

# Afghanistan: Urgent Investments in the Long Transition

Philipp Rotmann

After a very busy and politically demanding year, the United States, Europe and their key international partners in Afghanistan are at risk of wasting the modest opportunity that they managed to create. Yes, there is now a plausible political strategy in place where there was none before. But the twin hopes for long-term international assistance and a sustainable political settlement with the Taliban remain too doubtful and ambiguous to make a positive difference yet. To make success more likely, the international community needs to deliver a truly impressive follow-up on the decisions taken in Bonn.

In the short term, a stronger focus is required on getting ready to subordinate international military operations to the emerging political negotiations, on preparing for the presidential elections in 2014 and on managing local power transitions as a result of ISAF redeployments. At the same time, the decisions being made in the coming weeks and months to predetermine the size and shape of the long-term international engagement with Afghanistan must meet a double challenge: to break or at least slow the cycle of fear that grips the country, and to avoid building the next series of well-intentioned political traps for the international community by a new emphasis on thoughtful analysis and program design.

## Into the unknown: the long transition

Since the NATO Lisbon summit in 2010, the international community has begun to shift from an open-ended counterinsurgency campaign without a viable political strategy to a more realistic political approach that combines security transition, institutional development and support for a negotiated political settlement to the conflict. As a result, a profound political transformation has started in Afghanistan and the region. The political and economic order of the past decade is beginning to give way to a new one, the shape of which remains a mystery to all. Uncertainty breeds fear, exacerbating the already daunting political and security risks in one of the world's most volatile and dangerous regions.

This period of upheaval will last at least three more years, and it will require delicate engagement with the multiple political, economic and partly military transitions at the local and regional levels. At the same time, the news of impending military drawdown has already relegated the war in Afghanistan to the second tier of international crises. This was inevitable, but if the international community does not follow-up on its Bonn promises with substantial pledges, it risks

losing even the modest opportunity it has worked hard to create over the past year.

### **Political strategy in place**

The international community seeks to manage the current period of change through the process of security transition, through support to closer regional cooperation and through facilitating a political process between the Afghan government, insurgent opposition groups and other local and international stakeholders. The announcement to withdraw international combat forces by 2014 gave rise to a widespread fear of chaos linked to the powerful historical memory of 1989-1992, when the sudden end to Soviet financial assistance sounded the death knell for the Najibullah regime and plunged the country into civil war. This anxiety, perhaps the first incentive uniting Afghans and internationals alike, has been a double-edged sword: While it appears to be a key reason for major actors on all sides to support political talks, it also holds a danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. To guard against the latter, the international community made high-profile political commitments at the 2011 Bonn conference to support Afghanistan for another decade, between 2015 and 2024.

For the first time since the Taliban insurgency began to control major parts of the country, there is a plausible political strategy to end the war. Now that all stakeholders have shown some fragile readiness for negotiations, this political strategy does have a chance to work. At the same time, the incentives for political and economic stakeholders big and small to secure their interests and safety, from the thousands of highly educated Afghans on the verge of emigration to the old warlords renewing their alliances, are contributing to a vicious circle of brain drain, recession and conflict in the years to come.

The ability of the international community to maintain regional stability is therefore limited. To maximize its leverage and use it constructively, however, requires decisive action this year on two parallel tracks. In Afghanistan and in the region, it requires a delicate engagement with the ongoing political, economic and (in part) military transitions at the local and regional levels. At the level of international policy, the international community must urgently follow up on the commitments it made last December in Bonn. While certainly no panacea, big and specific pledges can help reduce the widespread fear in the region of being abandoned again by the world after 2014, as it was after the Soviet withdrawal. To work, these pledges must be big and specific enough to cut through the fog of uncertainty and rumors that dominate much of the political discourse. At the same time, the associated planning for the post-2014 international presence must avoid a re-run of another tragic set of historical experiences – those of well-intentioned but ill-designed programs, many of which produced too few positive results to outweigh their harmful side effects from distorting labor markets and power structures to undermining the international community's own political agenda. In that regard, vague US military plans of \$4.1 billion in financial support per year after 2014 for 228,500-strong Afghan National Security Forces without specifics or conditions and barely linked to solid analysis<sup>1</sup> may entail significant risks of repeating such mistakes.

