Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway
Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Rolf Tamnes
Director of Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, 1996-2012

Interviewer: LaiYee Leong
Fellow, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University
Senior Fellow, John G. Tower Center for Public Policy & International Affairs, Southern Methodist University

Date of Interview:
May 11, 2018

Editorial Note and Disclaimer:
This transcription has undergone a verification process for accuracy, according to the strictest practices of the academic and transcription communities. It offers the CPH's best good-faith effort at reproducing in text the subject's spoken words. In all cases, however, the video of the interview represents the definitive version of the words spoken by interviewees.

Normal speech habits—false starts, incomplete words, and crutch words (e.g. "you know")—have been removed for purposes of clarity. Final transcriptions will conform to standard oral history practices. Editors will conform all transcription quotations to the Center for Presidential History's final edition.

Please contact the editors at cphinfo@smu.edu with any corrections, suggestions, or questions.

Citation:
Interview with Rolf Tamnes, interviewed by LaiYee Leong, 11 May 2018. "Transatlantic Diplomacy after 9/11: The U.S. and Norway" Collective Memory Project, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University.

[Begin Transcription]

LEONG: Today is May 11th, 2018. I'm with Rolf Tamnes, and I'm LaiYee Leong with the Center for Presidential History. And Rolf Tamnes is with the Norwegian

Defense Institute. Rolf, let's start with the dimensions of Norwegian security and foreign policy. What are they?

TAMNES: If I'm going to summarize, I would like to emphasize four dimensions. The first one is what we call the High North, or the European High North, and that is the region that includes the northern part of Norway and Russia, as well as the oceans surrounding that region, that is the Norwegian Sea and the Barents Sea. This is a great strategic and economic interest from the Norwegian perspective, because we have [00:01:00] the very rich cod fish that's up there. We have a huge energy potential related to oil and gas, but it's, first of all, in the North that we meet Russia as a neighbor, and we have to cope with Russia as a neighbor and we are doing so in a number of ways. But as you know, Russia is not part of the western security community, and has not been so. So we have to deal with Russia also as a challenge, security and defense, a challenge. And that has brought us into NATO. That is basically the key element in Norwegian security policy throughout the whole postwar period, that we have tried to balance between having a kind of cooperation with Russia, while at the same time relying on the Western powers and NATO, and the U.S. in particular, to balance Russia up in the North. [00:02:00] So that is one key element, and the most direct challenge in Norwegian security, which we have to deal with all the time. Then there are also periods of more tension, relaxation, and all this. So that is the first.

The second dimension stems from the first one, and that is the trans-Atlantic dimension NATO with the United States as the key actor. And the United States is extremely important from a Norwegian security perspective, not only because of affinity, because there is a strong affinity here, but because the United States, much more than any other major European country, is interested in the North for strategic reasons. Because Russia has its bases up in the North, first of all, those who are basing the strategic submarines. That brings us into the bilateral relationship [00:03:00] between the United States and Russia. So from such a perspective, the United States is, and has always been, far more interested in the North than most of the European countries. So from such a perspective, Norway is very reliant on the United States as a security guarantee. The saying in Norway is that there is no NATO without the United States. Also, what was said by a Norwegian politician many years ago, should NATO fall apart, Norway will be the last one to leave the sinking fleet. Then he is basically talking about the United States.

The third dimension is Europe. Both near and far. Norway is not part of the European Union. The population, the majority of the population voted against it, but most of the Norwegian [00:04:00] export and import is related to the European markets. So we are very dependent on Europe, but we have this rather complex situation that we are integrated into Europe, but we have not very much to say. And things are decided in Europe. Being in that situation, that we are not

a member of the European Union, it's equally important to have a closer relationship with some key countries. Britain traditionally, and today, and to an increasing extent Germany -- so Germany is and will become gradually more important in Norwegian foreign policy, economic policy and security policy. The third dimension is, then, as I said, the European one.

The fourth is the global dimension. [00:05:00] That has many facets, but the starting point is that Norway is a small country. It's very dependent on robust international regimes and institutions. Multi-lateralism is key in Norwegian understanding of international relations, and how to deal with the Norwegian interests. Norway has always been a strong supporter of the United Nations and all the global regimes and institutions. And we have, for many reasons, also from the perspective of ideas, tried to promote international cooperation on a more or less global scene. It includes participation in peacekeeping operations. It involves peace diplomacy and many other things like that. It involves a rather significant [00:06:00] assistance in the field of developing countries.

Of course, gradually, the global dimension also involves the question of security in the sense that, especially as we have seen with transnational terrorism, there are no borders. So even a small country, close to the North, far from the crisis of the day, seizes as an interest to take part in solving global challenges. So those are the four challenges. Of course, when we look into the situation, by the turn of the century, all these dimensions were part of the picture.

