

NOREF Report

Initiatives to foster an Afghan peace process, 2001–12: a role for Norway?

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Executive summary

The objective of this report is to examine the attempts to seek a durable resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan through a political process, including the possible role of Norway in this regard. In the area of transitional justice the post-2001 Afghan polity has basically cemented the victors' peace in terms of the Bonn treaty, and with amnesties for all pre-2001 crimes, the essence is that all government associates are freed of responsibility for their actions, while insurgents are not. Amnesties have also been tested as a more generic measure to invite individual insurgents to defect, but despite a massive new programme from 2010 onwards seem to have had only modest impact. Political talks have been discussed for a long time, but became a real option only when the U.S. insistence on so-called "red lines" was abandoned in early 2011. Numerous attempts to build confidence, establish reliable communication channels and start talking about talks have occurred over the past few years, but seem to have yielded relatively little. By 2012 – very understandable, given recent experiences – a deep concern had developed that a peace treaty might be rough and dirty, as a means by which the

U.S. and its allies could cut their losses and get out. A durable peace may require a more patient and comprehensive approach in which consultations within the various groups that should be at the table, combined with input from various civil society actors, are as important as talks between the main adversaries. An effective regional compact is pivotal, and here processes are under way, with Norway engaging with Turkey, the U.S. and the Afghan government. Doubts remain as to whether the U.S.-inspired model of Afghanistan as the centre of a large, potentially prosperous neighbourhood veils the impact of conflicts within each of the three regional complexes (Central Asia, South Asia and the Gulf region) surrounding Afghanistan or how its neighbours engage in its internal conflict. Norway has engaged in a number of activities key to a possible political resolution, but does not appear to have played a leading or pioneering role, probably because such a role has been difficult to pursue in a situation where the country's own commitment to NATO and the U.S. is essentially defined by its willingness to contribute militarily.

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The Afghan Peace Treaty signed in Bonn in early December 2001 did not involve the Taliban and their associated entities. It was commonly assumed that the Taliban were a spent force and that the political process in Afghanistan could proceed without their inclusion. The main measure against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda network – for most purposes seen as two sides of the same coin – was Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the U.S.-led military campaign, which over the years became the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). By 2004, however, Taliban remobilisation was evident. As early as December 2001 President Karzai signalled that the Taliban could become part of the government, a view immediately countered by the U.S. The Afghan peace rested on the warlords and their political groupings who had been instrumental in toppling the Taliban.

By late 2007, six years after Bonn, the renewed UN mandate emphasised political reconciliation (a short-hand for dialogue), and the special representative of the UN secretary-general (SRSG) engaged in various confidence-building initiatives, including exploratory meetings with Taliban representatives. Yet it was only with President Obama's endorsement in March 2009 that "talking to the Taliban" was considered a legitimate theme. By then the Taliban had built up a considerable force, adopted a combination of guerrilla and terror tactics, were in control of considerable parts of the south and east of the country, and challenged government control in much of the country. Obama's endorsement of talking went hand in hand with a military surge, which was seen as necessary for motivating the insurgents to engage in politics. Additional attempts to weaken the armed opposition came in the form of an initiative to attract defections in return for security and economic opportunities. So-called "red lines" – laying down one's arms, accepting the constitution, distancing oneself from al-Qaeda – which effectively blocked genuine talks, were insisted upon until February 2011.

From late 2009 onwards the military surge had some success in putting the Taliban on the defensive in key areas in the south. Whether this had a political impact – i.e. weakening the organisation, undermining support and motivating the leadership to talk – was less clear. So was the

ability of Afghan and international military forces to maintain control in the longer term. It has been decided that security responsibility will be handed over to the Afghans by 2014, and at the time of writing (May 2012) indications are that the military drawdown will be accelerated, so that 2013 may in effect be characterised by retreat rather than a continued surge.

At the time of writing little seems to have been achieved in preparing the ground for a tangible political process, and continued armed confrontation, in which Afghan security forces increasingly take over from international forces, seems far more likely than a settlement with the Taliban. The killing by a suicide bomber of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of the so-called High Peace Council, did not bode well and has been followed by other assassinations of key go-betweens. Efforts to set up a Taliban representative office in Qatar seem to have stalled, in part because Pakistan countered what it saw as an attempt to free Taliban interlocutors from Pakistani influence. There are reports of assassinations within the Taliban ranks of those who have promoted dialogue. The government seems so deeply divided over the issue that these divisions may threaten the fragile alliance it is built on. The optimist may hope that this is only the quiet before the (peace negotiations) storm; the realist can only conclude that short-term progress seems unlikely.