### **Toward 2014: Managing multiple transitions**

The formal transition process of security handovers from ISAF to the Afghan government is just one of several military, economic and political transitions going on. From the local level in Kabul, Helmand or Taloqan up to the regional level of South and Central Asia, these multiple transi-

tions are interconnected, but many of them are not directly linked to what ISAF is doing, nor are they all susceptible to international management. However, the international presence inadvertently influences these transitions to a large extent, and it needs to become more effective at doing so – at least by reducing its own harmful effects, such as excessive spending, while maintaining what it does well, such as helping to develop Afghan national security forces.

At the local level, the security transition and the redeployment of ISAF forces looks very different in different parts of the country. In the South, it means getting out of frontline combat and into a support and rapid reaction role. In some Northern provinces, it means entirely dismantling what had never been more than a symbolical presence of ISAF. Neither is unimportant, as both have a political impact on people's sense of security and autonomy, and on the sense of protection afforded to (or threat posed toward) local political figures. Where ISAF was a major source of income to a few local businessmen, the redeployment of troops may cause a reallocation of resources and power.

On the national level, the possibility of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban has caused political and military realignments already since 2010. The most visible of these is the reemergence of the former Northern Alliance as something of a collective defense organization for the non-Pashtun ethnic groups of the North and West of the country. Their networks continue to hold major stakes in the official security apparatus, and they are using it to improve their relative position should the country fall back into civil war.

On the regional level, the expected withdrawal of the majority of ISAF combat troops by the end of 2014 changes the balance of power in a way that

cannot be overstated. It also changes the regional economy in major ways; the demand for trucking NATO supplies will disappear, for example. Unsurprisingly, these changes have already sparked various reactions. Pakistan's heavy-handed attempts to secure a seat at the table of the Afghan "reconciliation" process to protect its interests vis-à-vis India and its own insurgency is only the most widely discussed such reaction. The Afghan government's new vigor in pursuing better relations with its regional neighbors as well as Russia and China is another.

Many of these changes are not directly affected by international political or military power and influence. While a full analysis of the possible scenarios and international levers of influence goes beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>2</sup> below are three specific recommendations for international stakeholders:

### **Prepare to subordinate ISAF operations to the peace process**

If and when real political talks emerge between the Afghan government, major insurgent groups and other key stakeholders, ISAF must be ready to support any political progress by implementing concrete confidence-building measures, such as local cease-fires, limits to night-raids or targeted prisoner releases. Designing and negotiating such measures is not a military task, although they require absolute strategic unity of effort and close operational and tactical coordination. Nonetheless, senior military leaders should resist the temptation to monopolize strategic decision-making in the political process to the extent it has monopolized strategic decisions for the counter-insurgency campaign.

To live up to the strategic challenge of supporting the long and bumpy road toward a political

accommodation according to the principles of a multilaterally acceptable settlement as defined in Bonn<sup>3</sup> is therefore even more important than the necessary operational “change of mission” from partnered counterinsurgency operations to security force assistance.<sup>4</sup> Apart from military and operational planning and the occasional cultural challenge, this will require further developing the organizational links between international and Afghan political, intelligence and military stakeholders down to the level of local implementation.

### **Prepare thoroughly for Afghanistan’s political transitions in 2014**

The year 2014 will see heavily contested presidential elections and the withdrawal of the last ISAF combat forces. In addition, if talks with the insurgents result in a settlement, additional political changes would follow, possibly in that same year. Altogether, two or three major political transitions in 2014 have the potential for a perfect storm. The international community needs to be prepared for a range of scenarios, not just in terms of planning but also politically at home, among the international community and together with Afghanistan’s regional neighbors.

Being prepared requires a close analysis of the politics of past elections, as well as a timely effort to manage expectations among all audiences about what kind of international support for elections will be realistic and conducive to stability in 2014, taking into account all of its geographic, security and political challenges. The persistent calls from international actors for a constitutional debate are fanning the flames of mistrust among Afghan politicians. Instead of publicly advocating particular changes, international stakeholders should leave this debate to Afghans. Only if and when the Afghans themselves put constitutional changes on the table should the interna-

tional community defend its interest in sustainable stability and the adherence of Afghanistan to the legal and political commitments it made, including its commitments to human rights under its own constitution as well as international law.

