

RESEARCH ARTICLE

When peace nations go to war: Examining the narrative transformation of Sweden and Norway in Afghanistan

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(Received 12 October 2020; revised 26 February 2021; accepted 26 February 2021; first published online 30 March 2021)

Abstract

What happens to dominant narratives and settled self-images of so-called peace nations when experiencing actual combat in out-of-area military missions? This question arises when studying the contemporary international engagement of small states that previously have mostly been engaged in peacekeeping with limited mandates and non-use of force restrictions. As today's international missions have altered radically, it is important to analyse narrative friction and transformation in small states with little prior experience of international war-fighting. This article addresses this lacuna by examining two small states and self-proclaimed peace nations – Sweden and Norway – in relation to their engagement in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO-led security mission to Afghanistan 2002–14. By examining the interplay and discursive struggle of two narratives – peace nation and military culture – this article finds that these narratives constantly constitute and reconstitute a small state's self-image and the boundaries for acceptable or even required behaviour. With altered principles regarding use of force there is an increased friction between the narratives. By addressing these frictions, the article contributes to the literature on small state international military engagement and develops and refines assumptions regarding the drivers and consequences of small state participation in out-of-area missions.

Keywords: Military Intervention; Peace Nation; Military Culture; ISAF; Small State Peacekeeping

Introduction

What happens to dominant narratives and settled self-images of so-called peace nations when experiencing actual combat in out-of-area military missions? This question arises when studying the contemporary international engagement of the category of small states that commonly refer to themselves as peace nations. Until the late 1990s, many European small states – and the Nordic ones in particular – frequently engaged in out-of-area missions on peacekeeping terms; meaning that the missions had limited mandates and operated according to the non-use of force restrictions of Chapter 'Six and a Half' in the UN Charter.¹ Over time, the character of peacekeeping altered and at the turn of the millennium the idea of Peace Support Operations (PSOs) was launched by both scholars and practitioners. Unlike the peacekeeping of the past, PSOs

¹There exists no such chapter in the UN Charter. Instead, it was Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld who began referring to 'Chapter Six and a Half' of the Charter, in relation to the traditional forms of peacekeeping; placing it between resolving disputes peacefully, such as negotiation and mediation under Chapter VI, and more forceful action as authorised under Chapter VII.

encompass military forces, diplomatic efforts, and humanitarian agencies in tackling challenges and uncertainties in collapsing states.²

The perhaps most obvious PSO to date is the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan 2002–14. ISAF was the largest PSO in the world, consisting of 51 troop-contributing states, and is by many seen as a gigantic, but failed, experiment of multilateral security cooperation; marred by various shortcomings such as uncoordinated forces, lack of resources, and leadership and communication problems.³ Another key concern is that ISAF troops became increasingly engaged in war-like situations, resulting in over 3,000 coalition casualties. Still, few studies have examined how this first-hand experience of violence can affect narratives of self-identification in the troop contributing states.⁴ It is therefore important to analyse narrative friction and transformation in small states with little prior experience of international war-fighting.

This article addresses this lacuna and examines the ISAF involvement of two small states – Norway and Sweden – that traditionally have perceived themselves as peace nations; meaning that their post-Second World War international engagement mainly has concerned participation in UN peacekeeping missions under Chapter ‘Six and a Half’, as well as negotiation and mediation assignments. In addition, both states have publicly declared themselves to be ‘do-gooders’⁵ in world politics. However, and as will be shown in this study, their respective engagement in ISAF became increasingly militarised and their missions often ended up in combat situations. This combination of being a peace nation on the one hand, and the participation in war-like missions on the other constitutes an interesting paradox, which consequences on the identity constructions of the Self need to be unpacked.

In relation to small states’ military involvement in out-of-area missions, such as ISAF in Afghanistan, we argue that there is an interplay between two narratives – *peace nation* and *military culture*. Peace nation stresses the broader ideational aspects of making a difference internationally, while military culture focuses on how the actual combat experience and socialisation with others in the same context moves the boundaries of what is legitimate and even expected behaviour. The narratives complement as well as contrast each other as they appeal to different types of actors and establishments. While peace nation speaks to the political arena and broader public opinion, military culture reflects the practical sphere, that is, the defence establishment and the military and civilian actors who had to perform in the mission. A crucial point, however, is when the domains of these narratives intersect.

²See also Ralph Sundberg, ‘Values and Attitudes across Peace Operations: Change and Stability in the Political Psychology of Swedish ISAF Soldiers’, Conflict Research Series No. 105, Department of Peace and Conflict Research (Uppsala University, 2015); Nicola Johnston, ‘Peace support operations’, *Inclusive Security, Sustainable Peace: A Toolkit for Advocacy and Action* (Washington and London: Hunt Alternatives Fund and International Alert, 2004), available at: {www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/38_peace_support.pdf} accessed 10 February 2021; NATO, ‘Peace Support Operations, AJP-3.4.1’ (July 2001), available at: {<https://info.publicintelligence.net/NATO-PeaceSupport.pdf>} accessed 3 September 2017.

³Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, ‘Campaign disconnect: Operational progress and strategic obstacles in Afghanistan, 2009–2011’, *International Affairs*, 87:2 (2011), pp. 271–96; George R. Dimitriu, ‘Winning the story war: Strategic communication and the conflict in Afghanistan’, *Public Relations Review*, 38:2 (2012), pp. 195–207; Karsten Friis, ‘Which Afghanistan? Military, humanitarian, and state-building identities in the Afghan theater’, *Security Studies*, 21:2 (2012), pp. 266–300; David E. Johnson, ‘What are you prepared to do? NATO and the strategic mismatch between ends, ways, and means in Afghanistan in the future’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34:5 (2011), pp. 383–401; Stephen M. Saideman and David P. Auerswald, ‘Comparing caveats: Understanding the sources of national restrictions upon Nato’s mission in Afghanistan’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 56:1 (2012), pp. 67–84; Amin Saikal, ‘The UN and Afghanistan: Contentions in democratization and state-building’, *International Peacekeeping*, 19:2 (2012), pp. 217–34; Astri Suhrike, *When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Michael J. Williams, ‘Empire lite revisited: Nato, the comprehensive approach and state-building in Afghanistan’, *International Peacekeeping*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 64–78.

⁴One exception is Tua Sandman, ‘The Dis/appearances of Violence: When a “Peace-Loving” State Uses Force’, *Stockholm Studies in Politics* No. 180 (Stockholm University, 2019).

⁵On the concept of ‘do-gooders’, see, for example, Kevin C. Chang, ‘When do-gooders do harm: Accountability of the United Nations toward third parties in peace operations’, *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 20:1–2 (2016), pp. 86–110.

We argue that in light of an increasingly severe security situation combined with altered principles regarding use of force, the initially dominant peace nation narrative becomes seriously challenged by the military culture narrative. By addressing these frictions, our approach will contribute to the literature on small state international military engagement and develop and refine assumptions regarding the drivers and consequences of small state participation in out-of-area missions that over time have come to increasingly resemble regular military operations.

Understanding small state involvement in out-of-area missions – state of the art

As the overall area of interest of this study is small state military involvement in out-of-area military missions, it can be linked to several different literatures. One is the extensive peacekeeping literature, although much of it is primarily concerned with explaining the overall success or failure of peacekeeping missions in terms of reducing conflict violence or creating a more durable peace.⁶ Few studies have investigated small state participation in out-of-area peacekeeping missions.⁷ Similarly, studies on military intervention more broadly have either focused on great power interventions,⁸ or have studied interventions that can be explained by regional and ethnic ties.⁹

It is therefore useful to also tap into the fields of International Relations and foreign policy, as they have dedicated more attention to small state participation in world affairs. Traditionally, small state security engagement was mainly seen as a means of survival in a bipolar international system dominated by superpowers.¹⁰ After the Cold War, and with an increasing proliferation of small states at the world stage, there was a second wave of small state literature, although mainly focusing on Western Europe and the EU.¹¹ More relevant for this study is therefore to relate to more recent studies and those that more specifically try to understand why the Nordic countries – individually or as a region – have changed their international out-of-area operations during the post-Cold War period towards a more militarised profile.¹² Whereas some studies emphasise domestic-level frameworks,¹³ others suggest that the Nordic states bandwagon with great powers

⁶See, for example, Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, 'International peacebuilding: A theoretical and quantitative analysis', *The American Political Science Review*, 94:4 (2000), pp. 779–801; Lisa Morje Howard, *UN Peacekeeping in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Lisa Hultman, Jacob D. Kathman, and Megan Shannon, 'Beyond keeping peace: United Nations effectiveness in the midst of fighting', *American Political Science Review*, 108:4 (2014), pp. 737–53.

⁷One exception is Victor Adolphe Gignoux, *Explaining Small States' Changing Patterns of Peacekeeping Contributions through Role Theory: The Case of Austria and Belgium* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2018).