LEONG: So as Bush became president, or in fact in the lead-up to him becoming president, of course he had made some statements about how the United States was going to approach the world under his leadership. What were some of the concerns that were, perhaps, arising from the Norwegian point of view? [00:07:00]

TAMNES: I think the Norwegian governments have learned to live with the different administrations, and to become somewhat okay, worried, but also relaxed, and hopefully that it might be sorted out in due course. So that was the starting point this time as well. I think we also must take into consideration that the Bush administration, before 9-11, wasn't that preoccupied with the international questions. From what I read at the time, and speaking to politicians and bureaucrats, they weren't that worried about the situation. Then 9-11 was the turning point, in many ways, and raised, much concern also in Norway.

LEONG: Although even before 9-11, he had [00:08:00] made statements about Kyoto, he had made statements about the --

TAMNES: Yes, but we are used to new presidents, Ronald Reagan, whatever it is, who are very bold during the presidential campaign. I think the reading often will be, well, let's wait and see. And in any case, we won't have any choice. We have to deal with that and try to manage, find some solutions. I don't think there were very much more concern at that stage, compared to many other situations before that. But, of course, you had those dimensions of the first Bush as well, related to

a different approach than we were used to during Clinton during the '90s, yes, of course.

LEONG: Now of course, very shortly into his administration, 9-11 happened. [00:09:00] When that event happened, how did that affect Norwegian thinking about all these different dimensions?

TAMNES: The first one was, of course, that it came as a shock. And then this was defined as an Article 5 NATO situation, which meant that Norway had an obligation to take part, and to act in solidarity with the United States. That was done out of sympathy, but it was also done out of self-interest, because there is this deep notion that if there is an Article 5, Norway will take part, because we are so reliant on other countries to take part if there is a crisis in the North, that we should take part when other members of the Alliance are affected by a crisis. So that was the obvious response to that [00:10:00] situation, both from the perspective of sympathy and from the idea of self-interest.

Then, came earlier that fall, the question of how to contribute. And it took some time until Norway came out with some sort of commitment here. And there were some people who were worried in the bureaucracy and in Washington that, hi, where are you Norway? Are you not prepared to take part? Are you just going to talk about this? Where are the commitments -- which took some time. This has to do with a tradition that we were not used to operate internationally. Of course, the first situation here was the first Gulf War in 1990, before the actual

intervention, when Norway had not actually been engaged in international operations apart from peacekeeping. And [00:11:00] we didn't have a military structure to cope with such situations. The traditional mentality was still there by the turn of the century as well, even though we had taken part in Bosnia, whatever it is during the '90s. But this hesitation was there throughout the whole 2001.

But when we were approaching Christmas, Norway came down, gradually, very clearly, that we should send units to Afghanistan, and then we were basically on board.

LEONG: Was the capacity in place to do that?

TAMNES: Well, the capacities here was the question of rather small capacities. And of course, Norway couldn't make any difference in the broader picture, so this was a question of [00:12:00] sending some defined capacities that, first of all, defined that we are part of the campaign, the coalition, the sympathy, solidarity. Then we defined some capacities that we could have drawn at the time. One of them, at an early stage, was Special Forces, which became one of the key contributions to Afghanistan.

LEONG: Was there any perception at that time among policymakers and the bureaucracy that beyond the immediacy of war in Afghanistan, that in many ways the security situation globally might have become different? Or that the United States has come to approach global security in a different way?

TAMNES: Yes, of course, you heard this notion that the United States [00:13:00] was far more globally-oriented than they used to be during the Cold War, so that during the Balkan crisis as well, the push from Washington to which Norway and many other countries to take part, beyond Article 5 situations, that churned and accentuated after the turn of the century. So it was a bit of concern that the United States now would move in other directions than Europe.

At the same time, I think it is fair to underscore that the notion of the emerging transnational terrorism was very strong, even in Norway, that we were about to face global challenges, that terrorism of the character would be strong, materialized during 9-11. [00:14:00] It illustrated a new world with no borders. Even Norwegian politicians began to talk about, there are no borders when it comes to security. That was one of the new readings of the strategic and security situation also in the North. Traditionally, during the Cold War, we had this idea that we should defend Norway in another Norway. Now, the reading, some of the presentations by the government was that the forward defense now would be abroad in Afghanistan.

LEONG: Now the talk about going to war beyond Afghanistan, so in Iraq specifically, began to be broached very quickly, very soon after 9-11. Was that a surprise for [00:15:00] Norwegian policymakers?

