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

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ARTICLE

Slip-Sliding on a Yellow Brick Road: Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan

Vanda Felbab-Brown*

The ongoing transition process in Afghanistan will deliver three shocks in the coming few years: foreign forces will complete the handover of security responsibility to their Afghan counterparts, aid volumes and international spending in the country will decrease and, lastly, the political dispensation will be upended by presidential elections in which President Hamid Karzai is not supposed to run again. These challenges are mounting at a time when, due to inconsistent international approaches and a lack of appreciation for the Afghan context, Afghanistan is dealing with rising insecurity, dysfunctional governance, rampant corruption, and ethnic factionalization within the society and the domestic security forces. Based upon a review of the security sector, governance, social and economic conditions, regional relations and negotiation efforts with the insurgents, this article finds that fundamental questions about the efficacy of stabilization efforts in Afghanistan continue to lack clear answers. Regardless, significant room for improvement – both in policy and execution – appears to exist. It remains to be seen whether, as many Afghans fear, a civil war will engulf Afghanistan once again in the post-transition period or whether the international community will take those steps – re-energizing governance reform efforts, maintaining financial support and continuing to strengthen the Afghan army and police – which could help to bolster stability.

After a decade of fighting – starting with the relatively easy victory over the Taliban in 2001 and then featuring an increasingly tough counterinsurgency campaign against the reemergent Taliban – the growth of the Afghan security forces has become the lynchpin of the US and NATO strategy to achieve success in Afghanistan and extricate themselves from the Afghanistan war. At the end of 2014, NATO's International Assistance

Security Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan will hand over responsibility for Afghanistan's security, economic development, and governance over to the Afghans. This transfer of responsibility is taking place already via a so-called "Transition" process.¹As yet, however, the Taliban and its jihadi cohorts – the Haqqanis and Hezb-i-Islami – remain entrenched and robust. Although degraded by the 2010 "surge" of US military forces, they still exercise substantial sway over large parts of Afghanistan. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are clearly making progress. But they still continue to be dependent on

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NATO's assistance for critical assets and capacities; and dangerous ethnic rifts and competing patronage networks continue to run through the ANSF.

Despite the improvements of Afghan security forces, few Afghans believe that a better future is on the horizon after 2014. NATO and US officials remain by and large cautiously optimistic about the success of the counter-insurgency and stabilization campaign, even if acknowledging that progress is hard.² Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who headed the US Embassy in Afghanistan between July 2011 and July 2012, for example, stated at the time of his departure that he considered the outbreak of another civil war in Afghanistan after 2014 unlikely.³ Yet many Afghans fear there will be a renewed outbreak of civil war after 2014 when the NATO presence is much reduced.⁴

Worse yet, Afghans have become disconnected and alienated from the national government and the country's other power arrangements. They are profoundly dissatisfied with Kabul's inability and unwillingness to provide basic public services and with the widespread corruption of the power elites. They intensely resent the abuse of power, impunity, and lack of justice that have become entrenched over the past decade. The initial post-Taliban period of hope and promise did not last, as governance in Afghanistan became rapidly defined by weakly functioning state institutions unable and unwilling to uniformly enforce laws and policies. Characteristically, official and unofficial powerbrokers issue exceptions from law enforcement to their networks of clients, who are thus able to reap high economic benefits, and can get away even with major crimes. Murder, extortion, and land-grabbing, often perpetrated by those in the government, have gone unpunished. Many Afghans believe that they live under unaccountable mafia rule.

The culmination of the Transition in 2014 will bring about a triple shock to Afghanistan and its current political dispensation. Not only will ISAF forces be substantially

reduced, but international financial flows – whether direct foreign aid or economies spawned by the presence of the large foreign military⁵ – will also inevitably decline with the drawdown of NATO forces military. For a country that it still overwhelmingly dependent on foreign aid and illegal economies for its revenues, the outcome will be a massive economic shrinkage. Although various efforts are now under way to cushion the shock, such as pledges by international donors at the Tokyo conference in July 2012 to provide \$16 billion in foreign aid to Afghanistan between 2013 and 2016, they are unlikely to be sufficient to offset the revenue losses. There are no easy ways to generate revenues and employment in Afghanistan over the next three years, despite Afghanistan's mineral riches.