There is a sad irony that from 2001 onwards, when the Taliban was weak and many of its key people willing to talk, there was no receptivity. We may be watching a new instance of timing failure now, i.e. genuine international support for talks only started appearing at a time when the Taliban had built considerable organisational and military strength, while reductions of international support (military and otherwise) to the government are under way.

The remainder of this report will first look briefly at Norway's ambitions with respect to peace and reconciliation thematically, and in Afghanistan specifically. It will then look at the main elements of an engagement for peace and reconciliation, covering, firstly, the area of transitional justice; secondly, offers of amnesties; thirdly, negotiations with the Taliban; and, fourthly, initiatives at a

regional level. Norway has extensively supported certain types of activities that have major implications for peace and reconciliation, such as democratisation and governance reform, but these will be touched on only in passing. The report will end with a set of overarching conclusions and recommendations.

Norwegian ambitions

The Norwegian government sees the engagement in Afghanistan as one of its most important foreign policy commitments. Afghanistan also figures prominently when the Norwegian peace engagement is presented, such as on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website, where the country is listed alongside the Middle East, Sri Lanka and Sudan as the main geographic areas of Norway's focus (there are also references to Haiti, Nepal, the Philippines and Somalia) (MFA, n.d.). While the precise peace role that Norway sees itself in is less clearly defined, there is little doubt that there is an ambition to make a difference by contributing to the establishment of peace and reconciliation, widely defined, in Afghanistan.

Box 1: The "Norwegian model"

- Long-term willingness to assist
- Resources to assist
- Close co-operation with Norwegian NGOs
- Experience from earlier engagements
- Good relations with key international actors
- No colonial past
- Peace facilitator, not peacemaker

Source: MFA (2011; author's translation)

At the root of this is the so-called "Norwegian model" (see Box 1), which has been distilled from various high-profile engagements in the 1990s, primarily the Oslo Process, which brought together Israelis and Palestinians. Politicians and diplomats engaged in this area would likely say that the Norwegian model is not really a model at all, just a listing of possible comparative advantages that the country possesses in terms of peacebuilding. This author would add that the reason it may be misleading to talk of a "model" is that it is the extreme flexibility with which Norway has pursued its engagements – in terms of how it works, with whom it works and to what end –

that has characterised the approach. In other words, the main feature of the Norwegian model is that there is no model. In the 2000s MFA staff have increasingly acknowledged that the field is getting more crowded, and the ministry responds by teaming up with others (as when supporting the Kofi Annan-led team in Kenya in response to the electoral violence there in 2007-08). Recently, working closely with so-called "emerging powers" (Brazil and Turkey in particular) has become a prime avenue to peace engagements.

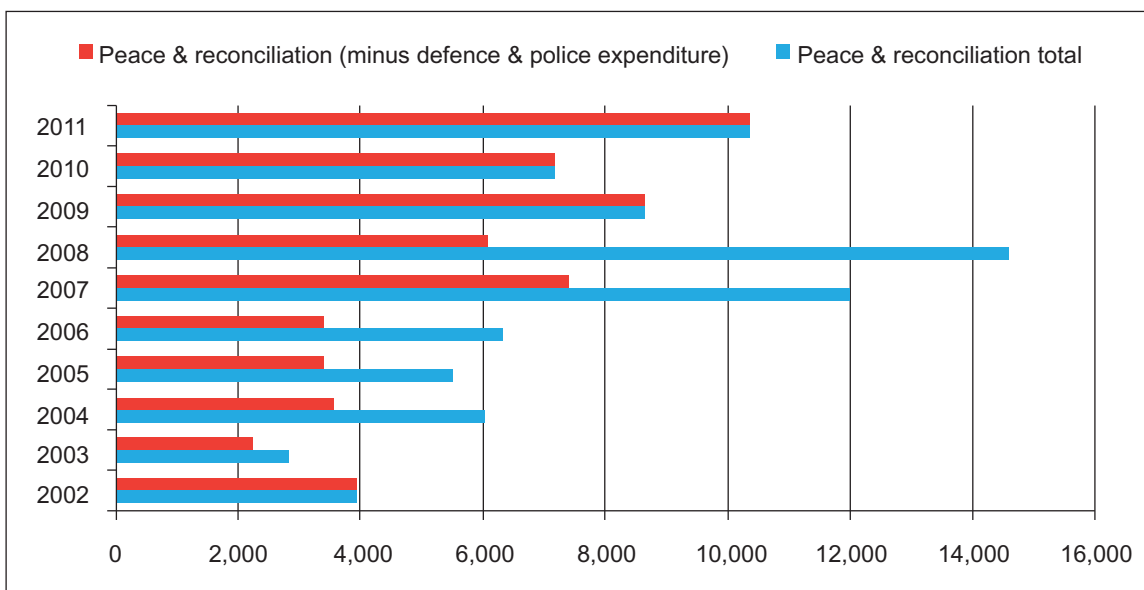
The Afghan situation has not lent itself easily to a Norwegian peace role. While Norway has a significant humanitarian engagement in the country dating back to the late 1970s, its post-2001 role has in large measure been defined by its military contribution to OEF and ISAF (Harpviken, 2011). With some 700 soldiers in Afghanistan at its peak (2007-08), the Afghan operation has consumed the bulk of Norwegian military personnel in international operations for well over a decade. The fundamental justification for the engagement has been Norway's obligations within NATO, i.e. a close alignment with the so-called "war on terror", as it was defined by then-U.S. president George W. Bush in the early period after the attacks in New York and Washington, DC of September 11th 2001. Norway's orientation to Afghanistan has fluctuated over the years, from an early emphasis on NATO solidarity, via the placing of increasing emphasis on statebuilding (development and good governance), to an emphasis on depriving terror groups of safe havens from which they can threaten international security. This evolutionary cycle is largely a mirror image of changing U.S. positions, which again illustrates how the space for independent Norwegian political initiatives in Afghanistan has been very limited.