TAMNES: Yes and no. No, because this new administration, with the vice president and the defense secretary and some of the other people, Wolfowitz and those

people, began to underscore very clearly the need for a regime change, all of this package. When the Iraqi question came up, it was part of this package that this was an administration that would be very proactive on the international scene -- Iraq, Iran, Korea -- all these things, axis of evil, whatever it was. One hoped for a time that Iraq should not be an [00:16:00] immediate and urgent priority, but of course that proved to be the case when it came to 2003. And that ended up with a rather unpleasant situation.

LEONG: Do you remember at that time, 2002-2003, among your colleagues here, people you know in policy circles, was there some confusion, perhaps? Or what was their sense of why this was going on, as to why the United States was focused on this?

TAMNES: Well, we are used to new administrations in Washington changing the course, and some of the administrations has been very bold when it comes to promoting its interest internationally. We saw the same with Ronald Reagan in the early ages -- new course, stronger action. I don't think Norwegian politicians [00:17:00] were very surprised that when those people began to talk about a more proactive international road that they would do so, and they did so, with Rumsfeld as the key instrument in doing so. That was the observation, that this was taking place, that it might materialize. But then, of course, we were faced with that situation when we came to 2003, and we had to deal with it, also because the Americans expected us to stand up and be counted in this situation.

LEONG: Was there a lot of direct pressure from the Americans?

TAMNES: I would say so, especially from the American embassy in Oslo, very active in trying to pressure Norway on board.

LEONG: Did that come as a surprise?

TAMNES: No. The embassy, in periods, have [00:18:00] tended to play that role, and to be extremely formulating when it comes to pushing Norway on board. We have seen it in many periods.

LEONG: Now, Kristin Krohn Devold, the defense minister at the time, was known to have had a very good relationship with Donald Rumsfeld. Did that ease the way in terms of good relations between Norway and the United States? Would it have been different, had it been a different government?

TAMNES: Yes, to some extent. But when it comes to Iraq, I think the most important part of it was that the prime minister at the time, Kjell Magne Bondevik, managed to establish sort of an understanding in conversation with your president in 2003, when Bush rang him about this situation and asked, is Norway prepared to take part? [00:19:00] That was that conversation, was a meeting of minds, between those two persons, both with, shall we say with a Christian background, and our prime minister could tell him that this operation, from a Norwegian perspective, does not have a U.N. mandate, and we are very eager to have a U.N. mandate before we participate. We have a strong tradition for that and, as it is now, we have strong ethical and moral reasons for not taking part. As your president

concluded in that conversation, from what we know, that among friends there can be disagreements. I think that was an extremely important and good conversation that brought Norway out [00:20:00] of a rather nasty situation in connection with the Iraqi question. But of course, as part of the background was also that we had a foreign minister at the time, Jan Petersen, and a defense minister, Kristin Krohn Devold, who both had very close and good relationship with the Americans.

LEONG: Was it really a principle decision? Or were there other strategic interests behind it as well?

TAMNES: It was a principle decision in the sense that on the one hand, it was important from Norway to maintain a dialogue with the Americans, because of the security guarantee. It was a dilemma, and it's very hard for Norway to say no. At the same time, it was very important at that stage, and especially for the prime minister on this call, that there are some principles here [00:21:00] when it comes to how to behave in international relations, and that is the rule and regulations and norms. To us, the United Nations and the Security Council, and the need for having a good mandate is extremely important. He communicated that, and he was successful in managing to get through that message to the U.S. president.

LEONG: I've also had the opportunity to speak to, at that time Ambassador Vollebaek, who was in the U.S. And he said that he was under tremendous pressure. It was a relief to him. But he also said that the United States was not always aware of the some of the constraints that Norway faced, and that quite

often he was hauled up and then given a talking to. Does [00:22:00] that surprise you?

TAMNES: No, because the United States is a superpower. And it can't spend too much time on thinking about what are the considerations in any small country. So that is the fact of life in Washington. I'm not surprised at that. No, not at all. But of course, there is always challenge in Washington to have time to talk to them about the dilemmas that are part of Norwegian security and defense policy. And those are those ethical and moral principle dilemmas, as we talked about, but also goes at any time the domestic scene. In Norway, as in many other countries in Europe, very clearly when it comes to Iraq, there is [00:23:00] strong domestic opposition to the operation. That is not often understood in Washington, that even in Europe you have to take into consideration the opposition.

LEONG: Now of course, as this was developing in Norway, you were probably observing what was going on with Germany and France, who took a very different approach than the one that the United States wanted them to take. What were the thoughts that were going through people here, as they were watching this? What were some of the concerns?