⁸Hans J. Morgenthau, 'To intervene or not to intervene', *Foreign Affairs*, 45:3 (1967), pp. 425–36 (p. 425); James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: the Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1996); Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

⁹Jacob D. Kathman, 'Civil war diffusion and regional motivations for intervention', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55:6 (2011), pp. 847–76; Jun Koga, 'Where do third parties intervene? Third parties' domestic institutions and military interventions in civil conflicts', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:4 (2011), pp. 1143–66; Martin Austvoll Nome, 'Transnational ethnic ties and military intervention: Taking sides in civil conflicts in Europe, Asia and North Africa, 1944–99', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:4 (2013), pp. 747–71.

¹⁰David Vital, *The Survival of Small States: Studies in Small Power/great Power Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Robert O. Keohane, 'Lilliputians' dilemmas: Small states in international politics', *International Organization*, 23:2 (1969), pp. 291–310; Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

¹¹See, for example, Laurent Goetschel, 'Bound to be peaceful? The changing approach of Western European small states to peace', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 259–78; Jean-Marc Rickli, 'European small states' military policies after the Cold War: From territorial to niche strategies', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2:3 (2008), pp. 307–25; Baldur Thorhallsson and Anders Wivel, 'Small states in the European Union: What do we know and what would we like to know?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19:4 (2006), pp. 651–68.

¹²For a study on Denmark's militarized profile, see Anders Wivel, 'From peacemaker to warmonger? Explaining Denmark's great power politics', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 298–321.

¹³Erik Noreen, Roxanna Sjöstedt, and Jan Ångström, 'Why small states join big wars: The case of Sweden in Afghanistan 2002–2014', *International Relations*, 31:2 (2017), pp. 145–68; Fredrik Doerer, 'Sweden's participation in Operation unified protector: Obligation and interests', *International Peacekeeping*, 21:5 (2014), pp. 642–57.

for ‘non-material gains’ ... [seeking] ‘prestige, standing, status, or reputation’.¹⁴ A third approach explores small states’ self-images in terms of norms, identities and collective memories.¹⁵ Although these factors do have relevance for Norway’s and Sweden’s continued and increasingly militarised international involvement, we argue that it is essential to further unpack and problematise our understanding of this involvement, suggesting an analytical framework to do so.

The discursive struggle

To analyse Norway and Sweden’s recent military involvement, this study suggests a two-level analytical model that incorporates the interplay of two sets of narratives linked to the political and the practical spheres: *the peace nation narrative* and *the military culture narrative*.

In prior works on narratives and their effects on various forms of political action, it is commonly held that narratives ‘play an important role in the constitution of norms, identities and ideologies and are fundamental to the construction of the political world’.¹⁶ Narratives act as frames that help making sense of political realities and guide actors in their political strategies. Policymakers not only connect to and reconstruct narratives but also constantly interact with counter-narratives, which in the cases examined here would be the narratives of the practitioners (both civilian and military) in an out-of-area mission. There is thus an ongoing struggle about which narrative frames are the dominant ones. To understand Norway’s and Sweden’s continuous international military involvement, this study suggests that attention is paid as to how the narratives delimit or enable policies and action in terms of a two-level discursive struggle between the political and the practical arenas.

It is important to note, however, that the impact of these narratives on the character of military engagement can be constrained or enabled by different factors. First, the likelihood of dominant elite narratives becoming powerful enough to shape policy is dependent on the degree of institutionalisation, as this can determine why one narrative dominates another. The way institutional settings are arranged in the troop-contributing state, for example in terms of parliamentary committees or governmental agencies, are important enabling or constraining factors that influence the character of state’s involvement in a PSO. As an example, if a government searches for broad political support in the context of a traditionally consensus-seeking political culture, it might be difficult for a contesting narrative, critical to a prolonged military involvement in the mission in question, to become institutionalised.¹⁷

Second, there is the tricky relationship between security missions abroad and domestic public opinion of the troop-contributing states. Public opinion often expresses limited support for involvement in, for example, Afghanistan or Iraq. Moreover, the success of a PSO, as well as the ability to mobilise support for such a mission, is more linked to a credible strategic narrative than the actual outcome of tactical operations on the battlefield. There are examples of states that did not succeed in communicating such a narrative to its domestic audience and subsequently

¹⁴Rasmus Brun Pedersen, ‘Bandwagon for status: Changing patterns in the Nordic status-seeking strategies?’, *International Peacekeeping*, 25:2 (2018), pp. 217–41 (p. 222); also Peter Viggo Jakobsen, Jens Ringsmose, and Håkon Lunde Saxi, ‘Prestige-seeking small states: Danish and Norwegian military contributions to US-led operations’, *European Journal of International Security*, 3:2 (2018), p. 256–77.

¹⁵Christopher S. Browning, ‘Small, smart and salient? Rethinking identity in the small state literature’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19:4 (2006), pp. 669–81; Peter Lawler, ‘The “good state” debate in international relations’, *International Politics*, 50 (2013), pp. 18–37; Annika Bergman Rosamond and Christine Agius, ‘Sweden, military intervention and the loss of memory’, in Christine Agius and Dean Keep (eds), *The Politics of Identity: Place, Space and Discourse* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 159–79.

¹⁶Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, ‘Narrating success and failure: Congressional debates on the “Iran nuclear deal”’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:2 (2018), pp. 268–92.

¹⁷Erik Noreen and Jan Ångström, ‘A catch-all strategic narrative: Target audiences and Swedish troop contribution to ISA in Afghanistan’, in Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War* (London: Routledge 2015), p. 296.

had to either interrupt or significantly decrease their contribution to a mission due to domestic political pressures.¹⁸

The political arena: The peace nation narrative

A common small state narrative, and of the Nordic states in particular, is peace nation.¹⁹ A peace nation is characterised as an internationalist approach that links the activist ambitions of small states in world politics to peaceful forms of foreign policy. Civilian and humanitarian means are emphasised over military instruments and diplomatic means are preferred to coercive ones. Moreover, the peace nation narrative includes attributes such as being a role model for other countries and making a difference in conflict-ridden areas. It is rooted in the liberalist idea that also the small state can contribute to making the world a better and more peaceful place. The peace nation narrative has been developed over centuries and has thus become a fundamental part of a 'historical self-understanding'.²⁰ The post-Cold War era became a window of opportunity for small states to become humanitarian powers since 'ideals and soft power diplomacy gained prominence internationally'.²¹ The ambition expressed in this narrative is that influencing world politics through various kinds of assistance programmes and active participation in global and regional organisations is beneficiary to everyone.²²

The peace nation narrative thus comprises both altruistic internationalist aims of striving for a global liberal peace order, but also pragmatism that refers to a national interest that reaches far beyond territorial borders.²³ This study therefore argues that the peace nation narrative is one key motivation as to why small states engage abroad and why Sweden and Norway has a continued engagement in peace and security missions. How this narrative is formulated, to what extent, and by whom, will be further explicated below.

The practical arena: The military culture narrative

As a state's involvement develops during an extended international security mission, its troops often increasingly participate in military operations that may end up in real combat situations. We suggest that the form and extent of such military involvement within a multinational security operation is inextricably intertwined with the so-called military cultures of states. Inspired by previous studies, it is here argued that this military culture is actuated by narratives 'that shape collective understandings in how armed groups organize themselves and engage in the use of force'.²⁴ We suggest that the concept of military culture has developed in a manner similar to

¹⁸Beatrice de Graaf and George Dimitriu, "Fighting" versus "reconstructing": Framing the Dutch mission in Afghanistan', in de Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War*, pp. 241–62.

¹⁹Øystein Haga Skånland, "Norway is a peace nation": A discourse analytic reading of the Norwegian peace engagement', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 45:1 (2010), pp. 34–54; Kristian Stokke, 'Peace building as small state foreign policy: Norway's peace engagement in changing international context', *International Studies*, 41:3–4 (2012), pp. 207–31; Halvard Leira, "Our entire people are natural born friends of peace": The Norwegian foreign policy of peace', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 338–56.

²⁰Leira, "Our entire people are natural born friends of peace", p. 338.

²¹Stokke, 'Peace building as small state foreign policy', p. 214.

²²A recent concept that to some extent can be viewed as a development of the peace nation narrative, and is adopted by both Norway and Sweden, is 'feminist foreign policy'. FFP shares many key assumptions with peace nation, stressing for example 'less militaristic orientation [and] investment in development aid and humanitarianism'; see Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, 'Gendering foreign policy: A comparative framework for analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16:2 (2020), p. 155; also Victoria Scheyer and Marina Kumskova, 'Feminist foreign policy: A fine line between "adding women" and pursuing a feminist agenda', *Journal of International Affairs*, 72:2 (2019), pp. 57–76.

