SIPRI: The visit of United States President Barack Obama to Stockholm this week presents the Swedish Government with an opportunity to discuss urgent foreign policy issues, including Sweden's future engagement in Afghanistan. Unlike the other Nordic countries, Sweden has yet to sign a bilateral agreement with Afghanistan and it remains unclear whether it will continue to provide a support mission which includes combat elements after 2014. SIPRI's Theresa Höghammar outlines the factors that are likely to influence Sweden's decision on its future involvement in Afghanistan.

**Nordic countries' support for military intervention and reconstruction**

The five Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—have supported the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its International Security and Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan since 2001. The current ISAF transition process—which was agreed at the 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon and confirmed by the coalition leaders at the Chicago Summit in May 2012—involves the Afghan national security forces (ANSF) gradually taking on 'lead security responsibilities' across the country, with the goal of achieving a full transfer of responsibilities and the withdrawal of most foreign forces by the end of 2014.

Denmark, Finland and Norway have all signed bilateral strategic partnership agreements with Afghanistan, which together indicate a shift from a combat and military crisis management role to a focus on development cooperation, civilian crisis management and training of the ANSF. For example, in the period 2013-17 Denmark has committed to spending 530 million Danish kroner (€71 million) in aid per year.

In contrast, despite supporting development policies in Afghanistan, Sweden has not yet signed a bilateral agreement setting out its post-2014 strategy. However, the current Swedish military operation in Mazar i Sharif is currently being transformed from a counterinsurgency operation into an operation to support, advise and train the ANSF, with a reduction from 400 soldiers to 300 by the end of 2013.

The decision to dismantle the military operation by the end of 2014 was agreed in 2010 by the Swedish Government and two opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party.

**Factors likely to influence Sweden's future role in Afghanistan**

According to statements made by the Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, Sweden is waiting for the announcement of the USA's post-2014 strategy in Afghanistan before making a decision on its own future commitment in Afghanistan. The USA has not officially announced the size of its residual force but it will most likely include a limited US counterterrorism force of 5000–10 000 soldiers and military advisers as well as personnel to train and support the ANSF. Nevertheless, just like the other Nordic countries, Sweden's future engagement in Afghanistan

will be affected by a number of factors.

The post-2014 scenario in Afghanistan could place pressure on the fragile Afghan Government and the ANSF to maintain stability in the country. According to US Department of Defense reports, the ANSF is not adequately trained to operate independently without the support of ISAF. In addition, according to a recent United Nations report, there has been an increase in violent attacks against civilians by the insurgents.

The donor countries seeking to channel and implement development assistance may therefore face obstacles in the context of the deteriorating security situation. Crucially, despite ongoing dialogue between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, no peace agreement has been concluded that involves all parties. The Taliban continue to demand that all ISAF forces leave Afghanistan, which is not compatible with the USA's plans.

**The importance of domestic politics**

Domestic Swedish politics could also be a crucial factor, given that any continuation of support of combat troops would require a majority vote in the Swedish Parliament. While previous governments have been able to obtain such a majority with the support of opposition parties, recent events in the United Kingdom—where the House of Commons voted down a government motion to intervene in Syria—demonstrate that support in Western countries for military intervention is fluid and unpredictable.

*This text was written by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament. Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public.*