Moreover, 2014 is also the year of another presidential election and hence of major power infighting, whether or not President Karzai will seek to remain in power. The fight over the remaining rents of the ending political dispensation and the need to consolidate one's support camps in anticipation of the shaky future, and hence to deliver spoils to them in order to assure their allegiance, will not be conducive to consensus decision making and broad-based good governance.⁶ A country's government can maintain stability without legitimacy purely through repression as long as it has a sufficiently effective repressive apparatus. But given Afghanistan's existing war and intense ethnic tensions (that also permeate its security forces), Afghanistan does not have such a repressive apparatus. Yet the government's legitimacy too has been steadily declining for years, and most Afghans consider the government and associated powerbrokers to represent a venal, abusive, and exclusionary mafia rule.

Washington's and the International Definition of the Mission

From 2001 on, the US government and other members of the international coalition have struggled with how to define the mission in

Afghanistan. For the allies, the question for years was whether to characterize the effort as a peacekeeping operation (which many chose to do despite the level of insecurity in the country and a lack of peace to keep) or a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism mission. For the United States, the question was whether to set the objective as state-building or as limited counterterrorism that could be accomplished without ensuring that a stable Afghan government was in place.

The George W. Bush administration vacillated between the two labels of the mission's scope. It conceived of and resourced Operation Enduring Freedom as a limited military intervention, confined to the removal of the Taliban government in order to destroy al Qaeda's capabilities and deprive it of a safe haven. But the Bush administration ultimately recognized that it could not just leave the country merely after driving the Taliban from Kabul. Moreover, the need to generate public support in America for the war, even in the wake of 9/11, led the Bush administration to adopt much broader rhetoric about its goals in Afghanistan, including bringing democracy to a brutally oppressed people and emancipating its suffering women. At the same time, however, it continued providing slim resources for the military and economic efforts in the country, inadequate for either responding to the growing insurgency or for effective reconstruction.⁷ The under-resourcing deepened as the White House shifted its focus to Iraq.⁸

Moreover, even while the effort in Afghanistan came to take on the trappings of a state-building effort, the policies adopted did not sufficiently focus on promoting good governance. Instead, the lack of US and international military resources, and the consequent reliance on warlords with a long record of serious human rights abuses in fighting the Taliban, strongly empowered these powerbrokers and weakened Kabul's already tenuous writ.⁹ The visible embrace of the warlords by the US military, and the lack of responsiveness on the part of Washington

toward President Karzai's early requests that Washington disempower the warlords, progressively led him to seek accommodation with them and gutted his will to challenge them.

The Barack Obama administration inherited the war at a time when the military situation on the battlefield was going very poorly. The Taliban and Haqqani insurgencies had ramped up, and the quality of Afghan governance was progressively deteriorating.¹⁰ And during his presidential campaign Barack Obama emphasized Afghanistan as the important, yet unfinished "war of necessity" unlike the "war of choice" in Iraq he promised to terminate as fast as possible.

But despite the election rhetoric, from the moment it took over, the Obama administration struggled with some of the very same dilemmas that perplexed the Bush administration. Since al Qaeda was the primary source of terrorist threats against the United States, was it also necessary to continue combating the Taliban? Could an effective counterterrorism mission be prosecuted essentially just from the air and off-shore? Or was it necessary to defeat the resurgent Taliban on the ground and build up a stable Afghan government? Should the US military engagement be intensified – with the all blood, treasure, and domestic-support ramifications that would entail– or should the US military engagement be significantly scaled back?

These competing definitions of the objectives embodied very different policies, force postures and military strategies, and civilian components such as economic development programs. They were premised on very different behavior on the part of the Afghans and created different expectations in Kabul, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and among the Western publics. The persistent oscillation among them continued to complicate the Afghanistan campaign even in the Obama administration.

After several rounds of policy reviews on Afghanistan and Pakistan,¹¹ the Obama administration ultimately did decide to in-

crease the amount of military and economic resources devoted to the war, and its rhetoric about the goals in Afghanistan became far more circumscribed than that of the Bush administration. The strategy consisted of a broad counterinsurgency effort, which was to include a strong agricultural program. Yet, despite its multifaceted and comprehensive approach, the policy was couched in narrow counterterrorism terms, emphasizing mainly the need to prevent al Qaeda safe havens in Afghanistan.¹²