TAMNES: Well, as a starting point, and that is nothing new in connection with Iraq -- Norway cannot afford to be defined as the most extreme anti-American nation in Europe. [00:24:00] So it's always very nice to have some countries that are more extreme. We can hide behind them. That was the case also in the '80s, during the

Reagan administration, that we had some so-called "footnote countries," which defined, so to say, the reading in Washington about the situation in Europe. We had Denmark. We had Greece. So that gave us sort of freedom of maneuver that we wouldn't have had if we had been defined as the "bad guy." And that was the situation here as well, that we had those, especially Germany and France, who defined the European setting very clearly in relation to Rumsfeld and the administration. So Norway could define itself as it's somewhere in the middle in the European family.

LEONG: Was there any sympathy in Norwegian [00:25:00] circles for the positions taken by Germany and France?

TAMNES: Of course. When it comes to a major part of the political community, there was much sympathy with those countries. Mainly because there was no mandate, and that was very much against the Norwegian tradition. But also because this idea that there were weapons of mass destructions in Iraq -- that argument was not at any time very convincing. As we know, afterwards, we know it was a rather shallow argument. All us having the Norwegian political landscape, a big group, that are very reserved, to the great [00:26:00] power, the superpower of America, for many reasons. That is part of the picture. And it has to be coped with. And any government would have to take that into consideration, while at the same time being aware of the simple fact that our security guarantee relies on America.

LEONG: Was there any real fear that NATO would really fall apart?

TAMNES: I don't think so. Of course, we had the same discussion in the '90s. But I don't think so. Concern, yes, but a deep fear? I don't think so. In any case, there is the Norwegian reading of the situation, right or wrong, that America will be interested in maintaining a cooperation with Norway because of Russia, and the strategic courses in the North. Then we are talking about [00:27:00] an intelligence cooperation. We are talking about various kinds of cooperation within the maritime domain. We often underscore in this country that the relationship with America is an alliance within the alliance. The bilateral dimension of the security cooperation. So even though NATO should be weakened, that is the bilateral dimension. Based on some other components, then, just U.S. solidarity with Europe, whatever it is, it's based on rather strong, strategic, geostrategic considerations about the nuclear issue.

LEONG: Were there any efforts on the part of Norwegians to help to repair the relationship perhaps? [00:28:00]

TAMNES: That is going on all the time in such a situation. Of course, we had a government at the time, during the Iraq crisis and afterwards, that was very keen on maintaining close contacts with the Americans. And the fact that this conversation with our prime minister and the U.S. president went so well, made it possible to maintain the contact in the years to come. But that's part of the Norwegian instinct, that if the risk rises, an imminent crisis in the relationship to

the United States, one has to go beyond that and try to re-establish a good relationship.

LEONG: Were there any efforts also to try to mediate between, say, Germany and France on one side and the U.S. on the other? I mean, given the strong relationship between Norway and the U.S.?

TAMNES: I have not observed any [00:29:00] such efforts. It might have taken place. But in any case, Norway would not have any influence on that situation.

LEONG: So given Norway's non-participation in the Iraq invasion -- of course later on Norway did send some logistical support -- did Norway, in a way, pay a price in terms of greater contribution to the war in Afghanistan as a result? Was there attempts to balance things out that way?

TAMNES: That brings us, of course, to the Afghanistan question. There was a relationship between those two questions. But if you look at the scene in Afghanistan, there were two difficult questions. That was of participation in Operation Enduring Freedom, U.S. anti-terror operations, and the second was the question of participating in the [00:30:00] South in Afghanistan. When we came gradually to 2005, 2006, Norway began to make a priority in favor of Afghanistan and leaving Iraq, which we did in 2006, and then in favor of NATO in Afghanistan. We left that operation. So that was a gradual change taking part. It started during the Bondevik government, and it continued after 2005. So that was a connection in the sense that we left Iraq, and we basically left southern Afghanistan. But we

underscore that we continued to participate in a [00:31:00] serious way. NATO, in the northern part of Afghanistan, became the answer, so to say, to those challenges.

LEONG: This was a period that coincided with a transformation of the armed forces within Norway as well. Was there a connection between the two?

TAMNES: Yes it was, in two ways. The first one was that we, until the turn of the century, had very old-fashioned armed forces. They were not at all designed to operate internationally. As part of the Cold War structure to contain and fight the Russians, especially in the North. So the first stage, which was impacted by the operations on the Balkans, was the need to transform the forces, to make them [00:32:00] available for the international forces, and the Afghanistan War underscored the need for accentuating this process. But it also meant that we had very little to contribute with at an early stage, when it comes to contributions in Afghanistan after 2000, because we haven't that much. We couldn't mobilize very much at short notice at the time. We had to define very clearly, what could we send? That was a hindrance when it comes to contribution. At the same time, Afghanistan, more than anything else, underscored the need for transforming the forces. That brought us into contact with the American notion at the time, [00:33:00] transformation. Especially our defense minister after the turn of the century in the Conservative Party, Kristin Krohn Devold, came out very strongly in favor of transformation. That was one of the pillars in the good relationship

between her and your U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. There was, again, a sort of meeting of minds about this idea, what kind of forces we needed in the future. She was very much on board in the notion that we should transform and have other kind of forces now, when facing the future.