²³For a problematisation of liberal internationalism in terms of a 'good state' versus nationalism, see Lawler, 'The "good state" debate in international relations'; also Kjell Goldmann, 'Nationalism and internationalism in post-Cold War Europe', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3:3 (1997), pp. 259–90.

²⁴Andrew M. Bell, 'Military culture and restraint toward civilians in war: Examining the Ugandan civil wars', *Security Studies*, 25:3 (2016), pp. 488–518; also Chiara Ruffa, 'Military cultures and force employment in peace operations', *Security Studies*, 26:3 (2017), pp. 391–422.

the more comprehensive strategic culture; in other words, progressing from being a static concept to a more dynamic process mechanism that includes learning, adaptation, communicative practices, and socialisation.²⁵ Learning from, as well as communicating and socialising with troops as well as civilians from other participating countries, along with actual combat experience, contribute to the internalisation of a military culture. In turn, this culture influences the assessment on the possibilities and limitations regarding the use of military force. We therefore argue that the development of a military culture by the troop contributing states of a multinational security mission moves the boundaries of what is possible, and this in turn sets the premises for subsequent military action. This narrative can help to account for the continuous state commitment to international security missions although the roles and activities in those missions change.

To summarise, our overall argument is that two narratives, peace nation and military culture, offer a two-level discursive interplay in which these narratives interact, reinforce, and contest one another. An in-depth investigation of Norwegian and Swedish political and military narratives regarding their respective ISAF missions will help to visualise and shed light on this complex dynamic.

Methodological considerations

There are several reasons for analysing the ISAF involvement of Norway and Sweden. Initially, Norway and Sweden became militarily involved in Afghanistan based on different predispositions. Norway, being a 'good ally', prepared like other NATO members already in autumn 2001 to take part in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).²⁶ The militarily non-aligned Sweden did not have any alliance obligations and did not take part in the OEF but in the UN-sanctioned ISAF in the beginning of 2002. Initially, Sweden thus opted for a 'less risk willing' militarised strategy compared to Norway.²⁷ However, apart from these different points of departure, there are strong similarities between the Swedish and Norwegian engagement in ISAF. During the ISAF mission, Afghanistan was administratively divided into 26 so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team Areas (PRTs), and both Norway and Sweden were lead nations for their respective PRT in the relatively peaceful northern Afghanistan. Their squad sizes per capita were similar and their missions were roughly parallel in time. A structured, focused analysis of the political and military discourses of these two peace nations at war can help us to explore new theoretical avenues to understand and unpack the paradoxical relationship between the peace nation narrative on the one hand, and the military culture on the other.

We analyse the respective Norwegian and Swedish engagements in Afghanistan from autumn 2001 to the phasing out of ISAF in 2014. To collect data on the peace nation and military culture narratives, trying to minimize possible selection biases, we employ a broad range of sources. We have collected and analysed all government bills and annual debate memos from the Norwegian and Swedish parliaments (the Storting and the Riksdag) that concerned the ISAF mission during our chosen period. We also analysed the three official reports on ISAF by the Swedish

²⁵Frederic Labarre and Pierre Jolicoeur, 'Shaping and measuring military culture development: A case study of defence education enhancement program', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 22:2 (2016), pp. 135–46; Edward Lock, 'Refining strategic culture: Return of the second generation', *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 685–708; Christoph O. Meyer, 'Convergence towards a European strategic culture? A constructivist framework for explaining changing norms', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:4 (2005), pp. 523–49; Theo Farrell, 'Military adaptation and organisational convergence in war: Insurgents and international forces in Afghanistan', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2020), available at: {doi: 10.1080/01402390.2020.1768371}; Jeffrey S. Lantis, 'Strategic cultures and security policies in the Asia-Pacific', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 35:2 (2014), pp. 166–86; Alessa Biava, Margriet Drent, and Graeme P. Herd, 'Characterizing the European Union's strategic culture: An analytical framework', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49:6 (2011), pp. 1227–48.

²⁶Norges Offentlige Utredninger (hereafter NOU), 'En God Alliert: Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014, NOU 2016:8'. For a critical assessment of this report, see Mats Berdala and Astri Suhrke, 'A good ally: Norway and international statebuilding in Afghanistan, 2001–2014', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41:1–2 (2018), pp. 61–88.

²⁷Pedersen, 'Bandwagon for status', pp. 223–4.

government (SOU and FOI reports) and the very thorough official investigation by the Norwegian government (NOU report). In addition, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with Swedish and Norwegian military and civilian representatives connected to the ISAF mission. We also analysed classified reports from the field. As additional sources, we use the rich previous research on the ISAF mission.

Although our approach to some extent is inductive, in which we analyse a large number of texts in an open-ended manner in order to discover dominant discourses, our analytical method is a structured discourse analysis (SDA).²⁸ While having the same ontological assumptions of the powers of discourse and speech as other discursive approaches, SDA differs from more critical forms of discourse analysis, which often aim towards detecting hegemonic structures of domination and subordination through a purely inductive approach.²⁹ Rather, SDA is mainly concerned with chiselling out what is being said, how it is said, the underlying meaning of the statements, and how different statements are bound together in a web of intertextuality. In addition, the in-depth reading of text is guided by key theoretical concepts, and inspired by Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer's narrative analysis we have identified some key elements that make up the coding frame for each of our two narratives.³⁰ For the peace nation narrative, we code statements stressing the recognition of international law; UN resolutions; humanitarian issues, and role models. Expressions coded as indicating a military culture focus on statements that discuss the learning from combat experience and to what degree it is important; the possibilities and limitations of the use of force; and the degree of communication and socialisation with other troops in the mission. In order to contextualise the concepts and to structure the empirical analysis, we ask a broad set of questions to the different texts: What actors appear to be the main proponents of a particular narrative? What appear to be the main motives for participation, that is, which narrative is emphasised? Are there narratives of contestation and who are the main proponents of those narratives? By answering these questions and examining how policymakers and practitioners emphasise certain concepts we can see how the dominant discursive formations have developed; we can trace them over time, and we can detect how they interplay with and contrast each other. Linked to this we also examine the domestic institutional settings and the degree to which the narratives can find 'institutional homes' in terms of, for instance, parliamentary committees, governmental agencies, or public opinion. Here, we can also detect narratives of affirmation or contestation and whether the broader political elite and the public express support for or critique against the missions.

How Norway and Sweden became involved in ISAF

Within a month of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, US bombers began to strike Afghan terrain in their hunt for al-Qaeda operatives and to oust the Taliban government. Both Norway and Sweden initiated preparations for interventions in Afghanistan, although the decisions to intervene were taken from slightly different premises. After a formal US request in mid-November, Norway's liberal conservative government decided to assist the United States in the coalition Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The fight against international terrorism consisted of, among other things, fighters and transport aircraft.³¹ In the beginning of December 2001, the decision was made public in the Storting. Foreign minister Jan Petersen

²⁸See also Roxanna Sjöstedt, 'How does a threat become salient? The case of swine flu in Sweden', in Kai Oppermann and Henrike Viehrig (eds), *Issue Salience in International Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 79–98; Anders Themnér and Roxanna Sjöstedt, 'Buying them off or scaring them straight: Explaining warlord democrats' electoral rhetoric', *Security Studies*, 29:1 (2020), pp. 1–33.

²⁹See, for example, Louise Phillips and Marianne W. Jørgensen, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: Sage, 2002).

³⁰Oppermann and Spencer, 'Narrating success and failure'.