Security Sector

The Obama administration counterinsurgency strategy was embodied in a plan designed by the then-commander of ISAF forces in Afghanistan in the fall of 2009, General Stanley McChrystal. The White House endorsed the plan in December 2009 – albeit with far fewer resources than the general had recommended. Also over objections from the military, the White House stipulated timelines for the withdrawal of US forces. The result was a 30,000 US troop surge lasting through August 2012 and bringing the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan to approximately 150,000 at its peak. The plan assumed that by the time ISAF would be transferring Afghanistan to Afghan forces, large parts of the country would have been secure. Four years later, some real progress had been achieved – such as in central Helmand and Kandahar, both of which used to be either intense battle zones or strongly under the Taliban's sway. But as this article goes to press, the territory cleared of insurgent forces that is being handed over to the Afghans is much smaller than had been projected.

The growth of the ANSF – particularly the Afghan National Army (ANA) – has been one of the brightest spots of the transition process of creating Afghan capabilities. The size of the ANSF has been expanding rapidly – to just over 350,000 combined, and the quality of military skills of the Afghan forces has also been growing. As of the summer of 2012, Afghan soldiers or police were participating

– in some form – in at least 90 percent of all operations and leading some 40 percent of operations, even if these were mostly the less complex operations.¹³ The ANA Special Forces are the most capable component of the ANSF and are closest to standing on their own. With much of the pre-2014 transition being about the gradual shift in ISAF's mission from “combat to support,” the growth of the ANSF is very important. But much about its capabilities remains unknown as yet.

Afghan National Army

The ANA has grown to 195,000 personnel. The current cost of the ANA and the Afghan police is about twice as much as the current GDP of Afghanistan, and for years beyond 2014 Afghanistan will depend on the US and international community to foot the bill for the ANSF. Also for many years to come, certainly well beyond 2014, the ANSF will continue be deficient in several critical domains. These include command, control, intelligence, air support, medical evacuation, logistics and maintenance, contractor management, battle-space integration, and other specialty enablers. Without them, the Afghan Army will be severely hampered. Currently, Afghan forces frequently know how to fight and win battles at the tactical level, but they yet have to learn how to fight and win campaigns. The latter requires the development of logistical systems, ability to combine arms, and strengthened command and control at the strategic level.

The 2012 spate of the so-called “green-on-blue attacks,” later renamed “insider attacks,” has generated pressures on limiting partnering and restricting interactions between ISAF and ANSF forces as well as between international civilian advisors and Afghan government officials. In September 2012, ISAF announced the end – at least temporarily – of partnering below the battalion level. But it is of course below the battalion level where the vast majority of counterinsurgency operations, including village patrols, take place. Such restrictions can potentially dangerously

reduce the quality of training and advising by international forces. Although NATO has stressed that many of these attacks have been conducted by disgruntled ANSF recruits with personal grudges rather than Taliban infiltrators, the Taliban has been keen to appropriate the attacks as a purposeful component of its insurgency strategy.

A disturbing big unknown is whether the ANA will be able to withstand the ethnic factionalization that is already fracturing the institution. The NATO Training mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A) has worked hard to bring the ethnic balance among the Afghan officer corps closer to what is believed to be ethnic composition of the overall population. Apparently up to 2008, 70% of Afghan *kandak* commanders were Tajiks, a situation that was resented by Pashtuns.¹⁴ In 2012, ethnic distribution within all senior positions – *kandak* commanders through generals (ISAF does not separate out *kandak* commanders in its latest records) – were: 42% Pashtun, 29% Tajik, 13% Hazara, 8% Uzbek, and 8% others.¹⁵ NTM-A has also been striving to make the entire force ethnically balanced. And while overall that is indeed the case, the ANA still manages to recruit disproportionately low numbers of southern Pashtuns. The factionalization problems within the Afghan force, however, are more serious than merely the ethnic balance. Deep ethnic fissures and patronage networks run through the Afghan military, with segments of the force loyal to particular top-level commanders rather than to the institution overall or – more importantly – the government in Kabul.¹⁶

Afghan National Police

The Afghan National Police (ANP) has of course been notorious both for such intense ethnic factionalization and patronage fragmentation and for general corruption.¹⁷ Its desertion rates, retention problems, illiteracy rates, and levels of drug use are much higher than within the ANA.¹⁸ So is the theft of equipment. Logistical problems remain acute.¹⁹ Often under sway of local powerbrokers, many

police units continue to function essentially as militias. Increasingly, ANP commanders, especially at the local level, are prone to reach out to the Taliban in their areas to establish ceasefires and hedge their bets.