LEONG: And she had the support of the bureaucracy and the security experts behind her?

TAMNES: Well, sort of, parts of the bureaucracy. There was much conservative hesitation [00:34:00] related to this kind of transformation of the forces. Partly because it meant that, some argued, that we tended to ignore and forget Russia. The other one was, of course, that in doing this transformation, focusing on quality, the quantity became extremely small. The Army, in particular, became extremely small. We went from thirteen brigade groups down to one.

LEONG: Wow.

TAMNES: That's quite a challenge, mentally. And from an army, the notion of what is an army. But it was justified, and because the Army then, was actually, able to take part internationally, which they would not necessarily have been able to do in the '80s. They had the numbers, but they hadn't the [00:35:00] ability to react swiftly and to take the forces to Afghanistan in the course of some days or weeks. But it was a very painful transformation. This idea is still a major part of the Norwegian discussion, what is left of the armed forces, especially the Army.

LEONG: Norway participated in its first actual bombing campaign in Afghanistan at that time. It was a first since World War II, if I remember correctly.

TAMNES: Yeah.

LEONG: Was that a major event?

TAMNES: Well, it was a major event for the Air Force, because it demonstrated that the Air Force now was transformed, put it that way, from the Cold War without any fight at all, and into a natural combat situation. So that was a turning point [00:36:00] for the Air Force. The public discussion about that was hardly there. It was noticed in the newspapers, but it was not a part of the public discourse. We as scholars noticed this, and saw it as an interesting change, as part of the major transformation. But apart from that, it was not part of the political or public discussion. This goes back to Kosovo in 1999 when the Norwegian Air Force took part, but it had no capacity to deliver weapons from air to ground. It was basically a token contribution, and it was somewhat embarrassing, I would say, to take part without taking part.

LEONG: Right. Right. [00:37:00] Now you mentioned that with all this focus on Afghanistan and Iraq, that there was some concern about Russia. Where is Russia in all of this? And indeed, where was Russia in all of this? To what extent was Russia an occupation? To what extent did the United States, for instance, take its eyes off Russia?

TAMNES: Because Russia was in a deep crisis from the early '90s, throughout the '90s, and well into the period after the turn of the century, so from a broader security policy perspective, Russia was not a challenge. Russia fell apart, as you know. So very much of the concern during the '90s was more about what might happen if Russia would actually fall apart. [00:38:00] One element of it was what might happen to the nuclear installations and nuclear pollution. Norway engaged itself very strongly in trying to cope with this challenge. It was partly a question of pollution, but it was also a question of a nuclear base and resources being smuggled, for example, into terrorist organizations. So from 1996, in Norway, Russia and the United States enter cooperation about nuclear security in the North. So that was an important part, and a typical illustration of the situation throughout the '90s. The concern about a nuclear base and [00:39:00] the spread of that type of knowledge and components. But, of course, Russia will always be a part of the Norwegian calculus, the geostrategic calculus. Norway, then, had to take into consideration -- well, the Americans in particular, NATO also, they are not basically interested in the North any longer. We would have to take that into consideration. And if it is so that Russia and Brussels are primarily interested in international operations, we would have to take part in international operations as well, to keep NATO floating.

LEONG: So in your view -- we are now wrapping up our discussion about the Bondevik government -- so in your view, did the Bondevik government succeed in

[00:40:00] ensuring that Norway remains strategically important and vital to NATO, to the United States?

TAMNES: I would say so, to the extent it was possible to succeed in that situation, but the government managed to establish a kind of compromise between that or taking part internationally, to satisfy the Alliance and the Americans, while at the same time having in mind the High North agenda. Russia did not come back during that period, until 2007, 2008, so that became a consideration in the Stoltenberg government after that. But Norway managed to keep an interest in circles in Washington about the situation in the North. [00:41:00] Nuclear pollution was one, another is, of course, always the intelligence cooperation, which will be there irrespective of the the geopolitics of the world because of the nuclear arsenal in the North.

LEONG: I want to ask a question about personality, because sometimes it matters. Was there a sense -- I know you say that Norwegians are used to dealing with different administrations -- but was there a sense that people like Cheney or Rumsfeld were particularly arrogant, or particularly offensive, particularly high-handed? Was there this sense? And did it matter?