³¹NOU, 'En God Alliert', p. 22.

referred to the UN resolutions from the Security Council approving United States' right to self-defence according to Article 51, but he also mentioned Norway's NATO membership, which – according to the NATO charter Article 5 on collective defence – obliged the country to assist the US after the terrorist attacks. It is notable that all parties in the Storting, except the Socialist Left Party, supported the government's decision to send troops to OEF. Although the initial decision to send military troops to Afghanistan was taken without any major public discussions, the Norwegian government gradually had to establish public support for the military mission.³² Consequently, humanitarian arguments were used more frequently to legitimise the continued Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan.³³ It became increasingly apparent that the Norwegian OEF involvement was a controversial issue in domestic politics and that the Socialist Left Party, being against the Norwegian NATO-membership, strongly opposed an 'offensive' use of force that would put Norwegian soldiers under US-command.³⁴

In 2005 a new coalition government led by Jens Stoltenberg was formed, consisting of the Labour Party, the Centre Party, and the Socialist Left Party. In the government proclamation, called the Soria Moria declaration, it was stated that Norway would withdraw from the OEF mission – a decision that was strongly acclaimed by the Socialist Left Party.³⁵ A key issue in the debate was also the geographical location of the Norwegian forces. Consequently, in autumn 2006, the Stoltenberg government decided not to follow NATO's request to assign Special Forces to the turbulent southern Afghanistan. In the beginning of 2007, the government instead decided to send 150 additional Special Forces to the area around Kabul. The key restriction was that these forces could not operate in other parts of the country, and especially not in the south.³⁶ The Norwegian security mission to Afghanistan would rather focus on leading the relatively calm PRT Meymaneh in the Northern provinces. Starting in autumn 2005, a force of 350 to 500 per contingent operated in Meymaneh until the PRT arrangements were phased out in 2012.³⁷

Government discussions regarding a possible Swedish military contribution to Afghanistan can be dated back to the end of October 2001.³⁸ However, in mid-December, Sweden was formally invited to take part in a British-led multinational force in Afghanistan, and the social democratic government immediately tasked its armed forces to prepare for the mission. The very same day the UK asked Sweden for help, it was emphasised in parliament that Sweden ought to contribute to the military operations in Afghanistan. Opinion polls also called for a Swedish participation. Almost 70 per cent of those polled by the Swedish Board of Psychological Defense approved of Swedish participation in a military force abroad under a UN mandate,³⁹ and as was the case in Norway, there was overwhelming consensus in parliament

³²Helge Lurås, 'Vestens intervensjon i Afghanistan – bakgrunn, praksis, fortsettelse', NUPI Working Paper No. 765 (Oslo, 2009), pp. 1–44 (p. 4); Erik Bøifot, *Det Norske Militære Engasjementet i Afghanistan: Idealisme eller Egeninteresse?* (Oslo: Forsvarets høyskole, 2007), pp. 1–77; Kristian B. Harpviken, *A Peace Nation Takes up Arms: The Norwegian Engagement in Afghanistan* (Oslo: PRIO, 2011), pp. 1–21 (p. 6).

³³Bøifot, *Det Norske Militære Engasjementet*, p. 67.

³⁴Janne H. Matlary, 'Norway: Militarily able but politically divided', in Janne H. Matlary and Magnus Petersson (eds), *NATO's European Allies: Military Capability and Political Will* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 279–300 (p. 291); Nina Græger and Kristin M. Haugevik, *The Revival of Atlanticism in NATO? Changing Security Identities in Britain, Norway and Denmark* (Oslo: NUPI report 2009), pp. 1–58 (p. 39).

³⁵Ida Maria Oma, 'Unngåelse av innenrikspolitisk risiko? Stoltenberg II-regjeringens beslutninger om styrkebidrag til ISAF', *Internasjonal Politikk*, 69:2 (2011), pp. 159–81 (p. 170).

³⁶Otto Trønnes, *Mapping and Explaining Norwegian Caveats in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2008* (Trondheim: Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 2012), pp. 1–156 (p. 75); Græger and Haugevik, *The Revival of Atlanticism*.

³⁷Oma, 'Unngåelse av innenrikspolitisk risiko', p. 172; Ola Bøe-Hansen, Tormod Heier, and Janne H. Matlary (eds), *Strategisk Suksess? Norsk Maktbruk i Libya og Afghanistan* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013), pp. 1–108 (p. 13).

³⁸Wilhelm Agrell, *Ett Krig Här och Nu: Sveriges Väg till Väpnad Konflikt i Afghanistan* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2013), pp. 1–320 (p. 77).

³⁹Göran Stutz, *Opinion 2004* (Stockholm: Styrelsen för Psykologiskt Försvar, 2004); Margareta Viklund, 'Internationell samverkan', *Utrikesutskottets betänkande 2001/02:UU1* (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 10 December 2001).

on the importance of making a contribution to the mission. Neither was there any hesitation regarding Sweden's status as a non-aligned state when it later became apparent that NATO would lead the ISAF-forces.⁴⁰ In a government bill of 2005, it was emphasised that the Swedish force had 'an impressive influence in the areas it served in', and the task to take over the responsibility of PRT Mazar-e-Sharif in 2006 was 'welcomed by NATO and other troop-contributing states'.⁴¹ However, at this time there was no longer total consensus in parliament to prolong the Swedish ISAF mandate. The Left Party in particular, but also the Greens, were concerned about the risk of confusing the ISAF mission with the counterinsurgency warfare of the OEF forces.⁴²

When the liberal conservative coalition government in Sweden succeeded the social democrats in October 2006, the security situation had deteriorated significantly in Afghanistan. Battles between OEF forces and the Taliban took place in the south and gradually came to involve units from ISAF and the newly established Afghan National Army. Against this backdrop, the new government proposed to increase the Swedish force to a maximum of six hundred soldiers, under the condition that there was a valid mandate for the force provided by the UN Security Council.⁴³ A parliament majority, with the exception of the MPs from the Left and Green parties, approved the proposal for the major troop increase. Another controversial issue concerned that Sweden, like Norway, had Special Forces engaged in Afghanistan. However, this, in contrast to Norway, was (and still is) highly confidential. This Special Operation Task Group (SOG) came to public attention at the beginning of 2014 when the broadsheet *Dagens Nyheter* (independent liberal), published interviews with soldiers of the group, which testified of deadly battles with Taliban insurgents.⁴⁴

Beginning in 2010, the entire ISAF-mission transformed into a transition process, which in essence meant the transmitting of security responsibility from ISAF to Afghan security structures. This was the main objective of the new strategy, and consequently the PRT arrangements would be phased out. Already in March 2012, the PRTs were replaced by a new structure under civilian control, a so-called Transition Support Team (TST). By 2014 the Norwegian and Swedish military efforts were tasked to support and train the Afghan security forces as part of handing over security responsibility from ISAF to the Afghan authorities. Emphasis shifted from a capability support to an advisory role and instructors from a Nordic-Baltic cooperation (Sweden, Finland, Norway and Latvia) took over in northern Afghanistan.

The manifestation of the peace nation narrative

The peace nation narrative has been framed as a fundamental symbol of Norwegian national identity in world affairs. It can be traced back more than one hundred years and is possibly the oldest prevailing self-image in Norwegian foreign policy.⁴⁵ Although being less relevant during the Cold War, it gained renewed foothold in the 1990s as Norway became engaged in peace mediation. As an example, Prime Minister Bondevik in 2003 developed the historical narrative by stating that 'the work for peace [has] been one of the foundations that Norway has built through centuries'.⁴⁶ In the so-called Soria Moria declaration, the Stoltenberg government declared the

⁴⁰Regeringens proposition 2003/04:71, 'Fortsatt svenskt deltagande i en internationell säkerhetsstyrka i Afghanistan' (Stockholm: Utrikesdepartementet), p. 9.

⁴¹Regeringens Proposition 2005/06:34, 'Utökad svenskt deltagande i den internationella säkerhetsstyrkan i Afghanistan' (Stockholm: Utrikesdepartementet), pp. 12–13.

⁴²Riksdagens protokoll 2003/04:121 (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag).

⁴³Regeringens proposition 2006/07:83, 'Fortsatt svenskt deltagande i den internationella säkerhetsstyrkan i Afghanistan' (Stockholm: Utrikesdepartementet), p. 16.

⁴⁴Ewa Stenberg, 'Sveriges hemliga krig', *Dagens Nyheter*, special edition (25 January 2014), pp. 10–14.

⁴⁵See, for example, Kristian Berg Harpviken and Inger Skjelsbæk, 'Tilslørt fredspolitik', *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 27:4 (2010), pp. 379–88; Leira, "'Our entire people are natural born friends of peace'".

⁴⁶From Halvard Leira, Axel Borchgrevink, Nina Græger, Arne Melchior, Eli Stamnes, and Indra Overland, 'Norske selvbilder-norsk utenrikspolitik', *Internasjonal Politikk*, 65:2 (2007), pp. 1–45 (pp. 11–12).

ambition to be a distinct peace nation which included not only acting as a peace mediator, but also taking part in military peace support operations.⁴⁷

Both the Bondevik and the Stoltenberg governments legitimised the Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan as being mandated by the UN and international law; something which indicated that peace nation was a dominant narrative at the time. Already in December 2001, the decision to send troops to OEF was based on UN Security Council's resolutions and the argument for doing so was brought up prior to the above-mentioned statement on Norway's commitment to NATO.⁴⁸ This line of reasoning was further developed in the Storting by emphasising that Norway always had held the firm belief that the UN Security Council has the main responsibility to maintain international peace and security. In addition, it was stated that Norway should work within the framework of NATO when seeking solutions of international conflicts.⁴⁹ The Stoltenberg government was even more explicit, emphasising that Norway only took part in military operations that occurred within the framework of international law. The UN mandate, rather than any commitment to NATO, was often put forth to legitimise the Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ When criticised in the public debate for participating in a 'war' in Afghanistan, Minister of Defense Strøm-Erichsen reminded her opponents that a unified UN Security Council on several occasions had declared the situation in Afghanistan to be a threat to international peace and security. The Norwegian mission in Afghanistan was accordingly based on an unambiguous mandate from UN, together with the invitation from the Afghan government that has asked for help to establish peace and stability.⁵¹