The ANP critically continues to lack an adequate anti-crime capacity, and the anti-crime training it receives is minimal, bordering on nonexistent. Instead, for a number of reasons, the ANP is more of a light counter-insurgency and SWAT-like counterterrorism force. Yet crime – murders, robberies, and extortion – is the bane of many Afghans' daily existence, which the Taliban is happy to exploit to its advantage. Traditional informal justice mechanisms – themselves often weakened by decades of war – have not been able to cope with the rise of crime, and are of particularly limited usefulness if crime is perpetrated by government officials and powerbrokers. The inability of the Afghan government to respond to crime such as land theft, extortion, and murder (as well as its own participation in crime, of course) allows the Taliban to impose its own brutal forms of order and justice and develop a foothold in Afghan communities.²⁰ And a bigger problem yet is that the ANP have been and remain notorious for themselves being the perpetrators of many crimes.

Afghan Local Police and other self-defense forces

As extending security via regular Afghan security forces became elusive in large parts of the rural areas, ISAF has increasingly sought to compensate the security deficiencies by standing up irregular self-defense forces. The latest version of the effort is called Afghan Local Police (ALP). Numbering about 16,000 as of August 2012, it is slated to generate at least 30,000 recruits.

The effort is nothing new: the Soviets in the 1980s resorted to raising tribal militias when they realized that they were not winning in Afghanistan and used the militias as part of an exit strategy. Indeed, Afghans overwhelmingly associate the militia program with the

Soviets' defeat and see it as yet another signal of the US preparing to leave without a stable order in place.²¹ Since 2002, various versions of the militia option have existed, such as the Afghan Auxiliary Police, the Afghan Public Protection Program (APPP), Village Stabilization program, and the Community Defense Initiative, also known as Local Defense Initiative groups in some areas.²² In some of these efforts, the self-defense forces are not supposed to be paid; but many of them insist on some sort of payment, so the non-payment rule is often adjusted.²³ A great deal of skepticism is warranted about such efforts.²⁴ Great variation in the quality of the ALP effort and its long-term consequences are to be expected. Only sometimes can the militias reliably accomplish the tactical objective of effectively fighting the Taliban – Arghandab provides an example where the ALP seems to be a success.²⁵

Tribal structures in much of Afghanistan have been deeply damaged, and the community often is unable to resist the Taliban physically. Thus, the Afghans frequently hedge their bets by paying off part of their income – including from ISAF – to the Taliban to reduce its attacks and reach a *modus vivendi* with the Taliban. Indeed, such hedging is typical of Afghan history, with local warlords, khans, and tribes siding and making peace with those they sense would prevail in a conflict, easily breaking deals if the situation on the battlefield changes. Sometimes, such accommodation between the militias and the Taliban even results in temporary improvements in security in the locale, such as along roads, and the community welcomes it. Logar province, where such an initiative is currently under way, presents a good example.²⁶ But the reduction in violence often exists only at the mercy of the Taliban and the deal collapses when the Taliban chooses to renege on it.

At the same time, the militias greatly complicate state-building efforts and efforts to improve governance in Afghanistan. Self-defense forces in Afghanistan have a long histo-

ry of turning their force on local populations and engaging in predatory behavior toward local communities, including the theft of land and goods, extortion, and murder. In Kunduz, for example, after they defeated the Taliban in their villages, they started extorting the communities and demanding taxes for themselves.²⁷ Not infrequently, they also turn and fight each other, instead of the Taliban. One notorious case of such infighting took place in Uruzgan in 2010.²⁸

Although the ALP is supervised by the Afghan Ministry of Interior (MoI), the Ministry has often proved unable to control the self-defense forces. The MoI, long one of Afghanistan's most corrupt and ethnically-rift institutions, has also sought to legitimize and formalize other militias not vetted like the ALP, raising worries about intensification of predatory behavior by the militias. While the district police chief has authority over the ALP, police chiefs in Afghanistan are frequently corrupt. Hence, the affiliation between the ANP chief and ALP does little to ensure accountability and effective oversight. In the ALP's case, three village elders are also supposed to vouch for each militiaman.²⁹ Yet not infrequently a powerbroker controls the village elders, dictating his preferences in a way that escapes international scrutiny. At other times, the village elders have no problem vouching for the militia members as long as they only extort a rival village.