### **Develop better political awareness of local power transitions due to ISAF withdrawals**

Many of the practical political or security challenges from the coming changes are unknown today. Navigating the next few years in a way that promotes sustainable stability will often depend on timely early warning of such risks. Therefore, policymakers and planners should make sure that the reduction of its presence across Afghanistan does not cripple the international community’s awareness of local and regional political developments that may fuel violent conflict. The inevitable reductions should be managed strategically in order to reduce complexity, since fewer organizations and smaller staffs will face fewer obstacles to working together effectively. Leveraging these benefits as well as cooperating with local research organizations of proven expertise could be the building blocks for an effective and realistic early warning system.

### **Beyond 2014: Building confidence and avoiding the traps of the past**

It is a remarkable achievement on the part of the international community, a rare case of a lesson actually learned and implemented, that policymakers are now in a position to look beyond 31 December 2014 for a set period of another decade, from 2015 to 2024. In exchange for and linked to an Afghan government pledge to further improve governance and uphold the country’s international human rights obligations, 85 governments have committed themselves to support Afghanistan’s security forces as well as the country’s civilian

reconstruction for 10 more years. As announced in Bonn, the region expects specific pledges as a follow-up to these commitments by the NATO summit in May 2012 in Chicago (preceded back-to-back by a summit of the G8) and a donor conference in July in Tokyo.

A number of bilateral partnership agreements with the United Kingdom, France or India have begun to spell out some of the details of this support. At the same time, Kabul's most crucial strategic relationship – that with the US – remains stuck in negotiations because President Karzai is stalling. Despite what appears to be the majority opinion in Kabul, holding out will not increase but constrain the government's options as the extent of support that the US government is willing and politically able to provide is shrinking, and will continue to shrink after the presidential election in November. While Karzai is stalling, then, most other actors in the region are preparing for the worst: those who rely on US support expect to be abandoned, while others continue to fear an almost undiminished military presence that is incompatible with US domestic politics and budgetary constraints. Neither of these two extremes is likely to obtain, so the sooner there is clarity and transparency about the size and shape of America's long-term presence, the fewer will regional reactions reflect wildly exaggerated fears.

At the same time, expectations in Afghanistan and in the region with regard to international support remain unrealistic. There will and there should be no free lunch to any and all potential Afghan governments after 2014, but both Afghanistan and the international community will have to calibrate incentives very carefully to meet the international priorities of stability, counterterrorism and respect to fundamental human rights while avoiding to give power brokers with links

into the security forces free rein, to mention only one major risk.

The past 10 years of international intervention in Afghanistan has been a veritable graveyard of good intentions in program design. Fundamental weaknesses and unintended consequences of a succession of programs for disarming, demobilizing and reintegrating fighters, building Afghan security forces and delivering civilian assistance over the past decade already constitute a major burden for the country's future. Many of these failures of past international programs in Afghanistan stem from the extraordinary complexity and operational pressure to deliver results, a context in which cognitive, institutional and political traps systematically favor decisions that aim to deliver and prepare for the best case. Some policies, such as unconditional funding for a security apparatus which is largely unaccountable to the people and their representatives, hold significant risks of contributing to precisely the kinds of futures that policymakers seek to avoid.

While the challenges of decision making under conditions of extreme uncertainty, pressure and institutional complexity remain insufficiently understood, some implications are clear: to carefully shape path dependencies where they cannot be avoided, and to systematically prepare for multiple futures. Such an approach to political-strategic planning will need to be more thoroughly based on scenario analysis to help prepare not just for the best case scenarios that the same officials and policymakers are working to bring about, but also for a range of realistic alternatives in which their current decisions would continue to shape the way the international community interacts with Afghanistan.