The Swedish peace nation narrative developed in a similar fashion to the Norwegian one. Since the 1920s, official Swedish foreign and security policy has emphasised the need to join organisations like the League of Nations and the UN with the purpose of becoming an active and influential peace nation in international affairs.⁵² A narrative that stresses national priorities has nonetheless existed side by side with the international peace nation ambitions; with the former being an overarching strategic narrative for Sweden during periods of war, including the Cold War.⁵³

In the post-Cold War era, the policy of neutrality was deleted from the foreign policy declarations in favor of the less committal 'military non-alignment',⁵⁴ as Sweden continued its international engagement. The driving force behind Swedish peace nation efforts after the Cold War, as expressed through the contributions to operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, has not necessarily been one of altruism only, but also one of national interest and a desire to position oneself in the world arena.⁵⁵ A statement from the chairman of the Defense Committee expressed this clearly in 2009, stating that 'the defense of Sweden is after

⁴⁷Regjeringen, 'Plattform for Regjeringssamarbeidet Mellom Arbeiderpartiet, Sosialistisk Venstreparti og Senterpartiet 2005-09', available at: {www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/smk/vedlegg/2005/regjeringplattform_soriamoria.pdf}; also Matlary, 'Militarily able but politically divided', p. 291.

⁴⁸Stortingstidende, 'Afghanistan: Mulige norske styrkebidrag', 5 December 2001 (Oslo: Stortinget 2001/2002), pp. 598–600.

⁴⁹Stortingstidende, 'Redogjørelser av utenriksministern og forsvarsministern om en samlet norsk instans i Afghanistan og Irak 2004', 15 December 2003 (Oslo: Stortinget 2003/2004), pp. 1333–7.

⁵⁰Stortinget, 'Møte onsdag den 8. februar 2006, Utenrikspolitisk redegjørelse av utenriksministeren', available at: {www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2005-2006/060208/2/}

⁵¹Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen, 'Hvorfor vi er i Afghanistan', *Sjekkposten*, 5 (2009), p. 16.

⁵²Herbert Tingsten, *The Debate on the Foreign Policy of Sweden: 1918–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949); Östen Undén, 'Fk 1945 34:34' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag); Östen Undén, 'Neutralitet och Solidaritet', *Tiden*, 1 (1945); Östen Undén, 'Neutraliteten släppes när ett nytt NF bildas', *Socialdemokraten* (28 April 1943).

⁵³For a detailed account of the Swedish discourse, see Noreen et al., 'Why small states join big wars'.

⁵⁴Ministry for Foreign Affairs, *Documents on Swedish Foreign Policy 1991* (Stockholm: New Series 1, C 41 1992), pp. 30, 32–3, 100.

⁵⁵Agrell, *Ett Krig Här och Nu*, pp. 19–58.

all conducted also in Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan'.⁵⁶ The Swedish involvement in Afghanistan can thus be interpreted in the context of strengthening Sweden's identity as an active and relatively independent player that makes a difference in world politics.

As was the case in Norway, there was a general consensus in the Swedish parliament on the importance of a troop contribution to Afghanistan. In 2005, the social democratic government assessed the ISAF experiences as 'very good', while stressing the importance of the Swedish contribution and how Sweden was a well-respected and influential actor.⁵⁷ This peace nation discourse was echoed by the subsequent liberal conservative government, which stressed additional peace nation attributes:

Sweden can contribute to increased efficiency and legitimacy of the concerted international operations. Swedish involvement strengthens commitment to human rights, good governance, and the promotion of women's safety, influence, and participation ... Sweden is often seen as a constructive actor. ... Our efforts should also be designed so that they act as role models for how we want to ensure that international efforts are organized.⁵⁸

In other words, both the social democrats and the liberal conservative political bloc, who both led governments during the period of investigation, emphasised not only the importance of the Swedish contribution to ISAF, but also how appreciated Sweden was by other ISAF-states, as well as the Afghan authorities. Both sides stressed that the Swedish contribution in Afghanistan clearly made a difference.⁵⁹ This view is epitomised by the sharp reply in the Riksdag, when a then-aspiring liberal conservative minister responded to criticism against the Swedish involvement in Afghanistan:

If we are not there, if we do not care, we will leave the field open. We will create soldiers who do not act with the standard and in the manner that has become the distinctive feature of the Swedish soldiers.⁶⁰

As was the case in Sweden, the Norwegian engagement in ISAF had a broad political support in parliament. In addition, the media debate was not overly critical.⁶¹ As regards public opinion, only a few opinion polls were conducted on the issue and all of them after 2006 by media agencies. The results of these polls were mixed and did not point in any specific direction.⁶² Nevertheless, already in December 2003 there were critical political voices, for example the leader of the Centre Party, who raised concerns regarding the image of Norway as a peace nation:

⁵⁶Jan Ångström, 'Försvarsmaktens Internationella Insatser: I den svenska säkerhetens eller identitetens tjänst?', in Kjell Engelbrekt and Jan Ångström (eds), *Svensk säkerhetspolitik i Europa och världen* (Stockholm: Norstedts Juridik 2010).

⁵⁷Regeringen, 'Proposition 2005/06:34: Utökad svenskt deltagande i den Internationella Säkerhetsstyrkan i Afghanistan' (Stockholm: Regeringen, 2005), pp. 12–13.

⁵⁸Utrikesdepartementet, 'Strategi för Sveriges stöd till det internationella engagemanget i Afghanistan' (Stockholm: Utrikesdepartementet 2010).

⁵⁹Urban Ahlin, 'Fortsatt svenskt deltagande i den internationella säkerhetsstyrkan i Afghanistan (ISAF), Riksdagens protokoll 2009/10:32' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag).

⁶⁰Gunilla Carlsson, 'Afghanistan, Riksdagens Protokoll 2005/06:45' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag).

⁶¹For example, 'Our impression is that Norway is one of the few countries where there has been a solid and great consensus, especially in the parliament ... There were sound debates and criticism in the media. The Norwegian government has been able to adjust the course during the mission.' (Interview NCR2, 2014). For this and following footnotes: NCR: Norwegian civilian representative; NMR: Norwegian military representative; SCR: Swedish civilian representative; SMR: Swedish military representative. For a full list of interviewees, please refer to the Appendix.

⁶²NOU, 'En God Alliert', pp. 174–5. Also in Sweden there was a relatively low interest in polling for particular international missions, there were only data from 2007 and onwards. The results from these polls were as in Norway contradictory; see Noreen and Ångström, 'A catch-all strategic narrative', pp 294–5.

Norway's international profile is increasingly characterized by a desire to be a military actor, and it is increasingly less characterized by a wish to be seen as a peace nation.⁶³

Almost a decade later, in May 2013, a similar critique was raised from the Socialist Left Party in the Storting in connection to a discussion on the need to evaluate the above-mentioned Norwegian contribution to Afghanistan:

It can be uncomfortable for a peace nation like Norway to realize the true reality of the war behind the speeches, press releases and press photos for over twelve years.⁶⁴

According to the report by the Independent Government Commission, additional critical voices against the Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan came from 'a small group of researchers, journalists and left-wing politicians'.⁶⁵ In all, we find that the media debate in Norway, as well as in Sweden, generally followed the arguments of each respective parliament. In particular, this became evident in 2009–10 when the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated also in the previously relatively peaceful provinces, and when death rates began to increase also among Scandinavia troops. Despite these developments, only occasional media voices opposed any Scandinavian involvement in ISAF, or demanded immediate withdrawal of troops.⁶⁶

To the dominant political narrative, emphasising the importance of the Swedish involvement in ISAF and Sweden's role as a peace nation, some narratives of contestation are found. While the Left Party was the harshest opponent against the Swedish involvement in ISAF,⁶⁷ some MPs from the Green Party also criticised the mission, especially regarding the risk of confusing the ISAF mission with OEF counterinsurgency warfare.⁶⁸ Thus, the principal discursive struggle with regard to the Swedish identity as a peace nation, with particular reference to the involvement in Afghanistan, mainly focused on the role that Sweden should play in relation to NATO and the United States. In particular the Left Party stressed that Sweden should focus on the humanitarian aspects and refrain from a military cooperation with the NATO-led ISAF.⁶⁹ The tension in the narrative of whether the Swedish military engagement in Afghanistan was a war-fighting operation or a peace supporting and development mission continued to resurface throughout the duration of the operation and was often brought up in parliamentary debates. The tendency in the debate was that the Left described the Swedish contribution in terms of war, while those who supported the Swedish mission wished to downplay the image of Sweden being at war.⁷⁰

⁶³ Åslaug Haga, 'Redogjørelser av utenriksministern og forsvarsministern om en samlet norsk instans i Afghanistan og Irak 2004', 17 December 2003 (Oslo: Stortingstidende, 2003/2004), p. 1426.

