area”. In the case of Norwegian contributions to ISAF, however, coalition politics in the Government has interestingly enough been a more important part of the picture; the shared interest of staying in power has led to concessions in these questions to the Socialist Left Party (SV), which is opposed to NATO-membership and offensive operations. Stationing Norwegian soldiers in the South could very well have meant the end of Stoltenberg II.

This is not to say that the Stoltenberg II Government hasn’t considered potential contributions to ISAF in light of the effect on public opinion also. But probably because of relatively few Norwegian losses, few questioning the operation’s legitimacy in the public debate and the “remoteness” of the issue, the Government has been able to act relatively freely vis-à-vis the home public. Nevertheless, the strong emphasis on ideal reasons for participating can probably partly be interpreted as the Government being conscious of the perceived normative legitimacy of the operation. It is certainly interesting how the military vocabulary is almost absent, and some have criticized the Government for disguising the more “unpleasant” sides of the mission with an

eye to domestic popularity and in consideration of SV's ministers.

However, an emphasis on ideal reasons doesn't mean that they are untrue. Furthermore, it is difficult to ascribe such cynical motives to the politicians – not to say documenting them. It may be that the more important point is recognizing that the politicians are also a part of the “peace-nation” – with a belonging need of perceiving their actions as corresponding to this part of their identity, and start questioning to a greater extent the effects on for instance the public's preparedness for setbacks and losses in the field, and soldiers' feeling of understanding when they come home.

Finally, it is important to note that the strong emphasis on ideal reasons for participating as compared to for example the last Norwegian government (Bondevik II 2001-2005) is perfectly in line with Stoltenberg II's wish of strengthening the UN-line in Norwegian foreign policy. Nevertheless, it is certainly interesting how there is an almost total absence of narrow national interests in some statements, while in other statements – they seem to be priority number one. The influence from domestic factors can hardly be discredited.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Both narrow national interests and genuine concerns for the Afghan people lay at the bottom of the Norwegian ISAF-engagement. Decisions on contributions to ISAF cannot be fully understood as only the traditional balancing act between realism and idealism, however, and neither are the two necessarily in conflict. With the “normalization” of security policy, a government has to weigh the costs and benefits of different courses of action across a more complex set of arenas; what is rational in one arena, might mean political suicide on another arena. More specifically, the interests of domestic actors who are crucial for a government's political survival should be included into the analysis if one wishes to understand how specific decisions on contributions came to be; domestic politics can even trump national security interests. Under the Stoltenberg II-period, coalition politics has been an important part of the

picture – but the relevant factors is dependent on the power structure in the period being investigated. Unless Afghanistan becomes more of a success story, however, or Norwegians perceive to be facing a more imminent threat than they do today, it seems like a reasonable prediction that a special challenge for a government in Norway in the years to come will be securing allied solidarity on the one hand, and domestic support on the other – especially if the country would have to face a substantial loss of soldiers.

#### NOTES:

1. The essay builds on my Master's thesis. For in-text references and literature list see Oma, Ida Maria (2008). “Internasjonal militær deltakelse. En analyse av Stoltenberg II-regjeringens sannsynlige avveininger mellom kostnader og fordeler av å imøtekomme forespørsler om styrkebidrag til International Security Assistance Force”. Oslo: The University of Oslo, Department of Political Science.

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