TAMNES: Well, of course. Of course. A great majority of the politicians would see it in that way. Then you have to deal with the Americans, whether it is the Bush administration [00:42:00] or the present administration. Having said that, one succeeded in establishing contact with some of these key figures, and especially

between the defense secretaries. They had a good personal connection as well. That was very instrumental. It was noticed. Some would say it was not appropriate, but it was instrumental from a security perspective.

LEONG: She was seen as being too uncritical of American policy?

TAMNES: Yes. Yes. No doubt about that.

LEONG: With 20-20 hindsight, what's your view on that?

TAMNES: Well, on the one hand, I tend to agree with them. At the same time, [00:43:00] I see the benefits of these close ties.

LEONG: Now we move into the Stoltenberg government. So when the Stoltenberg government came in, there was a shift. Could you describe that shift, and why it happened?

TAMNES: It was a shift to some extent. At the same time, there is a high degree of continuity as well. As I mentioned, the nervous attitude towards Iraq and southern Afghanistan, that began to change during the Bondevik administration already. But it was underscored with the shift in 2005. That was, of course, a part of the agenda of the new government, the Stoltenberg government, even more so since one of the parties of the government was the Socialist Left Party coming [00:44:00] out from a tradition of being anti-NATO and anti-American, I would say, and, if you go back in time, neutralist. They were very, very defined, as a challenge, when he came into position. That contributed to shape the agenda of the new government, pretty much so the Socialist Left Party. So that contributed

to the image of the new government being more, could you say challenging to the U.S. position, say, in international politics. And that was, of course, underscored by the first conversation between Bush and Stoltenberg in September in 2005, which was not a success story, [00:45:00] to put it that way, very different from the one that Bondevik had with Bush in 2003. It's very hard to understand what went wrong. But if I should underscore, or try to identify some factors. One was the reality of the situation, that this is a government which will make it much clearer that there are some limits when it comes to Norwegian contribution internationally. The second one was that the administration in Washington was not prepared well enough for what might come; that Norway would convey this message. The third one might have been a question of language.

LEONG: A question of language?

TAMNES: Yeah, the English, the question of how, to what extent, the Norwegian, [00:46:00] coming prime minister was able to communicate this in a way that was precise as it might be. Some could argue that Prime Minister Stoltenberg was a bit clumsy in that conversation, which tended to complicate things.

LEONG: Hmm. Did it really make -- was it a bad start, and a bad personal encounter? Or did it actually have genuine consequences for U.S./Norway relations?

TAMNES: It was a very bad start. It underscored that Norway was not among the inner core nations of the Alliance. Of course, that was the case even before 2005,

because we were not part in Iraq and in southern Afghanistan, in contrast to Denmark, the Netherlands, [00:47:00] and Canada. But it tended to strengthen that in which Norway as not being one of the inner core nations. At the same time, I would like to underscore that this did not have long-term consequences for the relationship. Of course, with the change of administration in Washington in 2009, very much of this just disappeared, for a number of reasons.

LEONG: Sure. How did it manifest itself in terms of Norway no longer being in the inner core?

TAMNES: First of all, lack of an intimate and good bilateral dialogue between the politicians, of course, but also among key bureaucrats in the two countries.

LEONG: So in terms of not communicating [00:48:00] and exchanging views --

TAMNES: Yeah, as we were used to during the Cold War and afterwards, that we went to Washington and they came here, and we had these good and confidential matters, discussions about any question. So that was part of the picture, for some few years.

LEONG: Did Ambassador Whitney play any role in some of these exchanges?

TAMNES: He was very much on the American side. Of course, we have seen, through the declassified documents coming out, his telegrams, and he is very critical of the Norwegian positions during these years. While he was a pleasant guy, his attitude, political attitudes [00:49:00] were very, very, very Bush-oriented, also in

conversations with the Norwegians and in his messages and telegrams back to Washington.

LEONG: Do you get a --

TAMNES: So he was not a bridge. I would not say he was a bridge. Some members just tend to be that, trying to build bridges between nations. He was not among them.

LEONG: Do you have any sense that because of the Socialist Left pulling the government in a particular direction that there was a sort of internal conflict, that the Labour Party, the politicians of the Labour Party, felt this sort of inner conflict about how to approach this matter?

TAMNES: Yes, it contributed to making the Labour Party more cautious. At the same time, I think it is fair to say that politicians such as [00:50:00] Barth Eide, who was defense minister and foreign minister various times, he is a professional politician. He knew that, well, this is a correlation. We have to sort this out. And it is possible for me to move on with compromises. That's politics. He was a very good guy when it came to trying to, again, to strike a balance between the need for having close ties to the Americans, while at the same time paying due regard to the domestic considerations and the Socialist Left Party in the coalition.

