

**Ann Wilkens**

## National Prestige Is Big – Even for Small Countries

Suddenly he tosses me his telephone.

It is February 2008. I am in Tokyo, sitting in the Nordic delegation to the second international meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB). I am seated behind the Norwegian representative, Ambassador Kai Eide, who is about to deliver his speech. It is a longish speech, elaborating on possible solutions to the problems of Afghanistan and the Norwegian contributions to the country, substantial as they are.

I listen attentively, while wondering what to do with the telephone in case it starts ringing. The speech is unscheduled, tagged onto the common Nordic speech, delivered by the representative of Denmark, currently chairing the Nordic group. This intervention has not been coordinated within the group; in fact, it is a sales pitch for Eide's candidature as the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative (SGSR) in Afghanistan, with the high-level meeting of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) providing an opportunity that the Danish representative is not in a position to refuse. Lord Ashdown has just been discarded by the Afghans, a move which has opened the door for other candidates. As is customary, the Nordic countries back the Nordic candidate, in this case Ambassador Eide.

Still, it is a bad omen. The idea behind the shared Nordic seat was to pool the Nordic representations to the JCMB into one voice, thereby gaining strength but also setting an example: if more like-

minded countries would follow suit, meetings would be shorter, more efficient and provide the participants with more clout. We, the donors, are at a stage now, where clout is needed in order to follow through with the optimistic bench-marks set for the Afghan government in the Afghanistan Compact endorsed by the London conference in January 2006. The JCMB was created as the instrument for this follow-up, and we are now, two years later, gathered in Tokyo for the second international meeting (the first was in Berlin in January 2007), in an atmosphere of growing cynicism regarding the viability of these goals. Compact means partnership – but does the Afghan government really have the political will to carry out the agreed-upon reform package?

The biggest problems rest with the second section of the Compact, the 'Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights Pillar'. This is also where the Nordic countries traditionally have a particular interest and a common perspective. Respect for human rights, gender equality, the freedom of expression, transparency and the fight against corruption, as well as the importance of UN leadership and coordination, are flagships for all of us. At the same time, they are issues that tend to be pushed into the background when hard-core military questions are on the table – as they are in Afghanistan. So here is definitely a slot for the Nordics to act as a watchdog and dynamo. The other rationale for creating the common Nordic seat at the JCMB is expediency. There are already

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at least 30 international actors with differing vested interests in Afghanistan around the table. At the regular meetings in Kabul, which take place every three months in between international meetings, there are even more participants – scores of them. Meetings tend to take on the allure of diplomatic conferences, rather than deal with the acute and growing problems on the ground. Statements are delivered, at the cost of a genuine dialogue. Nobody is put on the spot, not the Afghan government, which is not delivering on important scores, nor the donor countries that have made commitments they cannot, or will not, honour. As in all diplomatic contexts, causing loss of face is taboo.

While honouring an old tradition of Nordic cooperation in multilateral forums, the different Nordic countries have gone into this particular cooperation from differing points of departure: Norway is a relatively big contributor to Afghanistan, both in terms of troops and development assistance. Denmark is also bigger than Sweden on both scores, and, unlike Norway, is part of the coalition participating in the US-led 'Operation Enduring Freedom', the primary purpose of which is to hunt down al-Qaeda and put an end to international terrorism. In the larger context, Sweden remains a small donor, contributing troops to a relatively peaceful area in Northern Afghanistan and delivering development assistance to the tune of US\$70 million per year, amounting to approximately one per cent of the total international assistance. Finland's contribution is even smaller; it is cooperating with Sweden in the North. Iceland's role is, naturally, insignificant, but it has an interest as a member of NATO, as do Norway and Denmark (whose prime minister at the time, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, is now the secretary-general of NATO). For Sweden and Finland, being in the good books of NATO is still important, as well as, more generally, being a responsible and competent member of the EU and the international community at large.

But even if we are all minor actors in Afghanistan, Afghanistan is big for us, involving our largest number of troops sent abroad and a significant chunk out of our development budgets. With the exception of Iceland, we are on the list of good donors, those who reach or surpass the UN goal of 0.7 per cent of GDP for development assistance. So we have some moral high ground from which to operate.

From Tokyo, and the first bad omen, let us now take a leap three years into the future. Today, there are three Nordic seats on the JCMB: one for

Norway, one for Denmark and one for the remaining three countries (Sweden, Finland and Iceland), representing 'the Nordics'. So what happened? Norway, the biggest donor of the group, was perhaps never very comfortable with the common seat. Albeit the largest contributor in the group, Norway felt reduced in comparison to Denmark, Sweden and Finland that, as EU members, were also represented by the EU chair, the EU Special Representative (EUSR) and the EU delegate heading the office of the Commission. (Later, the offices of the EUSR and the EU delegate were merged.) Ambassador Eide's candidature for the post of UN SGSR was also successful, which created certain lopsidedness within the Nordic group during the period of his tenure (2008–10): internal coordination meetings tended to become forums where the Norwegians shared – or did not share – inside information, and there was certain reticence on their part to speak out on problems, which other members would have liked to put on the table at the JCMB meetings.

Nobody, in fact, wanted to give up their right to intervene at the regular JCMB meetings in Kabul, be it from a position at the table or from a back seat. The efficiency dividend of the arrangement was largely lost when representatives from different Nordic countries continued to make use of their right to speak – the only difference being that all of them started their interventions by pointing out that all Nordics were in agreement on what was being put forward. Still, the attempt at coordination, albeit flawed, was not lost on other JCMB members and earned the Nordics some respect.

But already six months after the Tokyo meeting, Norway started to raise the possibility of having a national Norwegian seat in addition to the common Nordic one. In a volte-face of logic of a kind common in diplomatic dealings, it was now argued that such an arrangement would, in fact, strengthen the Nordic voice, through duplication. Sweden, still being the minor donor of the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark), found it difficult to appear to deny Norway the right to get full diplomatic dividend on its deposit. So we had to go along. Denmark, being the only Nordic country active in the actual war zone of Afghanistan, and thus carrying the highest human losses, felt that if Norway was to have a national seat, Denmark should certainly have one, too.

The end result in terms of representation on the JCMB of the different Nordic countries, all relatively marginal contributors to the

international intervention in Afghanistan, is as follows:

- Norway: national seat, party to common Nordic seat, party to NATO representation;
- Denmark: national seat, party to common Nordic seat, party to NATO representation, party to EU chairmanship, party to EUSR;
- Sweden: party to common Nordic seat, party to EU chairmanship, party to EUSR;

- Finland: party to common Nordic seat, party to EU chairmanship, party to EUSR;
- Iceland: party to common Nordic seat, party to NATO representation.

What is the lesson to be learned? In the diplomatic game, national prestige trumps almost everything. It certainly trumps efficiency, and it is sure to put big stumbling blocks on the path towards coordination. Big countries have big prestige – but small countries have big prestige, too.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ANN WILKENS

Ann Wilkens is a member of the Advisory Board of the AAN. She served as the Swedish Ambassador to Pakistan 2003–07. During this period, she was also accredited to Afghanistan. She is now an independent consultant.

## ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

The chapters and full document can be found on the AAN website ([www.aan-afghanistan.org](http://www.aan-afghanistan.org)) under publications.

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