⁶⁴ Snorre Serigstad Valen, 'Innst 226S, Document 8:29 S, 2012-2013, Stortinget meeting', 14 May 2013 (Oslo: Stortinget, 2013).

⁶⁵ NOU, 'En God Alliert', p. 175. However, some of the interviews with senior military officers having served in Afghanistan corroborates the critical discussion on the true reasons for participation:

'I believe that both Norway and Sweden were mainly in Afghanistan to secure their interests, their status *vis-à-vis* the United States and other NATO countries.' Interview MNRI 2014, also NCR4 2014.

⁶⁶ NOU, 'En God Alliert', pp. 174–5. A screening of 137 articles 2009–10 on ISAF in the Swedish press, using the database *Artikelsök* (Article Search), corroborates this. See [<https://artikelsokip.btj.se/search?count=20&filter=2009%2Fqfryr%202010%2Fqtoyr%20&lastSearch=1612449905260&query=ISAF&sort=created-desc&start=0>] accessed 24 February 2021.

⁶⁷ Alice Åström, 'Riksdagens Protokoll 2003/04:121' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2003).

⁶⁸ Eva Björning, 'Riksdagens Protokoll 2003/04:121' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2003).

⁶⁹ Berit Jóhannesson, 'Riksdagens Protokoll 2002/03:37' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2002); also, Lotta Hedström, 'Riksdagens Protokoll 2002/03:37' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2002).

⁷⁰ Urban Ahlin, 'Riksdagens Protokoll 2009/10:32' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2009); Hans Linde, 'Riksdagens Protokoll 2009/10:32' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2009).

This discursive contestation had an impact in the sense that it contributed to an increased tendency in the parliamentary debates and government bills to highlight Norway and Sweden as both security actors and important contributors regarding humanitarian activities. In addition, it was often emphasised that their troops were in Afghanistan on a mandate from the UN as well as by invitation from the Afghan government.⁷¹ Although the contesting narratives did not find any institutional homes, they succeeded to move the boundaries of the dominant discourse. The discursive struggle as it was manifested in the parliament and in the media debates contributed to a 'catch-all' model, particularly in the Swedish case, which included 'economic growth, strengthening respects for human rights, strengthening the rule of law, and improved security'.⁷²

In the Norwegian debate, there was from time to time a tension, especially between the Socialist Left Party and other radical actors opposing a Norwegian NATO membership, *vis-à-vis* the establishment supporting this membership. The core issue concerned on the one hand whether Norway should choose to be a 'good ally' within the framework of its NATO membership, or a peace nation focusing on conflict prevention and humanitarian efforts. According to the Independent Government Commission, with the purpose to evaluate Norway's civil and military involvement in Afghanistan 2001–14, this was not an 'either/or' question. The commission concluded that according to the government, a NATO-led ISAF was an opportunity to strengthen NATO's 'relevance' beyond the deterrence politics that developed during the Cold War. According to the commission, 'the alliance [thereby] became a key guarantee of cooperation for stability and peaceful development in Afghanistan'.⁷³ This way of framing NATO's new role in terms of contributing to 'stability and peaceful development' was somehow, after all, in line with Norway's tradition of being a peace nation.

The formation of a military culture

Only a few years after Norway's takeover of the leadership of PRT Faryab it became apparent that the Norwegian forces had to overcome major difficulties to reach ISAF's main goal in the province, to stabilise the situation and prepare for a strengthened state capacity and development. As the above-mentioned independent government commission emphasized, '[t]his ambition became increasingly unrealistic as the security situation deteriorated'.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the commission report also stressed that the Norwegian PRT engagement contributed:

primarily to the professionalization of the Norwegian army. The operations provided a lot of practical experience at the technical and tactical combat levels as well as insights into warfare within a joint operational framework together with allies and partners. This experience has strengthened in certain areas the Norwegian military ability to participate in international operations.⁷⁵

The Norwegian Armed Forces efforts in Afghanistan had, thus, several consequences for the development of its military culture, especially regarding combat experience and ability to organise coalition operations. The commitment in Afghanistan resulted in the most intense combat experience since the Second World War, and the Norwegian Armed Forces drew significant lessons from this; at the individual as well as the organisational levels. Testimonies from our interviews underscore this assessment, although not everyone was as straightforward as in the following quote:

⁷¹ Leni Björklund, 'Därför har Sverige trupper i Afghanistan', *Göteborgsposten* (29 January 2006). Also Sten Tolgfors, *Dagens Nyheter* (28 July 2009).

⁷² Gunilla Carlsson, 'Riksdagens protokoll 2012/13:46' (Stockholm: Sveriges Riksdag, 2012).

⁷³ NOU, 'En God Alliert', pp. 25–6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Why would Norway be particularly interested in Afghanistan? We were in Afghanistan because we were a part of a coalition and it is in the Norwegian security interests to contribute because we believe participation had a security policy pay-off. This contributes to the development of the Norwegian army, so the Norwegian army is much better, better because of Afghanistan.⁷⁶

This reasoning is echoed in several other interviews with senior officers:

from a military point of view, the Norwegian army has experienced that both our training and education are relevant and work. The soldiers have got faith in their own abilities and equipment ... they have been in battle, survived, taken terrain ... I am talking about classic military experience.⁷⁷

And:

the entire Norwegian defense that contributed to the operation in Afghanistan has grown and developed in a positive direction ... there are many now who have gained a lot of fighting experience, who have been involved in and planned operations that we previously only practiced on⁷⁸

These quotes indicate that there was obviously a tension between the two narratives, peace nation on the one hand, military culture on the other, although they sometimes became inter-mixed, something which affected the soldiers on the ground. The idea that Norwegians were more peace loving and humanitarian was projected on the soldiers accordingly.⁷⁹ There was thus a discrepancy between how Norwegian politicians and the civil society on the one hand, and the army on the other, perceived the mission in Afghanistan. While the former actors were trying to connect the peace nation narrative with the military mission, the military's self-image was more of a warrior. The Norwegian participation in ISAF was more consistent with this self-image compared to other, previous missions; the fundamental task was military training, rather than peace support.⁸⁰

Also Sweden evaluated its involvement in Afghanistan, with particular focus on the Swedish engagement in PRT Mazar-e-Sharif. When considering the goal fulfilment to 'strengthen Afghanistan's ability to maintain stability and security, democracy and human rights, as well as offer its citizens the opportunity to improve their living conditions and fair and sustainable development',⁸¹ the evaluation scores ranged between 'somewhat' to 'very disapproving' on every aspect but one. The sole exception, where the evaluation concluded that there was a 'satisfactory goal fulfilment', concerned Sweden's credibility and ability as a participant in multi-national military missions. In particular, it was highlighted that Sweden's 'participation in ISAF contributed to the development of certain aspects of the abilities of the Armed Forces'.⁸² Exactly what this meant was not clear in the quite sweeping Swedish evaluation. However, on

⁷⁶Interview NMR4 2014, also, NOU, 'En God Alliert', p. 58.

⁷⁷Interview NMR2, 2014.

⁷⁸Interview NMR3, 2014.

⁷⁹Asle Toje, 'Fortellingens makt', in Gjert Lage Dyndal and Torbjørn L. Knutsen (eds), *Exit Afghanistan. Tilbakeblikk: og Debatt om Utviklingen* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2012), p. 116; Ida Dommersnes, *Bringing War Home: The Use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams by Norway and Denmark to Construct Strategic Narratives for their Domestic Audiences* (Oslo: The Norwegian Atlantic Committee, 2011), p. 13.

⁸⁰Torunn Laugen Haaland, 'Still homeland defenders at heart? Norwegian military culture in international deployments', *Journal of International Peacekeeping*, 17:4 (2010), pp. 539–53 (pp. 547, 550).