LEONG: Did it, in any way, this somewhat greater distance between Norway and the United States, did it push Norway closer to the EU in terms of security and defense policy? [00:51:00]

TAMNES: No. No. Because again, we have the starting point that the majority of people in this country are not open for membership. Of course, the EU arena was not very vibrant during these days. The question of the security cooperation of the European Union was not very much in the forefront during these years. But I think it tended to underscore that we would have to have good relationships with some key European countries. Britain, of course, but Britain was rather a difficult player during this period because it was so strongly engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was critical of the Norwegian hesitation, in some periods even more so than the [52:00] Americans. But, of course, we had Germany. There is a strong meeting of minds between Norway and Germany when it comes to the broader reading of international relations. That is the case even today. The calculus that one has to, yes, Russia is a challenge, but we have to live with Russia. All of us try to find a balance, strike a balance, between various positions, which is the German position. The German *Ostpolitik* during the Cold War, which is very much akin to the Norwegian, to top policy. We would find that during the period after the turn of the century and today. But, of course, Germany was not a defense player of any importance after the turn of the century. But as a foreign policy player, Germany was a nation Norway would listen to. [00:53:00]

LEONG: So there were closer ties between Germany and Norway as a result.

TAMNES: Gradually. Gradually. Of course, we had a cooperation in northern Afghanistan, and German leadership up there.

LEONG: This might be a bit of a digression from our current focus, but I'm just curious, given what you said. Considering what is happening in the world today, again, there's something of a breach between the United States and key European allies. Does what you were just describing about Norway and Germany, does it set up a sort of more Euro-centric approach for Norway today?

TAMNES: I think so. But I don't think we would expect any major changes, also because there is no prospect of becoming a member of the European Union. That is because of the main hindrance here. At the same time, one [00:54:00]can observe that Norway underscores very clearly the need for trying to enhance the dialogue, also the security dialogue, with the European Union, and it is very clear when it comes to trying to prioritize up the cooperation with Germany.

LEONG: Now going back to this period, the foreign minister at that time, Mr. Støre, began to advance an initiative to return the NATO focus to the High North. Could you discuss that a little bit? What was that significance? Why did he do it?

TAMNES: Well, this started basically in 2007, 2008. And the concrete background was that Putin had come into position in Russia, and he had begun to talk about a tougher stance towards NATO and West, [00:55:00] especially in 2007 in Munich at a conference in Munich, it was very clear when he came to a New Russia, so to say, or an Old Russia, one might also call it, in any case, which led to Norway beginning to underscore the need for striking a balance between out-of-area and in-area, as we called it, which led to the Norwegian initiative in NATO in the fall of

2008, the in-area initiative, to use that term. Which, in many ways, was a change, a shift in the Norwegian attitude towards how to balance internationally. After being solely preoccupied with the North during the Cold War and into [00:56:00] the '90s, we were in, in many ways, forced to take part internationally. We tended to ignore the North, with Russia coming back, and we saw the cautious build-up again. We had to find a balance. So this conceptual, gradual, practical change started in 2008. At that time, it was hard to convince many key allies about the prudence of doing so, when Britain was, at an early stage, very critical of the Norwegian initiative. But we have seen over time that this position was respected and had some sympathy in key capitals. One part of it was that Norway later understood that this is not an either-or. We will continue to take part in Afghanistan. We [00:57:00] will not leave you with that. We will stay with you throughout the whole operation. But we need to think about the Article 5 requirements as well. So that was the good idea about it, that so clearly underscored the need for doing two things that run at the same time. So that was the conceptual change in 2008. Then it took some time until this was implemented practically.

LEONG: Even though it was in 2008, I'm assuming that there was some talk about it a little bit before that. Did the Bush administration come on board with that early? Or did that also take some doing?

TAMNES: Well, to some extent, but not with very strong enthusiasm. That came gradually. I would say there was no basic change with the [00:58:00] Obama administration, as such. This is what grew over time, and basically the major change came with the crisis in Ukraine in 2014. That was the turning point in U.S. policy.

LEONG: Right. Right. Because we are now still focused on the Bush administration, was there any sense that you're aware of, of how officials in the Bush administration appreciated the importance of the High North?

TAMNES: Well, there was some appreciation of it, but the High North was not the crisis of the day. As you know, it was this very strong U.S. priority of the great Middle East during those years. You had to participate in that region to be part of the team. [00:59:00] But with the rise of Putin, some segments in the United States realized how important it was to have at least a Northern watch up here, Norwegian Intelligence Service, to watch the activities up here, in nuclear dimension.

LEONG: Secretary Rice, of course, as an academic, is a Russian specialist. Did the security policy circles here, did you get a sense that she had any particular interest in Russia or the High North during her term as secretary? Or was she also, did she give due stress to the High North, given her background?

TAMNES: No. [01:00:00]

LEONG: No?