Norway spends a considerable share of its total aid on peace and reconciliation, broadly defined. In the period 2008-11, when large amounts of Norwegian defence and police expenditure were not part of this budget line, peace and reconciliation formed between 6% and 7.5% of Norway's total aid to Afghanistan. Norway has simultaneously been at the forefront in channelling funding through the Afghan government, the trust fund mechanism and the UN.

It is not possible to conduct a full assessment of Norway’s contribution to peace and reconciliation in post-2001 Afghanistan. As Jonas Gahr Støre, the minister of foreign affairs at the time, said when he outlined Norway’s peace engagement policy in June 2010: “Norway is directly or indirectly involved in some quiet processes where the purpose is to establish channels between parties who do not want publicity around their conversations” (Støre, 2010; author’s translation). Hence, we should be open to the possibility that Norway plays a role that is known only to those involved. This in itself is a delicate issue: in Afghanistan, there is considerable concern that a deal with the Taliban will be quick and dirty, with no involvement of democracy and rights activists, yet secrecy often proves to be the only way to get a dialogue going. For the purposes of this report the author does not claim to know of or be able to assess all the initiatives in which Norway plays a part. Rather, the report will be based on the positions expressed in public, such as the Afghanistan briefings to parliament given by the ministers of foreign affairs since 2001. While such public presentations give little or no insight into concrete initiatives, which may often be secret, they do give a representation of changes in the fundamental analysis of the situation and what types of initiatives are under way.

A fundamental analysis of the political situation in Afghanistan gives critical clues to what Norway may see as sensible activities for fostering peace (although the analysis will also in part be affected by what key Norwegian actors are committed to). A reading of the foreign ministers’ briefings to parliament that focus on Norway’s positions on peace and reconciliation issues (Box 2) reveals interesting patterns. The minister’s expressions of concern over weak progress in transitional justice come up as early as 2006. At the same time, he points to the risk that poor developmental progress and aggressive warfare may strengthen insurgents, yet continues to talk about defeating them militarily. As late as February 2008 there is talk of al-Qaeda and Taliban as if they were two sides of the same coin. As late as February 2009 discussion of a political process refers only to insurgents willing to lay down their arms and support the constitution as a condition for talks. And the only initiative related to peace and reconciliation where the minister explicitly recognised a Norwegian role is the regional dialogue that was referred to in April 2011 (although the criticality of the region was hinted at in 2006 and made explicit in 2008).

Figure 1: Norwegian support to peace and reconciliation, Afghanistan, 2002–11 (\$ ‘000)



Note: The subtracted defence expenses were assigned to various infrastructure and outreach activities; the subtracted police expenses supported various aspects of Norway’s police mission. Expenses supporting, for example, legal capacity-building have not been subtracted.

Source: Figures drawn from Norwegian aid statistics presented by NORAD (n.d.)