Governance Sector

The lack of resolution of the debate over whether effective counterterrorism in Afghanistan requires state-building also has involved continuing policy oscillation over whether to combat corruption and how. A decade after the US intervention, Afghanistan has become the third most corrupt country in the world after Somalia and North Korea.³⁰ US and Western reliance on corrupt and abusive warlords for intelligence, logistics, and direct counterterrorism operations has often come at the price of ignoring governance. Some of the most notorious power-

brokers, such as Ahmed Wali Karzai, Matiullah Khan, and Gul Agha Shirzai, know how to get things done to facilitate the operations of the international community in Afghanistan. Moreover, the large influx of Western money disturbed with an eye toward fast burn rates and without the ability to monitor the spending generated its own extensive corruption.

Unlike the Bush administration that mostly put anti-corruption in Afghanistan on the back burner,³¹ the Obama administration early on accorded greater importance to fighting corruption in Afghanistan: building up various civilian structures, such as the Major Crime Task Force, and ultimately similar equivalent units within ISAF, such as its anti-corruption task force, Shafafiyat. But it often demanded reform with an intensity that ignored Afghan realities and political complexities – a system in which the highest government officials as well as the lowest ones, line ministries, banking centers, and most international contracts are pervaded by corruption.³² The Obama anti-corruption campaign thus secured dramatic promises from President Karzai to tackle corruption, with little actual follow up. Moreover, the lack of prioritization as to what corruption needs to be addressed first and definitively, often ignores the political debts President Karzai owes and his internal entanglements and dependencies. Karzai thus often seeks (and many times succeeds) to reverse the anti-corruption efforts, such as indictments of powerful corrupt officials or the development of anti-corruption and anti-crime institutions which the internationals are trying to stand up.

But as the Obama administration decided to scale down its military presence in Afghanistan, US officials started vacillating once again in their determination to take on corruption. Many in the US government have begun to argue that tackling corruption is a luxury the United States can no longer afford; instead it needs to prioritize stability. This school of thought holds that limiting the military mission in Afghanistan mostly

to remotely-delivered airborne counterterrorist strikes could permit working through the local warlords and powerbrokers, instead of being obsessed with the means they used to acquire their power and their criminal entanglements and discriminatory practices.³³ Meanwhile, absent a coherent policy on corruption, the Obama administration and ISAF have failed to develop mechanisms and structures to work around and marginalize the problematic powerbrokers and often continues to be dependent on their services. The international community's strategy has thus oscillated between tolerating corruption for the sake of other goals – with the justification that Afghans are used to corruption anyway– or confronting it head on, but with little effectiveness. Ignoring corruption is often justified as prioritizing stability, but since corruption and the lack of rule of law are key mobilizing mechanisms for the Taliban and the source of Afghans' anger with their government, it is doubtful that stability can be achieved without addressing at least the most egregious corruption.

Social and Economic Sectors

Health and education sectors have registered some of the greatest improvements since 2002, albeit from an extremely low baseline. Their continuing massive problems and deficiencies notwithstanding, the number of health facilities (however extensive the facilities are) in Afghanistan has grown from an estimated 498 in 2002 to 2,136 in the spring of 2012,³⁴ expanding access to basic health services for millions of Afghans. In 2002, only about nine percent of the population had such access; in 2008, the number reached an estimated 85 percent.³⁵ The Basic Package of Health Services, delivered by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health, has helped to reduce the infant mortality rate during the 2001–2008 period from 172 to 77 per 1,000 live births and the mortality of children under the age of five from 257 to 97 deaths per 1,000 live births. Maternal mortality rates also declined significantly, from 1,600 to 327

per 100,000 births.³⁶ Still, one in ten Afghan children dies before the age of five, and one Afghan woman dies every two hours due to pregnancy-related causes.³⁷ The number of children enrolled in schools (mostly primary ones) is at eight million students – more than ten times the number of children enrolled in 2002.³⁸ Between 2002 and 2010, the United States provided close to \$800 million in health assistance to Afghanistan and close to \$680 million in education assistance.³⁹ Efforts to improve the administrative capacity of line ministries have also registered some notable accomplishments, such as those of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. And in some Afghan districts of intense Western supervision, service delivery has improved.