### Strategic coordination

- So far, policymakers have prioritized the institutional integrity of Afghanistan's national security forces over almost everything else. This strategic choice must be balanced with **encouraging effective political control of all security forces through the state and promoting the rule of law as a core requirement of sustainability**. In the past, the decoupling of security and the rule of law into separate sectoral priorities and institutions such as NTM-A/CSTC-A and EUPOL generated unnecessary friction that undermined an already ambitious operational agenda.
- In the same vein, the **short-term preservation of the state cannot be allowed to push aside the long-term need for development assistance**. At the very least, policymakers need to make sure that the incentives and conditionalities set up in the security and development realms mutually reinforce rather than undermine each other, for example by providing an unaccountable source of funding for the security forces that would undermine many incentives for the government in other areas.

### Security

- **Afghanistan's future national security forces will not be effective and sustainable if designed by international experts**. Beyond the bare minimum of necessary financial constraints, the process of debating and defining the size, shape and character of the country's security institutions by 2016-17 must be conducted by Afghans and extend far beyond the presidential palace and the security ministries. Its result must be based on the country's security needs, its long-term financial resources and the buy-in of the country's major political stakeholders. The last element has been neglected so far, as the US government,

its NATO allies and select figures in the Afghan government monopolized decision-making among themselves. Therefore, Afghan, US and international officials should **encourage a broad national dialogue on the country's defense and security institutions** over the next two years – a dialogue that should include parliamentary opposition and civil society. Such a dialogue requires meaningful political choices about the character of the Afghan state and its security institutions so they can be debated before the key decisions are made. Therefore, **NATO and the government should limit their current decisions to those absolutely necessary to plan for international funding**. Without broad political buy-in, the sustainability of any of the current work beyond 2014 is deeply uncertain.<sup>5</sup>

- One of these necessary decisions is how to design the supplemental funding arrangements for the Afghan national security forces. It reflects a central dilemma of post-2014 Afghanistan: While blanket conditionality on security funding cannot be credible due to the overriding international interest in regional stability, **unconditional security funding would feed bad governance and ultimately precipitate the kind of instability it seeks to avoid**. Therefore, US and international officials urgently need to design a more sophisticated structure of aid and incentives. In doing so, they should consider separating the core requirements for maintaining force cohesion (i.e., salaries paid in a way that keeps fraud to the minimum) from optional equipment, construction and other support that could be used to maintain some leverage over the security forces. Such a model should be set up in principle in Chicago and developed in more detail thereafter.

- Afghanistan will require a **strategy to deal with tens of thousands of soldiers and militia members** to be demobilized as part of the planned

downsizing.<sup>6</sup> Given the dismal track record of previous attempts at disarmament, demobilization and reintegration in Afghanistan, it will be crucial to define realistic ambitions and design any such program with reference to these experiences as well as the limits on a centralized monopoly on violence in the post-2014 political order.

- **Post-2014 training and advisory support to the Afghan national security forces** will require rethinking the complex and in some ways counter-productive maze of institutional providers set up bilaterally (private security contractors and small national police or military training projects) and through a handful of multilateral organizations, such as the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan and the European Union Police Mission Afghanistan. Which training and advisory functions will be required, and which institutional setup will be most effective – politically and technically – to deliver them? Current discussions about the future of the NATO, UN and EU roles should take this dimension into account.

### Development

- **Civilian assistance for development should not be allowed to fall significantly short of security funding.** For all the risks they entail, the transition process and the end of ISAF amount to an opportunity for Afghanistan to normalize its economy and politics as a result of a rebalancing of short-term and longer-term international incentives to Afghan actors. If security assistance were much higher than civilian assistance, and less constricted by donors, the international community could easily exacerbate existing stability risks.
- **Donors should agree on common modalities for their 2012 pledge.** With lower overall aid lev-

els at least in the second half of the 2015-24 period, neither Afghans nor donors should be willing to accept the waste and friction from the dysfunctional competition among the donor community. Therefore, donors should agree on the specificity of their pledge up front in a way that maximizes the stabilizing political impact while maintaining the broadest level of domestic and international acceptance, both among the OECD donor community and other key stakeholders such as China, India and the Gulf states.