Box 2: Main signals of relevance to a political process in briefings on Afghanistan to the Norwegian parliament by the minister of foreign affairs, 2001-12

2001, December 5th (Jan Petersen – JP): The term “extremists” is used in reference to “Osama bin Laden, his terror network and active supporters”, all of whom need to be “defeated by military means”. There is no distinction between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and no reference to political inclusion.

2003, December 15th (JP): “The Taliban regime is replaced with a representative government” (i.e. with no role for the Taliban). The “Taliban and al-Qaeda” (no distinction) work actively towards destabilising the transitional government.

2005, November 9th (Jonas Gahr Støre – JGS): There is reference to “signs that illegal groups with ties to terror cells are about to strengthen their role in parts of the country and in the border areas”. This can be read as a careful pointer to Pakistan’s role. There is no distinction made between al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

2006, October 24th (JGS): Recruitment to the Taliban – “and other insurgent groups” – is related both to developmental outreach (particularly education, i.e. stemming the flow of recruits to religious education in Pakistan) and the costs of the military campaign (civilian casualties in particular). Yet there is continued emphasis that the insurgent groups must be defeated militarily. Little progress is recorded on calls for intensified efforts regarding transitional justice.

2008, February 5th (JGS): There are calls for a more nuanced understanding of the government-insurgent relationship, yet the minister talks of “Taliban and other insurgents, such as al-Qaeda and Hezb-e-Islami” as one whole. He recognises President Karzai’s invitation to dialogue and the need to support it. He calls for Afghan leadership and signals conditions on human rights and democracy, while reconciliation basically seems to mean surrender. He stresses that it is important to support civil society and transitional justice. The importance of the regional dimension emphasised.

2010, February 9th (JGS): There is renewed emphasis that “the Afghans must take the lead in a political settlement”, with explicit reference to the fact that their standards may differ from Norway’s. Calls are made for a better analysis of the complex composition of what is referred to as the Taliban (continuity; factions; ethnic and tribal composition; criminal networks). There is an explicit call (with reference to the newly concluded London conference) for a political process with Afghan leadership and minimum standards, as well as a call for confidence-building measures (delisting people from the UN’s 1267 list).

2011, April 26th (JGS): The minister renews the call for a nuanced understanding of the Taliban and of the multiple drivers of the insurgency. He recognises the increasing north-south polarisation and the growing insurgency in the north. He calls for an “inclusive political process”, while “attitudes in important Western capitals have changed fundamentally”. This follows U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton’s February speech in which “red lines” prior to talks were dropped. He renews the emphasis on the regional dimension and recognises that Norway has taken the initiative with the U.S. and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), in co-ordination with Turkey, to foster regional dialogue on Afghan stability.

2012, February 14th (JGS; from annual general foreign policy briefing): The minister states that it is a “sign of the times that political solutions are in focus”. “The conflict cannot be solved by military means. It must find a political solution.” He refers to progress in talks with the Taliban and the establishment of a Taliban office in Qatar. He calls for realism and the need for an inclusive process with “all ethnic groups, civil society and Afghan women involved”. A regional commitment to stability is important and Norway continues its work for regional co-operation.

Overall, when we read the briefings from the period 2001-11 two things stand out. Firstly, the Norwegian analysis of the situation – on critical issues such as the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the drivers of the mounting insurgency and the unintended impacts of the military campaign – seems conservative and changes only in response to international (mainly

U.S.) repositioning. Secondly, with the important exception of the regional initiative that was taken, there is no hint that Norway has engaged in any peace initiatives that may alter the domestic conflict dynamic. While there may be important initiatives – whether completed, aborted or ongoing – that do not appear here and the clear image is that Norway does not stand out as a

leader on peace and reconciliation in the Afghan context. Some of the constraints on Norway's ability may be general, but the main challenge seem to have been the overarching importance given to being a loyal military ally to the U.S. and NATO in the fighting.

Transitional justice

The Norwegian concern about the lack of progress on transitional justice is more than a symbolic exercise. Early on it seemed clear that the main body that would take on the challenging task of documenting the war crimes of the 1980s and 1990s would be the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), whose mandate is defined in the constitution. Norway's support for the commission was motivated by its interest in both human rights monitoring and reconciliation. In 2002 Norway took the lead in ensuring financing to the commission at a time when UN trust fund mechanisms did not deliver and it has remained a strong supporter of the AIHRC throughout.

But efforts to put a transitional justice mechanism in place in Afghanistan have had little success. In some ways this is unsurprising, since the 2001 intervention relied on Afghan commanders and their forces for the ground battles (with extensive international air support). The former commanders had a mixed record at best and had been ousted by the Taliban when the latter took power in the mid-1990s. The intervention not only brought these characters back into power, but also rewarded them handsomely, first for fighting the war against the Taliban, later for remaining loyal to the vulnerable government alliance. It was a difficult context in which to pursue transitional justice.

In his early years as head of the Afghan government Hamid Karzai consistently supported calls for transitional justice. In 2004 the AIHRC conducted wide-ranging national consultations and found what it referred to as a "rich understanding of and strong desire for justice among the people for both past and current crimes" (AIHRC, 2005). The AIHRC, with support from UNAMA, followed up on this and by late 2005 – after a long delay caused by Karzai's apparent hesitation – released the Action Plan on Peace, Justice and Reconciliation

(Afghanistan, 2005). Two streams of responses followed. Human rights organisations followed up with a number of reports on human rights abuses and war crimes, often placing the responsibility on particular individuals, many of whom were in key positions in the government structure. Immediately, this led to massive demonstrations by former commanders.

The alliance of warlords rallied support in the parliament, where both houses passed a resolution on National Stability and Reconciliation at the beginning of 2007. The initial proposition was that of a blanket amnesty for all war crimes committed before 2001, while anyone who had violently resisted the post-Taliban administration would be held responsible for his actions. After several rounds in the system, a modified version extended amnesty to all who joined the government and chose to abide by the constitution. Yet the overall signal sent was that those who had managed to get into powerful positions were fully protected, regardless of the extent of their former crimes, while those on the side of the Taliban would be held to account. This not only sent a counterproductive signal about reconciliation to the Taliban, it also undermined the broader popular legitimacy of the Karzai government. Ultimately, it may also effectively have put an end to any calls for transitional justice in Afghanistan.

Amnesties

Karzai, then head of the Afghan Interim Administration, called on members of the Taliban to reconcile with and join the government as early as December 2001, an invitation that was immediately contradicted by the U.S.-led coalition (Semple, 2009: 59). It was only some four years later, in January 2006, that Karzai's invitation became firmer, as he extended a direct invitation to Mullah Omar and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to come and live in peace in Kabul. Such invitations have often been talked about as peace talks, but in actual fact included conditions of such magnitude that they could more adequately be seen as calls for surrender (Suhrke et al., 2009).

In 2005 the Afghan government established the National Commission for Peace and

Reconciliation (in Dari called Programme Takhime Solh (PTS), or Commission for Strengthening Peace and Stability). The PTS was established by the Afghan government with close support from some foreign governments. The programme offered a package to Taliban members who wanted to change sides and renounce violence; in return they were given amnesty, a certificate of demobilisation and a small financial stipend. The programme was controversial, but was supported by the U.S., British and Dutch governments. Sibghatullah Mojadiddi, a 1980s resistance commander and Sufi religious figure, headed the programme, which was increasingly seen as ineffective. There was serious doubt about the extent to which the programme, rather than being a genuine reintegration channel, was designed to deliver military intelligence. By mid-2011 the PTS officially claimed to have brought on board some 8,700 insurgents, but most observers believe that this figure is massively exaggerated (ICG, 2012: 19).

Full international recognition of Karzai's invitations for talks came only with the London donor conference in January 2010. The offer of reintegration made to adversaries who laid down their arms was somewhat confusingly referred to as "reconciliation" in the Afghan context. The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) is described as follows in a recent paper by Deedee Derksen (2011: 2):

The APRP proposes parallel processes of reintegrating lower-level fighters and higher-level political dialogue. But while the Afghan government envisaged reintegration accompanied by talks with insurgent leaders, the International Security Assistance Force ... saw it as part of a military strategy to force them to the table, and pressed for quick implementation of the reintegration component. Divisions remain between the government and different international actors over the reintegration "package", the sequencing of reintegration and reconciliation, and who the program targets. These divisions, rushed implementation, and the absence of a comprehensive political approach, have led to limited results in the first ten months.

The contrasting views on what the programme is about are fundamental. For ISAF there is a close link between the military surge, aimed at increasing pressure and eliminating mid- and top-level leaders, and reconciliation, aimed at giving individuals an opportunity to abandon the insurgency. For the Afghan government, reconciliation goes hand in hand with an open invitation to negotiate, the two being seen as mutually reinforcing. This basic difference has hampered the programme from its initiation.

The idea behind power-sharing is fundamentally different from a concept of reconciliation that asks individuals to give up fighting and integrate into the post-2001 political order. From 2001 onwards a number of figures with a background in the Taliban or Hezb-e-Islami pursued this option: some gained seats in parliament; others were rewarded by high administrative positions. The government lays down the terms of integration, and it is fundamentally a one-sided, non-negotiable arrangement: those concerned have "reconciled" with the government.

Political process/negotiations

It has become commonplace to say that it was a mistake to have neither the Taliban nor Hezb-e-Islami at the negotiating table in Bonn in 2001 (UNSC, 2000). Two things could have made the inclusion of the losing party in the peace treaty more realistic. Firstly, "including the Taliban" in 2001 would not necessarily have meant Mullah Omar and his closest circle. There were others within the larger network ready to step in who at the time enjoyed considerable legitimacy among parts of the Taliban constituency and who would have been willing to become involved. Secondly, the inclusion of representatives of a Taliban type of constituency would have required a much more prolonged peace process than the one-week, heavy-handed, get-to-a-treaty-now-focused meeting that took place in Bonn. The continuing military effort aimed at rooting out al-Qaeda and the Taliban proved to be counterproductive and the losing party gradually built up a capacity to challenge the international forces and Karzai's government.

One robustly held view, informed by unsuccessful rounds of negotiation with the Taliban while they were in power and attempts to negotiate the handing over of Osama bin Laden in the days and weeks following the September 2001 attacks, was that talking to the Taliban was a waste of time because they were ideological fanatics who were unwilling to compromise. Seen from the Taliban leadership's perspective, the negotiation attempts of the late 1990s and those in the fall of 2001 did not seem genuine. The organisation was under tremendous pressure even before the September 2001 attacks (which key members of the organisation tried to prevent), hardly on speaking terms with the wider international community and subject to UN sanctions. Taliban gestures, such as the ban on drugs production from 2000, were met with a cold shoulder in Washington and elsewhere. Post-2001, particularly from 2005, when the Taliban increasingly adopted terrorist tactics (suicide bombers, roadside bombs, etc.), their scepticism regarding talking was reinforced.

The opposing view is that talks are possible, that the Taliban have the ability to compromise and perhaps even that the organisation is struggling with internal pressures related to its current tactical choices. Undoubtedly, the main form of communication has been by military means and there is reason to ask what strength the Taliban would have had today if it were not for the extent to which the international armed campaign became a threat in many areas in the south and east. The view that negotiations are possible was not widely held in 2001 and the first years thereafter. While Karzai sent multiple invitations, the debate between the Afghan government and the international representatives gained shape only in 2008, after the former produced its so-called "Reconciliation Principles", which became a basis for trying to develop a common understanding. In other words, when people frequently refer to "talking about talks", it is not only because massive confidence-building is needed to get the adversaries together, but because there is need for a lot of talking on the side of the government and its international allies. Even then, the U.S.-inspired "red lines" were so fundamental prior to their abandonment that they effectively signalled that genuine talks were not an option.

Numerous initiatives have been taken that have effectively tested out various channels through which to start building the confidence that could bring the parties together. We can take it for granted that not all of those are known, but some of the known ones are the following:

- UN representatives met with Taliban representatives. These talks were aborted after media reports of the meetings appeared, followed by the arrest of key Taliban commander Mullah Baradar in Pakistan in February 2010 (Eide, 2012).
- Talks were held between Afghan and NATO officials and Mullah Mansour, an alleged Taliban envoy who proved to be an impostor (aborted November 2010).
- U.S. officials met with Tayeb Agha (the former personal secretary of Mullah Omar) in Germany, facilitated by the late Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the High Peace Council (mid-2011; this track collapsed in August).
- There were attempts spearheaded by Abdullah Anas, a former Bin Laden associate, to form a panel of Islamic scholars chaired by Egyptian scholar Yusuf Qaradawi (in the making since 2010 or before, but collapsed in late 2011 due to Taliban scepticism regarding the scholars) (ICG, 2012: 27).

Seemingly, none of these channels went beyond initial confidence-building measures.

Kai Eide, the Norwegian diplomat who served as SRSG from March 2008 to March 2010, talks about what was pursued through his contacts with the Taliban. Some main issues (not necessarily exclusive to this particular track) include the following:

- Individuals on the so-called 1267 list who had had their assets frozen and were banned from international travel were delisted. Five people were removed from the list in January 2010 and several others since.
- Inspection visits were made to detention centres (both Afghan- and U.S.-controlled). In late 2011 and early 2012 prisoner exchange was also a main issue.
- Access was opened up for vaccination campaigns, as a prime example of the need for humanitarian access to the country.
- On UN Peace Day in 2008 (September 21st) the SRSG called on ISAF and the Taliban not

to engage in offensive operations, with a 70% drop in incidents

These are examples of things that have been tested, but the list could be much longer. Interestingly, in his memoirs of his time in Kabul, Eide refers to how his Taliban counterparts complained that their co-operation on humanitarian access was not publicly acknowledged.

Considerable set-backs in trying to start talks and a suspicion among many that the Taliban think they are winning anyway, particularly now that the international forces have started drawing down, has led to scepticism about the prospects for negotiations in the short run. Increasingly, even staunch supporters of talks are trying to encourage calm and patience. One worry, of course, is that a quick and dirty deal would decrease the risks associated with the withdrawal. Regarding the government, there is a sense that its internal tensions are so deep that real talks might tear it apart. There is also the worry over still weak structures of governance that undermine general legitimacy and constitute a poor basis for broadening the alliance. Relatedly, the election system, with all its flaws and recent failings, may need an overhaul to become both more efficient and legitimate (Norway has been a steadfast supporter of both the governance and election portfolios). Regarding the insurgents, there are concerns about their overwhelming military orientation and their lack of management and diplomatic skills, and some would suggest that only an extended process, in which the capacity of the insurgents is built up, can succeed (ICG, 2012).

What has been Norway's role in the political process? Undoubtedly, the U.S. is the main actor in the international alliance in Afghanistan, and the key to how negotiations are approached lies in changing U.S. positions. If we take our clue from the ministerial briefings to the Norwegian parliament, there is no sign that Norway has been ahead of the crowd in arguing that talks are possible. Rather, the main proponent of talks seems to have been the British, whose position is that "all democracies must talk to terrorists". In 2009 this stance informed a deep British scepticism when the U.S. turned to a combination of targeted killings and invitations to surrender.

It is clear that Norway also developed a similar view in the course of 2007-08, and indications are that Norwegian representatives have sought to influence U.S. positions in private meetings. To what extent this has played a role in the 2009 U.S. acceptance of the principle of talking to the Taliban is hard to say. What is clear, however, is that Norway has not publicly pursued a principled argument for "talking to the Taliban" in the same way that Britain has done and that – again publicly – Norway was far from an early starter in terms of opening up to the possibility of negotiating a settlement.

Regional initiatives

Afghanistan's neighbours took part in the 2001 treaty talks in Bonn, yet the resulting treaty did little to ensure constructive regional engagement and – still worse – the intervening forces and the Afghan government did little to pursue a regional compact in the years that followed. Afghanistan and its six neighbours met in December 2002, resulting in the Kabul Declaration on Good-neighbourly Relations. Despite this initiative, both the U.S. and the Afghan government dealt with the region one country at a time. In the case of Pakistan, presumed to be the main troublemaker, rather than constructive engagement, the instinct in Kabul seemed to be isolation by inviting Pakistan's arch-rival India to play a significant role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and relying on a long-term alliance with the U.S. for securing Afghanistan against external threats. Neither Pakistan nor India is particularly enthusiastic about a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Ideas in the direction of some sort of neutrality status for Afghanistan have met fierce resistance from the leadership in Kabul.

It was only by 2009 that the regional dimension fully re-entered the scene, after Barack Obama took over as U.S. president and appointed the late Richard Holbrooke as a special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan (India was initially part of his script, but lobbied successfully to be exempted). In Obama's formulation the new policy focused almost exclusively on Pakistan and, rather than bringing attention to the need for a regional compact to secure Afghanistan's future, expanded the zone of troubles to also

include Pakistan. “Afghanistan policy” was replaced by “AfPak policy”. Many saw the need to shift the focus to Pakistan, which was expected to be a more serious challenge in the future than Afghanistan itself.

Yet there was also a parallel track where a comprehensive regional analysis gained force, materialising in the U.S. Department of State’s “Silk Road Project”. The guiding idea here is that Afghanistan is at the heart of an extended South-Central Asia region, with vast potential for bringing together countries in the region economically and politically, and eventually also in terms of building common security. Behind this is a principled argument, most forcefully pursued by Barnett Rubin, a leading analyst on Afghanistan and a member of the U.S. special representative team, who sees the intersection of identities and transnational networks as the foundation of the larger region (Gregg, 2010).

An alternative analysis takes Afghanistan’s history as a buffer state as its point of departure and sees the engagement of neighbours in the conflict there not as a reflection of their interest in Afghanistan itself, but of existential security dilemmas within their own security complexes. Such an analysis, laid out elsewhere by the current author (based on research funded by the Norwegian MFA), would see Afghanistan as surrounded by three strong security complexes – South Asia, Central Asia and the Gulf region – each of which has distinct internal tensions that inform how its member states engage with Afghanistan (Harpviken, 2010):

- South Asia’s dynamic is basically driven by relations between Pakistan and India, which are embedded in an existential conflict dating back to independence, and Pakistan’s deep involvement is primarily a reflection of its security concerns vis-à-vis India.
- The Central Asian states gained independence in 1991 after the break-up of the Soviet Union and have proved unable to build a strong common security architecture.
- In the Gulf region, both Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are engaged in a long-standing rivalry over leadership in the Muslim world (in a region fundamentally changed by the destruction of Iraqi power), have played a role in alliance with various Afghan parties.

The long-term implication of such an analysis is that only by addressing the main tensions in the region can Afghanistan’s stability be secured. Short-term implications would aim to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming the playground for the conflicts of the surrounding regions, for example by pursuing a neutrality status guaranteed by its neighbours.

As Minister Støre acknowledged in his April 2011 presentation to parliament, the Norwegian MFA has engaged heavily in regional diplomacy, in terms of which Norway has teamed up closely with the U.S. and Turkey. The close co-operation with Turkey, representing a new trend in Norway’s peace engagement, is interesting also for the long-standing relationships the former claims with Afghanistan (and Pakistan), as well as the major role it already plays in much of the neighbourhood. Nonetheless, progress seems to have been slow and piecemeal, with uneven commitment by the relevant countries. This raises the question of whether the foundational analysis is flawed. Other challenges may relate to the here and now, not least the mounting tensions between the U.S. and Iran over the latter’s nuclear programme. It is also unclear to what extent the series of meetings – now often referred to as the Istanbul Process – is a platform for domestic Afghan talks (between the Taliban and the government, with Pakistani endorsement) rather than an attempt to foster a security community in Afghanistan’s wider neighbourhood. If Afghan talks are the main point on the agenda, this is important in its own right, yet there is a risk that the all-important regional commitment is again neglected.

Conclusions

Transitional justice: While Norway has promoted transitional justice through its support for the AIHRC, the quest for an effective process towards this end is effectively countered by a peace that rests on rewarding the warlords while excluding the Taliban. The culmination of this process was the Afghan parliament’s amnesty bill in 2007, which effectively freed all government allies from responsibility for atrocities while holding their adversaries accountable and was a major blow to the legitimacy of the post-2001 political system.

Amnesties: The offer to individuals to cease fighting and join the government has been in existence since 2005, but became a major policy measure by 2010. Amnesty initiatives have been hampered by implementation shortfalls, design weaknesses and fundamental disagreement on the interface with the military campaign. Norway has not been a major actor in this area.

Political negotiations: There have been talks about talks since 2008 and numerous confidence-building measures have been taken, yet it was only when the U.S. ceased insisting on “red lines” that genuine talks became possible. Once Washington endorsed talks, Norway actively promoted the need to talk to insurgents. Yet the opening for genuine talks came at a time when international withdrawal was on the cards, the Afghan government was divided, and the Taliban and their associate groups seemed resilient. Achieving a durable peace under those circumstances will require a long perspective, firm international commitment and a gradual build-up.

Regional initiatives: A regional compact has not been a top priority until recently. Now that it has become one, it is based on an assumption of Afghanistan’s central role in the larger neighbourhood, which may be flawed, since it downplays the importance of tensions internal to the three regional security complexes surrounding Afghanistan – South Asia, Central Asia and the Gulf region – for how their states engage with Afghanistan. Norway, working with the U.S. and Turkey, has engaged extensively in a process of fostering a large regional compact.

Norway’s role: There are few indications that Norway, with its ambitions regarding the peace and reconciliation agenda both in Afghanistan and globally, has been able to play a pioneering role in promoting political solutions to Afghanistan’s problems. In the public debate Norway has not taken the lead. It seems likely that the country’s ambitions as a peacemaker have been hampered by the fact that the Afghan engagement is very much a result of Norway’s fundamental security concerns, manifested in NATO and the special relationship with the U.S.

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