The Obama administration set out to promote rural development, allocating about a quarter billion dollars a year to the effort. Particularly in the contested south, the efforts focused on providing vouchers for wheat seed, fertilizer, and tools as well as cash-for-work programs and small grants to cooperatives. Yet especially in southern Afghanistan where counterinsurgency has been strong, the economic development programs were plagued by vacillation between two competing understandings of the purpose of economic development projects. Is their purpose to buy off the population and wean it from the insurgents? Or are the projects designed to produce long-term sustainable development?

The buy-off concept – called “economic-stabilization programs” – built upon the so-called Quick-Impact Projects (QIPs) first implemented via the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in 2003 and funded by the US Department of Defense money from the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP).⁴⁰ Designed to start with temporary economic injections, often short-term cash-for-work activities, the programs were meant to last weeks or at best months, and only later to be switched to more sustainable efforts. Their goals have been to keep Afghan males

employed so that economic necessities do not drive them to join the Taliban, and to secure the allegiance of the population who, ideally, will provide intelligence on the insurgents. Although US government officials emphasize that these stabilization programs have generated tens of thousands of jobs in Afghanistan’s south, many of the efforts have been unsustainable short-lived programs, such as canal cleaning and grain-storage and road building, or small grants, such as for seeds and fertilizers. Characteristically, they collapse as soon as the money runs out, often in the span of several weeks.⁴¹ Adequate consideration has not been given to the development of assured markets; consequently much of the produce cultivated under the USAID-contracted programs will possibly not find buyers and rot. And there is no robust and systematic evidence that the stabilization programs have secured the allegiance of the population to either the Afghan government or ISAF forces, nor have they resulted in increased intelligence from the population on the Taliban.⁴²

Nor have these programs yet addressed the structural deficiencies of the rural economy in Afghanistan, including the drivers of poppy cultivation, and Afghanistan continues to be the world’s largest producer of opium.⁴³ And the latter – such as the lack of legal microcredit, inadequate rural infrastructure, and no processing facilities for legal crops which might make them profitable – also persist.⁴⁴ In particular, CERP-funded and PRT-implemented programs have tended mostly to replace government capacity rather than to grow it.⁴⁵ The economic “stabilization” programs often created expectations on the part of the population for cheap handouts from the central government and international community without the programs being economically viable and sustainable in the long run and without requiring commitments from the local community. The result: persisting deep market deficiencies and compromised rule of law. Overall, the vision of economic transformation of Afghanistan

through agriculture growth has produced few tangible outcomes over the decade,⁴⁶ with over a third of the population still at extreme poverty levels, and another third only slightly above poverty levels – no doubt, however, it takes a long time to reduce poverty levels.⁴⁷

Moreover, persisting insecurity also threatens the short-term “stabilization” programs. In 2011 and 2012, for example, even in high-profile areas, such as Marja and Arghandab, the Taliban strongly intensified a campaign to assassinate Afghan government officials, contractors, and NGOs who cooperated with ISAF and the Afghan government. Both the implementers and Afghan beneficiaries of the economic programs were killed. This intimidation campaign scared off some Afghans from participating in the programs. Thus, for these stabilization programs, as for any economic development efforts, security is a critical prerequisite.

A constant challenge and dilemma has been whether to provide money through the Afghan government – “on budget” – or directly from the international community to “the people.” In theory, channeling outside financial aid through the national government is highly desirable since it can increase fiscal capacity of the state and link the population more closely to the state, building accountability.⁴⁸ Yet, the Afghan government at its various levels has turned out to be too corrupt and too lacking in capacity to process the money (at least what has been left after the international community’s “overhead” deductions). Bypassing the national government and channeling money directly or through NGOs has resulted at times in the money reaching the ground faster (though not necessarily in a less corrupt manner). But it also has undermined the government’s authority and capacity and often has strengthened local powerbrokers. At the July 2010 donor conference in Kabul, President Karzai won a pledge from the international community in which at least fifty percent of all economic assistance will be channeled through

his government within two years, a goal reiterated at a donors’ conference in Tokyo in July 2012, but not yet achieved.⁴⁹