⁸¹SOU, *Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014: Betänkande av Afghanistanutredningen, 2017:16* (Stockholm: SOU, 2017), p. 20.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 27.

behalf of the government, The Swedish Defense Institute (FOI) published a report on Sweden's ISAF involvement's impact on its Armed Forces. Based on several interviews with Swedish military staff involved in ISAF, the report suggested that the involvement in Afghanistan had increased the ability of Swedish Armed Forces to handle difficult situations – a sort of 'reality check' – 'which reflects increased confidence in their own ability in the role as soldier'.⁸³ In addition, the Swedish ISAF involvement provided its Armed Forces with an opportunity to show the outside world that it could successfully deal with difficulties and risks in the field of action, and as stated in a quoted interview:

The fact that experience of combat is now broadly integrated in the organization has further resulted in the de-dramatization of such experiences and an increased ability to evaluate, analyze and address them, [which] is estimated to have had great impact in the short term [but also] becoming integrated in the organization for a long time.⁸⁴

Our conducted interviews with officers who served in Afghanistan evolved around similar themes:

I think we make a great difference, otherwise I would have never gone out again. And I think that the development of our armed forces is positive ... we have very talented units, officers, soldiers who are professional ... our many military units are very, very, very appreciated.⁸⁵

Another statement adding:

We have talented officers and soldiers [who] can handle the pressure and the circumstances that this is all about, so I think that's an important lesson ... To summarise, we now have a more professional view of our tasks.⁸⁶

And:

[our] confidence has ... definitely [been] strengthened among officers and soldiers as a result of the experience of the international missions. We have received acknowledgment [for] the military culture that we have established, that it works. We get on well.⁸⁷

As has been emphasised elsewhere, '[a] more relaxed attitude towards the international use of force gradually developed' among the Swedish troops in Afghanistan.⁸⁸ As an indication of this, the Swedish Supreme Commander decided in May 2010 to remove the Swedish reservations to ISAF's rules of action concerning the right to attack an enemy if the mandate's goal achievement in some way was obstructed. Before, the Swedish forces could only engage in stabilising and non-combat activities, but after May 2010 a more proactive use of violence was allowed.⁸⁹ As the security situation deteriorated also in northern Afghanistan, and ISAF increased its counterinsurgency activities, the Swedish government admitted that there was an internal armed conflict also in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. It was thus hinted that Swedish ISAF troops could be

⁸³The Swedish Defense Institute (FOI), *Det är på riktigt nu! Hur det svenska Isaf-deltagandet har påverkat Försvarsmakten*, FOI-2015-1631 (Stockholm: FOI, 2016), pp. 32–3.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 20.

⁸⁵Interview SMR5, 2014.

⁸⁶Interview SMR1, 2012.

⁸⁷Interview SMR2, 2013.

⁸⁸Arita Holmberg and Jan Hallenberg (eds), *The Swedish Presence in Afghanistan: Security and Defence Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 185; also interview SMR1.

⁸⁹SOU, *Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014*, pp. 85–6.

involved in war-like situations, ‘since resistance groups’ ability and the use of violence is reinforced [and] [p]reparedness must be in place to address the development of a deteriorating security situation in the [northern] provinces’.⁹⁰ This was confirmed by the number of enemy contacts of the Swedish forces, something that had significantly increased and culminated around 2010.⁹¹

Whether Swedish forces participated in a war during the ISAF mission has until recently been a controversial and sensitive issue,⁹² and was moreover lively debated in parliament.⁹³ The ambiguity whether the Swedish forces participated in a war in Afghanistan was also present among the actors in the field. While several of our interviewed military personnel were relatively unprecise whether Swedish soldiers really participated in a war, many civilians, including critics of the ISAF mission, were clearer on this point. As an example, one of the force commanders in the PRT Mazar-e-Sharif stated that he did not ‘perceive this as a war, but we have been in war-like situations many times’.⁹⁴ In contrast, a former ambassador in Kabul stressed that Swedish forces participated in

a campaign to drive them away and that’s certainly what is a reasonable definition of going to war ... we declared war against those villages and took terrain.⁹⁵

This clash of narratives also affected the way Norwegian military and civilian actors perceived and related to each other within its PRT. According to the PRT handbook, the ISAF mission was a military *and* civilian project, implying that military and civilian actors should strive towards the same goal of achieving peace, democracy, and development in Afghanistan.⁹⁶ This so-called comprehensive approach was to a great extent in line with the counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine introduced by ISAF Commander McChrystal in 2009 with the purpose to synchronise the various ISAF-troops all over Afghanistan. A cornerstone in the COIN doctrine was that military operations should be integrated with civilian efforts to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the local people, convincing them that it was in their interest to support the Afghan authorities *vis-à-vis* the Taliban.⁹⁷

Although Norwegian authorities formally acknowledged COIN it was never really practiced in the field. Especially the imposed close connections between civilian and military instruments challenged the ‘Norwegian model’, which instead emphasised a clear distinction between military and civilian efforts.⁹⁸ The model was a consequence of Norwegian NGOs’ sceptical view of the military in general, and of it carrying out civilian tasks, such as drilling wells, building hospitals and schools, in particular. The problem with the strict division between military and civilian actors was that this arrangement also was in need of coordination, which completely failed in the Norwegian-led PRT area. There was a lack of communication between military and civilian actors at all levels, something that created frustration, not least among Norwegian military personnel.⁹⁹ In addition, there was a lack of any clear guidance from the ISAF headquarters on how to coordinate military and civilian efforts. As a consequence, the Norwegian PRT commanders

⁹⁰Regeringen, ‘Proposition 2009/10:38, Fortsatt svenskt deltagande i den internationella säkerhetsstyrkan i Afghanistan (ISAF)’ (Stockholm: Regeringen), pp. 8–9.

⁹¹SOU, *Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014*, p. 75.

⁹²Inger Osterdahl, ‘Swedish use of force and the international legal framework’, in Holmberg and Hallenberg (eds), *The Swedish Presence in Afghanistan*, pp. 60–6.

⁹³Noreen et al., ‘Why small states join big wars’, pp. 157–8.

⁹⁴Interview SMR8; also SMR7, SMR4.

⁹⁵Interview SCRI.

⁹⁶‘ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Handbook’, Edition 4, available at: {<https://info.publicintelligence.net/ISAF-PRThandbook.pdf>} accessed 23 February 2021.

⁹⁷*The Petraeus Doctrine: The Field Manual on Counterinsurgency Operations* [prepared under direction of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] (Washington, DC, 2009).

⁹⁸NOU, ‘En God Alliert’, pp. 35–6.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 117.

drew very different lessons from the field and they ‘did both learn and adapt based on experiences conveyed by previous PRTs and their *own* experiences’,¹⁰⁰ rather than following and practicing COIN literally in terms of civil-military integration or winning the hearts and minds of the locals.

In contrast to Norway, Sweden initially tried to follow the COIN doctrine, although several Swedish force commanders struggled with the vague concept.¹⁰¹ However, reports as well as interviews testify that the Swedes adapted to the central elements of the doctrine *in their own way* and Swedish ISAF personnel were enrolled in counterinsurgency courses. Parts of the doctrine were already familiar to the staff of PRT Mazar-e-Sharif before it was introduced by McChrystal in 2009, for example the ability to perform armed combat at different levels of engagement, as well as the possibility of practicing a ‘firm-fair-friendly’ approach.¹⁰² An area related to COIN that created a lot of confusion, in particular among the Swedish PRT staff, concerned the relations between civil and military activities.¹⁰³ Vagueness and lack of clear guidelines provided force commanders with the opportunity to design the mission in their own way. They could concentrate on what they were best at – to perform armed combat at different levels of engagement, or as stressed by a force commander: ‘I was the new warlord in the area, but with better equipment and better-trained soldiers.’¹⁰⁴ Although this is an unusually outspoken statement, the overall implication that can be drawn from the Swedish experience is that the commanders had relatively greater leeway to interpret their mission independently. Accordingly, they were able to develop their own strategies, partly from the conditions that were present on the ground, and partly from the military culture they had developed at home. It was indeed a reality check that Swedish troops could somehow take advantage of.

The Norwegian and Swedish authorities, which essentially were very critical of the respective ISAF missions, were nevertheless positive with regard to one issue, namely the defense experiences and especially the combat operations and opportunities to cooperate with coalition partners.¹⁰⁵ In light of this it is noteworthy that for example the Norwegian PRT Commanders reported that ‘with few exceptions’, they were ‘satisfied with their own effort’, in spite of a deteriorating security situation when they were steadily losing ground to the Taliban.¹⁰⁶ The main point here is not necessarily that the Scandinavian ISAF troops made a difference in Afghanistan, but rather that their military culture had been both tested and developed. They had accordingly drawn lessons from the field and in this respect dealt with a ‘real’ enemy in collaborations with coalition partners. These were lessons they could bring home to their regiments.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

As demonstrated in the sections above, there were dominant peace nation and military culture narratives in both Sweden and Norway. They challenged each other to some extent with regard to the purpose and consequences of each country’s respective participation in ISAF. The overarching challenge for the Scandinavian policymakers was that their ‘war-activities’ discredited their peace policies; what could have been a trademark for peace and trust-building exercises with the conflicting parties was difficult to combine with the NATO-led and US-dominated ISAF operation.

¹⁰⁰From Torunn Laugen Haaland, ‘The limits to learning in military operations: Bottom-up adaptation in the Norwegian army in northern Afghanistan, 2007–2012’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 39:7 (2016), pp. 999–1022 (p. 1014), emphasis added.