TAMNES: I hadn't noticed that. She was a prudent person, with a broad perspective, and she had the Russia dimension with her from her education onwards. So she was not basically critical of the Norwegian positions, but she had also to deal with what was on the agenda, and that was not the High North.

LEONG: Right. You sat on two, in fact, you were the head of one commission, the one reviewing Norwegian Security policy in 2013, 2014, is that correct?

TAMNES: Yes, it was released in 2016. Yes.

LEONG: You were also a member of the Afghanistan commission that was led by former Foreign Minister Mr. Godal.

TAMNES: Okay, you are talking about two different commissions.

LEONG: Two different, yes.

TAMNES: The first one was the expert group on the Defense of Norway, [01:01:00] which came in '15, and then the Afghanistan Inquiry Commission in 2016, yes.

LEONG: Right. Okay. So two separate commissions. I wonder if we could talk about one after the other.

TAMNES: Okay.

LEONG: Let's talk about the Afghanistan one first. In terms of the conclusions of that report, which, if I remember offhand, were three; one was that Norway achieved great success in terms of maintain good relations with the United States. But in other respects, in terms of civil society, development in terms of human

rights and so on, Norway didn't do such a good job in Afghanistan. Why was that commission even necessary, even seemed to be necessary in Norway?

TAMNES: That was because of domestic considerations. We have had the same in a number of countries, in Britain, [01:02:00] in particular, when it comes to Iraq. After so many years, there was a need in general for making a lesson learned of what we had done in Afghanistan. That was the broader picture. Then there were groups that were highly critical of the participation, and wanted to dig into this. So those came together, those various groups. And people came to a consensus about having an inquiry about it. It was a rather traditional approach from parliament, basically, and from the newspapers and public opinion. There is a need for looking into what we now have done through this period.

LEONG: Does it in any way inform how Norway-U.S. relations might be shaped in the future? [01:03:00]

TAMNES: Well, you should have in mind the title of the commission, the Good Ally, which brings us back to what I basically talked about all the time during the other conversation, and that is the primacy of the United States and Norwegian security policy. It boiled down to the simple fact that Afghanistan was first and foremost a question how to be on board, and to maintain the cooperation with the United States in general, and NATO in particular. So from such a perspective, the Afghanistan engagement and the commission have underscored how important the United States is in reaching security policy.

LEONG: As for the other commission, the expert Commission on Norway Security Policy, does that offer the [01:04:00] same lesson?

TAMNES: Oh yes, very much so. That Commission had a much narrower perspective, dealing primarily with security and, to some extent, defense policy. It was dealing with hardcore security in the North, basically. So there were two messages here. One was that Russia under Putin is about to return as a major challenge to Norwegian security, both when it comes to Putin's reading of international relations, the zero-game attitude to international relations, and also the gradual rebuilding of armed forces and capabilities. We talked about the need for establishing a new normal, which of course implied that there had been a normal before. A more traditional approach to [01:05:00] international relations, which should shape Norwegian defense and security policy. So that was the starting point, and with that as a background, the Commission was concluded with a need for strengthening the ties to NATO and to key allies.

LEONG: Okay. Well, I think I have covered most of the questions that I have presented to you. Perhaps one final question, and that is, how did Norway perceive the United States at the end of the Bush administration?

TAMNES: I think it was a relief when he left. Of course, that's not a unique reading in Norway, with the next administration, with the Obama administration and with Hillary Clinton as a foreign secretary, that was mentally quite a significant shift. We saw that from an early stage. [01:06:00] Obama didn't pay very much attention

to Norway, but Hillary Clinton came on board as a close partner, in many sense, especially the relationship between her and the foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, that relation became very close. Of course, she had been to Svalbard at an early stage. She knew the North. And she became from 2009, '10, deeply involved and informed about the Norwegian Peace Diplomacy in Afghanistan. She noticed, with some surprised, I would assume, the first conversation was presented to her, well, you should listen to me. We are about to establish a dialogue between the government in Kabul and Taliban. There might [01:07:00] be some hopes for peace along this path. Of course, she hadn't paid very much attention to that, because the administration before that was not prepared to talk about Taliban. So it took some time. Wasn't until Hillary Clinton came on board, thinking about these issues. I think the Norwegian dialogue with Taliban and then with the government in Kabul contributed to rebuilding Norway as a key partner and loyal partner to the United States, and gradually contributing to making Norway one of the nations in the INTERPOL.

LEONG: Okay. [01:08:00] Was there any question that I skipped over, or something that perhaps should have been discussed and we did not discuss?

TAMNES: I don't think so. It's very much up to you.

LEONG: I think that pretty much covers it from my point of view. So thank you very much.

TAMNES: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO]