

NOU 2025: 9 Defeat – Norway in Afghanistan 2015–2021

Summary

1 Summary

In the early hours of 15 August 2021, President Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan. The Taliban entered Kabul and seized power. Within two weeks, more than 100 000 Afghans and international citizens were evacuated from the country. Norwegian and American soldiers were the last to leave Kabul airport in the final days of August. This marked the end of 20 years of international engagement. The defeat of the Afghan Republic and the international community was a fact. The transition to an authoritarian regime under the Taliban is a dramatic setback for the Afghan people, especially for women.

Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the United States, supported by NATO allies and partners, sought to defeat Al Qaeda and the Taliban. They also sought to build a democratic Afghan state based on liberal values. Over time, ambitions and efforts grew. When it became clear that it was impossible to defeat the Taliban, the United States, Norway and others tried to engage the insurgents in dialogue. The aim was to reach a political settlement between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban.

By 2018, the U.S. political will to remain engaged in Afghanistan was exhausted. President Donald Trump entered the Doha Agreement with the Taliban, pledging to withdraw all military forces in exchange for reassurances that Afghanistan would not again become a hotbed of international terrorism. Attempts to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between the Republic and the Taliban failed. In the spring of 2021, President Joseph Biden upheld the Doha Agreement, thereby preparing the ground for the eventual collapse of the Republic, which followed a few months later.

American priorities dominated the international engagement in Afghanistan. For Norway, as for many other countries, it was important to support the United States and NATO, in order to strengthen NATO's relevance. The desire to be a good ally contributed, however, to the absence of critical assessments of the international effort. 'In together, out together' was the mantra for NATO's effort, but discussions among Allies had limited influence on U.S. decisions and the development of the engagement.

While Afghanistan was important as the origin of 9/11 and the key theatre of the war on terror, the country's relevance on the international agenda gradually diminished after 2014. The Middle East increasingly became the centre of gravity in the war on terror, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine and U.S. rivalry with China overshadowed the war in Afghanistan. In many ways, Kabul's fall marked the end of an era following the Cold War, in which military and civilian stabilisation operations dominated the international agenda.

1.1 Norway's role and efforts

In a bigger picture, Norway's efforts did not change the outcome of the conflict. For 20 years, the Norwegian authorities supported the Afghan Republic, and NATO and the U.S. involvement. Norway's goal was to be a good ally, to contribute to the international fight against terrorism and to help build a democratic Afghan state. Norway sought to achieve these goals through aid, peace diplomacy and military contributions. The Commission finds that Norway achieved its goal of being a good ally and in helping prevent new terrorist attacks. The final goal, to build a stable, democratic Afghan state, was not achieved. This constitutes the effort's main defeat.

Norway was one of the first countries to advocate a political solution to the conflict, and it was through peace and conflict diplomacy that Norway came closest to making a difference. As early as 2007, Norway established contact with the Taliban and sought to contribute to an intra-Afghan peace process. During the period 2015–2021, Norwegian authorities built on this foundation, and cooperated closely with American counterparts. Norway's advantage was its contact with the Taliban, and these efforts yielded good political results in Norway's relation to the US. However, the hope and desire to contribute meant that the Norwegian authorities placed less emphasis on the parties' ownership of the process and the impartiality that otherwise characterises Norwegian peace diplomacy. The Norwegian authorities posed few critical questions concerning their own role as a facilitator for the United States.

The Norwegian Armed Forces' efforts in the years 2015–2021 were small compared to those of the years 2001–2014, but nevertheless provided military visibility and political dividends. The Norwegian Special Forces trained and assisted the Afghan special police force Crisis Response Unit 222, which became increasingly important for the security of Kabul and its inhabitants. The Norwegian Intelligence Services provided threat assessments and strategic analyses, and assisted in Norway's peace diplomacy. The Norwegian military field hospital at Kabul airport was of crucial importance during the evacuation operation.

Peace diplomacy and military efforts were particularly important in Norway's success in achieving its goal of being a good ally. There are few other examples of Norway gaining such significant political rewards for two such relatively small contributions. The contributions have also had long-term value, particularly for Norway's co-operation with the United States and the United Kingdom, especially within intelligence and special forces.

Norway provided close to 20 billion Norwegian Kroner in aid to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, including over 6 billion Norwegian Kroner in the period 2015–2021. The aid was part of the international development effort aimed at ensuring a well-functioning Afghan state and, through this, also preventing international terrorism originating in the country. The level of Norway's aid was determined politically, rather than on the basis of an assessment of actual needs in Afghanistan. Despite several reforms of the government's aid policy in 2015-2021, Norwegian aid to Afghanistan continued largely as it had done in the years 2001–2014. The exception was a new emphasis on preventing migration. The aid effort had positive effects in many areas, such as health and education for women and girls, but the attempt to create a liberal democracy remained largely unsuccessful. After the Taliban reclaimed power in 2021, many of the previous advances have been reversed, particularly with regard to women's rights.

The evacuation from Kabul was challenging. The crisis management operation continued for several weeks – in Kabul, Tbilisi, Islamabad, and Oslo. The situation was characterised by great uncertainty and high risk. No one had foreseen that the Republic would collapse as quickly as it did – and when it did, Norway's national crisis management system was only partially mobilised. Improvisation therefore became a key feature of the response. Nevertheless, a joint effort by a number of different authorities and agencies ensured the safe evacuation of around 1 100 people to Norway.

Thousands of Norwegian women and men, civilians and military personnel, served in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. The follow-up of these has varied. Equal follow-up regardless of which sector or agency the personnel work for has been decided upon in principle, but has in practice been implemented to varying degree. In particular, the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has room for improvement with respect to follow-up of own personnel.

Norway also evacuated around 900 Afghans, including 27 underage children without caregivers. The follow-up of these children is an example of good and pragmatic, inter-agency problem solving, from which the Norwegian authorities should aim to learn. However, the follow-up of the CRU veterans failed, and Afghan human rights defenders could have been given better conditions, to enable them to continue their political work.

Women, peace and security and corruption were recurring themes in all Norwegian efforts. The Norwegian authorities promoted Women, Peace and Security as an important justification for their involvement in Afghanistan, both in terms of Norway's own efforts and within the context of NATO and the UN. The Women, peace and security efforts, however, did not sufficiently account for Afghanistan's specific challenges within this area. Similarly, Norwegian aid contributed to the problem of corruption in Afghanistan, but Norwegian authorities did relatively little to counteract the risk of corruption.

1.2 Lessons

In this report, the Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan points to lessons that can be used for the planning, organisation and implementation of future contributions to international operations, aid and other civilian efforts, in peace and conflict diplomacy, in the organisation of crisis preparedness for major incidents, and in the follow-up of Norwegian employees, as well as of people with ties to Norway based in crisis and conflict areas. The first Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan also put forward a number of lessons learned and recommendations. Nine years later, few of these have been followed up.

Norway's involvement in Afghanistan lasted for 20 years, claimed Norwegian lives, involved a number of ministries and agencies, and cost more than 30 billion Norwegian kroners. Despite the extensive efforts, few evaluations have been carried out, and there has been scant fundamental reflection on possible need for adjustments or potential improvements along the way. Evaluations and a culture for critical thinking are fundamental to the ability to learn and adjust direction during long-term, international engagements such as the mission in Afghanistan. The public sector's learning culture has clear potential for improvement: it must facilitate open and knowledge-based debate on goals, means and methods. It is this Commission's hope that this report will contribute to actual learning, public debate and reflection about future Norwegian engagements in a changing world.