- **Donors and the Afghan government should further develop the Kabul Process and other incentive mechanisms to ensure that the Bonn “mutual firm commitments” will be met.** As one example, such mechanisms could be linked to the goals set by the Afghan government in its recent economic strategy *Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan*.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

It is easy to overstate the influence that any form of international engagement or support can have on conflict dynamics in Afghanistan and the region. Local and regional actors have concrete interests to defend, and some may choose war over politics to pursue these interests in order to get a bigger share for themselves or their constituencies. Not all of this is susceptible to diplomacy, financial incentives or even military power.

At the same time, the huge financial and military intervention of the past decade has changed the face of political and economic power in Afghanistan, and the choices made this year about the future shape and size of international engagement will continue to have a major impact on the region. Now is the time to carefully consider the consequences of such decisions against a range of

possible scenarios in Afghanistan and the region.

There is not just one replay of history that international policymakers should avoid with a view to 2014. In addition to the lesson taken from the collapse of the Afghan government after the end of Soviet financial and military assistance, there is a decade worth of lessons to learn on the politics of intervention in Afghanistan alone, and many other war-torn nations to boot. These lessons must be the foundation on which to prepare for the future.

## Endnotes

1 Yaroslav Trofimov, *Afghan General Sounds Alarm*, Wall Street Journal, 18 February 2012 (accessed on 15 March 2012 at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204059804577229081438477796.html>).

2 For scenario analysis, see Thomas Ruttig, *Afghanistan between Democratization and Civil War: Post-2014 Scenarios*, and Sharbanou Tadjbakhsh, Scenarios for Afghanistan and for the Region and Political Options for the International Community, Aspen European Strategy Forum 2012; as well as Citha Maass and Thomas Ruttig, *Afghanistan vor neuem Bürgerkrieg? Entwicklungsoptionen und Einflussfaktoren im Transformationsprozess*. SWP-Aktuell 2011/A 40.

3 *Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade*, Conclusions of the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, 5 December 2011, para. 18 (accessed on 15 March 2012 at [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/603686/publicationFile/162776/Conference\\_Conclusions\\_-\\_International\\_Afghanistan\\_Conference\\_Bonn\\_2011\\_engl.pdf](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/603686/publicationFile/162776/Conference_Conclusions_-_International_Afghanistan_Conference_Bonn_2011_engl.pdf)).

4 David Barno, Andrew Exum and Matt Irvine advocated a change of ISAF's mission to security force assistance in a paper entitled "The Next Fight: time for a change of mission in Afghanistan," Center for a New American Security, December 2011 (accessed on 10 March 2012 at [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_TheNextFight\\_BarnoExumIrvine.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_TheNextFight_BarnoExumIrvine.pdf)).

5 Such a process could be supported by the international community in a manner similar to the Kosovo Security Sector Review, cf. Jérôme Mellon, Preparing for a Security Sector Review: Lessons from Kosovo (UNDP 2006, [http://www.undp.org/cpr/documents/jssr/ssr/Preparing\\_for\\_a\\_Security\\_Sector\\_Review\\_Lessons\\_from\\_Kosovo.pdf](http://www.undp.org/cpr/documents/jssr/ssr/Preparing_for_a_Security_Sector_Review_Lessons_from_Kosovo.pdf), accessed 29 February 2012), Internal Security Sector Review, Final Report (2006, [http://www.kosovo.undp.org/repository/docs/ISSR\\_report\\_eng\\_ver2.pdf](http://www.kosovo.undp.org/repository/docs/ISSR_report_eng_ver2.pdf), accessed 29 February 2012).

6 There is a theoretical difference of about 120,000 soldiers and police between the pre-2014 end strength of 352,000 and the new ceiling of about 230,000 formal ANSF, plus tens of thousands of militia fighters. This number will likely be reduced by an unknown number of casualties, deserters and even emigrants over the next five years that is impossible to reliably predict. It will be safe to assume, however, that a large number of trained fighters outside the command structure of the official security forces will remain, readily available for hire by the protagonists of a renewed conflict. This is the challenge that needs to be addressed.

7 *Toward a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan*, economic strategy of the Afghan government, November 2011.