Even with robust security persisting after 2014 and better donor policies, Afghanistan is heading toward dire straits economically – for at least several years. Much of the money coming into Afghanistan has been associated with the large presence of foreign military forces. That money will inevitably shrink dramatically as a result of foreign troop reductions. And so will the entire economy of Afghanistan – at least in the short term. The World Bank estimates that even under favorable assumptions, Afghanistan’s real GDP growth may fall from the 9% a year over the past decade to an estimated 5-6% during 2011-18.⁵⁰ The total international current annual aid (estimated at \$15.7 billion in 2010) approximately equals Afghanistan’s GDP and cannot be sustained. Yet it has been foreign aid that has funded the delivery of essential services such as education, health, and infrastructure as well as government administration. Afghanistan’s fiscal capacity will be particularly badly hit: The World Bank projects a 25% GDP financial gap in Afghanistan by 2021-2022, or about a \$7 billion annual deficit.⁵¹ Closing the gap requires that foreign donors deliver about \$7 billion annually for several years – about \$4 billion for the ANSF and another \$3 billion for the non-security budget. At the Tokyo conference in July 2012, donors did indeed pledge \$16 billion in non-military assistance for 2013-2016. Long-term economic sustainability, such as by developing a mining sector – Afghanistan is believed to have mineral assets worth at least \$1 trillion⁵² – or by becoming a new regional trading hub and resurrecting a New Silk Road,⁵³ depends on security and, in both cases, is a long way off.

Regional Efforts

For two decades now, Pakistan’s government (or at least parts of it) has been coddling the Afghan Taliban, Hekmatyar’s groups, and the Haqqanis. Its relationship with the Haqqani network has been particularly tight. More

than merely allowing the groups to enjoy safe havens in the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Khyber-Pashtunkwa, Baluchistan, and Karachi – and fundraise in Pakistan – the ISI has also provided logistical support, armaments, and technical and planning advice to the insurgents.⁵⁴

As in the case of Afghanistan, the Obama administration inherited a deteriorated security situation in Pakistan. The country's structural problems had also deepened, its polity was fractured, and after decades of mismanagement the state had been hollowed out. And the strategic trust deficit plagued the bilateral relationship. But in Pakistan US leverage was considerably more limited than it was in Afghanistan.

President-elect Barack Obama and his foreign policy advisers had hoped to launch a new initiative to embed the Afghanistan effort in a regional security framework that included Pakistan and India. That effort was quickly thwarted both by the Mumbai attacks in November 2011 perpetuated by Pakistani Lakshar-e-Taiba and linked to Pakistan's intelligence services, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and by India's desire to be treated by Washington on its own terms and not in conjunction with Pakistan.⁵⁵

Nor was the Obama administration successful in persuading the Pakistani leadership that the US wanted to be a genuine long-term partner of Pakistan. Indeed, the location of bin Laden's compound – so close to Pakistan's military and intelligence installations in the heart of Pakistan – only raised further suspicions in Washington that Pakistan's duplicity was so great as to undermine top US government priorities (e.g., the campaign against al Qaeda and bin Laden). Even though he had sought for years to build up a positive relationship between the United States and Pakistan, the former US Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, felt compelled before retiring to call the Haqqanis "a veritable arm of the ISI."⁵⁶

Overall, after a decade of some \$21 billion in defense assistance and reimbursements

and economic aid to Pakistan,⁵⁷ whether defined as a transactional payment or the undergirding of a strategic partnership, the United States received little systematic and committed cooperation from Pakistan in return, even on key issues. For dealing with the Pakistan-based al Qaeda and other anti-American militants in the Afghanistan war, the Obama administration was basically left with the option of intensifying its drone strikes across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Although purportedly highly effective in decimating al Qaeda's leadership structure, the policy also came with the cost of further alienating the Pakistani leadership and public from the United States.⁵⁸

Negotiations with the Taliban and Post-2014 Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan

In and after 2014, Afghanistan will face a triple earthquake: an economic shock, a likely security rupture, and a political crisis as highly contentious (and in the last round in 2009 highly fraudulent and illegitimate) presidential elections are to take place. The United States and the international community have pledged not to abandon Afghanistan after 2014; yet many questions surround the level and type of US and international level engagement. The precise nature of US and ISAF military support for the ANSF after 2014, for example, has not yet been exactly determined. In May 2012, at the signing of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement, President Barack Obama spoke of "steady military reductions"⁵⁹ in US troop levels in Afghanistan after the end of 2012. President Obama also stated that the US military forces remaining in Afghanistan after 2014, pending the signing of a US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement, would focus on only "two narrow security missions" – counterterrorism and training of ANSF.⁶⁰ But if the post-2014 mission is narrowly focused on counterterrorism operations, any remaining mentoring capacity will be severely undermined, as likely will be the overall ANSF capacity.⁶¹

A US and ISAF rush out of Afghanistan, the US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement notwithstanding, will also increase chances that the negotiations with the Taliban will produce a bad, unstable deal that compromises whatever progress has been achieved in Afghanistan and one that the Taliban will violate. Determined to avoid negotiating from a position of weakness – and waiting for the Taliban was degraded on the battlefield first⁶² – the United States hesitated a long time before reluctantly agreeing to begin them in 2009. But the ensuing talks with the Taliban (and reportedly also at least feelers with the Haqqanis) have mainly amounted to talking about talking despite repeated feelers from the various factions of the Taliban.⁶³ The Taliban's willingness to seriously negotiate has also been lukewarm and conflicted. It has repeatedly called for faster confidence-building measures, such as the release of Taliban prisoners by the United States, some of which may be currently under way.⁶⁴

Too much is unknown at this point about what the Taliban could settle for. Certainly, it will be loath to give up any influence it already has in large parts of the country. It may also be leery of simply being allowed to participate in elections, especially at the local level. Its strengths often lie far more in being a spoiler than in delivering good governance beyond order and rough justice. The Taliban faces some tough dilemmas in agreeing to a compromise with Kabul, such as accepting the Afghan constitution. Such a prospect and an overt power sharing deal with Kabul will discredit the group in the eyes of many of its fighters as well as in the eyes of the broader population to whom it appeals on the basis of its claim to be fighting against Kabul's venal, predatory, and unjust rule. Similarly, whether the Taliban will be able to abide by the international redlines, including breaking with al Qaeda, is still a major question mark.

Elements of the Taliban, especially the Kandahari ones, may well have learned that their association with al Qaeda ultimately cost them their power,⁶⁵ but the group also owes

many debts to the global jihadist movement. The death of bin Laden may have weakened some of the networks, but renegeing on these debts to their global jihadi brothers will be costly. The Taliban can agree to many things, but what will it uphold? The lesser and more narrowly-defined the presence of the international community after 2014, the lesser its capacity to roll back any violation of the peace deal. And such violations do not have to be blatant takeovers of territory – after 2014, as now, the Taliban can exercise a lot of influence through a far more subtle intimidation.

Meanwhile, the negotiating processes have so far produced far more fear than confidence. President Karzai has felt extremely threatened by the Taliban preference to negotiate with the United States. Despite Washington's extensive efforts to bring Kabul to the table and reassure the suspicions of the Arg Palace, President Karzai has not trusted Washington not to leave him high and dry by signing a separate deal with the Taliban. Ironically, as much as the Arg Palace is suspicious of negotiations, so are Afghan minority groups extremely leery of any negotiations with the Taliban. Memories of the Taliban's brutal rule of the 1990s and the Northern Alliance's fight against the Taliban loom large in their minds, and they also fear the loss of military and economic power they accumulated during the 2000s. Key northern leaders may prefer a war to a deal that they would see as compromising their security and power. Many in the north are actively arming and resurrecting their patronage networks and militias. Many civil society groups, including women's organizations, equally lament being left out of the process.⁶⁶ Few are satisfied with the performance of the High Peace Council that President Karzai designated to integrate the various Afghan voices into the negotiations and to promote a broad-based societal reconciliation. Under the current circumstances, negotiations with the Taliban are not likely to prove a strategic game-changer.

Fundamental questions about Afghanistan stabilization thus continue to be unan-

swered. It yet remains to be seen whether it is the fears of many Afghans that another civil war is coming or the optimism of the international community that Afghanistan is strong enough to withstand the post-2014 shocks that will turn out correct. But one thing is clear: The faster the international community rushes out of Afghanistan economically and militarily and the more it continues to underemphasize the need to improve governance in Afghanistan, the more likely it will be the former. **S**

NOTES

- 1 The term "Transition" is at times used differently by various stakeholders in Afghanistan policy. NATO frequently uses the term in a restricted sense as a military phase to be followed by Redeployment. The United States government often uses the term more broadly as one pillar of a larger political engagement with Afghanistan. And President Karzai sometimes uses the expression to denote the period through 2014, after which he talks about Transformation. When I use the term in the article I mean more broadly the entire process – before and after 2014 – of handing responsibility for security, political, and economic affairs over to the Afghan government as well as any resulting changes in the security, political, and economic order in Afghanistan the process will produce.
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