¹⁰¹Magnus Johnsson, *Strategic Colonels: The Discretion of Swedish Force Commanders in Afghanistan 2006–2013* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 198, 2017), pp. 1–282.

¹⁰²Jan Ångström and Erik Noreen, ‘Swedish strategy and the Afghan experience’, in Holmberg and Hallenberg (eds), *The Swedish Presence in Afghanistan*, p. 42.

¹⁰³SOU, *Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014*, pp. 167–9.

¹⁰⁴Johnsson, *Strategic Colonels*, p. 206.

¹⁰⁵See, for example, NOU, ‘En God Alliert’, pp. 58, 201.

¹⁰⁶Laugen Haaland, ‘The limits to learning in military operations’, p. 1019.

¹⁰⁷This conclusion was confirmed in all our interviews with military representatives.

A key issue concerned how the respective PRT missions should be characterised. The missions consisted of both civilian and military efforts and the latter necessitated, according to the counterinsurgency strategies, that soldiers took part in combat operations. Any such activities ran the risk of discrediting the civilian efforts in the PRT-areas. The question, then, was whether Norway and Sweden participated in a war. If it were generally recognised that the countries' troops participated in a war in Afghanistan, the peace nation narrative would become increasingly hollow. This may have been one of the reasons why the military was careful to emphasise that it engaged in 'warlike situations' rather than war. Likewise, the politicians in charge played down the war rhetoric as it did not appeal to the public. The critical narrative, which emphasised the negative consequences of the military commitments towards Afghanistan, pushed the respective governments to emphasise the peace nation narrative even further.

Over time, however, it became clear that the two missions did not lead to an improved security situation in the respective PRT areas and as peace seemed increasingly distant, the peace nation narrative became at stake. The debates regarding this issue peaked around 2009–10, when death rates increased among the Scandinavian troops in Afghanistan. Although the missions were at stake, they were nonetheless not terminated. In comparison, the Netherlands, for instance, interrupted its ISAF mission due to domestic political pressures,¹⁰⁸ but this did not happen in Norway or Sweden. In fact, none of the Scandinavian countries – including Denmark, which experienced the highest number of fatalities per capita compared to any other external troop contributor to ISAF – faced strong enough domestic pressures to even consider interrupting their Afghanistan military missions. This raises the question of why this was the case. One suggestion in the literature is that the authorities supporting the mission framed

success in ways that did not involve 'winning' but focused instead on the attainment of realistic short-term, tactical objectives such as police training and building schools, and by speaking with one voice to the media.¹⁰⁹

In an attempt to develop this line of reasoning, we argue that besides stressing the achievement of short-term realistic goals, and in particular, goals that could be claimed to fit into the peace nation narrative, the governments and parliaments of the troop contributing states recognised – at least off the record – that the experiences from the practical arena also mattered. In other words, essential military lessons could be drawn by continuing to providing troops to ISAF.

Against the background of a rather mixed public opinion in both Norway and Sweden on the issue of the countries' prolonged involvement in Afghanistan, it should be added that the question of whether the countries would fulfill their missions was firmly rooted in the larger parties of the respective parliaments. There was a consensus in both government and opposition. The issue was in this respect clearly institutionalised as only minor flank parties and occasional voices in the media debate that opposed the Scandinavian countries' military engagements in Afghanistan. In addition, the lack of any robust support in public opinion was obviously not a sufficient reason to terminate Swedish participation in ISAF. We have shown that the situation was very similar in Norway.

Let us finally return to our initial question of what happens to settled self-images of so-called peace nations when experiencing actual combat in out-of-area military missions. Although prior studies have addressed the consequences of the small state war experience – finding that this experience has resulted in more militarised profiles,¹¹⁰ and altered collective memory banks,¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸de Graaf and Dimitriu, "Fighting" versus "reconstructing".

¹⁰⁹Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Jens Ringsmose, 'In Denmark, Afghanistan is worth dying for: How public support for the war was maintained in the face of mounting casualties and elusive success', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:2 (2015), p. 211.

¹¹⁰Brun Pedersen, 'Bandwagon for status'; Wivel, 'From peacemaker to warmonger'.

¹¹¹Bergman Rosamond and Agius, 'Sweden, military intervention and the loss of memory'.

we nonetheless identified lacunas in previous research that this article has helped to fill. In order to probe the drivers and consequences of small state international engagement, and to explore the paradox of being a peace nation at war, this article has demonstrated that a systematic analysis of the political and military narratives found in the political and practical arenas sheds light on how these narratives operate. Although being linked to different spheres and actors, the narratives interact in terms of causing friction and contestation, but also move boundaries and make different types of behaviour possible. Employing a structured discourse analysis on a rich empirical material has generated novel and more detailed insights regarding the phenomenon of peace nations going to war.

The discursive struggle between the two narratives of peace nation and military culture resembles to some extent how ‘top-down’ decisions interact with a ‘bottom-up’ story. For a small state in particular, to be able to engage in a gigantic mission such as ISAF for several years, both of these perspectives are required, in spite of that they contrast and sometimes contradict each other. Politicians must make it clear that the mission is part of a peace nation tradition in order to make top-down decisions important for both opposition parties and public opinion. The bottom-up perspective from the field must clarify the benefits of the mission. The latter perspective does not necessarily have to reach public opinion but still convince politicians who are able to prolong the mission.¹¹² This interaction between top-down peace narratives and bottom-up perspectives appear to be relevant also when looking at PSOs beyond ISAF. Many current UN operations are characterised by high levels of ‘robust use of violence’,¹¹³ while still having the overall aims of creating peace. This indicates that the heritage from the developments of the ISAF operations in Afghanistan remains in contemporary missions – missions that the Nordic small states continue to participate in.

Acknowledgements. The authors are very grateful for the useful comments from the two anonymous reviewers, and from colleagues at the Department of Political Science, Lund University, and at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. We especially thank Niklas Karlén, Swedish Defense University, for encouraging suggestions. We also thank Anna Molin (née Brandt) for her assistance with collecting the Norwegian material. Earlier drafts of the article have been presented at seminars in Sweden and at the ISA 58th Annual Convention, Baltimore, 2017. This article has benefited from funding from the Swedish Research Council, Grant No. 2017-01959.

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¹¹²Evidently, this mixture of top-down and bottom-up perspectives continues to have strong impact on Sweden, as it currently, without any significant domestic debate, is involved in one of the most dangerous missions under UN command to this date, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Concurrently, Sweden also participates in the French-led, multinational elite combat force, Task Force Takuba, with the purpose of fighting terrorism and strengthening security in Mali. The Swedish authorities in relation to the mission employ humanitarianism and militarist arguments contemporaneously.

¹¹³John Karlsrud, ‘The UN at war: Examining the consequences of peace-enforcement mandates for the UN peacekeeping operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali’, *Third World Quarterly*, 36:1 (2015), pp. 40–54 (p. 43); also Peter Rudolf, ‘UN peace operations and the use of military force’, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 59:3 (2017), pp. 161–82; John Karlsrud, ‘For the greater good?: “Good states” turning UN peacekeeping towards counterterrorism’, *International Journal*, 74:1 (2019), pp. 65–83.

Appendix

List of interviews

Sweden

- MR1, RC North, Colonel, Chief of Staff, interviewed 2012.
- MR2, Armed Forces Headquarters, Stockholm, Training Commander, Lieutenant Colonel, interviewed 2013.
- MR3, Force Commander, PRT MeS, Colonel, interviewed 2013.
- MR4, ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- MR5, ISAF Joint Command, Kabul, Lieutenant Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- MR6, RC North; International Training Centre, Livgardet, Stockholm, Major, interviewed 2014.
- MR7, ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- MR8, Force commander, PRT Mes, Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- CR1, Swedish ambassador, Kabul, interviewed 2014.
- CR2, Senior Civilian Representative, PRT MeS, interviewed 2014.
- CR3, Senior Civilian Representative, PRT MeS, interviewed 2014.

Norway

- MR1, ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- MR2, Force commander, PRT Maymaneh, Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- MR3, Force commander, PRT Maymaneh, Colonel, interviewed 2014.
- MR4, RC North (three missions), Major, interviewed 2014.
- CR1, Senior HR Advisor, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Kabul, interviewed 2014.
- CR2, Head of Development section, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Kabul, interviewed 2014.
- CR3, Team leader of evaluation and research programmes in Afghanistan, Professor in Political Science, interviewed 2014.
- CR4, Coordinator of development programmes in Afghanistan, interviewed 2014.
- CR5, Expert in the Independent Government Commission on Norway's civil and military involvement in Afghanistan 2001–14, Professor in Peace and Conflict Studies, interviewed 2014.

Interviews were conducted in Enköping, Stockholm, and Uppsala (via Skype), December 2012 to December 2014. Transcripts of all the interviews are available at request from main author.